

SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

511 Ave. R Brooklyn, NY 11223-2093
Rabbi Moshe Shamah, Director

718 998 8171 Fax: 718 375 3263
Rabbi Ronald Barry, Administrator

בס"ד

Parashat Va'era Part III Regarding the Plagues

1. Design

The narrative of the ten plagues (Exod. 7–12) possesses a high degree of internal structure and cohesiveness. The most pronounced manifestation of this is the overall configuration of the plagues in a series of three increasingly severe triads with clearly distinct and meaningful inner patterns, plus one final, overwhelming blow. It is also the case that the plagues were designed to serve several purposes in an incremental manner.

Thus, before plagues 1, 4 and 7 – and only before those – the Deity instructs Moses to deliver his message to Pharaoh “in the morning,” to “stand attentively before Pharaoh” (always using the stem ב-צ-נ), and to do so “at the Nile” or “at the water.” (This latter detail is not explicitly mentioned in conjunction with plague 7, but it is clearly understood, since it states, הַשָּׁמֶשׁ יִבְקֹר וְהַיָּם יִצַּב לְפָנַי פְּרַעֲהָ, “rise early in the morning and stand attentively before Pharaoh” [Exod. 9:13], without specifying where he is to be found. Obviously Moses is to rely on what has already become known to be Pharaoh’s early morning routine.) These specifications that begin each triad imply a more personal communication away from the trappings of bureaucracy. It often is more possible to affect an individual when he is alone in a natural setting and more likely to be in touch with his inner feelings.

Before plagues 2, 5 and 8 – and only before those – G-d’s instructions to Moses are uniformly בֹּא אֵל פְּרַעֲהָ, “come to” Pharaoh. In contrast with the 1, 4 and 7 triad, this implies G-d summoning Moses to “come” speak to the king in his headquarters, where it is normally necessary to have permission to enter the inner chambers of the palace. (Sure enough, Moses was able to enter whenever necessary.) In such a

setting officialdom is present and the effect of government ministers and advisers is generally manifest. A ruler often judges a case differently from what he might otherwise have when his advisers are around to influence him. When Moses transmitted the warning for the eighth plague, the locusts, Pharaoh’s ministers did, indeed, press him hard and influenced him to change his mind, at least for a time (Exod. 10:7).

In each of these visits to Pharaoh, Moses requested of him to heed Hashem’s call to allow the Hebrews to serve Him, with all their possessions, at a location that was a three-day journey away. He also warned the king that in the event of refusal a plague would imminently strike. In each case the king refused, sometimes after equivocating or negotiating, and the plague struck.

Before the concluding plague of each triad, numbers 3, 6 and 9 – and only before those three – there was no warning. This is based on universal norms regarding patience with a defiant sinner. If after two events of warning, refusal, and chastisement the sinner remains defiant, additional retribution is warranted without further ado.

Meting out a three-component unit of plagues three times reflects G-d’s intention of giving Pharaoh and his ministers a full opportunity to take the lessons to heart and yield to the request.

In accordance with standards of fairness and instruction, the movement from one series of plagues to the next entailed an increase in severity and/or in the degree of divine revelation involved. The first series comprised plagues of annoyance and aggravation, the second involved personal pain and graver consequences while the third brought

widespread destruction and a three-day cessation of all productive activity.

Other features distinguish the triads. In the first, G-d manifests His superiority over the magicians, the latter giving up at the third plague. The second triad stresses the distinction between Israel and Egypt. In introducing the third series, G-d declares, “For this time I will send all My plagues...in order that you shall learn that there is none like Me in all the earth...and that My name shall be recounted throughout the world” (9:14-16). He identified the movement to the final and most serious group and articulated the goal. (Some interpret this statement to also include forewarning for the tenth plague.)

Another pattern is evident within the triads. To bring about plagues 1, 2 and 3 – and only for those – G-d has Moses instruct Aaron to raise or incline his staff. Plagues 7, 8 and 9 – and only those – follow Moses’ raising his hands (reflecting their more serious nature). Plagues 4 and 5 are brought about without any preliminary act. Plague 6, however, since it was the third of its series, and therefore given without warning, required official witnessing of its invocation in order that it should be known that it was coming from Hashem, so Moses threw soot heavenward in the sight of Pharaoh.*

The tenth plague has its own overarching meaning and is a direct blow against the gods of Egypt (Exod. 12:12; Num. 33:4).

Such design demonstrates that Hashem, and He alone, is in full control of all aspects of nature, precisely measuring His endeavors in time, sequence and degree. He employs a method that suits His objectives, blending together educative and retributive elements while fulfilling His multiple purposes.

2. Further Observations on G-d’s Purpose

Among Hashem’s stated purposes for the plagues are: “I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go except by [pressure of] a mighty hand so I will smite Egypt with all my wonders...after which he will let you go” (Exod. 3:19-20); “...and Egypt shall know that I am Hashem” (7:5); “...in order that you shall learn that there is none like Me in all the earth...to show you My power and so that My name shall be

recounted throughout the world” (9:14-16); “...in order that you may relate to your sons and your sons’ sons about that which I have wrought [alt: made a mockery, deriding] in Egypt...and you shall know that I am Hashem” (10:2). The latter statement refers to the establishment of the Exodus narrative as the underpinning of much of biblical lore and law.

Without explicitly mentioning the relevant Egyptian beliefs, between the lines the Torah alludes to the powerful blows struck against the gods of the mighty empire. The Nile River was the primary source of Egypt’s sustenance; its overflowing waters irrigated its otherwise parched soil and its fish furnished a significant amount of its food. It was venerated as a chief god. The first plague that turned its water to blood – forcing all Egypt to dig wells from which to drink, causing the death of its sea life and creating a great stench – contradicted its life-sustaining character and ridiculed belief in its divinity.

The second plague demeaned the Egyptian frog goddess who was widely worshipped as a goddess of fertility. The sun was another foremost god. It was believed to be victorious in its nightly battle against its opponents; its absence for three days disgraced that faith. The smiting of the firstborn finalized G-d’s judgment against the gods, a matter the Torah explicitly mentioned (Exod. 12:12; Num. 33:4), a topic we shall expand upon in our *Parashat Bo* study.

Scholars have pointed out that there is a natural, periodic phenomenon of red sediment that enters the Nile from the south that sometimes gives the river’s water the appearance of blood. On occasion, the foreign sediment carries contaminants that kill some sea life and raise a stench. It is hypothesized that the first plague was essentially an intensification of those phenomena. And the dead fish may have carried infection that killed the frogs, which may have been the basis of the second plague. The rotting frogs may have brought on the infestation of lice, and so on with the mixture of insects, leading to the pestilence and boils that follow.

Perhaps there was a natural basis to the plagues. The miraculous nature of the plagues in the Torah’s account is comprised of their magnitude, their uniform arrival in conjunction with Moses’ warnings and Pharaoh’s resistance, their cessation upon Moses’

prayer (in those cases that Pharaoh had so requested), and the distinction between the Egyptians and the Israelites (at least after the first three plagues).

The stubborn defiance of Pharaoh and the Egyptians and the resultant plagues generated a great deal of humor and satire at the oppressors' expense, features that made recalling and recounting the story so much more vivid. (This may have been alluded to in G-d's statement in verse 10:2.) One may imagine the goings-on with the Egyptians when digging for drinking water; living with frogs on their beds, in their ovens and kneading bowls, then encumbered with their rotting carcasses; dealing with lice infestation; coping with boils all over the body, such that the magicians couldn't stand before Moses, etc., etc., and Pharaoh being forced to send for Moses and Aaron time and again to request they entreat Hashem to end a plague.

A subtle aspect of the Torah's deriding Egyptian values and beliefs is its total omission of any account of the majesty and splendor associated with the Egyptian palace. The latter was well-known in the ancient world to be of extraordinary distinction. It has been described as including abundant gold, precious gems, items of exceptional craftsmanship, outstanding sculpture and artwork as well as magnificent garments and elaborate protocol. In the absence of morality, material achievement and pomp are unworthy of the Torah's attention. With the tabernacle, however, in which majesty and ceremony were for the purpose of serving G-d, such detail is important.

3. In the Psalms

Two psalms provide accounts of the plagues, Psalm 78:43-51 and Psalm 105:27-36. The commentators have wondered about the alternate sequence of the plagues and omission of several of them when recounted in these compositions. Of course, as poetic expressions and with a different agenda than the book of Exodus, the Psalms have much latitude in what is quoted. However, close attention to detail and recognition of a literary pattern common in biblical texts reveal that both these psalms are based on the Exodus account.

In Psalm 78 the order of the plagues (considering the Exodus narrative to be the official paradigm) is 1, 4,

2, 8, 7, 5, 10, with 3, 6 and 9 omitted. As we shall show, this faithfully adheres to the Exodus sequence throughout.

תהלים פרק ע"ה

- (43) אֲשֶׁר שָׁם בְּמִצְרַיִם אֶתֹתָיו וּמוֹפְתָיו בְּשֹׁדָה צִעֵן:
- (44) וַיִּהְיֶה לְדָם יַאֲרִיחֵם וַנִּזְלִיחֵם בַּל יִשְׁתִּיּוּן:
- (45) יִשְׁלַח בָּהֶם עָרֹב וַיֹּאכְלֵם וַצִּפְרֹדֶעַ וַתִּשְׁחַחֵתֵם:
- (46) וַיִּתֵּן לְחֹסִיל יְבוּלָם וַיִּגְיַעֵם לְאַרְבֶּה:
- (47) וַיִּהְיֶה בְּכֹרֶד גִּפְנֵם וַשְׂקֵמוֹתֵם בְּחִנְמָל:
- (48) וַיִּסְגֵר לְכֹרֶד בְּעֵרֵם וּמִקְנֵיהֶם לְרֹשְׁפִים:
- (49) יִשְׁלַח בָּם חֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ עֲבָרָה וְנוֹעַם וַצָּרָה מִשְׁלַחַת מַלְאָכָי רָעִים:
- (50) יִפְלֹס נְתִיב לְאַפּוֹ לֹא חֲשׂוֹךְ מִמֶּנּוּת נִפְשָׁם וַתִּיָּתֵם לְדָבָר הַסְּגִיר:
- (51) וַיַּךְ כָּל בְּכוֹר בְּמִצְרַיִם רֵאשִׁית אוֹנִים בְּאַהֲלֵי חֵם:

The envelope borders are identical to those in Exodus, beginning with the first plague (v. 44) and concluding with the tenth (v. 51). The three plagues that the psalm omitted – lice, boils and darkness – are those that in Exodus are dispensed without forewarning. Since they were not predicted to Pharaoh, the psalm does not consider them to be full manifestations of אֶתֹתָיו (“His signs and His wonders”) – a criterion established in verse 43 at the beginning of the account – and accordingly omitted them (based on Malbim's commentary on this psalm). The remaining five plagues are cited in two chiasm-style groups in the distinctive manner of biblical poetic citation: 4 and 2 (3 being one of those omitted) followed by 8, 7 and 5 (6 also being one of those omitted).

The plagues account in Psalm 105 is in a 9, 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 10 sequence.

תהלים פרק ק"ה

- (27) שָׁמוּ בָּם דְּבָרֵי אֶתֹתָיו וּמִפְתֵּי חֵם בְּאַרְצֵי חֵם:
- (28) שְׁלַח חֲשׂוֹךְ וַיַּחֲשֹׁךְ וְלֹא מָרוּ אֶת <דבריו> דְּבָרוֹ:
- (29) הִפְךָ אֶת מִימֵיהֶם לְדָם וַיִּמַּת אֶת דְּגָתָם:
- (30) שָׁרַץ אֲרָצָם צִפְרֹדָעִים בְּחֹדְרֵי מַלְכֵיהֶם:
- (31) אָמַר וַיָּבֵא עָרֹב בְּנִים בְּכָל גְּבוּלָם:
- (32) נָתַן גִּשְׁמֵיהֶם כְּרֹד אֵשׁ לְהַבּוֹת בְּאַרְצָם:
- (33) וַיַּךְ גִּפְנֵם וַתֵּאָנְתֵם וַיִּשְׁבֵר עֵץ גְּבוּלָם:
- (34) אָמַר וַיָּבֵא אֲרֶבָה וַיִּלַּק וַאֲיֵן מִקְסָר:
- (35) וַיֹּאכַל כָּל עֹשֶׂב בְּאַרְצָם וַיֹּאכַל פְּרִי אֲדָמָתָם:
- (36) וַיַּךְ כָּל בְּכוֹר בְּאַרְצָם רֵאשִׁית לְכָל אוֹנֵם:

The verse introducing the plagues account (v. 27) again speaks of אֶתֹתָיו וּמִפְתֵּי (“His signs and wonders”) and, as in Psalm 78, we might expect omission of the three Exodus plagues that were visited

without warning. Sure enough, “boils” (plague 6 in Exodus), is entirely unattested. “Lice” (פְּנִיָּים, plague 3 in Exodus) appears, but not as its own plague, while “darkness” (plague 9 in Exodus) appears at the very beginning. The final anomaly in this psalm is that plague 5, דָּבָר (pestilence), is omitted. The other six plagues are cited in straightforward Exodus sequence.

The lice mentioned in this psalm (v. 31) is given as an example of עָרֵב (the mixture), plague 4 in Exodus. A prominent feature of much of biblical poetry – especially the Psalms, including the passage we are dealing with – is the presence of a significant degree of parallelism between the sections of a verse. Usually, the later expression enriches the thought of the previous portion of the verse, either through expansion, intensification, specification, contrast, or the like. In this case, lice is brought in as a specific example of *‘arob*. This is an especially compelling parsing of the verse as it contains only one verbal clause, אָמַר וַיָּבֵא עָרֵב (“He spoke and the mixture came”), with the second clause, “lice in all their borders,” dependent on the first.

The word *‘arob*, which means mixture but a mixture of what is unspecified, in all probability refers to swarms of assorted insects (following Rabbi Nehemia in *Exod. Rab.* 11:3). The interpretation that the mixture refers to assorted “beasts of prey” (Rabbi Judah in *Exod. Rab.* 11:3) does not suit the context. The Exodus account states, “I will send against you, your servants, your people and your homes the mixture, and the homes of Egypt shall be full of the mixture” (Exod. 8:17). Had lions and tigers, etc., been sent against Pharaoh, the people and their homes, acting in accordance with their nature, the fear they would have evoked and the death and devastation wrought would necessarily have been described differently than the text depicts. Had such animals miraculously not behaved in accordance with their nature, the “wonder within a wonder” would have required an explanation or at least received acknowledgement. Surely beasts of prey would have been anomalous to this plague motif.

When Psalm 78 states, “He sent *‘arob* that ate them” (Ps. 78:45), it uses hyperbole to refer to biting and stinging, just as the continuation of that verse states, “frogs that destroyed them.” Had it been beasts of prey, the phrase “that ate them” would necessarily be

taken literally, which neither fits the Exodus description nor the continuation of that verse: “frogs that destroyed them.”

Although the psalmist acknowledged the limitation imposed by “His signs and wonders,” he had good reason to include lice as an example of the mixture. After all, in the paradigmatic account lice had been sent as one of the ten plagues, so he took the opportunity to enrich the psalm by including it as an example with another plague with which it appeared.

Regarding darkness, since it was not to be part of the plague description proper, it was utilized in another manner. It was chosen to serve as part of the introduction to the plague account and placed at the very beginning, preceding narration of plague 1. The second portion of that darkness verse (28) is וְלֹא מָרוּ אֶת דְּבָרוֹ (“they did not rebel at His word”). This plural verbal clause speaks of the personified darkness as part of a group with “His signs and wonders” of the previous verse (27), all obeying G-d’s word. Since the darkness plague in the Exodus account was visited without warning and not to be cited in this psalm as a standard plague, such deployment of darkness in the introduction was especially appropriate.

It should be noted that in Psalm 78 the thought that prompted citation of the plagues was Israel’s rebelliousness in the wilderness after the Exodus, which was expressed as כַּמָּה יַמְרוּהוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר (“How often did they rebel against Him in the wilderness [Ps. 78:40]). Our psalm, with the וְלֹא מָרוּ אֶת דְּבָרוֹ clause, links it with Psalm 78 and comments on it, drawing the contrast with Israel in the manner that the prophets sometimes do, pointing out that even the great forces of nature were obedient when G-d was redeeming Israel but Israel soon rebelled.

The reason plague 5 of Exodus – דָּבָר, usually translated as pestilence – is omitted in Psalm 105 may be as follows. דָּבָר (comprised of the same root letters that mean “speak” and “a spoken word”) is that which comes ה' בְּדָבָר (at G-d’s word). Since Psalm 105 explicitly highlights G-d’s word as having brought the plagues, it appears that there was no longer a need to cite a specific item that comes at His word. In introducing the plagues, verse 28 states, וְלֹא מָרוּ אֶת דְּבָרוֹ, “they did not rebel at His word,” speaking of His signs and wonders (and the darkness). Verse 31

has: אָמַר וַיָּבֵא עָרֹב (“He spoke and the mixture came”) and in verse 34: אָמַר וַיָּבֵא אַרְבֵּה (“He spoke and the locusts came”). It should be noted that verse 27 has an unusual locution: שָׁמוּ בָּם דְּבָרַי אֶתוֹתָיו (“They [Moses and Aaron] wrought in their midst the words of His signs”). The translation of דְּבָרַי in this context is probably “the matters of,” but it appears to be an intentional “bump in the road” to make the connection.

Endnote

* Some commentators, looking at the plagues in groups of two, maintain that another pattern is evident: blood and frogs involved the Nile; lice and ‘*arob* were insects; pestilence and boils were disease-like bodily infestations that struck man and beast; hail and locusts destroyed the crops; and plagues 9 and 10, darkness and death, go together.

©2010 Sephardic Institute