**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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**From Slavery to Redemption**

**Dr. Yael Ziegler**

**Shiur #32: The First Plague: Nile, Waters, and Blood (2)**

**Pharaoh at the Nile**

God’s instructions to Moses are clear: he is to approach Pharaoh “in the morning” (*Shemot* 7:15), as a new day dawns, to launch the first plague.[[1]](#footnote-1) As Pharaoh strides confidently toward the river, the great sun rises over the mighty Nile, bathing Egypt in warmth and light amidst a promise of ripening crops. For Pharaoh, the sun’s daily appearance signifies cosmic order, the routine triumph over Apophis, the serpent of chaos who threatens on a nightly basis to plunge the world into darkness. As the living embodiment of Ra, the Egyptian sun god, Pharaoh claims credit for this victory and for maintaining the stability of creation. But then Moses appears, wielding “the staff that had turned into a serpent.” Moses admonishes Pharaoh, in God’s name, and boldly announces the impending disaster that will strike at the heart of Egypt’s prosperity and power: the Nile itself

And you shall say to him: “The Lord, God of the Hebrews, sent me to you, saying, ‘Send My nation and they will serve Me in the desert.’ And behold, you have not listened until now. So says the Lord: ‘With this you will know that I am the Lord. Behold, I will strike the Nile waters with the staff that is in my hand, and they will turn to blood. The fish that are in the Nile will die, the Nile will turn putrid, and the Egyptians will be unable to drink the water from the Nile.’” (*Shemot* 7:16-18)

Pharaoh will remain mute throughout this initial plague. He and his servants witness silently as God’s messengers transform Egypt’s waters. But this silence should not be regarded as cowardice or acquiescence. Pharaoh’s magicians replicate the plague with ease, and the king remains impassive, coolly unimpressed by Moses’ wonders. At no point does the king call for Moses to provide relief from the calamity. Instead, Pharaoh will simply turn his back on the bedlam and calmly enter his palace, as his hapless citizens frantically dig for water. His silence betrays his disdain more than his uncertainty.

Pharaoh’s untroubled demeanor likely stems from several factors. First, of course, is the fact that his magicians were able to perform a similar miracle.[[2]](#footnote-2) Second, Pharaoh may perceive the plague as a natural and fleeting occurrence – one that poses no lasting threat to Egypt and will likely subside on its own. Indeed, it appears to dissipate after just seven days, without any explicit act of divine intervention. Third, Pharaoh himself is unscathed; his palace remains a haven. Even while the waters have become undrinkable, Pharaoh calmly enters his palace, which even if it does not have water, certainly has stores of wine, as a *midrash* notes:

[Pharaoh] said, “I am not disturbed by this, for if I cannot drink water, I shall drink wine.” (*Midrash Sechel* *Tov* (Buber) *Shemot* 7:23)

This Marie Antoinette-like portrait suggests not simply the absence of reverence for God, but also an apathy toward the people’s suffering that is typical of despotic rulers.

The biblical text often remains elliptical, leaving it to interpreters to clarify the details of a narrative. What, for instance, is Pharaoh doing at the river early in the morning? Actually, a visit to the river appears to be common practice for Pharaohs; the dream that Pharaoh relates to Joseph opens with him standing on the banks of the Nile (*Bereishit* 41:17). Still, interpreters offer different suggestions for this outing, ranging from the pragmatic to the ideological. Some assume that Pharaoh’s outing is for the purpose of his daily worship.[[3]](#footnote-3) A previously cited *midrash* proposes that when it came to matters involving the Nile, Pharaoh would issue directives to his servants himself, which explains his frequent presence there (*Pesiktra Zutrata*, *Shemot* 7:28). Ibn Ezra (*Shemot* 7:15) says Pharaohs would visit the Nile in the summer months to check its water level, akin perhaps to Dickens’ old Scrooge counting his money. In this scenario, just as Pharaoh arrives to enjoy the sight of the Nile’s abundance, Moses appears on the scene to cast a dark shadow over Pharaoh’s avaricious delight.

On the practical side, Rashbam opines that this was simply Pharaoh’s daily walk, while Ibn Caspi posits, based on his contemporary observation of Egyptian kings, that Pharaoh would go to the Nile to play ball on Tuesdays and Fridays, and that is how Moses knew how to obtain access to him.[[4]](#footnote-4) It is also possible that, like his daughter (*Shemot* 2:5), Pharaoh goes down to the river to bathe,[[5]](#footnote-5) or to attend to his physical needs.[[6]](#footnote-6) If this is the case, then Moses’ message requires boldly entering Pharoh’s private domain, a section of the Nile that is presumably cordoned off for Pharaoh’s personal use.

**Hebrews and Egyptians**

Are the Hebrews also affected by this plague? The text does not clarify whether God spares Israel from the negative repercussions of the bloody waters; in fact, Israel is not mentioned at all. The first time the plague narrative distinguishes between Egyptians and Hebrews is during the warning for the fourth plague, when God declares that no *arov* (mixed multitudes) will come to the land of Goshen, where Israel dwells (8:18).[[7]](#footnote-7)

Nevertheless, biblical commentators tend to assume that Israel remains unaffected by *all* the plagues; indeed, why should the Hebrews suffer from the punishment brought to bear upon their cruel taskmasters?[[8]](#footnote-8) To underscore the notion that the plague of blood distinguishes between Israelites and Egyptians, a *midrash* describes an intriguing scenario:

An Egyptian and an Israelite were in the same house with a canister filled with water. But when the Egyptian would go to fill his jug from it, it was filled with blood. The Israelite would drink water and the Egyptian [would drink] blood from the same canister. The Egyptian would say to [the Hebrew]: “Give me a bit of water from your hands.” He would give it to him, and it would turn to blood. [The Egyptian] then said to [the Hebrew]: “Let us drink from the same bowl, you and I, together.” But the Israelite would drink water, and the Egyptian would drink blood. (*Tanchuma* *Vaera* 13:2)

Ibn Ezra, however, posits that this plague – which he maintains was not an exceptionally harsh one – affected the Israelites slaves along with their Egyptian overlords. Noting the well-known midrashic approach cited above, Ibn Ezra casts doubt on its veracity, questioning why there is no textual hint to this:

In my opinion, the plagues of blood, frogs, and lice affected both Egyptians and Hebrews. For we will adhere to the text. And these three [plagues] did little damage. Only when [God brought] the plague of *arov*, which was harsh, did He differentiate between Egyptians and Israelites... So just as the Egyptians dug [for water], so too did the Hebrews. (Ibn Ezra, *Shemot* 7:24)

**God, Moses, and Aaron: Who Executed this Plague?**

Initially, God instructs Moses to tell Pharaoh that **He** will bring the plague upon the Nile: “Behold I will strike with the staff in my hand the waters in the Nile and they will turn to blood” (7:17). However, when it comes time to deliver the plague, God tells Moses to instruct **Aaron** to spread his staff over the waters of Egypt so that they will turn to blood (7:19). The following verse further presents a blurry portrait of who in fact struck the waters:

And Moses and Aaron did this, as God had commanded, and **he** raised the staff, and **he** struck the water in the Nile, in the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants. And all of the water in the Nile turned to blood. (*Shemot* 7:20)

Biblical interpreters struggle to discern who actually raised the staff and struck the waters. The subject remains hidden – even as Moses, Aaron, and God appear crowded together at the opening – and the previous verses point to conflicting possibilities. Abravanel tries to resolve the ambiguity by positing that Moses and Aaron acted together in bringing the plague: Moses struck the Nile, while Aaron turned the rest of Egypt’s waters into blood. In any case, this verse seems intentionally elliptical, interested in conveying a harmonious intertwining of Moses, Aaron, and God more than in identifying the specific agent who enacted the event.

Still, many Rabbinic sources assume that Aaron executes this plague, while Moses remains in an ancillary role. An oft-cited *midrash* explains this in a rather peculiar manner:

God said to Moses: The waters guarded you when you were cast into the Nile, and the dust protected you when you killed the Egyptian – thus, it would not be just for you to strike them. Therefore, Aaron struck them. (*Tanchuma* *Vaera* 14:4)

The text tells us that Aaron – not Moses – performed the second and third plagues (8:1-2, 12-13); according to this *midrash*, he initiated the plague of blood as well. This, according to the *midrash*, is because Moses owes a debt of gratitude to those objects which must be struck to launch these plagues: the Nile, which hid him in its reeds when he was an infant, and the dust, which he used to conceal the Egyptian that he killed for striking a Hebrew. This *midrash* does not have strong linguistic support, as the plague narrative makes little to no direct allusion to those earlier episodes in Moses’ life.[[9]](#footnote-9) More to the point, at first glance, the moral lesson of the *midrash* seems peculiar. Do we really owe gratitude to the inanimate objects that benefit us?

It seems to me that this *midrash* draws our attention to the concept of gratitude that lies at the core of the Exodus narrative, becoming the basis of Israel’s relationship with God. The Tanakh often refers back to God taking Israel out of Egypt, inferring from this event Israel’s obligation to maintain loyalty to God. By cultivating gratitude in our finite relationships, we can find the ability to feel gratitude in our relationship with the infinite.[[10]](#footnote-10) This argument can be made easily with regard to human relationships – in particular the relationship with one’s parents, which has been noted as an apt path through which to nurture appropriate gratitude toward God[[11]](#footnote-11) – but the requirement to express appreciation to an inanimate object still seems odd. Perhaps this is the point. In attributing excessive importance to the notion of gratitude (even to inanimate objects), the midrash draws our idea to its outsized importance in cultivating a relationship with God based on gratitude. It is this that underlies the proclamation that Israelites make when they settle in Israel and dedicate their first fruits to God:

“A wandering Aramean was my father, and he went down to Egypt and lived there with few in number. He became there a great nation, powerful and numerous. And the Egyptians did evil to us, and they tormented us and placed hard labor upon us. And we cried out to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voices and He saw our torments and our burdens and our hardships. And the Lord took us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, and with great awesomeness, with signs and with wonders. And then He brought us to this place, and He gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And now, behold I am bringing the first fruits of the land, which You have given me, Lord.” (*Devarim* 26:5-10)

Gratitude forms the foundation of the Exodus narrative, shaping Israel’s enduring relationship with God. By emphasizing gratitude – even to inanimate objects – the *midrash* highlights its central role in shaping a consciousness attuned to divine kindness. This is the spirit that animates the declaration that accompanies the first fruits, where the memory of Egypt becomes a springboard for grateful devotion to the God who redeems and sustains.

1. When biblical figures arise “early in the morning,” it conveys the forging of a new path, the launching of a new era. Two figures, in particular, arise early in the morning on several occasions: Abraham, the one who paves the path of monotheism (*Bereishit* 19:27; 21:14; 22:3) and Joshua, who conquers the land, thus initiating a fresh path for a nation stepping into its newfound autonomy (*Yehoshua* 3:1; 6:12; 7:16; 8:10). In our case, Moses’ morning approach to Pharaoh suggests a harbinger of a new era for Israel, Egypt, and the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rabbinic sources debate whether the Egyptian magicians had some kind of supernatural ability or whether they used a magician’s trickery. For Pharaoh, it makes little difference. Either he assumed that his magicians had the same powers as Moses and Aaron or, perhaps, that they were equally fraudulent. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Midrash* *Aggada* (Buber), *Shemot* 7:15. Indeed, many Egyptian temples were built on the banks of the Nile. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I found this comment so puzzling when I encountered it many years ago that I called my dear friend, Dr. Avigail Rock *z”l*, who wrote her doctorate on Ibn Caspi’s commentary to *Bereishit*. Avigail offered a possible background to this, explaining that Ibn Caspi was a great admirer of the Rambam, who died 75 years before Ibn Caspi was born. The prosperous Ibn Caspi journeyed to Egypt with the intention of meeting the great Rambam’s descendants. To his great disappointment, the objective of the trip turned out to be less successful than he had hoped. However, he returned to France with pragmatic – sometimes even banal – knowledge of Egypt (such as on which days the Egyptian king played ball by the Nile) that he was able to incorporate into his biblical commentary, thereby ensuring that his journey was not in vain! [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Herodotus, *Histories* 2.37, comments on the frequency of Egyptian baths. See also *Yechezkel* 29:5; 32:2-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A *midrash* (*Tanchuma* *Vaera* 14:1, cited by Rashi) suggests that Pharaoh attends to his bathroom needs early in the morning, at the Nile, in order to conceal his humanness from his subjects, thereby maintaining the fiction that he is a godlike figure. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. An explicit distinction will also accompany the plagues of pestilence, hail, darkness, and the firstborn. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. To account for the text’s silence on this matter, Nachmanides (on *Shemot* 8:18-19) explains that the text only explicitly notes the distinction with regard to plagues that easily move from place to place. This approach, however, is difficult to substantiate; do frogs and lice not move around as easily as others? [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The two incidents do not share a common word. In 2:12, Moses buries the Egyptian in *chol*, sand; in the plague of lice, Aaron strikes the *afar*, dust. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The opposite is also the case: A *midrash* notes with regard to the beginning of the Exodus narrative, when the new king over Egypt “did not know Joseph” (1:8), thereby precipitating his evil decrees against Joseph’s family. *Midrash Tanchuma* (Buber), *Shemot* 7, explains that this absence of gratitude in the realm of human interactions will inevitably lead to an absence of gratitude toward God: “‘And a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph’… Rav Avin the Levi said: ‘To what is this likened? To a person who stoned the image of the king. The king said, “Grab him and cut off his head, for now he does this [to an icon] but tomorrow he will do this to me!” So too [regarding] Pharaoh. Now he says he does not know Joseph, and tomorrow he will say, “I do not know God” (*Shemot* 5:2).’” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed* (New York: Toras Horav, 2002), 167-171. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)