**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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**From Slavery to Redemption**

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**Shiur #28: Introduction to the Plagues (1)**

**The Purpose of the Plagues**

**The Plagues: Basic Questions**

Reaching a conclusive interpretation of the plague narrative’s details and development remains a persistent challenge. What is the nature of its order and progression? It would seem logical for the plagues to have become increasingly more severe, but that does not appear to be the case: Are frogs in the houses (plague #2) or lice on the bodies (plague #3) a more severe blow than the life-giving waters turning to blood (plague #1)? Is darkness (plague #9) more harmful than the locusts (plague #8), which threaten the food supply of Egypt?[[1]](#footnote-1)

The plagues can seem repetitive and circuitous, often returning to the same themes and motifs. Details overlap and blur: hands stretch out, staffs strike, Pharaoh’s heart hardens – at times by his own resolve, and at times by divine intervention. The cast of characters shifts slightly from plague to plague: Egyptian magicians and servants, Aaron, and Israelites all appear intermittently – yet Moses and Pharaoh remain constants. God, of course, hovers omnipotently in the backdrop; nothing happens unless He wills it.

Patterns emerge: Moses approaches Pharaoh and warns of an impending plague. Once the plague strikes, Pharaoh appears to capitulate, only to reverse course once the danger subsides. This cycle repeats twice, and then God instructs Moses to bring a plague upon the Egyptians without prior warning (lice, boils, and darkness). How should we understand these rhythms, the repetitions and the deviations, and what do they reveal about the story’s deeper meaning?

Similar features draw attention to the subtle differences. For example, while warnings are a recurring feature, those warnings are sometimes delivered at the Nile’s edge and sometimes inside the palace.[[2]](#footnote-2) Some plagues seem menacing, others merely annoying. The plagues strike in natural, outdoor settings but they also reach into the inner crevices of the Egyptian houses. At times, they afflict bodies directly. Some explicitly spare Goshen, while the accounts of others are ambiguous about location. These themes collide and mingle, resisting simple or consistent explanations.

Each plague also carries unique features, beginning with the specific nature of the disaster. Every episode unfolds differently, and each seems to have a unique message for the Egyptians, for Israel, and for our understanding of the narrative’s purpose.

Over the years, biblical scholars have proposed a wide range of interpretations to make sense of these questions. Although a comprehensive treatment is nearly impossible, the following examination will offer a schematic overview of major interpretive approaches – focusing, of course, on those that best align with my understanding of the narrative aims of the Exodus story.

In this endeavor, I follow the path of Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz (the author of the *Kli Yakar* commentary), who articulates a similar observation in his introduction to this section of *Shemot* and explains that he will select ideas from among the vast corpus of existing scholarship.

There is a multiplicity of ideas regarding the ten plagues – for what purpose these particular plagues came upon them – the interpreters sought to choose reasons, each according to his own rationale. I, too, will not hold myself back from bringing ideas that [I think] explain the meaning of the text. (*Kli Yakar*, *Shemot* 7:17)

**Movement Toward the Final Plague**

Among the best-known narratives in the Bible, the plagues that God brings against Egypt constitute the core of the Exodus story.[[3]](#footnote-3) God strikes Egypt with a series of ecological calamities in an uncharacteristically long and detailed narrative that begins in 7:14 and (nearly) concludes with the ninth plague at the end of chapter 10. Chapter 11 anticipates the imminent arrival of the ominous tenth and final plague:[[4]](#footnote-4) death upon the firstborn of Egypt – but then (in chapter 12) the story pauses and pivots, shifting its focus to the Israelites. They are instructed to remain in their homes, fulfilling God’s commandments both to shield themselves from the death sweeping through Egypt and to prepare for their imminent exodus from Egypt. The plague narrative then resumes in 12:29 with its climactic tenth plague, which facilitates the expulsion and exodus of the Israelites from Egypt.

The tenth plague sends Egypt into a frenzy; a collective cry pierces the night as Pharaoh, his servants, and indeed all of Egypt arise in terror, watching death encroach on every home. A decisive blow, the plague of the firstborn leaves no room for hesitation or for a repeat of Pharaoh’s earlier backtracking and duplicitous behavior. Sheer panic spawns surrender. Pharaoh finally capitulates to God’s demands while the Egyptians rush to do their part, eagerly ejecting the Israelites from Egypt:

And Pharaoh arose in the night, he, his servants, and all of Egypt. And there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was no household in which there was no one dead. And he called to Moses and Aaron in the night, and he said, “Arise and exit from amidst my people, you and also the children of Israel, and go serve God as you have spoken. Also your sheep and your cattle take, as you have spoken, and go – and also bless me.” Then Egypt grabbed hold of the nation to quickly send them from the land, for they said, “We will all die!” (*Shemot* 12:30-33)

**Why Ten Plagues?**

The final plague achieves resounding success, prompting the reader to question why the narrative doesn't begin directly with that event. After all, at the beginning of the story – when Moses first sets out from Midian to Egypt – God informed Moses that He would bring this plague upon Pharaoh as due recompense for Pharaoh’s behavior toward Israel, God’s own “firstborn”:

And you shall say to Pharaoh, “So says God: ‘My son, My firstborn, is Israel.’ And I have said to you, ‘Send out My son so he will serve Me,’ and you refused to send him. Behold I will kill your firstborn son.” (*Shemot* 4:22-23)

So why all these circumlocutions? As an opening gambit, the plague of the firstborn could have brought this story to a summary conclusion, swiftly extracting Israel from enslavement in Egypt.

One could argue, of course, that this is not necessarily true. Egypt’s final capitulation may be a product of accumulated blows, each one further denting Egypt’s confidence and intransigence. The final blow is decisive because of the nine blows preceding it.

Perhaps, however, we need to reframe the goals. God does not wield His power primarily to procure liberation for the slaves; if that were the aim, one blow would certainly suffice:

When God decided to bring the plagues upon the Egyptians, He initially wanted to begin with the plague of the firstborn… He said, “If I bring the plague of the firstborn first, [Pharaoh] will send them out [immediately]. Therefore, I will first bring other plagues upon him.” (*Shemot* *Rabba* 18:5)[[5]](#footnote-5)

Evidently, God does not want Pharaoh to release Israel immediately. There are many possible reasons for this, all of which can offer insight as to the principal goals of the lengthy series of plagues. Biblical interpreters often see these specific plagues as punitive in nature, fitting recompense for the Egyptians’ cruelty.[[6]](#footnote-6) Specific plagues are often described as “measure-for-measure” punishments carefully designed to repay the Egyptians for practices such as their terrible oppression, their attempt to curtail Israel’s fertility, or their drowning of Israel’s newborn sons.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Educational objectives also emerge as a key aim of the extended plague narrative. The plagues are intended to foster knowledge of God (His omnipotence and supremacy) among both Egyptians and Israelites, as stated in *Shemot* 6:6-7 and 7:4-5[[8]](#footnote-8) and repeated throughout the plague story (*Shemot* 7:17; 8:6, 18; 9:14, 29; 10:2; 11:7).[[9]](#footnote-9) This sort of knowledge may not have been properly acquired in one blow; instead, it penetrates slowly and increasingly as each successive misfortune strikes Egypt. Another educational objective – stated explicitly by God – is to do battle with the gods of Egypt and with their reputed power (*Shemot* 12:12; *Bamidbar* 33:4). Indeed, the plagues wreak havoc with the pantheon of Egyptian gods, striking them down one by one: Hapi, the Nile god;[[10]](#footnote-10) Heket, the frog-like goddess of fertility; Ra, the sun god; Anubis, the god of the dead; and Amun, the god of wind. Most significant of all, the story shatters the godlike stature of a self-deified Pharaoh, concluding with his panicked middle-of-the-night surrender.

However, the plagues do not simply affect Egypt; they unleash chaos onto the fundamental order of the world itself. Using language that recalls *Bereishit* chapter 1, God strikes at Egypt’s water, land, fish, insects, earth, heavens, dust, vegetation, trees, animals, and humans. The plagues systematically reverse creation,[[11]](#footnote-11) removing the barriers between chaos and order, wreaking havoc on a carefully structured hierarchy, and finally, plunging Egypt into darkness, an eerie reminder of the darkness and chaos that preceded creation.

Egypt, a leading civilization of the ancient world, has allowed God’s world to go awry, leading it far afield from its moral and religious purpose. For the sake of all, Egypt must be uncreated, namely destroyed.[[12]](#footnote-12) The plagues demolish the known world for the purpose of rebuilding it from scratch, allowing Israel to emerge from the renewed primordial darkness as a newly created nation, lush with possibility and designated to remake the world in accordance with God’s design. For this reason, the description of Israel’s fertility at the beginning of *Shemot* linguistically evokes the creation of the world:

And the children of Israel increased and swarmed, and they multiplied and became very, very robust, and the land filled with them. (*Shemot* 1:7)[[13]](#footnote-13)

To guide Israel in its new role at the helm of a newly created world order, Moses is born – with further echoes of the beginning of creation:[[14]](#footnote-14)

And God **saw** the light, **that it was good**. (*Bereishit* 1:4)

And she gave birth to a son, and she **saw** him, **that he was good.** (*Shemot* 2:2)

Moses is designated to guide Israel in leaving behind a society that has failed to lead the world to good and assuming its role as the bearer of morality, spirituality, and light for the world.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Thus, the ten plagues serve a multifaceted purpose extending well beyond the aim of securing Israel’s release. They function as a divine response to Egypt's oppression, both punishing the Egyptians for their cruelty and educating them about God's presence and supremacy. More than that, the plagues represent a cosmic process of destruction and renewal, a form of uncreation where Egypt’s unravelling paves the way for the re-creation of a new world order centered around Israel’s covenant with God and designed to allow Israel to help the world realize its purpose. Thus, the plagues are not merely acts of liberation but also instruments of transformation, generating the broader theological narrative aims of judgment, education, and redemption.

1. Some do in fact see the plagues as increasingly severe, e.g., Ralbag *Shemot* 7:8-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. While the verses never explicitly describe Moses entering Pharaoh’s palace, some interpreters see the phrase *Bo el Pharaoh* (“Come unto Pharaoh”), which appears in the warnings for the plagues of frogs, pestilence, and locusts, as an indication that God is commanding Moses to confront Pharaoh inside his palace. See, e.g., Rabbeinu Behaye on *Shemot* 10:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. While the word plague is commonly used in English, the Hebrew text refers to these harmful events using a variety of Hebrew words (in both nominal and verbal forms) whose precise meanings seem to differ: *makka* (strike; most common; see, e.g., 7:17), *shefatim* (judgments; see 6:6 and 7:4), *nega* (harm; 11:1), *moftim* (signs; 11:10); *negef* (plague; 7:27). (All of my translations are approximations, intended to illustrate that these words are separate and distinct. As is often true of synonyms, it is very difficult to show the precise distinction between these words or to offer the most precise nuance of each word.) However, I will use the common terminology of “plagues” throughout, as deviation from this ubiquitous usage would surely result in unnecessary confusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Bible never explicitly states that there were *ten* plagues. As a result, some modern scholars have taken interpretive liberties regarding what counts as a plague – sometimes omitting certain plagues, sometimes adding others – based on literary and thematic considerations. I will continue to refer to the conventional number ten, as is traditionally accepted and as seems to me best indicated by the trajectory of the narrative. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See, similarly the question of *Shemot* *Rabba* 15:10: “Could God not have rescued Israel from the hands of Egypt with the first plague?” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This is the approach of the apocryphal book, *Jubilees* 48:11-12: “And everything took place according to Thy words; ten great and terrible judgments came on the land of Egypt, that Thou might execute vengeance on it for Israel. And the Lord did everything for Israel's sake, and according to His covenant, which He had ordained with Abraham, that He would take vengeance on them, as they had brought them by force into bondage.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See, for a few examples among many, *Mekhilta* *Beshalach* 4; *Tanchuma* *Vaera* 14, *Bo* 4; *Tanna* *De-vei* *Eliyahu* 7; and Abravanel’s lengthy explanation of the punitive (measure-for-measure) component of each plague in his commentary on *Shemot* 7:25. In an intriguing variation on this theme, the apocryphal book *Chokhmat Shlomo* frequently illustrates how God bestows blessings upon Israel in the desert in a manner that directly contrasts with the way He inflicts plagues upon Egypt. See, for example, 11:6-7, which contends that God brings Israel water in the desert in contrast to His pollution of the Nile with blood and gore, or 16:1-2, which indicates that the quail that God brings Israel in the desert contrasts with the multitude of wild animals that God brought to torment the Egyptians. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This assumes, as suggested in an earlier *shiur*, that the upcoming “*shefatim* *gedolim*” (great judgments) in these verses refer to the plagues. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For one example of a Rabbinic source that notes this, see *Sifrei* *Devarim* 306. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See *Tanchuma* *Vaera* 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Maharal (*Gevurot Hashem*, 57) maintains that the ten plagues correspond to the ten sayings (*ma’amarot*) with which God created the world (see *Avot*, chapter 5, which lists the plagues among several episodes that occur in a series of ten). The *order* of the ten plagues does not necessarily correspond to the ten sayings of creation, but the broader schema suggests that the plague narrative as a whole represents the uncreation of the world, even if the Maharal does not state this explicitly. See also R’ Eliezer Ashkenazy’s commentary on the Haggada (*Ma’aseh Mitzrayim*) in his book, *Ma’aseh Hashem* (11), where he notes the correspondence between the plagues and God’s creation, suggesting that these parallels demonstrate to all that God is the creator of the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Later prophets often use the language of creation to depict a society (usually Israel) that has run afoul of God’s plan and is therefore doomed to uncreation for the purpose of allowing the world to restart with a fresh orientation. See, e.g., *Yirmiyahu* 4:23-25; *Tzephanya* 1:2-3; *Yechezkel* 38:20. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See similar descriptions of fertility in *Bereishit* 1:22, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. As noted in an earlier *shiur*, a *midrash* (*Sota* 12a) cited by Rashi points to this connection by positing that the house filled with light at Moses’ birth. More to the point, this *midrash* recognizes that Moses’ birth will bring light (the light of justice, morality, and eventually the Torah), thereby aligning the world with the original aims for which it was created. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See *shiur* #7, where this idea was developed at greater length. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)