YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Yishai Jeselsohn**

**PARASHAT SHEMOT**

**Signs**

**I. Signs Regarding the Past and the Future**

In various places in Tanakh, we come across prophets and leaders who ask God for a sign, or *ot*.

For instance, Gidon, in the book of *Shoftim*, asks:

And he said to him: If now I have found favor in Your sight, then show me a sign [*ot*] that it is You that talks with me. (*Shoftim* 6:17)

Gidon is answered with a fire that goes up out of the rock and consumes the meat and the *matzot* that he had prepared as an offering. Afterwards, Gidon asks again, for signs via dew on a fleece of wool and then on the ground (ibid. 36-40).

Shaul, after having been anointed as king by Shmuel, also receives a series of signs to prove that God is indeed with him:

And let it be, when these signs [*otot*] come to you, that you do as your hand shall find; for God is with you. (I *Shmuel* 10:7)

So too in our *parasha*, Moshe receives three signs to demonstrate his trustworthiness to the people of Israel. He experiences two of them at the burning bush – his staff turning into a serpent and his hand becoming leprous. In contrast, God describes the third sign, turning the water of the river into blood, but Moshe does not actually experience it.

Indeed, when Moshe meets the people, the signs help his words to be accepted by them:

And Aharon spoke all the words which the Lord had spoken to Moshe, and he did the signs [*otot*] in the sight of the people. And the people believed. (*Shemot* 4:30-31)

The word *ot* is also often used in the Torah to describe physical actions that show the connection between man or Israel and God. Thus it is stated about the rainbow:

I have set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign [*ot*] of a covenant between Me and the earth. (*Bereishit* 9:13)

 So too regarding circumcision:

And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a sign [*ot*]of a covenant between Me and you. (*Bereishit* 17:11)

The word "*ot*" is also used regarding *tefillin*:

And it shall be for a sign [*ot*] to you upon your hand, and for a memorial between your eyes, that the law of the Lord may be in your mouth; for with a strong hand has the Lord brought you out of Egypt. (*Shemot* 13:9)

So too in many other places.[[1]](#footnote-1) These signs are not random; rather, there is a close connection between them and the messages they signify. Thus, the rainbow in the cloud expresses in precise fashion the meaning of peace (both through the form of the rainbow, and its appearance after the rain in a context reminiscent of the flood); circumcision symbolizes a sacrifice offered to God; and in the *tefillin,* the ideas that must be remembered are written explicitly, black on white.

In contrast, the signs given to Moshe in our *parasha* come to testify about the future. On the face of it, we are dealing with a completely different type of "sign" – not a sign that serves as a reminder about the past, but one that serves as proof about the future.

**II. Arbitrary or essential?**

Regarding the signs given to Moshe and others like them, the question may be raised: Does the content of the sign itself come to teach something to the prophet or the people? Or is there no particular significance to the content of the sign, and its entire importance lies in the fact that it proves the superiority of the prophet and his supernatural ability?

With regard to the leprosy that appeared on Moshe's hand, various commentators demonstrated that there is indeed meaning in the content of the sign. *Pesikta Zutarta* offers two explanations, one of which conveys a message to Moshe himself and the other to the people of Israel:

"And the Lord said furthermore to him: Put now your hand into your bosom… behold, his hand was leprous, as white as snow" (*Shemot* 4:6). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: You said: "But, behold, they will not believe me" (*Shemot* 4:1), but I know that they are believers, descendants of believers. For it is written: "And he believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness" (*Bereishit* 15:6). By your life, you will be afflicted with leprosy, for whoever slanders his fellow is afflicted with it, as it is stated: "This shall be the law of the leper [*metzora*]" (*Vayikra* 14:2) – he who slanders [*motzi ra*]. Therefore, "Behold, his hand was leprous, as white as snow."

Another explanation: Because Israel was under the hand of the impure in Egypt, and in the future they will be purified. (*Pesikta Zutarta* 4:6)

The content of the sign can indeed be explained as relating to Moshe or to the people, for both of them were to see it.

It is certainly possible to suggest that the signs that Moshe was commanded to experience at the time of the burning bush contain a message directed to Moshe, for he performs them on his own, before entering the presence of the people. It is possible that Moshe as well needed persuasion and therefore he had to perform the signs. However, even then, one must ask whether it is the very power and greatness of God (which Moshe had already witnessed when he saw the bush burning without being consumed) that convinces Moshe to set off on the Divine mission, or whether it is something in the content of the signs that causes him to do so.

**III. "And everything is Yours"**

Rabbi S. R. Hirsch explains that the two signs come to show that all of nature, even things that seem to be entirely subject to human control, are also, in fact, subject to God's control:

What is a staff? The most natural emblem of man's mastery over nature. A stick, a staff has a double function (which has a corresponding double meaning in the root *nata* which means incline, to lean, and also to stretch over something). A staff is (a) an elongation of the hand by which a man supports himself on the ground and (b) an elongation and extension of the sphere of his power, and sign of his mastery. So the people are to be shown by Moshe: that, on which man leans and supports himself, and by which he commands, will, if and when God wishes it, change to the very opposite, to a snake. All animals attach themselves more or less to man, but the snake has enmity hidden within him towards man. Man runs away from the serpent.

Hence: that One has sent you, who when He so wills, makes the very thing on which man reckons he supports himself, and which serves him as a means of his mastery, rise up against him; and the reverse: that which now stands against him as a fearsome enemy force, changes at His will to an accommodating support and to an obedient tool in his hand. But just this proclaims your sender as God, as the one on whose will depends every coming moment, every moment of the future. (Rabbi S. R. Hirsch, commentary to *Shemot* 4:5)

Rabbi Hirsch sees the serpent as an animal that is clearly not under man's control and the staff as a symbol of things that are under his control. In this way, God comes to show Moshe that even the most human things are subject to Him.

This message is sharpened by the sign of the leprous hand:

To place one's hand in one's bosom and thereby make it leprous, and to place it there again and thereby make it healthy, is by itself a sign that one is sent by God. It teaches, that not only the staff, but also the hand that holds and guides it, is in God's power. (Ibid., v. 7)

Rabbi Hirsch's words correspond well with the plain meaning of the words uttered to Moshe at the burning bush:

And the Lord said to him: Who has made man's mouth? or who makes a man dumb, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I the Lord? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth, and teach you what you shall speak. (*Shemot* 4:11-12)

God is not subject to the laws of nature because it is He who created them. Thus, He is capable of bringing salvation even in a situation that seems to be lost, such as Israel's situation in Egypt.

According to Rabbi Hirsch, the essence of the sign performed with the staff is turning the staff, which represents man's control over the world, into a snake. According to this understanding, the signs are directed toward Moshe, who has qualms about God's mission on the grounds that he is not fit for it, as well as toward the people who may not believe in God's ability to take them out from such a great affliction.

**IV. "But you may rule over it"**

The *Or Ha-Chaim*, on the other hand,explains the sign of the staff in an almost opposite manner. According to him, the emphasis is not only on turning the staff into a serpent, but also on the opposite process – turning the serpent back into a staff. As usual, the *Or Ha-Chaim's* explanation, apart from its great originality, is also a practical and important guide in the service of God. He writes as follows:

"And it became a serpent." This sign comes to hint that the forces of the *kelipa* ["husk"] relate to the serpent. Go out and learn from the primeval serpent that it represents "*sam*," something potentially poisonous. (*Or Ha-Chaim* 4:3)

The serpent was understood by the *Or Ha-Chaim* as symbolizing the evil inclination and the *sitra achra* ["the other side," i.e., the aspect of impurity] already in *Parashat Bereishit* [[see *shiur* there](https://etzion.org.il/he/tanakh/torah/sefer-bereishit/parashat-bereishit/vayinachem-Hashem-al-mashmauta-shel-habechira)]. Indeed, the serpent has been associated with the world of sin from the time of creation. He is the first to tempt and incite man to sin (*Bereishit*, chapter 3), thus symbolizing the root of the lust for sin.

This symbolism of the serpent appears in the *Or Ha-Chaim* in other places as well,[[2]](#footnote-2) and plays a central role in the understanding of our passage, as stated later in the *Or Ha-Chaim*:

God hinted to Moshe that his hands possessed the enormous power to neutralize the power of the serpent and turn it into a dry piece of wood. But when he lets go of it and casts it away, it turns back into a serpent, causing Moshe to flee from it. (Ibid.)

God demonstrates to Moshe that it is his grip on the staff that prevents the dry and harmless piece of wood from turning into the evil inclination. What does this mean? In contrast to Rabbi Hirsch, who interpreted the signs as coming to diminish man's actions in relationship to God’s, the *Or Ha-Chaim* seems to see matters in a completely opposite way: *the signs come to magnify the significance of man's actions*.

When Moshe holds the staff, he does not pay attention to the potential inherent in it to serve as a serpent. The same is true about man in general. When he grasps the good, he does not notice that the very same good can turn into evil. The evil inclination is not something that acts on a person haphazardly and without discrimination. However, man has the power to rule over it:

If you do well, shall it not be lifted up? and if you do not well, sin crouches at the door; and to you is its desire, but you may rule over it. (*Bereishit* 4:7)

As long as a person wages war against his evil inclination and holds it close and tight, he can use it as a staff that helps him in his ways and actions. But the moment he weakens his hold, the staff suddenly turns into an unbearable serpent:

"And he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent." In a single moment it became a serpent. The words "on the ground" intimate that in the eyes of the serpent, the earth assumes great significance, as it is the source of its food and it is important to it. (*Or Ha-Chaim,* ibid.)

At this moment, the most mundane and physical things, like the dust of the earth, become precious and important – this is one of the evil inclination's modes of operation.

As stated, while for Rabbi Hirsch the essence of the sign lies in the staff's being turned into a serpent, for the *Or Ha-Chaim*,the message in the second half of the sign is no less significant, and perhaps even more so:

When God instructed Moshe: "Put forth your hand," He wished to show him that even though he had already lost control of what had been his staff, he still had the power to regain control over it and remove its power. (Ibid.)

Even if a person let go of the good and the evil inclination already reached its serpentine form, it is still within the person's power to go back and seize control of it. The *Or Ha-Chaim* spells out how this should be done, and finds important symbolism in the precise wording of Scripture:

When God instructed Moshe: "And take it by its tail," and not "And take it," he meant to say that the danger of a snake is when one grabs it by the tail. For if he wisely grabs it by the head and crushes it, there is no longer any danger from the tail. Therefore, God said to him: Grab it even by the tail without fear. And so it says: "And he laid hold of it," that is, he took hold of the nearest part of the snake without fear. And it became a staff when he took it into his hand. That is to say, when it touched Moshe's hand, it immediately lost its power, and became void of vitality. This is what is meant by: "And it became a staff in his hand." (Ibid.)

Grabbing a serpent by its head is scary and difficult, because the serpent bites; it has teeth and perhaps venom. In parallel fashion, confronting the evil inclination face to face is not always an easy task, and this can sometimes cast a person into great despair. For this reason, God gives Moshe a simple piece of advice, which we can also apply to ourselves – to grab the evil inclination by its tail. Not to start battling it face to face, but to come at with guile and strategies.

The *Or Ha-Chaim* adds that just as the evil inclination immediately turns into difficult and complicated desires when one loosens his grip and loses control over it, the opposite is also true: as soon as one takes hold of it, it immediately turns back into a staff and is once again subject to his control.

The ability to control the evil inclination and to impose one's rational faculties over one's emotions and desires is a basic quality in the service of God in general, and in the work of building one's character and fighting the evil inclination in particular. And that is what God is teaching here through this sign that was given to Moshe and the people of Israel:

God taught Moshe many things with this, also that he should perform the sign itself for Israel. (Ibid.)

Moshe needs to understand that the decision to muster his mental faculties and stand before Pharaoh and Israel depends not on God, but on him. As long as he remains steadfast in his refusal, he will indeed have a hard time and will not be able to stand before Pharaoh. But when he fully believes and grabs hold of the evil inclination that prevents him from going on God's mission, he will enjoy success.

**V. *Tanin* or *nachash*?**

This interpretation of the *Or Ha-Chaim* can explain an interesting point regarding the similar, but subtly different, sign that Moshe and Aharon perform before Pharaoh in *Parashat Va'era*:

When Pharaoh shall speak to you, saying: Show a wonder for you; then you shall say to Aharon: Take your staff, and cast it down before Pharaoh, that it become a *tanin*. (*Shemot* 7:9)

The signs in our *parasha* are performed by Moshe, and the staff turns into a *nachash*, "serpent."In the meeting with Pharaoh, Aharon performs the sign instead of Moshe, and the staff turns into a *tanin* rather than a *nachash*. The commentators struggle to explain the difference between a *tanin* and a *nachash*, with the majority (and there is a source for this already in the *midrashim*[[3]](#footnote-3)) explaining that a *tanin* and a *nachash* are essentially the same thing, in one form or another.

If we follow the path of the *Or Ha-Chaim*, however, the explanation of this difference is simple. The essence of turning the staff into a serpent was to demonstrate man's ability to overcome his evil inclination. With Pharaoh, the exact opposite takes place – his evil inclination becomes part of him. At first he hardens his heart, but ultimately, God makes it happen from above. Moshe and Aharon have no interest in teaching Pharaoh how to take control of his evil inclination, and therefore it is clear and simple why the staff turns into a different creature.

If we wish to take the matter one step further, we can try to explain the "sign" performed for Pharaoh based on the same principle. This is related to another difference between the two signs: In *Parashat Shemot*,Moshe is commanded to turn the serpent back into a staff, whereas with Aharon and Pharaoh, this stage is not mentioned. Apparently, there is little importance in turning the *tanin* back into a staff, and it is not part of the lesson God wishes to teach us by way of the sign. It seems that we can suggest that the *tanin* comes to symbolize Pharaoh – who is described in the book of *Yechezkel* as a great *tanin* in the river:

Speak, and say: Thus says the Lord God: behold, I am against you, Pharaoh King of Egypt, the great monster [*tanin*] that lies in the midst of his rivers, that has said: My river is mine own, and I have made it for myself. (*Yechezkel* 29:3)

Presumably, the great *tanin* is a big and scary creature. Perhaps, this is why the Torah explicitly states in *Parashat Bereishit* that even it, with all its majesty and greatness, was created by God:

And God created the great sea monsters [*taninim*]. (*Bereishit* 1:21)

The sign here comes to show Pharaoh that God created him and not the other way around – that is why the *tanin* was chosen, the creature to which Pharaoh likens himself. Thus, the purpose of the sign is to show that it is the Creator of the world who created Pharaoh. Now it is clear why turning the staff into a *tanin* suffices, without regard to turning it back.

Of course, Pharaoh does not understand the sign, and shows that he too has the power to create *taninim* – but God emphasizes that His *tanin* has the power to swallow up and destroy Pharaoh.

In this week's *shiur*, we explored the meaning of signs in general, and in particular we tried to understand the lesson we can learn from Moshe's sign of the serpent.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. See *Shemot* 31:13; *Bamidbar* 17:3; 17:25; *Devarim* 28:46; *Yeshayahu* 19:20; *Yechezkel* 20:12; *Tehillim* 135:9; *Nechemia* 9:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, for example, *Bamidbar* 23:22. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See *Pesikta Zutarta*, *Shemot* 7:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)