**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**From Slavery to Redemption**

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**Shiur #34: The Third Plague: Lice**

The third plague comes without warning, a direct and unannounced strike from God. Aaron simply raises his staff and strikes the dust, producing a cloud of tiny parasitic creatures that settle upon human and animal.

As with the others, Rabbinic sources search for the deeper meaning of this plague, assuming that it represents some kind of just retribution for the Egyptians’ cruelty. Commentators propose that the Egyptian overlords deliberately prevented their Israelite slaves from attending bathhouses, creating an environment where lice could easily spread and adding to the indignity and discomfort of their oppression.[[1]](#footnote-1) As just retribution for their own behavior, the Egyptians now undergo a similar ordeal.

A *midrash* (unrelated to the Egyptian plague narrative) recounts that during the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem, God afflicted the licentious women of Judah with lice to repel the interest of Babylonian officers.[[2]](#footnote-2) Perhaps a similar idea is at play here: by covering the Egyptians’ bodies with loathsome lice, God disrupted intimacy between couples – a fitting measure against a people who had sought to suppress Israel’s fertility.

Alternatively, this plague may have been intended to target the Egyptian priests, who, according to the early historian Herodotus, shaved their entire body every other day, “so that no lice or anything else foul may infest them as they attend upon the gods.”[[3]](#footnote-3) In this reading, the plague of lice is yet another blow against the Egyptians’ idolatrous practices, directed this time at the highly-respected priests, who are prevented from serving their gods.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Other biblical interpreters focus on the dust of the earth (*afar ha-aretz*) that seems to produce the lice. Mentioned three times in rapid succession in 8:12-13 (twice as the “dust of the earth,” and once, “**all** the dust of the earth”), dust appears to be a major focus of the episode. To explain this, Abravanel suggests that the plague recalls the dust-filled labor of the Israelites, who work in the fields and build with clay and bricks.[[5]](#footnote-5) Turning the dust into lice metaphorically represents the slavery of the Hebrews; now the Egyptians can experience themselves how dust becomes a source of suffering.

Rather than a retributive plague, one *midrash* sees the transformation of “all the dust” in Egypt as a bid to release Israel from one small part of their work duty.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Why lice? For they had tasked Israel with sweeping the streets and the marketplaces. Therefore, the dust turned to lice; even when they would dig a square cubit [into the earth], there was no dust! (*Tanchuma* *Vaera* 14:6)

The phrase “dust of the earth” (*afar* *ha-aretz*) only appears eight times in the entire Bible. Prior to its threefold appearance in this plague, it appeared three times in *Sefer Bereishit* to signify God’s promise of fertility for Israel: “And I will make your descendants [as many as] **the dust of the earth**, such that [only] if one can count **the dust of the earth**, your descendants can be counted” (*Bereishit* 13:16).[[7]](#footnote-7) Later, King Solomon expresses gratitude to God for fulfilling this promise and giving him rule of “a nation that is as many as **the dust of the earth**” (*II Divrei Ha-yamim* 1:9).[[8]](#footnote-8) This casts the plague in a new light, evoking Pharaoh’s bid to curtail Israel’s fertility and national growth:

God said, “Something created from the dust will come to punish the Egyptians who sought to destroy a nation that is compared to dust, as it says, “And I will make your descendants [as many as] the dust of the earth.” (*Yalkut* *Shimoni* 182)

Thus, Aaron’s act of striking the dust of the earth symbolically represents Pharaoh’s act of striking at Israel, who are likened to the dust of the earth. An exercise in futility, Pharaoh’s campaign against God’s blessed nation brings nothing but suffering upon him and his own nation.

One final point to consider regarding the word dust (*afar*), emerges from its initial appearance in the Bible. This word describes both the humble origins of human creation (*Bereishit* 2:7) and the mortality of humans, their ignoble end:[[9]](#footnote-9) “For you are dust and to dust you will return” (*Bereishit* 3:19). This plague therefore alludes to the inevitability of human mortality, an important lesson for pride-filled humans. In a clever flourish, the plague transforms the dust (symbolizing the end of the human body) into lice, insects that feed on humans, recalling the maggots that posthumously consume human flesh. This is an especially important message – and reproach – for the Egyptians, who meticulously preserve the human body after death, believing they have overcome death and can ensure passage into a concrete afterlife.

**Aaron and the Magicians**

Like the first two plagues, the plague of lice is also executed by Aaron, rather than Moses. *Midrashim* generally attribute this to Moses’ supposed allegiance to the dust, which had earlier helped Moses by concealing the Egyptian whom Moses had killed.[[10]](#footnote-10) It would be a sign of ingratitude for Moses to strike the loyal dust; therefore, Aaron is tasked with bringing this plague. Perhaps, however, Moses’ youthful exploits hover in the backdrop of these *midrashim* to indicate a different reason Aaron is chosen to launch the plagues. After all, Moses’ early life leads him away from his people, first in the Egyptian palace and then in Midian. It is Aaron who has remained steadfastly within the confines of the nation, a witness to their daily agonies. It seems appropriate that Aaron will be the one to launch the retributive acts against the Egyptian oppressor.

There may be another reason for Aaron’s role during these three initial plagues. Notably, Aaron acts whenever the magicians assume an active role.[[11]](#footnote-11) Aaron and the magicians seem well-matched, each acting as the proxy of one of the two men whose fierce conflict stands at the center of this narrative (the magicians represent Pharaoh, while Aaron represents Moses).[[12]](#footnote-12) In this schema, the plagues begin as a lower-level contest between deputies, which then ascends upward toward the more significant players. Indeed, the final set of three plagues focuses extensively on the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh.[[13]](#footnote-13) The tenth plague involves no confrontation at all: God, who has no counterpart in a human world, will simply release death upon Egypt, bringing the story to its conclusive end.

The final plague brought by Aaron records the dramatic failure of the Egyptian magicians.[[14]](#footnote-14) During the first two plagues, the magicians were said to replicate the plagues brought by God’s messengers (*Shemot* 7:22; 8:3). Ironically (as we saw in *shiur* #27, note 4), their heroic efforts only increase those plagues upon Egypt, but that seems hardly the point. The magicians’ success suggests that Aaron is no more talented than any practitioner of the magical arts.[[15]](#footnote-15) But now, those same respected figures – experts in their craft and influential within Egyptian society – are unable to replicate his feats. Their failure casts doubt on a central pillar of Egypt’s elite.

Commentators argue as to the exact nature of the Egyptians’ failure.[[16]](#footnote-16) For our purposes, what matters is not how they failed, but simply that they did (*ve-lo* *yacholu*). This moment represents a significant step in the collapse of Egypt’s belief system, along with her power structure. The magicians believed they could manipulate and tame the gods, in contrast to the Israelite notion of an absolute God whose power rises about human control. The practice of magic was closely related to the priesthood; in fact, the biblical word *chartumim* likely reflects the Egyptian word for the magician-priests (ẖry-ḥb),[[17]](#footnote-17) who acquired great magical knowledge. This may be another reason that the magicians and Aaron always appear in tandem. Aaron will found Israel’s priesthood; in this role, Aaron is the counterpoint to the Egyptian priest, illustrating the triumph of those who serve the God of Israel and the distinction between the notions of priesthood in Egypt and in Israel. With this plague, Aaron’s victory over the Egyptian magicians is complete and his leading role in the plague narrative is done; he ceases to function as the executor of the plagues.

For the duration of the Exodus narrative, however, Aaron continues to work alongside Moses. This attests to the firm fraternity between the two brothers. Brotherly unity produces greatness and freedom; herein lie the stirrings of a national ideal.

1. *Pesiktra Zutrata Shemot* 8:15; *Baal Ha-Turim Shemot* 8:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Both *Eikha Rabba* 4:18 and *Pesikta Derav Kahana* 17:6 describe God bringing lice upon the Judean women who thought that they would save themselves from the Babylonian onslaught by seducing Babylonian military officers. I am unaware of a Rabbinic tradition that explains the plague of lice here in this way, but perhaps we can suggest that something similar is at play. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Herodotus, *Histories*, Book II, Chapter 37, section 2 [*Herodotus*, with an English translation by A. D. Godley. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1920]. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This approach seems more likely to me than other – somewhat generic – attempts to identify which god collapses as a result of this plague. Suggestions include: Geb, the god of the earth; Seth, the god of desert storms; or Khepri, a god depicted as a flying beetle. Other scholars focus on the failure of the magicians as a result of this plague; the Egyptian magicians may not be gods themselves, but they have godlike power and promote Egyptian theological concepts, which suffered a blow when they confessed themselves unable to replicate the plague of lice. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Abravanel, *Shemot* 7 (where he lists each plague and the reason that it serves as due retribution – *mida keneged mida*). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Yalkut* *Shimoni* 182 says this more explicitly: “Therefore God turned the dust to lice, so that Israel could not find dust to sweep.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The context of the twofold appearance of the phrase here is God’s promise to Abraham. In its third appearance in *Bereishit*, God offers Jacob the same promise (*Bereishit* 28:14). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The eighth appearance of the phrase is an elliptical use, in *Yeshayahu* 40:12, where the prophet describes God’s ability to measure waters in His palm, to fortify the heavens with His little finger, and to hold the “dust of the earth” in a basket. Based on the previous usages of this phrase, it is possible to speculate that *Yeshayahu* 40:12 alludes metaphorically to God’s protection of Israel. I did not find any biblical commentators that proposed this metaphoric reading of the verse in *Yeshayahu*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Significantly, the only other appearance of the word *afar* in the creation story appears as part of God’s curse of the snake: “On your belly you shall slither, and dust you shall eat, all the days of your life.” Previously, we have noted some intriguing linguistic and thematic similarities between this arrogant and wily snake, who defies God’s power, and the hubris of Egypt, who similarly denies God’s power. The end of all corporeal creatures – no matter how clever or how successful - is that they will turn to dust. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Aside from the peculiarity of this idea, which I discussed earlier, the absence of any linguistic correlation between the dust (*afar*) that Aaron strikes and the sand (*chol*) that conceals the Egyptian renders this correspondence less compelling. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. We discussed this in the initial contest involving staffs and snakes (7:8-13; see *shiur* #27). Following their inability to bring the lice, the next (and final) appearance of the magicians will be during the plague of boils, where once again Aaron appears to take an active (if secondary) role. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Aaron, of course, represents God as well, although less directly than Moses. The idea that Aaron functions as Moses’ proxy (more so than God’s) is based upon *Shemot* 4:16 and 7:1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. If we break up the plagues into three sets of three (with the final plague in its own category), the first set of plagues (1-3) is executed by Aaron, while the final set (7-9) is executed by Moses. The middle set (4-6) involves a complex amalgamation of players: God, Moses, and Aaron. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. When the magicians reappear during the plague of boils, covered with pustules, they are rendered utterly useless; they will not even be able stand up before Moses (*Shemot* 9:11). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Tanna* *De-Vei* *Eliyahu* 7 concocts a scenario (similar to the one we saw in *Shemot* *Rabba* 9:6; see *shiur* #27) in which Pharaoh mocks Moses during the plague of frogs, claiming that even young children can perform these acts. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Commentators debate whether the magicians were unable to **create** lice from the dust (e.g., Ibn Ezra, Rashi, Ramban) or whether they were unable to **remove** the lice from the people (e.g., Abravanel, Bekhor Shor, Rashar Hirsch, Benno Jacob). This debate may relate to two different ways of regarding the goal of the narrative here: Is the idea to negate the creative power of the Egyptian magicians, or to negate their power to save their people? It may also be a debate as to whether or not this plague reveals something new about the limitations of the magicians: in the first two plagues, the magicians were able to create more of the plague, but they could not eliminate it. Here, perhaps they could not even recreate the plague. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. As we saw in *shiur* #26, note 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)