



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת היום

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת וארא תשס"ט • Parshas Va'eira 5769

PIGS AND PESTILENCE

A true but little known historical fact is that Mitzrayim (Egypt) set the gold standard for the pig industry of the ancient world. The Mishnah in *Bechoros* (4:4) records the manner in which the Egyptians would “process” the pigs that they exported to other countries:

אמר תודוס הרופא, אין פרה וחזירה יוצאה
מאלקסנדריא עד שהם חותכין את האם שלה,
בשביל שלא תלד.

“Todos the doctor said: ‘Any cow or pig that would be exported from Alexandria (of Egypt) would first have its womb removed. This was done to prevent it from further reproduction.’”

Rashi there explains that the cows and pigs raised in Mitzrayim were of such superior quality that the Egyptians resorted to extreme measures to protect their monopoly on these high-grade herbivores. By ensuring that no Egyptian-issue cow or pig would be born in any other country, Mitzrayim preserved its name as *the* place to go to buy fine swine (and bovine).

Being that Mitzrayim was – for all intents and purposes – the pig capital of the ancient world, we should notice something odd in relation to the plague of *dever* (pestilence). In announcing the upcoming plague, Hashem states:

“Behold, the Hand of Hashem is (poised to strike)... against your herds... the horses, the donkeys, the camels, the cattle, and the sheep... a very severe pestilence (shall come upon them),” (*Shemos* 9:3).

It appears that one significant type of animal is missing from this list: what happened to the pigs?

OFF THE HOOK

According to the *Chamudei Yitzchok* (referenced in *Tallelei Oros, parshas Va'eira*), this omission was quite intentional, as the pigs were actually *spared* from this deadly affliction. The reason they received “special treatment” is based on an incident recorded in the Gemara (*Ta'anis 21a*), which occurred centuries later.

In Talmudic times, there actually was an outbreak of pestilence among the pig population. In response, R' Yehudah decreed a day of fasting and prayer to ward off the very real danger of the disease spreading to people. As the Gemara explains, the intestinal makeup of pigs shares certain characteristics with that of humans; as such, people are susceptible to the internal diseases afflicting pigs. In Mitzrayim as well, Hashem wished to contain the sickness to the animals. In order to prevent the disease from spreading to the people, it was necessary to leave the pigs untouched by the plague.

One difficulty with this approach, however, is that it begs an obvious question. Hashem was in the midst of performing great miracles, which occurred in relative abundance throughout the period of the retribution visited upon the Egyptians and the subsequent redemption from Mitzrayim. The plague of *dever* was no exception, as evidenced, for example, by the fact that while the Egyptians lost all of their animals, none of the Jews lost theirs (*Shemos* 9:6, 7).

Dedicated in loving memory of

ר' צבי ב"ר אהרן יצחק ע"ה

by his loving children, Mr. & Mrs. David Presser, Brooklyn, NY

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Would it have been so difficult to merely extend the miracle somewhat by afflicting the pigs without affecting the people?

R' Chaim Kanievsky (*Derech Sichah*, parshas Va'eira) points to a fundamental principle regarding Hashem's management of the affairs of the world, which applies in our context as well. Generally speaking, Hashem does not perform "unnecessary" miracles; He prefers, instead, to manifest His Will in (what appears at least to be) a natural order. When He deems it appropriate, Hashem can and will deviate from the norm; otherwise, He controls the world in a natural sense (see *Michtav M'Eliyahu*, vol. 1, 177-186, for a fuller treatment of these matters). If pigs would contract pestilence, the "laws of nature" would dictate that people should also become infected. Instead of providing a miraculous immunity to the disease, Hashem determined – in this instance – that an extra miracle was unnecessary. He therefore avoided a further "breach" of the laws of nature by merely "passing over" the pigs entirely when visiting this plague on Egypt.

NOT SO FAST

Lest the Egyptian pigs feel too smug, however, they were soon to receive their own come-uppance, in the next plague: *shechin* (boils).

The Rishonim (Medieval commentators) raise an issue regarding the plague of boils. The verse states (*Ibid.*, v. 9) that the *shechin* affected both man and beast. This appears to be impossible, however; weren't all of the Egyptians' animals dead already, having been killed off in the previous plague of *dever* (see Rashi, *ibid.*)?

Based on the above discussion, however, we can submit a possible solution to the Rishonim's



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question. In fact, there was a whole population of animals ripe and ready to serve as candidates for the plague of boils: namely, the pigs, who survived the pestilence wholesale.

The distinction between pestilence and boils seems quite sensible, in light of the above. The plague of pestilence was intended for animals only, and not people. As such, the pigs dodged a bullet, as it was necessary to spare them so as to prevent the disease from spreading to humankind. The plague of *shechin*, however, was visited upon both animals *and* people. This time, then, the pigs were not eligible for any special dispensation.

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