



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת בא תשע"א

THE TEN PLAGUES: A COMPREHENSIVE COURSE IN EMUNAH (FAITH)

There is a curious passage in the Pesach Haggadah, following the enumeration of the ten plagues. R' Yehudah presents an acrostic – דְּצִי"ף עֲדִישׁ בְּאֶחָיִב – whereby each plague is represented by its opening letter.

While the significance of this rendering is not readily apparent, numerous possibilities are advanced by the commentaries. Some contend that these letters were etched on Moshe's staff; throughout the duration of a given plague, its representative letter would protrude. For example, during the plague of דָּם (blood), the letter ד would project (*Haggadas Si'ach Hasadeh*, quoting the *Maharil Diskin*). Others maintain that these letters were emblazoned onto the very flesh of the Egyptians themselves (*Iyun Tefillah*, based on *Yalkut Shimoni, Tehillim 863*).

The *Kli Yakar* (*Shemos 7:17*) presents a unique approach, which is quite revealing of the overall purpose of the entire plague "program." He explains that the plagues were intended to serve as a type of *shiur* (instruction) in *yesodos ha'emunah* (principles of faith). These ideas had been evident to man at the beginning of Creation but had become lost as the world descended into a morass of idolatry and confusion. The three groupings of R' Yehudah represent three distinct tenets that Hashem sought to clarify before the world and restore to man's awareness.

"I AM HASHEM"

It is interesting to note that the first plague in each of the three sets is accompanied by a verse delineating a particular principle. This verse serves as an introduction

of sorts, highlighting the specific idea that series was coming to reinforce.

In the first series (דְּצִי"ף), the opening plague is introduced by the following statement: "So says Hashem: 'Through this you shall know that I am Hashem'" (*Shemos 7:17*). Each of the three plagues of "series one" – דָּם (blood), צְפַרְדֵּי (frogs), and כִּנִּים (lice) – reinforced the plain truth of Hashem's existence. The Egyptians worshipped the Nile, mistakenly believing that it was a god. And so Hashem neutralized this false deity by turning it to blood. From this river emerged the frogs, which – Chazal tell us (*Pesachim 53b*) – were not your mere garden variety. They were in fact quite virtuous and brought further publicity to Hashem by publicly sanctifying His Name: they chose martyrdom and hurled themselves into the burning ovens of the Egyptians to fulfill Hashem's Word that they invade "your ovens and kneading troughs" (*Ibid. v. 28*). And, of course, it was through the plague of lice that the stubborn Egyptian sorcerers finally admitted that the plagues were evidence of "the Finger of Hashem" (*Ibid. 8:15*).

And so, by this time, it seems that at least a kernel of awakening had sprouted amongst the Egyptians. But their education was still far from complete.

"I AM HASHEM IN THE MIDST OF THE LAND"

While belatedly and begrudgingly recognizing Hashem's existence, the Egyptians had yet to absorb the concept of *Hashgachah P'ratis* – Divine Intervention. They mistakenly thought that Hashem was interested only in "the big things" but would not bother to involve Himself in the lives of individuals. This next series of plagues came to rectify this grave error.

Dedicated in loving memory of
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MISHNAS
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משנת היום

“THERE IS NONE LIKE ME”

Due in large measure to his hardened heart, Pharaoh was proving to be a slow learner. While having to concede the points of Hashem’s existence and intervention, he still clung to certain idolatrous notions. The Egyptians held the celestial spheres in high regard, attributing great power to the sun and the constellations. Pharaoh had yet to accept the Oneness of G-d; he believed that the celestial bodies actually “partnered” in running the world! To round out Pharaoh’s education, Hashem brought the final group of plagues (בָּרָד – hail; אַרְבֵּה – locusts; חוֹשֶׁךְ – darkness; and מַכַּת בְּכוֹרוֹת – the slaying of the firstborn). Their purpose was to remove any such lingering doubts and demonstrate clearly what was stated in the opening plague of בָּרָד: “There are no others like Me” (*Ibid.* 9:14).

The most obvious way to accomplish this feat would be to simply eliminate those luminaries. This possibility was addressed by the Mishnah in Avodah Zarah (4:7):

שָׁאֲלוּ אֶת הַזְּקֵנִים בְּרֹמֵי, אִם אֵין רְצוֹנוֹ בְּעִבּוּדָה זָרָה, לָמָּה אֵינוֹ מְבַטְּלָהּ. אָמְרוּ לָהֶן, אֱלֹהֵי לְדָבָר שָׂאֵין צָרָךְ לְעוֹלָם בּוֹ הֵיוּ עוֹבְדִין, הִיָּה מְבַטְּלוֹ. הֲרֵי הוּ עוֹבְדִין לַחֲמָה וְלַלְבָּנָה וְלַכּוֹכָבִים וְלַמַּזְלוֹת. וְיֵאבֵד עוֹלָמוֹ מִפְּנֵי הַשּׁוֹטִים?

“They asked the elders in Rome: ‘If Hashem is displeased with idolatry, why doesn’t He simply abolish it?’ They answered them: ‘Had the idolators worshipped some useless item, He would have done so; however, they worship the sun, moon, stars, and constellations. Should he destroy His world on account of some numbskulls?’”

Seeing as this was not an option, Hashem chose the next best thing: He temporarily suspended their illuminating power, which is the common theme of this last group of plagues. This is quite obvious for the plague of חוֹשֶׁךְ, as well as מַכַּת בְּכוֹרוֹת, which operated under cover of darkness. The other two plagues shared this feature as well, as the storm clouds of בָּרָד and the hordes of locusts effectively blocked out the sun (see 10:5).

Thus we find a recurring theme throughout the plagues of the עֲרוֹב grouping (representing עֲרוֹב – the conglomeration of wild animals; דָּבָר – pestilence; and שְׁחִין – boils). Each plague obliterated the Egyptians’ warped theory that world events were haphazard occurrences, as opposed to deliberate orchestrations of the Almighty. A mixed group of raucous, marauding beasts descended upon Egypt, but “somehow” coordinated their activities to harm only the Egyptians and leave every Jew untouched. After pestilence wiped out Egypt’s population of domesticated animals, Pharaoh’s inquiries revealed that not a single Jewish-owned animal had died. And the dust cloud which covered the entirety of the country bringing boils in its wake “coincidentally” affected only the Egyptians, while avoiding the Israelites. Clearly, a Guiding Hand was conducting these affairs, verifying the introductory statement made during the first plague of this series: “In order that you should know that I am Hashem (intimately involved in the affairs) ... of the land” (*Ibid.* v. 18).

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