**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**From Slavery to Redemption**

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**Shiur #27: Power on Display: The Contest in Pharaoh’s Court**

Set against the backdrop of a bustling palace, a showdown between Pharaoh’s representatives and God’s messengers unfolds before the full Egyptian court. The grandeur of the royal setting heightens the moment’s significance, as the halls of power become the stage for a dramatic confrontation. Far from a private exchange, this spectacle is witnessed by Pharaoh’s entire household.

At the heart of the scene is a battle of power with the spotlight fixed on two opposing forces: God’s messengers, Moses and Aaron, stand resolutely on one side, while Pharaoh’s various agents – his sages, sorcerers, and magicians – align against them. This is not simply a demonstration of miracles; it is a test of power, a symbolic clash between divine truth and human arrogance, between God's will and Pharaoh’s resistance. The presence of an audience, including passive observers as well as active participants, underscores the political and spiritual stakes of the encounter.

The episode concludes with an unmistakable victory for Aaron. If the staff represents authority, then it is significant that Aaron’s staff – not Moses’ – devours those of the magicians. In addition to symbolizing the undeniable supremacy of God’s power over Pharaoh’s illusion of control, the staff highlights the fact that Moses’ role remains subdued in this particular confrontation, with Aaron taking center stage.

Nonetheless, some place greater emphasis on Moses' role in the encounter. For example, Abravanel offers a striking suggestion that the *tannin* serves as a metaphor for Moses himself. Just as the *tannin* – a sea creature, presumably a crocodile – emerges as the dominant force in this encounter, so too did Moses, who was drawn from the water, rise to confront and ultimately overpower all other *tanninim* – namely, Pharaoh’s magicians. In this reading, the miracle not only demonstrates divine power but also foreshadows Moses’ own triumph over the forces of Egypt.

[Moses] emerged from the waters of Egypt like the *tannin* and he will do what he wishes in front of Pharaoh. Although [Pharaoh’s] magicians and sages will try to do as [Moses] did, this *tannin* [namely, Moses] will swallow their *tanninim*; this hints that they will be shamed and humiliated and will not be able to stand before Moses because of his authority. God hints to this when he commands that the staff shall become a *tannin* that came out of the Nile. (Abravanel, *Shemot* 7)

The following *midrash* also shifts the focus onto Moses, portraying him as the true figure of dominance in this scene. Dismissing Pharaoh’s blustering bravado, the *midrash* does not merely assert Moses’ superiority over Pharaoh’s servants and magicians; it proclaims his supremacy over Pharaoh himself. In this reading, the contest is not just between divine messengers and royal lackeys but between Moses and the king of Egypt, emphasizing the inevitable downfall of Pharaoh’s authority in the face of God's chosen leader.

Why did he tell them to perform the miracle of the *tannin*? Because Pharaoh is compared to a *tannin*, as it says: “The great *tannim* who crouches in his Nile rivers” (*Yechezkel* 29:3).[[1]](#footnote-1) When Moses would exit from Pharaoh’s presence, Pharaoh would say: “If the son of Amram will come to me [again], I will kill him; I will crucify him; I will burn him!” Yet when Moses would enter [again], Pharaoh would immediately become [petrified like] a staff. (*Shemot* *Rabbah* 9:4)

There is little doubt, however, that the true focus of this showdown is neither Aaron nor Moses, but God Himself. Staged before Pharaoh, the episode serves as a public demonstration of divine supremacy, making it clear – both to Pharaoh and to all who witness it – that God’s power far surpasses that of Egypt’s ruler.

God said, “This wicked one is arrogant and calls himself a *tannin*, as it is written, ‘The great *tannim*’ (*Yechezkel* 29:3). Go and say to him: ‘See, this staff is dry wood, and it will become a *tannin* and will have breath and life. Then it will swallow all the staffs and, in the end, return to dry wood. So too, I have created you from a fetid drop, and I gave you kingship. You became arrogant and said, “This is my Nile and I created it!” So, I will now return you to void and chaos (*tohu* *va-vohu*).’” (*Yalkut* *Shimoni* *Shemot* 181)

The effortless demonstration of divine control over the *tannin*, a symbol of Pharaoh, as well as over the staff that represents Pharaoh’s authority,[[2]](#footnote-2) highlights the ease with which a staff can be transformed into a *tannin* and back again at will. This display of power serves as a potent reminder that God created humans and He can just as effortlessly return them to a lifeless state.

God “brings death and gives life.” At His command, inanimate objects come to life and living beings are reduced to lifelessness.[[3]](#footnote-3) Unlike God, all humans are inherently mortal – including Pharaoh, who arrogantly presents himself as divine. Beneath this *midrash* lies an implicit warning: any human who exalts himself as a godlike creator will inevitably be confronted with his own mortality, shattering his illusion of divinity.

And yet, ever defiant, Pharaoh remains steadfast in his refusal to acknowledge God's superiority, a stance he will maintain throughout the plague narrative. His initial response to Aaron’s act is strikingly unshaken; rather than expressing awe or concern, he coolly summons his sages, sorcerers, and magicians, who effortlessly replicate the wonder. After all, Egypt is renowned for its mastery of magic.[[4]](#footnote-4) This dismissive attitude toward God’s miracles inspires a midrashic depiction of the utter scorn in Pharaoh’s reaction, as he trivializes Aaron’s display as nothing more than a common trick unworthy of serious attention:

Pharaoh began to mock them, and he crowed after them like a rooster, and said to them, “These are the signs of your God?... Do you not know that all sorcery is in my possession?” Immediately he sent for and brought young children from school, and even they were able to perform thus! And not only that, but he called his wife, and *she* performed thus! (*Shemot* *Rabbah* 9:6)

Having successfully replicated the very wonder performed by God's messengers, Pharaoh likely perceives himself as victorious in this confrontation. But the episode does not end there. The true climax arrives in *Shemot* 7:12, when Aaron’s staff swallows those of the Egyptian magicians.[[5]](#footnote-5) This act serves as a powerful metaphor for the ease with which God will ultimately dismantle Pharaoh’s authority. Pharaoh has wielded his power not just to rule but to oppress, consuming the lives and dignity of an entire nation. The *midrash* applies the imagery of swallowing to capture this idea as well:

You swallowed all the staffs of the tribes of Israel; behold, I will remove that which you swallowed from your mouth. (*Yalkut* *Shimoni* *Shemot* 181)

Pharaoh, who has relentlessly consumed Israel in his grasp, will now be forced to release them. Because Pharaoh abused his authority to subjugate and conquer, God will ensure that his own staff – i.e., his power – is defeated. Aaron’s staff swallowing those of Pharaoh’s magicians serves as a striking demonstration: the authority of God will overpower the might of Egypt, proving that divine supremacy will ultimately triumph over human tyranny.[[6]](#footnote-6)

To Pharaoh’s servants – and certainly to the powerless Israelite slaves – Pharaoh’s might must have seemed immutable. One can only imagine the Egyptians’ cheers and celebrations (and the Hebrews’ despair) as their magicians initially matched Aaron’s wonder. Yet, God can overturn realities in an instant. A fleeting victory can collapse; a moment of triumph can fade into insignificance. One seemingly insignificant staff can swallow an entire array of staffs, just as thin cows can consume fat cows.[[7]](#footnote-7) Empires rise and fall. Wealth and power vanish without warning. And even the greatest of rulers – Pharaoh himself – can be cast down into oblivion, swallowed by the watery depths, never to rise again.

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Following the dramatic episode in which Aaron’s staff swallows those of Pharaoh’s servants, the narrative shifts to its central focus: the ten plagues, beginning with the plague of blood. Before delving into the details of each plague, we will dedicate the following three installments to introducing the plague narrative as a whole. These essays will examine the narrative’s literary structure, recurring patterns, and significant deviations. Our primary goal will be to uncover the overarching purpose of the ten plagues and their role in shaping the broader themes of the Exodus story.

1. This *midrash* conflates the *tannin* and *tannim* without explanation. While the word *tannim* in Tanakh typically refers to a jackal (e.g., *Yeshayahu* 13:22, 34:13; *Yirmiyahu* 9:10, 51:37; *Micha* 1:8), in *Yechezkel* 29:3 and 32:2, it appears to denote a sea creature, perhaps synonymous with a *tannin*. See Abravanel on *Yechezkel* 29:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As noted, the staff represents authority – not only Pharaoh’s but also God’s. It can also symbolize punishment, as suggested in *Shemot Rabbah* 9:2, where God instructs Aaron to wield his staff as a warning of the impending judgment against Pharaoh. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As noted in *Shemot* 4, the transformation of a staff into a snake also demonstrates God’s power to restore life to the lifeless. Just as a seemingly inert piece of wood can be imbued with vitality, so too can an enslaved Israel – appearing like a withered, eviscerated remnant – be revived. Even a nation on the brink of spiritual and physical demise can be restored by God's will. This idea reappears in God’s promise to Yechezkel, where the vision of dry bones symbolizes Israel’s spiritless, despondent state. Just as God can bring the dead back to life, He can redeem His people from exile and slavery, reviving them as a living, thriving nation. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As is often the case with despotic rulers, Pharaoh seems more preoccupied with showcasing his own power than with protecting his own people. Instead of being alarmed by Aaron’s *tannin*, he escalates the spectacle, summoning his magicians to flood the palace with even more of these creatures. This moment foreshadows Pharaoh’s ironic pattern throughout the plague narrative, in which his relentless desire to outmatch his opponents repeatedly worsens Egypt’s suffering. In a misguided display of dominance, his sorcerers do not alleviate the plagues but intensify them, turning more water to blood (7:22), summoning additional frogs (8:3), and trying (but ultimately failing) to replicate the plague of lice (8:14). Pharaoh’s pride, rather than weakening his adversaries, only deepens the affliction of his own people. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The word *bala* (to swallow) appears again in the book of *Shemot* at the climactic moment of divine victory at the Reed Sea (15:12). There, as in this episode, the act of swallowing symbolizes God's triumph over Pharaoh’s power. *Midrashim* interpret that event, much like this one, as a testament to God's supremacy over the formidable mortal ruler. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Amos Chakham (*Shemot*, p. 114) observes that Aaron’s single staff consuming the multiple staffs of the Egyptian magicians may symbolize the inevitable triumph of the One true God of Israel over the many gods of Egypt. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For more on this idea, see Sharon Rimon, *Prisms: Perspectives on the Parasha* I (Brooklyn: Ktav, 2021), pp. 304-312, where she compares this episode to the narrative of Joseph, Pharaoh’s dreams, and his magicians and wise men in Genesis 41. She also draws parallels to *Sefer Daniel*, chapters 1–2. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)