**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**From Slavery to Redemption**

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**Shiur #35: The Fourth Plague: *Arov[[1]](#footnote-1)***

***Adash: Arov*, *Dever, Shechin***

*Arov* opens the middle set of plagues (*arov*, pestilence, and boils), known by its Hebrew acronym, *ada*”*sh* (*arov*, *dever*, *shechin*). If the first set of plagues takes place low to the ground (water and dust) and the third set (hail, locusts, and darkness) focuses upward on the heavens, this set seems to occupy some sort of middle ground, focused on the creatures that walk the earth.

This opening plague of this set (like the other openings of each triad) includes a purpose clause that contains the word *yada*: “*So that* you will *know* that I am God, in the midst of the earth” (8:18).[[2]](#footnote-2) Several new elements appear in this group: God explicitly distinguishes between Hebrews and Egyptians for the first time,[[3]](#footnote-3) and when warning Pharaoh of the impending plague, Moses suspends its arrival until “tomorrow.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Both of these innovations appear designed to heighten awareness of God’s absolute control over the plague; He determines who is affected and who is not, as well as its precise timing.

Who executes these plagues, and by what means? Unlike the first and third sets of plagues, no one brandishes a staff to launch any of the plagues in the second set.[[5]](#footnote-5) Moreover, the manner in which these plagues are carried out lacks consistency. *Arov* seems to materialize on its own, pestilence is brought by God Himself, and some combination of actions by Moses (primarily) and Aaron (in an ancillary role) bring boils upon the Egyptians.

**Identifying *Arov***

What exactly is *arov*?[[6]](#footnote-6) Until now, I have deliberately refrained from translating the word, mindful of the complexities and uncertainties surrounding its meaning.[[7]](#footnote-7) Lively debate produces a broad spectrum of answers, most of which begin with the assumption that the word *arov* relates to a Hebrew root that means to mix (*arev*)[[8]](#footnote-8) and that it involved some sort of creature – thus, a mixture of wild animals, birds, or flying insects.[[9]](#footnote-9) An outlying approach suggests that *arov* actually relates to the word for evening (*erev*), positing that God darkened the lights in Egypt.[[10]](#footnote-10) In what is perhaps a similar understanding of the meaning of *arov*, R. Hama and R. Yehoshua posit that God brings panthers upon Egypt; this opinion may derive from the fact that they are nocturnal animals.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The text provides a rather vague description of the plague, making it difficult to draw a conclusion:

For if you do not send My people, I will send, against you and your servants and your nation and into your houses, the *arov*, and the houses of Egypt will fill with the *arov*, and also the ground that they are upon… And God did so, and a heavy *arov* came into the house of Pharaoh and the house of his servants, and in all of the land of Egypt, the land was ruined because of the *arov*. (*Shemot* 8:17, 20)

Many different creatures – animals, birds, or insects – can fill houses (8:17)[[12]](#footnote-12) and cause the land’s ruin (8:20).

The Septuagint translates *arov* as *kunomuia*, meaning dog-fly. This approach may be slightly supported by a verse in *Yeshayahu* 7:18, which likens the Egyptians (and primarily their military forces) to a fly. This identification is particularly advantageous for those who view the plagues as occurring in pairs. The first two plagues revolve around the Nile,[[13]](#footnote-13) and plagues five and six involve animals. It makes good sense that plagues three and four would be connected as well. If plague three brings lice, then *arov* (plague four) may also involve insects (perhaps parasitic or biting ones, like the lice). Nevertheless, the evidence for this identification remains sparse and the details seem less suited. Flies cannot properly ruin the land of Egypt, nor do they fit well with the description of creatures that are “upon” the ground (8:17).

In many Rabbinic sources, the argument comes down to whether these are flying creatures or ones that walk on the ground:

R. Yehuda said: “He sent them birds of prey.” R. Nechemia said: “A mixture **below** of bears and lions, wolves and leopards.” R. Natan said: “A mixture **above** of falcons, impure birds, ravens, and birds of prey, and **below**, lions, bears, wolves, and leopards.” (*Midrash* *Tehillim* (Buber) 78:11)

From where did He bring them? Some say from **above** and some say from **below**. R’ Akiva says, “From **above** *and* from **below**.”…

“He brought a mixture of wild animals against them” – the words of R. Yehuda. R. Nechemia said, “Species of hornets and mosquitoes.” (*Shemot* *Rabba* 11:2-3)

In an unusually decisive move, the *midrash* in *Shemot Rabba* delivers a ruling on the debate:

And R. Yehuda’s opinion [a mixture of wild animals] seems [correct], because with regard to the frogs it was written, “And the frogs died [with the carcasses remaining in Egypt]” (*Shemot* 8:9), because there was no profit in their skins. But with *arov*, where there was [potential] profit [for the Egyptians] in the skins, not even one of them [i.e., their carcasses] was left. If these were hornets and mosquitoes, they would have been left there to rot. (*Shemot* *Rabba* 11:3)

The most common approach of biblical commentators does appear to be that *arov* involves a mixture of wild animals.[[14]](#footnote-14) This may be partially based on the following words: “And the houses of Egypt will fill with the *arov*, and also the *ground* (*adama*) *that they are upon*” (8:17). One would be more inclined to describe four-legged animals as “upon the ground,” rather than birds or flying insects.[[15]](#footnote-15) More substantial evidence emerges from the book of *Tehillim*:

He sent upon them the *arov*, and they ate them (*va-yokheleim*). (*Tehillim* 78:45)

It seems more likely to describe wild beasts eating humans, rather than birds or insects. Moreover, a plague of wild animals seems much more threatening, and more retributive, than birds or insects. The arrival of wild beasts into people’s houses and onto their land, where they wantonly destroy the great civilization of Egypt, represents the chaotic reversal of creation’s hierarchy. Animals no longer obey humans, nor do they remain within the confines of their wild kingdom. A society in disarray – restored to a primal state of animal hegemony – will later in the Bible become a symbol of societal destruction.[[16]](#footnote-16) The plague of *arov* ominously presages Egypt’s impending ruin, her uncreation.

**Why *Arov*?**

In accordance with what we have seen regarding previous plagues, *midrashim* search for a retributive reason for the *arov*. Some offer a general reason, based on the notion that whatever the plague is, it almost certainly involves multitudes of creatures:

R’ Shimon ben Lakish said: God said to them, “You brought multitudes upon multitudes against my children; I will also do this to you, bringing multitudes upon multitudes of birds of the heavens and beasts of the earth.” This is as it says, “I will send against you the *arov*,” namely, a mixture of beasts and birds. (*Shemot* *Rabba* 11:2)

This *midrash* addresses the bullyish behavior of the Egyptians, whose numerical superiority enabled them to gang up against Israel.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Several *midrashim* suggest this plague is primarily retribution for mixing disparate elements together. In *Midrash* *Tehillim* 78:11, Reish Lakish posits that God punishes Pharaoh for trying to adulterate (*le-arbeiv*) the descendants of Abraham – perhaps by forcing them to intermarry. In a symbolic gesture of retribution, God uses a mixed swarm against them by bringing the plague of *arov*.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Another *midrash,* similar to the preceding one, suggests that *arov* is a punishment for inappropriate sexual mingling:

And then He brought the plague of *arov* against them because they were mixing things up: one man would have sexual relations with ten women, and ten men would have sexual relations with one woman. Therefore, God brought against them a jumble. (*Shemot* *Rabba* 15:27)

An orgiastic portrait of non-monogamist sexual encounters, this *midrash* casts a spotlight on Egypt’s sexual perversions, which are noted in *Vayikra* 18:3.[[19]](#footnote-19) While Egypt’s immoral practices are not quite the target of the plagues, this *midrash* implies that one objective of the narrative is to highlight and condemn Egypt’s cultural depravity. This is both punitive and educational; Israel must pay attention to the sexual immorality in Egypt in order to reject it and establish a society based on different values.

Some Rabbinic sources posit that these wild animals entered the houses of the Egyptians and snatched their children in retribution for the Egyptians who abducted the Israelite children to do their labor.[[20]](#footnote-20) Another approach suggests that the Egyptians would send the Israelite slaves to capture wild animals (lions, bears, and leopards) for them.[[21]](#footnote-21) Why the Egyptians wanted these dangerous animals (perhaps as pets[[22]](#footnote-22) or for sport[[23]](#footnote-23)) is hardly the point; what is clear is that the Egyptians deserve punishment because they showed no regard for the lives of the Israelite slaves.

*Midrash* *Tanchuma*, *Bo* 4:2, offers a systematic explanation of all ten plagues, showing that God struck all the means used by the Egyptians to burden Israel with labor.[[24]](#footnote-24) Thus, for example, in the first plague, God struck the waters because the Egyptians commanded the Hebrews to draw water for them. In this schema, the plagues are both retributive *and* an active bid to release Israel from their enforced labor.[[25]](#footnote-25) In the case of *arov*, this *midrash* posits that the Egyptians compelled Israel to serve as tutors (or perhaps the intention is more like a child-minder) for their children. During the plague of *arov*, the wild animals would snatch the Egyptian children one by one while they were with their Israelite tutor, who would return to the houses of the Egyptians without any of his charges.

Yet another *midrash* suggests that the *arov* symbolizes Israel, whose tribes are frequently compared to animals: Judah and Dan to lions, Dan also to a snake, and Benjamin to a wolf.[[26]](#footnote-26) As we saw in the plague of frogs, the plagues can be seen as realizations of the Egyptians’ worst fears. Attempts to suppress the fearsome Israelites fail inexorably, and this plague may suggest that the Hebrew nation will rise up like fearsome animals and bring ruin onto the land of Egypt.

**Separation between Egyptian and Israelite**

For the first time in the narrative, the text explicitly distinguishes between Egyptians and Israelites; the *arov* will not attack the land of Goshen. In our discussion of the first plague, we raised the question of whether some of the plagues affected Israelites along with their Egyptian taskmasters. It is possible, as Ibn Ezra suggests (on 7:24), that they did; after all, these plagues are not only retributive, but also establish God’s might and intervention in the world. This would make *arov* the first plague where this distinction occurs.

For Ramban, on the other hand, it is inconceivable that any plagues would have struck the beleaguered Hebrew slaves. Would the Judge of all the earth not do justice?! This is, however, the first plague where the distinction is explicit, which raises the question of why this is so.

Ramban explains that until now, it was obvious that the plagues did not affect Israel. In contrast, *arov* roam the earth, and therefore the text makes a point of informing the reader that – against the laws of nature – the *arov* did not penetrate the land of Goshen:

When the beasts would emerge from their lion caves and the mountain lairs of the leopards, and they would destroy the land of Egypt, it would have been natural for them to also come to the land of Goshen, which was part of the land of Egypt. Therefore, the text had to state, “And I will separate the land of Goshen,” which will be spared because “my nation stands” upon it. (Ramban, *Shemot* 8:18)

Furthermore, Ramban writes that even if a wild beast would encounter a Hebrew, it would not attack, which is why God also declares, “And I will place a redemption (*pedut*) between My nation [Israel] and your nation [Egypt]” (*Shemot* 8:19).

Why does God spare the Israelites from the plagues (at least beginning with *arov*)? For Ramban, the answer is simple. Israel simply does not deserve to suffer; it would be a great breach of justice if the enslaved people would suffer the same fate as their oppressors.

Yet the verse itself offers another approach, explaining that the reason for making this distinction is, “So that you will know that I am God in the midst of the land” (8:18). The plagues have failed to convince Pharaoh thus far, but this differentiation moves the plague incontrovertibly beyond a natural occurrence to an emphatic demonstration of divine intervention. As noted above, saving the innocent while meting out justice to the evildoers reveals God’s absolute control and unfailing justice.

This moment may indicate a marked shift; possibly it is now that Pharaoh begins to ease the conditions of slavery.[[27]](#footnote-27) Ibn Ezra sees this as a logical conclusion, indicated by Pharaoh’s concession during the plague of *arov* that they may go worship God, within the land (8:21).[[28]](#footnote-28) Based on the word *pedut* (8:19), which means redemption (even though here it is used to describe the separation),[[29]](#footnote-29) Abravanel posits that slavery ceases completely after this plague; redemption has begun. For both commentators, once God extends immunity to Israel, Pharaoh loses the courage to battle them; they have evidently procured God’s special protection.

Redemption may well begin here, not simply from the perspective of the Egyptians, but also from that of Israel.[[30]](#footnote-30) In being spared from the suffering all around them, Israel experiences itself as distinct. Indeed, the language of 8:19 emphasizes the distinction between peoples (“between My nation and your nation”) and not simply between their geographic locations (namely, the land of Goshen versus the land of Egypt). For Israel, this illustrates God’s enduring commitment. Evidently, God intends to alleviate their suffering; He will surely redeem them from Egypt.

**Pharaoh’s Concession**

For the second time in the plague narrative (see also Pharaoh’s reaction to the frogs in 8:4), Pharaoh calls Moses and Aaron after the plague strikes. But this time, he seems to yield to their demands, issuing an imperial order that grants their request: “Go (*lekhu*)! Sacrifice to your God in the land.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Yet, Moses’ response indicates that Pharaoh’s concession is inadequate; the sacrifice to God must take place outside of Egypt, in the desert.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Pharaoh agrees to this as well, although there are indications that cast doubt upon his supposed surrender to God’s authority:

And Pharaoh said: “**I** (*anokhi*) will send you, and you may sacrifice to the Lord your God in the desert. **However** (*rak*), you must not go far! Pray on my behalf.” (Shemot 8:24)

Pharaoh opens his speech with the formal *anokhi*, highlighting himself and his regal authority: *I*will send you! He then limits his permission, stipulating a condition, introduced by the word *rak*. It is not easy for Pharaoh to concede power, and his dithering makes it clear that he is loath to do so.

Moses’ response, however, makes it clear that he is not cowed by Pharaoh’s imperial posturing; he uses the same words as a counterweight to Pharaoh’s bluster:

And Moses said: Behold, **I** (*anokhi*) will take leave of you, and I will plead to the Lord and the *arov* will depart from Pharaoh, his servants, and his nation tomorrow. **However** (*rak*), Pharaoh should not continue to deceive[[33]](#footnote-33) and refrain from sending the nation to sacrifice to the Lord! (*Shemot* 8:25)

*Anokhi* meets *anokhi* and *rak* meets *rak*.[[34]](#footnote-34) More to the point, Moses – God’s representative – stands as Pharaoh’s equal. Moses will not allow Pharaoh to dictate the conditions of Israel’s release;[[35]](#footnote-35) Israel will leave Egypt, unmoved by Pharaoh’s authority and in accordance with God’s guidelines.

**Conclusion**

The plague of *arov*, which opens the second set of plagues, stands as a powerful affirmation of God’s presence “in the midst of the land.” It marks a shift from undifferentiated suffering to visible evidence of divine providence, from chaos to emerging clarity. The same wild creatures that symbolize societal collapse for Egypt become, in the eyes of Israel, signs of divine distinction and protection. In this contrast lies the heart of the plague narrative: where Egypt faces judgment, Israel begins to glimpse the stirrings of redemption.

1. Although this term is commonly understood to refer to a of wild animals, the most accurate translation of *arov* is the ambiguous “mixed multitudes.” Given the uncertainty surrounding the precise nature of this plague (as will be discussed below), I have chosen to leave the word untranslated throughout the *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The context of the purpose clause creates a link to the fact that this is the first plague explicitly described as sparing the land of Goshen, where Israel resides: “And I will separate the land of Goshen, upon which My nation stands, so that no *arov* will be there, *so that* you will know that I am God in the midst of the earth.” In Abravanel’s broad understanding of the three groups of plagues, the purpose clause that opens each set presents the specific educational goal of the entire group. This middle group of plagues, in his view, is designed to show Pharaoh that God oversees and controls everything that happens on earth. See Abravanel on *Shemot* 7:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. During the plague of boils, separation is not explicit but may be inferred from the distinction between the Egyptian magicians – who cannot stand due to the boils – and Moses, who appears to be fine (9:11). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See 8:19 (*arov*) and 9:5 (*dever*). The plague of boils (like every third plague) does not come with a warning at all, and therefore lacks mention of a delay until “tomorrow.” On a different note, the word *tomorrow* appears in connection with both the second and fourth plagues – frogs and *arov* – to describe a delay in the removal of the plague, rather than its onset (see 8:6, 25). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. No staff appears in the final plague of the third set (darkness) either. However, to launch the plague of darkness, Moshe does stretch out the same hand that wields the staff in earlier plagues; the Torah describes this using remarkably similar language (*Shemot* 10:22-23). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The nominal *arov* appears in Tanakh only within the context of the plague narrative (here and in *Tehillim* 78:45; 105:31.) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This is different from my treatment of the second plague, which I refer to as the plague of frogs despite the controversy that arises there as well. I have treated this differently because the identity of *arov* is far less certain and there is no consensus on this topic, whereas the majority of commentators understand *tzefardeya* as frogs. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See, e.g., *Tehillim* 106:35; *Ezra* 9:2. See also BDB, p. 786, which discerns a cognate word in Syriac. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Abravanel offers the most elaborate understanding, positing that *arov* includes a mixture of beasts, insects, snakes, and worms, all of which harm, bite, and kill. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This is R’ Yoshiya’s opinion in *Midrash* *Tehillim* 78:11 (cited above). It may in fact be based on the same etymological understanding that relates *arov* and the word *arev* (mixture): the evening (*erev*) is the time when day and night mix together in a dim, shadowy light. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Midrash* *Tehillim* 78:11. They may identify the panther with the “wolves of the evening” (*ze’evei* *erev*) mentioned in *Yirmiyahu* 5:6 and *Tzefanya* 3:3. Rashbam (*Shemot* 8:17) maintains along these lines that this plague involves wolves, who attack at night. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Perhaps birds are less likely to enter the houses, but it certainly is not impossible. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Linguistic evidence supports the idea that the first two plagues are linked. Apart from the exact sequence of water sources listed in each plague (*neharot, yeorim, agamim*), these plagues record the success of the magicians in nearly identical language, as well as the terrible stench produced by the plague. However, with regard to the next “pair” (lice and *arov*), there is scant evidence linking them linguistically. *Arov* seems more connected to the following plague (pestilence). Hail and locusts also appear linguistically similar, lending credence to the theory (developed in the introduction to the plagues earlier in this series) that the plagues appear in threesomes where the first two plagues are linked and the third one stands independently, appearing without warning and designed to hint to the Egyptians what will happen to their bodies after death. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The list of exegetes who assume that the *arov* entails a mixture of wild beasts includes (but is not limited to): Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Ramban, *Midrash Ha-gadol*, Josephus, and the apocryphal *Chokhmat* *Shlomo* 11:18-19. *Chokhmat Shlomo* 15:19–16:1 further proposes that the wild animals were unleashed upon Egypt as a direct response to Egyptian worship of these very creatures – an idea that aligns with the notion that each plague dismantles another one of Egypt’s deities. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Seforno regards this phrase as evidence that the plague contains snakes and other creatures that crawl upon and burrow in the earth. While snakes would certainly be an appropriate plague for Egypt (as we have noted previously), it seems unlikely that the text would obscure their identity by calling them *arov*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See, e.g., *Yeshayahu* 34:11-15, which describes the animals that emerge as desolation settles over Edom. See also *Yeshayahu* 13:19-22 and *Tzefanya* 2:14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This idea is especially ironic considering that Egypt’s initial decrees against Israel stem from their supposed fear of Israel’s growing numbers (*Shemot* 1:9-10). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This explanation remains somewhat arcane; it is not entirely clear what sort of mixing the Egyptians did against Abraham’s descendants, and it is likewise unclear what the *arov* was that God inflicted on the Egyptians in return. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Prior to its list of forbidden sexual relationships, *Vayikra* 18:3 uses Egypt as a negative example: “Do not behave like the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelled.” Although ancient Egypt is not broadly known for perverse sexual practices either in scholarly circles or in its own cultural records, royal incest (namely, sibling marriage) did exist, especially among pharaohs, who sought to preserve the royal bloodlines and emulate their gods (Isis and Osiris, who were siblings). Nevertheless, *Sefer Bereishit* tends to portray outside cultures as sexually immoral (e.g., Egypt, Sodom, Gerar), a fact that Rabbi Sacks regards as the main theme of the book: that faithfulness to God necessitates a strong sexual ethic, not found in the surrounding cultures of the time. See his article on *Vayeshev* in *Covenant and Conversation*: https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayeshev/what-is-the-theme-of-the-stories-of-genesis/. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Midrash Sekhel Tov*, *Shemot* 8:19-20; Abravanel, *Shemot* 7:25. (Although it is not articulated, this approach may allude to the idea that *arov* constitutes due retribution for the Egyptians killing the Hebrew babies in 1:22.) [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Tanchuma* *Vaera* 14:7; *Shemot* *Rabba* 11:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Evidence from tomb paintings and mummified animals placed alongside their owners does suggest that ancient Egyptians sometimes kept wild animals (including baboons, falcons, lions, leopards, cheetahs, and hippos) as pets, ostensibly as a display of power and wealth. Netziv (*Shemot* 8:17) suggests that the wild animals the Egyptians had domesticated turned on them and attacked them during this plague. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Tanna De-vei Eliyahu Rabba* 7 seems to suggest that they used the wild animals for some kind of gladiator games. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The *midrash*’s explanations for the plagues of hail, darkness, and the death of the firstborn appear to be exceptions; they seem solely punitive in nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. We noted this idea briefly in reference to the dust that turned into lice, thereby releasing Israel from one part of their work duty. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Vaera* 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Although slavery is not mentioned after the onset of the plagues, there is no textual indication that Pharaoh ever lightened the Israelites’ burdens. Commentators differ on whether the Israelites remained enslaved throughout the ten plagues. As we have seen, several *midrashim* suggest that the plagues themselves eased their suffering by eliminating some of their labor obligations (see, e.g., *Tanchuma* *Vaera* 14). Ibn Ezra (cited above) seems to view the process as gradual, with the Israelites increasingly spared from Egyptian oppression as the plagues unfold. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibn Ezra, *Peirush* *Sheni*, *Shemot* 8:18. This permission suggests that Pharaoh no longer regards them as slaves without rights. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Scholars have expressed skepticism as to the reliability of the word *pedut*, meaning redemption. This is because its appearance in the verse results in an awkward syntax: how can one put redemption between one nation and another? Scholars offer various possible revisions, including the original word *parad*, meaning to separate, a possible root *padad*, which may also mean to separate (based on an Arabic word), or perhaps the root *palat*, which appears to mean separate (Garrett, *Exodus*, p. 306, fn. 110). These attempts seem to flail in many unlikely directions; neither of the two latter roots suggested are ever attested elsewhere in the Bible. It seems preferable to accept the unique usage of the word *pedut* in this sentence. Its awkward formulation may actually be intended to draw our attention to the vital connection between separation and redemption, as Rashbam observes (see below). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Rashbam *Shemot* 8:19 emphasizes that the word *pedut* – which in 8:19 points to a separation between Israelite and Egyptian – also alludes to liberation, which begins by separating one populace from another. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. The significance of Pharaoh’s surrender may be seen in his first word: “*lekhu*!” When Pharaoh initially angrily refused to release Israel, he used this word three times to send the Hebrews back to slavery and increase their burdens (*Shemot* 5:4, 11, 18). (This, in response to their request to go – *nelekha*, which Pharaoh repeats twice in rage: 5:8, 17.) [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. An intriguing question arises: Why is Israel’s sacrifice to God described as an abomination (*toeva*) to the Egyptians (8:22)? The answer to this question is likely found in the similar revulsion (using the word *toeva*) that the Egyptians display toward dining together with the Hebrews (*Bereishit* 43:32), and toward their vocation as shepherds (*Bereishit* 46:34). Rabbinic sources often suggest that Egyptians worshipped certain animals (such as sheep and goats) and were therefore repelled by those who sacrifice them, consume them, or shepherd them for food (see, e.g., *Shemot* *Rabba* 16:2; Rambam, *Guide for the Perplexed*, Book 3, chapter 46), but evidence for this sort of worship in ancient Egypt is tenuous. While there are several deities portrayed as rams (e.g., Khnum, Amun), there is no evidence that this would mean they would be opposed to slaughtering rams. Historical evidence suggests that cats were sometimes sacrificed in rituals dedicated to Bastet, a goddess depicted as a cat. However, Herodotus (2.42) claims that Egyptians did not sacrifice sheep because they were sacred animals, except in Mendes (Djedet). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. This is the first time that Moses calls Pharaoh to task for his duplicity, which recalls Laban and his similarly deceitful treatment of the laboring Jacob. The linguistic and thematic parallels between Jacob’s experience in Laban’s household and Israel’s experience in Egypt are noted by the Haggadah and by many commentators (e.g., Ibn Ezra, *Peirush Rishon*, *Bereishit* 31:9; Radatz Hoffman, *Bereishit* 31:18). These echoes suggest a broader biblical pattern: Israel’s time in exile is marked by initial hospitality that becomes oppressive, shaped by deceit, entrapment, and resistance to release. Yet, in both cases, God intervenes to liberate His people, granting them not only freedom but also material blessing and the foundation of national identity as they return to their land. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. *Sekhel* *Tov* (Buber) *Shemot* 8:25: “Pharaoh said to [Moses] *anokhi*, and Moses said to [Pharaoh] *anokhi*. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See later when Moses has contentious confrontations with Pharaoh regarding the terms of Israel’s journey during the plagues of locusts (10:9-11) and darkness (10:24-26). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)