

VA'ERA: SELECTED SHORTS

Rabbi Eliot Malomet January 16, 2021 3 Shvat 5781

שמות ו':ט'

(ו) ... והוצאתי אתכם ממצרים ומהצילתי אתכם מעבדתם ונאלתי אתכם בזרוע נטויה ובשפטים גדלים: (ז) ולקחתי אתכם לי לעם והייתי לכם לאלקים וידעתם כי אני ה' אלקיכם המוציא אתכם מתחת סבלות מצרים: (ח) והבאתי אתכם אל-הארץ...

Exodus 6:6-9

(6).. I will take you out from the labors of the Egyptians and I will save you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements. (7) And I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God. And you shall know that I, the LORD, am your God who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians. (8) I will bring you into the land...

These four bolded terms are the four stages of the Exodus represented by the four cups of wine at the Seder. Sometimes we overlook the fact that the core of this declaration is a betrothal: I will take you to Me, and I will be your God. The Exodus is a fulfillment of God's promise and culminates in a fifth stage: I will bring you into the Land.

(ט) וידבר משה בן אל-בני ישראל ולא שמעו אל-משה מקצור רוח ומעבדה קשה: (פ)

(9) But when Moses told this to the Israelites, they would not listen to Moses, their spirits crushed by cruel bondage. The remarkable thing is that the people are too overwhelmed to pay attention to Moses. It's a humbling thought: even the most masterful oratory will fall flat if the audience is distracted. Moses' first speech is a colossal failure. Before he can achieve anything, he has to move public opinion in his favor. The plagues that will follow are as much a demonstration to Israel of Moses' ability as it is a demonstration of God to Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

שמות ז':ט'

(י) ומשה בן-שמנים שנה ואהרן בן-שלוש ושמנים שנה בדברם אל-פרעה: (פ)

Exodus 7:7

(7) Moses was eighty years old and Aaron eighty-three, when they made their demand on Pharaoh. And they are just getting started! The Torah has a remarkable attitude towards age. 80 is vigor.

שמות ז':י"ב

(יב) וישליכו איש מטוהו ויהיו לתנינים ויבלע מטה-אהרן את-מטתם:

Exodus 7:12

(12) each cast down his rod, and they turned into serpents. But Aaron's rod swallowed their rods. And how do you think the Egyptian magicians felt after their magic rods were swallowed up?! Not only were they out-performed, they were rendered powerless! ( R. Barry Chesler)

שמות ז':ט"ו

(טו) לך אל-פרעה בבקר הנה יצא המלמה ונצבת לקראתו על-שפת הניאר והמטה אשר-נהפך לנחש תקח בידך:

Exodus 7:15

(15) Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is coming out to the water, and station yourself before him at the edge of the Nile...

Rashi, quoting the midrash, says that Pharaoh's visit to the Nile each morning conceals his human bodily functions. We detect satire in this line of interpretation. It is not surprising to find satire in the rabbinic retelling of the Exodus. Satire defangs the powerful and empowers the powerless.

שמות ח':ב'

(ב) ... ומהעל הצפרדע ותבס את-ארץ מצרים:

Exodus 8:2

..and the frog came up and covered the land of Egypt. In Hebrew this can also be interpreted in the plural: the frogs, prompting a debate among the rabbis. Why this formulation? R. Akiva: One great frog came up from the Nile and burst open releasing thousands of frogs; R. Elazar: The frogs were already in place (sleeper cells!) and one frog rose up and said, "It's time!" Their debate is a metaphor. Is political upheaval triggered by one cataclysmic eruption, or is it a function of a leader arousing a dormant populace to fulfill their mission?

שמות ט':כ"ד

(כד) ויהי כרד ואש מתלקחת בתוך הכרד כבד מאד אשר לא-היה כמהו בכל-ארץ מצרים מאז היתה לגוי:

Exodus 9:24

(24) The hail was very heavy—fire flashing in the midst of the hail—such as had not fallen on the land of Egypt since it had become a nation.

Why the reference to history? Is this an exaggeration or an attempt to locate us in a larger context of an ancient civilization? The Exodus story is filled with hints about Egyptian culture.

## On the Theme and Structure of the Plagues

There is a lively discussion in traditional commentaries and modern biblical scholarship on the structure of the story of the plagues. Even the Passover Haggadah gives us a mnemonic device grouping the ten plagues in three groups: *Rabbi Yehuda grouped them by these abbreviations: DeTZaCH, ADaSH, BeAHaV.*

There are at least four overlapping structures to the Plagues. 1. Pairs; 2. Triads; 3. Pentads; and 4. 7/10 prominence, a feature of many biblical lists. (See thetorah.com Scott Noegel, *Why Pharaoh Went to the Nile*)

That all of these structures exist simultaneously is a demonstration of the great narrative art of the Torah. But it also underscores an important theme: these are not random events. Great efforts have been made to explain the plagues by examining everything from the seasonal rhythms of the Nile to the proximity of a comet. But, as in the Creation story, the Torah is not laying a claim for scientific fact as much as it is trying to present a theological idea: God is above nature. Things don't happen by accident; God is the author history; human freedom is essential for God. And the Plague narrative emphasizes this over and over again. Almost each plague presents God's purpose: knowledge of God. Here's what it says:

### Preamble to the Plagues

(ה) וַיִּדְעוּ מִצְרַיִם כִּי־אֲנִי ה' בְּנֹטְתִי אֶת־יְדֵי עַל־מִצְרַיִם וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶת־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִתּוֹכָם:

### Exodus 7:5

(5) *And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD...*

### Plague of Blood

(יז) כֹּה אָמַר ה' בְּזֹאת תֵּדַע כִּי־אֲנִי ה'...

### Exodus 7:17

(17) *Thus says the LORD, "By this you shall know that I am the LORD..."*

### Plague of Frogs

(ו) וַיֹּאמֶר לְמֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר כְּדַבַּרְךָ לְמַעַן תֵּדַע כִּי־אֲנִי פֹה אֶלְקֵינוּ:

### Exodus 8:6

(6) *"For tomorrow," he replied. And [Moses] said, "As you say—that you may know that there is none*

*like the LORD our God;*

### Plague of Lice

(טו) וַיֹּאמְרוּ הַחֹרְטָמִים אֶל־פְּרֹעֹה אֲצַבֵּעַ אֱלֹקִים הוּא ...

### Exodus 8:15

(15) and the magicians said to Pharaoh, **"This is the finger of God!"**

### Plague of Swarms

(יח) וְהַפְלִיתִי בַיּוֹם הַהוּא אֶת־אֶרֶץ גֹּשֶׁן אֲשֶׁר עָמְלָה עִמָּךְ עֲלֵיָהּ לְבִלְתִּי הָיוֹת־שָׁם עִרְבַּ לְמַעַן תֵּדַע כִּי־אֲנִי ה' בְּקִרְבֵּךְ הָאָרֶץ:

### Exodus 8:18

(18) *But on that day I will set apart the region of Goshen, where My people dwell, so that no swarms of insects shall be there, that you may know that I the LORD am in the midst of the land.*

### Plague fo Hail

(יד) כִּי אֶבְרַע בְּפָעַם הַזֹּאת אֲנִי שְׁלַח אֶת־כָּל־מַגְפְּתֵי אֶל־לְבָבְךָ וּבַעֲבֹדֶיךָ וּבַעֲמָלְךָ בַּעֲבוּר תֵּדַע כִּי־אֲנִי בְּכָל־הָאָרֶץ:

### Exodus 9:14

(14) *For this time I will send all My plagues upon your person, and your courtiers, and your people, in order that you may know that there is none like Me in all the world.*

(טז) וְאוֹלָם בַּעֲבוּר זֹאת הָעֲמֻדָתִיךָ בַּעֲבוּר הָרָאֵתֶךָ אֶת־כְּהֵנִי וּלְמַעַן סַפֵּר שְׁמִי בְּכָל־הָאָרֶץ:

### Exodus 9:16

(16) *Nevertheless I have spared you for this purpose: in order to show you My power, and in order that you may speak of Me throughout the world.*

(כט) וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו מֹשֶׁה כִּצְאתִי אֶת־הָעִיר אֶפְרָשׁ אֶת־כַּפֵּי אֶל־ה' הַקָּלוֹת יִחַדְלוּ וְהַבָּרָד לֹא יִהְיֶה־עוֹד לְמַעַן תֵּדַע כִּי לֹהֵ הָאָרֶץ:

### Exodus 9:29

(29) *Moses said to him, "As I go out of the city, I shall spread out my hands to the LORD; the thunder will cease and the hail will fall no more, so that you may know that the earth is the LORD's.*

The Plague narrative is a face-off between God and Pharaoh in which God demonstrates His power over nature, and that portrays Pharaoh, an object of human veneration, as powerless. Pharaoh's freedom is limited with each subsequent plague, and, with the death of the firstborn (next week), he will have no remaining symbol of dominance or power. Shabbat Shalom!