

FOUR DIFFERENT WAYS TO GROUP THE TEN PLAGUES

R. Yehuda-Haggada: 3-3-3-1	Five Pairs of 2: 2-2-2-2-2	2 Groups of 5: 5-5	Number 7: 10=7+3
This is the traditional grouping that we are most familiar with.	The plagues are ordered in pairs:	The plagues are ordered in a "concentric" way:	This follows a consistent pattern in which biblical lists of 10 give prominence to the 7th and 10th elements. To wit, the 7th day, the 7th in a list of nations, the 7th child, and the 7th generation etc. ¹ The parasha division reflects this: the first 7 plagues are in grouped in Va'era, while the last 3 are in Bo. Hail is the 7th plague. It stands out in a lot of ways.
(1) Blood (4) Swarms (7) Hail	(1) Blood (2) Frogs	Blood	
(2) Frogs (5) Pestilence (8) Locusts	Plagues affecting the Nile.	Frogs	
(3) Lice (6) Boils (9) Darkness	(3) Lice (4) Swarms	Lice	
(10) Death of the Firstborn	Insect plagues.	Swarms	
Plagues 1, 4 and 7 have Moses presenting himself (נצבת) before Pharaoh in the morning. Plagues 2, 5, and 8 have Moses going (בא) to Pharaoh, and the third plague in each set, nos. 3, 6 and 9, arrives with no warning. In this structure, each plague has something in common with the plagues that are in the same position in the other sets. The 10th plague is set apart as it is the climax of the plagues.	(5) Pestilence (6) Boils	Pestilence	
	Illness plagues.	Boils	
	(7) Hail (8) Locusts	Hail	
	Plagues affecting crops.	Locusts	
	(9) Darkness (10) Death of the Firstborn	Darkness	
	Plagues that instrumentalize darkness: the three-day blackout (obviously), and the death of the Firstborn which takes place at midnight.	Firstborn	
		Each concentric pair has a common element. Example: כבד לב פרעה (Exod. 7:14) at the plague of Blood and כי אני הקבדתי את לבו (Exod. 10:1) at the Death of the Firstborn.	

Because the Seder shapes so much of our encounter with the Exodus story, most of us think of the 10 Plagues as groups of three, according to the acronyms of Rabbi Yehuda in the Haggadah: **ב-ד-ז-ח-ט-י-כ-ל-מ-נ** *De-TZa-KH, A-Da-SH, and Be'-A-Ha-V*. However, there are at least three other ways the plagues can be organized as illustrated in the chart above.²

Hail: More than the 7th Plague.

As the 7th plague there are many things that distinguish it. The Hail story has the most verses³ of all the plagues and also mentions God the most with a God-symbolic number: 14 (2 x 7) times. The word **בָּרַד** also appears 14 times, more than any other plague.⁴ Here are **seven** other ways in which this **seventh** plague is different.

1. Confronting Pharaoh in the Morning: Bringing Chaos to Pharaoh's World of Order. God instructs Moses to present himself before Pharaoh in the morning: **הִשָּׁמַע בְּבֹקֶר** *Start-early in the morning, station yourself*

TEXT STATS OF THE PLAGUE STORIES

	Plague	Verses	Words	Plague name occurs	God's Name
1	Blood	14	198	דָּם 5x	8x
2	Frogs	15	194	צִפְרָדִּים 11x	9x
3	Lice	4	71	כִּנָּם 5x	2x
4	Swarms	13	205	עֲרָב 7x	11x
5	Pestilence	7	97	דָּבָר 1x	7x
6	Boils	5	78	שִׁחִיחַ 4x	3x
7	Hail	23	346	בָּרַד 14x	14x
8	Locusts	20	366	אֲרָבָה 7x	13x
9	Darkness	7	106	חֹשֶׁךְ 3x	6x
10	Firstborn	10	174	בְּכוֹר 4x	6x

before Pharaoh (Exod. 9:13). This catches our attention because it happens on two other occasions in the plague stories - before the plagues of Blood דָּם and Swarms עֲרָב (7:16 and 8:16 respectively). In both of those instances, when God tells Moses to go to Pharaoh in the morning, God stipulates to Moses to go to Pharaoh *as he (Pharaoh) goes out of the water*. But here prior to the plague of Hail, God does not include the *going out of the water* stipulation.

The rabbis explain that **on the two other occasions, Moses ambushed Pharaoh while he was just completing his morning bathing/toilet routine!**⁵ But here, he confronted Pharaoh before his morning routine! That's some nerve! Egyptologists are convinced however, that Pharaoh's morning bathing/toilet routine did not involve going into the Nile. Rather it involved a series of other preparatory cleansing rituals that were done in a temple area, prior to his daily presentation of the goddess Ma'at, the goddess responsible for the orderly running of the cosmos, the Nile,

¹ Gary Rendsburg has highlighted this in a 1992 study of his discussing the importance of the 7th place in lists of 10. For example, the Amorites are seventh in the list of nations living in Canaan in Gen. 15:19-21. Hanokh is the seventh generation from Adam and is distinguished as having **walked with God** (Gen. 5:21-22). After Leah gives birth to six sons and a daughter, Joseph is the seventh full son born to Jacob (this excludes the four sons of the concubines Bilha and Zilpa). Boaz is the seventh generation after Peretz and there are many more examples.

² These ideas are based on Scott B. Noegel's article, *Why Pharaoh Went to the Nile in the Morning*, at TheTorah.com.

³ The account of the plague of Locusts actually has more words than Hail, but that is because there is a dialogue that takes place between Pharaoh and his magicians during that plague that interrupts the narrative.

⁴ The plague of the Firstborn is described in 11:1-10. In that chapter בְּכוֹר occurs 4 times. When the plague is carried out in 12:29-30 בְּכוֹר occurs another 4 times.

⁵ Shmot Rabbah 12:1, Tanhuma Buber Va'era 16:4.

and the sun. If that is the religious background to this confrontation then the Torah is artfully presenting us with a clash of worldviews. Pharaoh who is summoning Ma'at, the goddess of order, in the morning, and is confronted with Moses who is summoning the one and only God-ה', who will be bringing a complete and utter chaos never experienced before to Egypt, on the morning of the following day.

2. Hail=All the Plagues. **כִּי בַּפֶּעַם הַזֹּאת אֲנִי שֹׁלֵחַ אֶת כָּל מַגֵּפְתִּי** - **אֶל לִבְךָ וּבְעַבְדֶּיךָ וּבְעַמְּךָ** - **אֶל לִבְךָ וּבְעַבְדֶּיךָ וּבְעַמְּךָ** - **Indeed, this time I will send all my plagues upon your heart, and against your servants, and against your people,** (Exod. 9:14a). Hail is the equivalent to **כָּל מַגֵּפְתִּי** - **all my plagues**. Hail will wreak such havoc that it will surpass everything that has been experienced up until now.

3. Hail Will Bring Maximum Knowledge of God. In that same warning, Moses says: **בְּעִבּוֹר תֵּדַע כִּי אֵין כָּמוֹנִי בְּכָל הָאָרֶץ** - **so that you may know that there is none like me throughout all the land;** (Exod. 9:14b). This theme occurs throughout the plague narrative. But the scope of *knowledge of God* widens with this plague.

4. Hail is Historic. Moses warns Pharaoh that this will be a plague like no other: **אֲשֶׁר לֹא הָיָה כָמוֹהָ בְּמִצְרַיִם לְמוֹת הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה** - **the like of which has never been in Egypt from the days of its founding until now!** (Exod. 9:18) Once the plague occurs the Torah repeats the idea with a slight modification: **אֲשֶׁר לֹא הָיָה כָמוֹהָ בְּכָל אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מֵאֲזֻל הַיְּתֵה לְגוֹי** - **the like of which had never been throughout all the land of Egypt since it had become a nation.** (Exod. 9:24). The only other epoch-defining plague is the death of the firstborn.

5. God-Fearing People Heeded the Warning. Moses indicates that all livestock and people who remain out of doors during plague will die. Those who heard this warning now had a choice: ignore it and die or heed it and save yourself and your family. Some Egyptians listened to the warning and took precautions. Remarkably, they were God-fearing even if they were Egyptian servants to Pharaoh. **הִירָא אֶת דְּבַר ה' מַעֲבָדֵי פָרְעֹה** - **Whoever feared for the word of the Lord among Pharaoh's servants had his servants and his livestock flee into the houses,** (Exod. 9:24). **This is the only plague in which we see that some Egyptians are rewarded for fearing God. This is the exact center of the story and the crack in the foundation of the regime.**

6. Fire and Ice: The Impossible Mixture. The text recounts an extraordinary feature of this plague: **וַיְהִי כִדְּרֹךְ וָאֵשׁ מִתְלַקְחֶת בְּתוֹךְ הַבָּרָד כֶּבֶד מְאֹד** - **The hail was very heavy—fire flashing in the midst of the hail** - (Exod. 9:24). This is not any ordinary hail, a sudden burst of frozen ice pellets, but biblical hail, fire enclosed in ice! Rashi, offers a lovely homily: —

גַּם בְּתוֹךְ נֵס! הָאֵשׁ וְהַבָּרָד מִעֲרִבִין וְהַבָּרָד מִן הוּא וְלַעֲשׂוֹת רִצּוֹן קוֹנֵם עֲשׂוֹ שְׁלוֹם בְּיָנֵיהֶם.

Rashi: It was a miracle within a miracle! Fire and hail mingled, although hail is water! But in order to perform the will of their Creator they made peace one with the other.

We can point to the fact that fire and water were essential elements in Egyptian religion, elements that sustain life, and that the Torah is inverting them here

as elements that will lead to immediate death and destruction. A fire-enclosed ice-ball is hard to imagine anywhere, let alone Egypt, where this kind of violent precipitation is very rare. We will encounter another fire-enclosed item in the Exodus story very soon: the fire-enclosed cloud that accompanied and protected Israel from the very moment they left Egypt (Exod. 13:21). **Here is a wild speculation: hail is a fragment of "frozen cloud". The presence of fire in the hail is tantalizingly similar to the presence of fire in the pillar of cloud that protected Israel. On the journey, the fire-enclosed cloud led them on earth for forty years. During the plague of hail, the frozen fragments of the fire-enclosed cloud rained down on Egypt from heaven for close to forty hours.**

7. Pharaoh's Unusual Moment of Contrition. The hail was so severe that it caused immense damage, ruining crops and trees, and killing animals and people. Upon seeing the devastation, Pharaoh repents and begs Moses to relent: **וַיִּשְׁלַח פָּרְעֹה וַיִּקְרָא לְמֹשֶׁה וּלְאַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם חַטָּאתִי הַפֶּעַם ה' הִצִּידִנִי וְאֲנִי נֹעֵם** - **Pharaoh sent and had Moses and Aaron called and said to them: This-time I have sinned! God is the one-in-the-right, I and my people are the ones-in-the-wrong!** (Exod. 9:27) This is a turning point in the story. But Pharaoh is a great recidivist: Pharaoh is Pharaoh. **וַיִּסָּר לִחַטָּא** - **And Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had stopped, so he continued to sin: he made his heart heavy-with-stubbornness, his and his servants'** (Exod. 9:34). § Being **seventh** is enough to make you special in the Bible. But the Torah harnesses the specialness of the **seventh** plague to convey a deeper, religious message. This is the plague where fear of God enters the story. Some Egyptians act on it, and some don't. Those who do are spared. Those who don't meet with devastation. This is also the plague where the possibility of human change, or what we call *teshuvah* enters the story. The message is clear: given the opportunity to admit guilt and chart a new course, Pharaoh chooses to revert back to cruelty. The story could have ended there. Pharaoh could have freed the Israelites and spared the Egyptians further suffering and punishment. **But at this critical juncture, plague 7, Pharaoh failed and that led to catastrophe. The seventh plague is special because it illustrates God's imprint on humanity: moral freedom and the capacity for moral change based on reverence for God. That is God's signature, encoded by the number 7, and that is why this plague is different from all the others.**



Ruth Schreiber: The Plague of Hail

This parasha sheet is sponsored by Mitchel and Wendy Rosen in honor of the Bar Mitzvah anniversaries of Mitchel and Gerald Rosen, z'l.

Today is Day 477. As we anxiously await the release of the hostages, we also pray for the ones who remain. May God protect them and their families. May God comfort the bereaved, heal the wounded and shield Israel from terror.

Shabbat Shalom!