**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**From Slavery to Redemption**

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**Shiur #29: Introduction to the Plagues (2)**

**The Literary Artistry of the Plagues (Structure and Meaning)**

Considerable attention has been given to the literary artistry of the plague narrative, which – as noted in the previous *shiur* – follows a basic pattern (although not all plagues conform precisely to this design): First, God commissions His agents (Moses and\or Aaron), charging them to appear before Pharaoh to warn him of an upcoming calamity if he refuses to release Israel. One of these agents of God then brings the plague, which hurls itself with furious intensity upon Egypt. Pharaoh and\or his lackeys respond in varying ways, often by promising to accede to Moses’ request. The plague ends, and Pharaoh invariably returns to his intransigent posture.

Despite the repetitive themes, there is variation within the individual plagues. None of the plagues unfold identically; details vary, and unique features mark each one. We will examine the distinctive characteristics of the plagues when we consider each of them separately. For now, I am interested in the broader pattern of the overall narrative: Is there any sort of conscious literary arrangement? Is this simply a haphazard collection of various disasters that God brings upon Egypt?[[1]](#footnote-1)

Ramban posits that there is an incremental movement in which the plagues become increasingly more dangerous to humans, more life-threatening.[[2]](#footnote-2) This seems intuitively correct, but is difficult to sustain: does the plague of frogs constitute a greater threat than the waters of Egypt turning to blood? In what way is a period of darkness more lethal than the plagues of hail or locusts, both of which threaten Egypt’s food supply?

A *midrash* contends with the trajectory of the plagues by sketching a portrait of a full-blown military campaign that God wages against Egypt, who has rebelled against divine authority. These blows strike methodically at Egypt’s fortifications, weakening a mighty country and collapsing its veneer of impenetrability. Strikingly, the *midrash* frames Egypt’s cardinal offense as one of insubordination against God, rather than focusing on the cruel enslavement of the Israelites:

God approached Egypt with the strategy of kings. What does a human king do when a country rebels against him?... At first, He sealed their water source… and they did not reverse [their position.] He [then] brought upon them colonies (i.e., troops) – the frogs… and they did not reverse. He brought against them arrows – the lice… which entered the body of the Egyptians like an arrow, and they did not reverse. He brought legions against them – the *arov*… and they did not reverse. He brought against them indiscriminate execution – the pestilence – and they did not reverse. He threw against them boiling oil – this is the boils – and they did not reverse. He launched catapult stones against them – this is the hail – and they did not reverse. And afterward, He aroused against them a teeming multitude – the locusts. After that, He put them in a prison – the darkness… and they did not reverse. And so, He killed all of the eldest among them, as it says, “And God smote all the firstborn” (*Shemot* 12:29). (*Tanhuma* [Buber] Bo 4)

For this *midrash*, the primary goal of the plagues is to wage war with the obstinate Egyptians on their land. Along with her might, Egypt’s favorable geographical features (bordered on the south, east, and west by a formidable desert and on the north by the sea) render her fairly impregnable. The Nile River also played a significant role in maintaining Egyptian power, as its annual flooding and narrow valley limited access and troop movement, providing a further strategic advantage. Few indeed dared attack Egypt inside her borders, especially during the period of the New Kingdom, when Egypt’s power was at her zenith.[[3]](#footnote-3) God, however, levels a major blow against Egypt’s sense of invincibility by striking within her borders, in response to her rebellion against him. As a coup de grace, God will issue His final blow at the sea, drowning Pharaoh’s military might – his horses, chariots, officers, and troops. Building on the imagery of warfare, at the narrative’s triumphant conclusion, Israel grasps the notion of God’s military might and declares: “God is a Man of War; God is His name” (*Shemot* 15:3).

**Groupings of Plagues**

To find meaningful patterns, rabbinic interpreters point to different groupings of plagues. Literary arrangements may be based on their thematic focus, the agent who actively brings the plague (God, Moses, or Aaron), or other shared details. We will examine some of these proposed arrangements and how they extract insights and meaning from the narrative.

**1. Five pairs of Plagues: 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 = 10**

One *midrash* proposes – based on *Devarim* 26:8 – that the plagues be divided into five groups of pairs.

And God took us out of Egypt with a strong hand, an outstretched arm, great awe, signs, and wonders. (Devarim 26:8)

With a strong hand [alludes to] two [plagues]. With an outstretched arm [alludes to] two [plagues]. With great awe [alludes to] two [plagues]. With signs [alludes to] two [plagues]. With wonders [alludes to] two [plagues]. These are the ten plagues that God brought on the Egyptians in Egypt. (*Midrash Tannaim*, *Devarim* 26:8)[[4]](#footnote-4)

Rabbeinu Bechaye offers an explanation of the nature of the five pairs of plagues:

**Blood** and **frogs** are **from the water**… **Lice** and ***arov*** are **from the dust (namely, earth)**…[[5]](#footnote-5) And because [Pharaoh] hardened his heart and did not want to release them, [God] brought **from the heavens**[[6]](#footnote-6) plagues on their body… **pestilence** on the bodies of the animals and… **boils** on the bodies of the people. And **from the air**, He also brought **hail** and **locusts** upon the **vegetation of the earth**. And they still did not listen after this and so He brought upon them plagues **from the air**,[[7]](#footnote-7) namely **darkness** and the destruction of the breath of life from the **firstborn**. (Rabbeinu Bechaye *Shemot* 11:10)

These pairs demonstrate that God controls all spheres of existence. This is an especially important point within the context of a polytheistic society, where different gods have charge of different domains. Egypt has a god for the Nile (Hapi), a god of the earth (Geb),and a god of the heavens (Nut). Some spheres are shared by different gods: Neperis a god of grain, while his female counterpart Nepit is the goddess of grain. Osiris was originally a vegetation god linked with crops. Shu is an air god, Amun is god of the wind, and Seth is associated with darkness. In opposition to Egypt’s crowded pantheon of deities, the Bible offers one mighty, unparalleled God, whose power extends over every possible realm. Perhaps to make this point, the plagues progress in an upward movement, designed to draw our attention slowly, incrementally toward the heavens – from the waters to the land, to the creatures that roam the earth, to the air\sky. The narrative leaves us with our eyes fixed upward, symbolically toward God, who controls the entire universe![[8]](#footnote-8)

**2. Two Evenly Divided Groups of Plagues: 5 + 5 = 10**

The flip side of dividing the plagues into 5 groups of 2 is to divide them into two groups of five, like the classic division of the ten commandments.[[9]](#footnote-9) Each of these groups reaches its climactic conclusion with a plague of death – pestilence (the fifth plague) and the death of the firstborn (the tenth plague) – delivered directly by God.[[10]](#footnote-10) Both of these final plagues serve as ominous portents of divine power, with God bringing death upon the Egyptians. Pestilence, which can easily mutate to affect humans, functions as a dire warning, teetering dangerously close to transforming the land into a life-threatening place for both humans and animals. God says as much in His message to Pharaoh two plagues later (in the prelude to the plague of hail, 9:15): “I could have sent out My hand *and struck you and your people* *with the pestilence* – and you would have been annihilated from the earth!”

A *midrash* (that we recite as part of the haggada on Passover night) may intend to draw our attention to the fifth and tenth plagues, hinting to their parallel – and climactic – roles in the narrative:

“With a strong **hand**” – This is pestilence, as it says, “Behold the **hand** of God will be upon your cattle in the field” (*Shemot* 9:3). “And with an **outstretched** arm” – This is the sword, as it says, “And his sword was **outstretched** over Jerusalem” (*I Divrei Ha-yamim* 21:16). (*Sifrei*, *Shelach* 115)

The verse the *midrash* cites in reference to God’s sword admittedly points to a different incident, one that threatens Israel. Nevertheless, in the context of the *midrash*, it likely alludes to the manner in which God brings death upon the firstborn of Egypt, referencing the metaphorical divine sword.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Positioning God as the death-bringer to Egypt constitutes a key message to the Egyptians, and especially to Pharaoh himself. Pharaoh’s arbitrary decree of death to the Israelite boys and life to the Israelite girls launches the Exodus story. A mighty and capricious arbiter over life and death, Pharoah wields that power with volatility and cruelty, employing trumped-up charges against a vulnerable population (such as the claim that in the event of war, the Israelites would join the enemy). Unlike Pharaoh, God wields his power to bring justice to the world: liberation for His people and punishment for cruel oppressors.

**3. Division by the *Parashot* (Torah Readings on Shabbat): 7 + 3 = 10**

The Torah portions traditionally read on Shabbat divide the ten plagues into two unequal parts: seven plagues appear in *Parashat Va’era* and the final three in *Parashat Bo*.[[12]](#footnote-12) Every year, this division leaves Jewish communities in suspense, forced to wait a full week for the plagues to produce Israel’s liberation. Is there any meaning to this traditional division? Does it convey something meaningful about the plague narrative?

The final plague of *Parashat Va’era* is hail. It opens with a protracted warning to Pharaoh, the longest of its kind in the entire sequence. Using the full force of God’s power, Moses seems to be poised to deliver a decisive and devastating final blow:

This time, I am sending all My plagues upon your heart, against your servants and your nation, so that you will know that there is none like Me in all the land. For I could have sent out My hand and struck you and your people with the pestilence – and you would have been annihilated from the earth! But it is for this that I let you stand – so that I could show you my strength, and so that you would recount My name throughout the land.” (*Shemot* 9:14-16)

Opening with the phrase “*this* time” presents the plague of hail as qualitatively different from all previous plagues. Moses then describes the upcoming hail as “**all** My plagues,” a puzzlingly inclusive depiction for which biblical commentaries offer a variety of explanations.[[13]](#footnote-13) Rashbam explains that the hail combined a wide spectrum of natural elements (fire, hail, ice-pellets, sulfur, snow, and vapor), all welded together to wreak destruction. Similarly, Ibn Ezra posits that this plague is a multi-sensory experience, involving loud noises (thunder), hail, rain, and fire.[[14]](#footnote-14) Rabbeinu Bechaye observes that the plague of hail simultaneously targets a wide array of victims: humans, animals, trees, crops, fruits, and all the bounty of the land. Bekhor Shor adds that hail struck both houses and fields. *Midrash* *Sekhel Tov* explains that this plague evokes the memory and sensations of all the plagues, as though one were experiencing all of them simultaneously.

These commentators all note the uniqueness of the description of the plague of hail, which receives disproportionate attention and seems to wrap up the plague narrative by introducing one final comprehensive blow against the Egyptians. It turns out, however, that this is not the case: the series resumes at the opening of the next *parasha*, with the locust plague. This restart introduces a new objective, confirming that the seventh plague indeed involves some sort of conclusion:

And God said to Moses, Come unto Pharaoh, for I have weighted his heart and that of his servants so that I could place My signs in his midst. And so that you will recount **in the ears of your children and the children of your children** that which I did in Egypt and My signs that I have placed upon them. And **you** will know that I am the Lord. (*Shemot* 10:1-2)

Until this point, the plagues have related to the past, connecting backward to the conditions of slavery and excessive cruelty that made it necessary for God to bring them. The first seven plagues bring punishment upon Egypt.[[15]](#footnote-15) *Parashat Bo*, however, turns our attention to the future, to our children and grandchildren.

The last three plagues, those of *Parashat Bo*, intertwine with the *parasha* of liberation, where we witness the actual departure from Egypt. Thus, they look past the exigencies of the Egyptian present, focusing instead on educational concerns for the future. These three plagues tell the story of Egypt’s collapse into darkness: first, locusts obscure the sun (10:15); this is followed by a plague of three days of intense darkness (10:21-22), and then the final plague, which takes place at the midpoint of the night (12:29). *Parashat Bo* depicts Egypt as a shadowy land, doomed to obscurity; her success has been eclipsed by the moral depravities of her citizens. Israel’s final glimpses of Egypt’s once-glittering facade are murky and dim; one can barely see the fading glory of this failed society. As Israel moves toward liberation, God extinguishes the lights in Egypt, prodding Israel to seek light elsewhere.

Those who walk in darkness have seen a great light. (*Yeshayahu* 9:1)

At last, Israel leaves Egypt and heads toward Mount Sinai, where the nation will assume its task of constructing a society designed to shine God’s light – His morality and truth – upon the world.

House of Jacob, let us walk and draw others to walk by the light of God. (*Yeshayahu* 2:5)

I am the Lord… I have created you and appointed you as a covenantal nation, to be a light for nations. (*Yeshayahu* 42:6)[[16]](#footnote-16)

In our next *shiur*, we will examine the classic division of the plagues into three groups, mentioned in the *haggada*: 3 + 3 + 3 + 1 = 10; *detza”kh*, *ada”sh*, *be’ach”av*.

1. Some scholars despair of finding a pattern, concluding that the narrative represents a disorganized collection of several circles of tradition (Durham, p. 117). Others suggest that these are ecological calamities that naturally lead from one to the other (see e.g. Greta Hort, “The Plagues of Egypt,” *ZAW* 69 (1957), pp. 84-103; *ZAW* 70 (1958) pp. 48-59). I do not deny that this is a possibility. Certainly, the plagues themselves are both natural and endemic to the region. However, even if this can be true scientifically, it does not seem to be the point of the narrative, which seeks to establish God’s miraculous manipulations of nature. Taking my cues from the biblical text, I intend to reveal the divine hand in the plagues – perhaps only found in the timing or severity of the “natural” disaster. One thing is clear: the plagues are not presented in the biblical text as natural occurrences that simply happen randomly in Egypt. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This seems like a logical starting point to explain the order of the plagues and is adopted by other exegetes as well as biblical scholars. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The New Kingdom of Egypt, spanning roughly from the 16th to the 11th centuries BCE (circa 1550–1070 BCE), was a period of extraordinary political strength, military expansion, and monumental building projects. Although the biblical account of the Exodus cannot be definitively dated, most – if not all – theories place the Exodus story during this era (either the 18th or 19th dynasty.) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This *midrash* also appears in *Lekach Tov* and is recited as part of the *haggada* at the Passover *seder*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. While the lice are brought forth from the *afar ha’aretz* (dust of the land), the *arov* are said to *fill* the ground (*adama*) and destroy the land (*ha’aretz*). These plagues swarm in a shared sphere. Interpreters who accept the Septuagint’s translation of *arov* as swarms of flies or insects find even greater commonality between these two plagues, both of which involve vermin. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. These two plagues, both forms of illness, are described by Rabbeinu Bechaye as being “brought by the heavens,“ implying that all illnesses originate from God. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rabbeni Bechaye does not easily define this fifth pair, nor does he clearly distinguish it from the preceding pair, which is also associated with air. Though he calls darkness and death airborne, he probably means to say that the nature and origin of this final pair of plagues is amorphous. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. While certainly God’s presence resides everywhere, biblical passages often describe God’s residence as being in the heavens (see, e.g., *Devarim* 26:15; *Yeshayahu* 66:1; *Tehillim* 113:5-6; 115:3). These passages do not necessarily mean to say that God can actually be contained within a particular locus. After all, Shlomo explicitly notes that this is not possible (see *I Melakhim* 8:27) just before he references God’s dwelling place in the heavens (*I Melakhim* 8:30). God’s residence in “the heavens” appears to reference a distant, incomprehensible, and infinite realm, a fitting way to describe God’s existence in the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See *Yerushalmi Shekalim* 6:1: “How were the tablets written? R. Chanina ben Gamliel says, ‘Five on this tablet and five on the other tablet.’” See also *Otzar Midrashim* (Eisenstein) *Yochanan Ben Zakkai*, which posits a thematic idea behind this division: that the first five commandments involve commandments between humans and God, while the next five regulate matters between humans. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. God’s direct deliverance is unique to these plagues. Regarding pestilence, *Shemot* 9:3 declares that “God’s hand will be upon your cattle.” As for the plague of the firstborn, *Shemot* 12:12 portrays God describing His direct involvement: “And I will pass through the land of Egypt on this night, and I will strike every firstborn in the land of Egypt.” *Midrashim* emphasize this point in an oft-cited statement: “‘And God struck every firstborn in Egypt’ – Not via an angel and not via a messenger.” (*Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael*, *Massekhta DePischa* 7). The version that we recite in the *haggada* continues: “Rather, God in His glory *and on His own*, as it says, ‘And I will pass through the land of Egypt on this night, and I will strike every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from humans through animals, and I will execute judgments against all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord.’ [*Shemot* 12:12].” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This is a fairly common way of depicting events such as a plague, where an unseen divine weapon is employed against God's adversaries (see, for example, *Yeshayahu* 31:8). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This division follows the tradition of the ancient Babylonian tradition, which divided the Torah into 54 portions that enabled the community to complete the entire Torah in a single year through weekly readings. This is the tradition adopted by most Jewish communities today, although ancient Jewish communities in the land of Israel maintained a different custom. They divided the Torah into approximately 150 portions, resulting in a tri-annual cycle, where the Torah was completed over the course of three and a half years. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. A *midrash* maintains that this section introduces all three final plagues, which occur in rapid succession (Seforno similarly regards this as an introduction to the final group of plagues, all of which are airborne). According to several Rashi manuscripts, Rashi reads these verses as an introduction to the final plague: the death of the firstborn. See Rashi, *Shemot* 12:29 for support of this reading. Other manuscripts suggest, however, that this version of Rashi is a transcription error, and that Rashi actually reads the verses in their present context, as an introduction to the plague of hail. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The *Ba’al Ha-Turim* suggests this may be why Pharaoh expresses unusual fear during this plague. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Biblical passages often associate punishments with the number seven (*Bereishit* 4:15; *Vayikra* 26:18, 21, 24, 28; *Tehillim* 79:12; *Mishlei* 6:31). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See also *Yeshayahu* 49:6; 60:1-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)