**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Midrash on the Parasha**

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**Parashat Vaera:**

**The Ten Plagues in Rabbinic Literature**

**Introduction:**

**The Late Midrash**

In the previous *shiur,* we stated that over the course of our studies in the Book of *Shemot,* we would be concentrating on the development of *derashot* across Rabbinic literature, through the late Midrashic period. We will open this *shiur* with a brief introduction to the different eras of Midrashic literature, with emphasis on the late Midrash.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Aggadic materialappears in Rabbinic literature from its very inception. In the works of the Tannaim — the Mishna, Midrash Halakha and the Tosefta — it appears alongside halakhic material, as it does in the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds.

The Amoraim of Eretz Israel create a new genre of works dealing exclusively with Midrash in the 3rd to 5th centuries CE. The three classic works of the Midrash of Eretz Israel are *Bereishit Rabba*, *Vayikra Rabba* and *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*. In the following centuries, Midrashic works on the *Megillot* are compiled in Eretz Israel: *Eikha Rabba*, *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba*, *Rut Rabba* and *Kohelet Rabba*. The third group of Midrashic works is the late Midrash, which dates to the period of the Geonim and the Middle Ages. The late Midrash includes the following: *Midreshei Tanchuma-Yelammedenu*, *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, *Eliyahu Rabba*, *Bamidbar Rabba,* parts of *Shemot Rabba*, *Midrash Tehillim*, *Midrash Mishlei* and *Midrash Shemuel*. Some of these works are compiled in Eretz Israel, while others are not.

Thus, *Midrash Rabba* as we know it today is not a uniform work, but rather a collection of Midrashic material from different periods of time on the five books of the Torah. As stated, *Bereishit* and *Vayikra Rabba* are works composed by the Amoraim of Eretz Israel. *Devarim Rabba* and the second part of *Shemot Rabba* belong to the *Tanchuma* literature, while *Bamidbar Rabba* and the first part of *Shemot Rabba* are late works from the period of the Rishonim*.* Anyone who examines and compares these various works quickly sees the significant differences between them, in almost all respects: content, form of the *derasha*, structure, and the like.

The works of Midrash compiled in the later period contain early *derashot*, which at times appear in no other work. Thus, these works preserve Rabbinic traditions that would have been lost to us had they not been incorporated into the late Midrash.

**The Ten Plagues in Tannaitic Literature**

Studying a familiar topic from a new angle not only provides new insights, but also enables a mature encounter with the foundational bases of our heritage and culture. The Ten Plagues are familiar to us from early childhood, from the stories told by our kindergarten teachers, from the Haggada, and from Rashi's commentary to the Torah. Below, we will trace their appearance in aggadic literature, as we try to answer the questions: where in Rabbinic literature do we find the *midrashim* that underlie our early childhood version? Are they concentrated in a particular work or period, or do they appear throughout the course of Rabbinic literature?

The idea of the Ten Plagues is first formulated in the Mishna, in the fifth chapter of tractate *Avot*. Let us examine how they appear in the Mishna:

With ten [Divine] utterances the world was created. And what does this teach, for surely it could have been created with one utterance? But it is that penalty might be exacted from the wicked who destroy the world that was created with ten utterances, and to give a goodly reward to the righteous who maintain the world that was created with ten utterances.

[There were] ten generations from Adam to Noach, in order to make known how long-suffering is He; for all those generations provoked Him constantly, until He brought upon them the waters of the flood.

[There were] ten generations from Noach to Avraham, in order to make known how long-extended is long-suffering with Him; for all those generations provoked Him constantly, until Avraham, our father, came and received the reward of all of them.

With ten trials was Avraham, our father, proved, and he stood [firm] in them all; to make known how great was the love of Avraham, our father (peace be upon him).

Ten wonders were wrought for our fathers in Egypt, and ten at the Sea [of Reeds]. Ten plagues did the Holy One, blessed be He, bring upon the Egyptians in Egypt and ten at the Sea [of Reeds].

[With] ten trials did our fathers put to proof the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is stated: "Yet have they put Me to proof these ten times, and have not hearkened to My voice" (*Bamidbar* 14:22).

Ten wonders were wrought for our fathers in the Sanctuary...

Ten things were created on the eve of Shabbat at twilight… (*Avot* 5:1-6)

In the first part of Chapter 5 of *Avot* we find lists of sets of ten, seven, four and three items. The Ten Plagues appear in the first group of sets. This unit is delineated by the number ten: not only does every set include ten items, but there are also ten such sets, following the Ten Utterances. It is astonishing that among the things spelled out in the Mishna, we do not find the Ten Commandments, despite the fact that already in the Book of *Shemot* the Torah mentions them as a set of ten: "And he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he did neither eat bread, nor drink water. And he wrote upon the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten matters" (*Shemot* 34:28).[[2]](#footnote-2) The Mishna's choosing not to include them points to a clear conceptual goal on its part, which must be uncovered.

The number ten denotes wholeness, a circle, or an entire process. Thus, the unit begins and ends with the process of creation; at its beginning, the beginning of creation, and at its end, the last minute before sunset on the sixth day of creation. At the same time, it describes another process: the progression of human history from two thousand years of chaos, to the Temple standing in its place. It may be suggested that the Mishna deals with what is happening in the world and with the world's advancing from a situation in which there is no room or expression of God ("provoked Him constantly") to a situation in which the people of Israel have built the Temple, the site at which miraculous events are the norm.

The core of the unit — the four middle occurrences — is connected to Egypt: "Ten wonders were wrought for our fathers in Egypt, and ten at the Sea [of Reeds]. Ten plagues did the Holy One, blessed be He, bring upon the Egyptians in Egypt and ten at the Sea [of Reeds]." These four sets bring about the birth of the people of Israel, as they embark on their journey as God's people in the world. That each of these sets is sealed with the number ten points to the fact that each of them is perceived as a circle or as a full entity in itself. It may further be argued that the format of ten symbolizes a phenomenon that can effect a change in reality — just as ten Jewish men create a quorum (*minyan*) that allows for the resting of a higher level of holiness.

The Mishna draws a parallel between the miracles performed on behalf of Israel and the plagues brought upon Egypt. These miracles are not spelled out in the Torah, in contrast to the plagues.[[3]](#footnote-3) The plagues do not stand on their own, but rather they are part of the miracles. So too that which takes place in Egypt does not stand on its own, but rather is part of what is happening at the Splitting of the Sea.

The distinctive characteristic of the unit as dealing with groups of occurrences, rather than with a single occurrence in itself, reflects a view of human reality as a series of processes. These processes can lead humanity forward or backward. In the very midst of the process is the outstretched hand of God, who responds to the person or the nation in accordance with their actions, bringing them through a process parallel to the process they have initiated.

Our analysis portrays the whole of reality as processes within processes, a sort of symphony by an orchestra, each instrument of which has its own unique scales and sounds. If so, the Mishna presents the Jewish historiosophy that combines man's free choice with God's governance, which responds to man's choices, bringing the person or the nation through a process until they reach goodness and blessing.

*Avot de-Rabbi Natan* is a commentary on and expansion of *Avot*, which originated with the Tanna Rabbi Natan, a colleague of Rabbi Meir. It is conventionally seen as an aggadic work which preserves the original traditions of Eretz Israel, but it was edited in a later period.[[4]](#footnote-4) There are two versions of *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*.

Regarding the Mishna in question, in each of the versions we find a conceptual expansion regarding the Ten Plagues. Version A (33) sees internal symmetry between the ten trials given to Avraham and the Ten Plagues:

Corresponding to the ten trials by which Avraham, our father, was tested, and in each of them he was found whole… corresponding to them the Holy One, blessed be He, brought the Ten Plagues.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In contrast, in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, Version B (36), emphasis is placed on the impact of the plagues in Egypt upon the sanctification of God's name in the world:

Ten miracles were performed on behalf of our fathers in Egypt and ten at the Sea [of Reeds], in order to tell you the dearness of Israel. The Holy One, blessed be He, brought ten plagues on the Egyptians in Egypt and ten at the Sea, to inform you of the might of God.

The idea brought in version B is spelled out explicitly in the words of the Tannaim in the *Sifrei (Ha’azinu* 306):

And from where do we derive that God brought punishment and the Ten Plagues on Pharaoh and on Egypt only in order to sanctify His great name in the world? For at the beginning it is stated: “Who is the Lord that I should hearken to His voice?” (*Shemot* 5:2); and at the end it is stated: “The Lord is righteous, and I and my people are wicked” (*Shemot* 9:27).

Like the Mishna, the *Sifrei* relates to the Ten Plagues as a whole, and not to each plague by itself. Similarly, we find the following in other Tannaitic sources:

Rabbi Yosei the Galilean states:

From where [do you say] that the Egyptians in Egypt were struck with ten plagues and at the Sea with fifty plagues?

In Egypt, what does it say? "Then the magicians said to Pharaoh: This is the finger of God" (*Shemot* 8:15).

And at the Sea what does it say? "And Israel saw the great hand [which the Lord wielded against the Egyptians]" (*Shemot* 14:31).

How much were they struck with the finger? Ten plagues.

Say then that in Egypt they were struck with ten plagues, and at the Sea they were struck with fifty plagues.

Rabbi Eliezer says:

From where do you say that every plague with which the Egyptians in Egypt were struck was four plagues…?

As it is stated: "He sent forth upon them the fierceness of His anger, wrath, and indignation, and trouble, a sending of messengers of evil" (*Tehillim* 78:49).

"Anger," one; "and indignation," two; "and trouble," three; "a sending of messengers of evil," four.

Say now that in Egypt they were struck with forty plagues, and at the Sea they were struck with two hundred plagues

Rabbi Akiva says:

From where do you say that every plague with which the Egyptians in Egypt were struck was five plagues… and at the Sea they were struck with two hundred and fifty plagues?

As it is stated: "He sent forth upon them the fierceness of His anger…"

Say now that in Egypt they were struck with fifty plagues, and at the Sea they were struck with two hundred and fifty plagues. (*Mekhilta de-Rashbi* 14, 31)

They said: This staff [of Moshe] was of sapphire, it imposed punishment, it brought ten plagues on the Egyptians in Egypt and ten at the Sea. (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Beshalach, Vayisa*, 6)

They [the servants of Pharaoh] said: Had we been struck and not sent [them] away, it would have been enough for us, but we were struck and sent [them] away. Or had we been struck, and sent [them] away, and they had not taken our money, it would have been enough for us, but we were struck, and sent [them] away, and they took our money.

To what may this be likened? To one who said to his servant: Go out and bring me a fish from the market. He went out and brought a spoiled fish from the market. He said to him: A decree: Either eat the fish, or be struck with a hundred lashes, or give me a hundred talents. He said to him: I will eat it. He started to eat it, but he didn't have a chance to finish, before he said: I will be beaten. He was struck with sixty lashes, but he didn't have a chance to finish, before he said: I will give a hundred talents. It turns out that he ate the fish, he was whipped, and he gave a hundred talents.

This is what was done to Egypt. They were struck, and their money was taken. (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael Beshalach, Vayhi*, 1)

Thus, we may see here a trend that characterizes the literature of the Tannaim.

**The Amoraim of Eretz Israel**

In *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*, one of the classic aggadic works of the Amoraim of Eretz Israel, we find two all-embracing references to the Ten Plagues:

Rabbi Levi bar Zekharya said in the name of Rabbi Berekhya:

He [God] came upon them in the order in which kings go to war.

First He dammed up their water channel.

And then He brought shouters against them.

And then He shot arrows at them.

And then He brought legions against them.

And then He brought a heavy pestilence against them.

And then He threw naphtha upon them.

And then He cast stones thrown from the catapult.

And then He set conquerors upon them.

And then He detained them in prisons.

And then He took out the greatest among them and killed him.

He first dammed up their water channel: "And He turned their rivers into blood" (*Tehillim* 78:44).

And then He brought shouters against them: the frogs. Rabbi Yosei bar Chanina said: Their croaking was harder for them to bear than [the frogs] themselves.

And then He shot arrows at them: the lice.

And then He brought legions against them: the wild animals.

And then He brought a heavy pestilence against them: "a very heavy pestilence" (*Shemot* 9:3).

And then He threw naphtha upon them: the boils.

And then He cast stones thrown from the catapult: the hail.

And then He set conquerors upon them: the locusts.

And then He detained them in prisons: the darkness.

And then He took out the greatest among them and killed him: the plague of the firstborns.

Rabbi Levi said in the name of Rabbi Chama bar Rabbi Chanina:

He who punished the first ones will punish the last ones.

Just as in Egypt there was blood, so too in Edom…

Just as in Egypt there were frogs, so too in Edom…

Just as in Egypt there were lice, so too in Edom…

Just as in Egypt there were wild beasts, so too in Edom…

Just as in Egypt there was pestilence, so too in Edom…

Just as in Egypt there were boils, so too in Edom…

Just as in Egypt there was hail, so too in Edom…

Just as in Egypt there were locusts, so too in Edom…

Just as in Egypt there was darkness, so too in Edom…

Just as in Egypt He killed the greatest among them, so too in Edom… (*Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 7)

The first *derasha* is that of Rabbi Berekhya, a third-generation Amora of Eretz Israel. The second *derasha* is reported in the name of Rabbi Chama bar Chanina, an Amora of Eretz Israel of the second generation, the generation of Rabbi Yochanan. Following in the path of the Tannaim, both *derashot* relate to the Ten Plagues as a whole, but each one in a different direction. Rabbi Chama bar Chana copies the pattern of the Ten Plagues from the first redemption to the last redemption, whereas Rabbi Berekhya puts forward an overall explanation for the plagues, which relates also to the internal logic of the order in which they are brought against the Egyptians. On the one hand, his explanation is practical; on the other hand, it presents the Egyptians as enemies of God, against whom He engages in battle. The Ten Plagues are not a measure-for-measure punishment, nor are they intended to teach faith (as we saw above in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*); rather, they are meant to bring Egypt to a state of absolute defeat.[[6]](#footnote-6) The war against Israel's enslaver is the most direct expression of God's mighty hand and outstretched arm.

**The Late Midrash**

The late Midrash expands and develops the overall conceptual framework of the Ten Plagues.[[7]](#footnote-7) In addition, it has unique characteristics that are not found earlier in the Midrashic literature: considering the experience of the Egyptians and of the Israelites at the time of the plagues, and the manner in which things proceed. This is also the source of the beloved kindergarten stories over the generations, the treasured legacies of the collective Jewish consciousness.

Let us take a look at one example from the *Tanchuma* literature, which deals with the plague of blood. We will first cite the relevant verses:

Thus says the Lord: In this you shall know that I am the Lord. Behold, I will strike with the rod that is in my hand upon the waters which are in the river, and they shall be turned to blood. And the fish that are in the river shall die, and the river shall become foul; and the Egyptians shall loathe to drink water from the river.

And the Lord said to Moshe: Say to Aharon: Take your rod, and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their rivers, over their streams, and over their pools, and over all their ponds of water, that they may become blood; and there shall be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, both in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone. (*Shemot* 7:17-20)

*Midrash Tanchuma* explains:

Why did He first bring upon them the plague of blood?

Because Pharaoh and the Egyptians worshipped the Nile.

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe: Go, and strike their god…

Therefore: "Behold I will strike" (*Shemot* 7:17).

See what is written: "Over their rivers" (*Shemot* 7:19).

What is: "Over their rivers"?

Wherever water was found, they turned into blood.

What is: "Over all their ponds of water"?

Even what was in a pitcher turned into blood.

And even that which an Egyptian spit from his mouth turned into blood.

As it is stated: "And there shall be blood throughout the land of Egypt."

Rabbi Avin Ha-Levi said: Israel became enriched from the plague of blood.

How so?

An Egyptian and an Israelite were found in one house, and the tank was full of water.

The Egyptian would go to fill a pitcher from it, and it turned into blood.

And the Israelite would go and drink water from it.

So the Egyptian would say: Give me a little water in your hand.

And he would give him, but in the hand of the Egyptian it was found to be blood.

Then he would say to him: Come you and I, let us drink from the bowl.

But the Israelite would drink water, and the Egyptian would drink blood.

Still, when the Egyptian would purchase water from the Israelite, he could drink water.

Therefore, Israel became enriched from the plague of blood. (*Tanchuma*, ed. Buber, *Va'era* 14)

The *derasha* opens with a question about the plague of blood. In contrast to the literature of the Tannaim and the early Midrash of Eretz Israel, the late Midrash stops relating to the Ten Plagues as a whole and focuses on one of the plagues in itself. There are two parts to the *derasha:* an exposition of the words of the verses, which emphasizes the all-embracing nature of the plague in relation to all collections of water, natural and artificial; and a story that explains the assertion appearing at the beginning of the *derasha* that Israel becomes enriched by virtue of the plague of blood. The first part creates the backdrop for what happens in the second part: since water is not obtainable in Egypt, the Egyptian needs the help of the Jew in order to survive.

The Midrash portrays the phenomenon of water’s turning into blood through a dialogue between an Egyptian and an Israelite in the same house who drink from the same pitcher, explicating the terms of the miracle. Water does not turn into blood as a one-time event; rather, it is an ongoing miracle, in which both the characters — Israelite and Egyptian — become aware of the providence of God resting upon the Israelite. There is a playful tone in the dialogue that echoes the fact that the Jew in exile is not used to being the one who enjoys the upper hand and is in control of the situation, finding expression in the fact that the solution found for the Egyptian involves payment made to the Jew for the water.

Midrashic and aggadic literature record the heartbeat of the Jewish nation. From dealing with the Ten Plagues in concept and as consciousness, it transitions into the realities of life within the great event of the deliverance from Egypt. This allows one to fulfill the obligation to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt, to the point of seeing oneself as having been personally taken out of Egypt.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. For more on the late Midrash, see Anat Raisel, *Mavo La-midrashim* (Alon Shevut: 2012); Yona Frankel, *Midrash Ve-aggada*, Vol. 3 (Tel Aviv: 1997), pp. 839-844. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Similarly *Devarim* 4:13; 10:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Rashi, *Avot* 5:4; commentary of Rabbi Matityahu Yitzhari (14th-15th century, Spain), ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For an expanded discussion regarding *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, see Frankel, ibid. (above, note 1), Vol. 2, pp. 525-533. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In the continuation there, it says: "Egypt roared against them, so too the Holy One, blessed be He, roared against them… Egypt came against them with bow and arrows, so too the Holy One, blessed be He, came against them with bow and arrows." It is not clear whether or not this section is an addition, and therefore we will not not elaborate upon it here. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It is possible to see in the conceptual directions emerging from the Midrash an expression of the perceptions that emerge from the words of the Rishonimabout the role of miracles in the Exodus and in the wilderness. See *Kuzari*, I, 83-88; Rambam, *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*, Chap. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The *Tanchuma* (Buber), *Bo*, 5, brings the two *derashot* appearing in *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* discussed above, alongside an additional *derasha*, which explains the plagues that are brought as a reflection of the Egyptian schemes to achieve Israel's enslavement, measure for measure: "Everything that the Egyptians thought [to do] against Israel, the Holy One, blessed be He, brought against them…." This idea is found also in *Tanchuma* (Warsaw), *Va'era* 14, and in *Shemot Rabba* 10, 12-13. For a different direction, see *Pesikta Rabbati* 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)