

## Death of the Firstborn: Murder Mystery Rabbi Maury Grebenau

The Hagadah tells us that Hashem Himself carried out the final plague of the first born, “*Ani V’Lo Malach*”. Instead of sending a messenger angel to kill the first born, G-d Himself wished to be directly involved in this aspect of the Exodus. Much of the Hagadah is found rooted in the Torah itself in the description of the events of the Exodus. If we examine the verses we find something odd about the final plague, *Makos Bechoros*. From the verses alone, it isn’t clear exactly who carried out the plague. In one pasuk (Shemos 12:13) we see reference to a “*mashchis*” a destructive force, presumably an angel. **Rashi** (Shemos 12:22) seems to take this approach when he explains that the Jews had to stay in their houses so that they would not be hurt by the *mashchis* who does not differentiate between the righteous and the sinners when he is given the permission to destroy. This seems to fly in the face of the idea that Hashem was intimately involved in this plague. A number of approaches emerge from the commentaries on Chumash who grapple with this question. Here is a brief look at a number of answers.

The **Seforno** (Shemos 12:13) assumes that it was in fact Hashem who carried out the plague. The “*maschis*” that is referred to is just a reference to the destruction that Hashem will create. It isn’t referring to an angel.

The **Ohr Hachayim** (there) understands that it was a two part system. Hashem was the only one could clearly determine who was really a first born in all circumstances<sup>1</sup>. However, the actual killing was done by the *Mashchis*. So Hashem was intimately involved and yet the *maschis* ‘pulled the trigger.’

The **Ramban** explains that the answer lies in a Midrash which states that when Hashem goes out He is like a king who has guards who protect the king from those who would approach the king or stare at him disrespectfully. When we are dealing with Hashem, these guards are the *malachei chavalah*, destructive angels. So the plague is planned and even carried out by Hashem and yet Rashi is still correct. People needed to stay indoors so that they would not be attacked by the *malachei chavalah*, who were out protecting Hashem while He worked.

The **Beis HaLevi** (Parshas Bo) answers this question by presenting an incredible idea. He states that there are two natures at play in the world. There is *Teva Tachton* (nature of the lower world) which is our natural world with all the natural laws with which we are familiar. There also exists a *Teva Elyon* (nature on high) which is the laws of the spiritual world. If Hashem does a miracle on behalf of a *Tzaddik* (Righteous person) then while it may be “unnatural” and therefore break the lower laws of nature, it is in line with the nature of the spiritual world (since a *Tzaddik* deserves a miracle).

Angels aren’t bound by the laws of our world but they are bound by the laws of the upper world. So while an angel isn’t bound by the laws of physics, he is still

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<sup>1</sup> This was because Bechor in the case of twins is based on Tipah Rishona not Rishon L’Beten and this is only known by Hashem.

restricted. For example when Avrohom was thrown into the furnace of fire the Talmud (Pesachim 118a) says that the angel Gavriel (who is master over fire) was the one who wished to make sure Avrohom wasn't burned. Here Gavriel was breaking a law of physics but still was following the rules of his own nature, in that he was saving a righteous person.

When the Jews left Egypt they were on a very low spiritual level and so they did not deserve a miracle even within the rules of *Teva Elyon*. An angel couldn't be sent to do the job of saving the Jews since that would even be breaking the upper nature which an angel can't do. However, the destruction of the Egyptians was warranted and so the killing of the 1<sup>st</sup> born was able to be handled by an angel. So the *maschis* did in fact kill the Egyptian firstborn. Yet, Hashem was intimately involved with the other aspect of the plague, the fact that the Jews were saved<sup>2</sup>.

Hashem loves us so much that He is willing to break even the upper rules of nature and be personally involved in saving us. The entire Exodus was a very public display of Hashem's love for us. May we merit seeing another public display of Hashem's love for us when He brings the Messiah speedily in our day!

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<sup>2</sup> This would also explain why the angels complained at Yam Suf that the Jews weren't worthy of being saved and they didn't complain in Egypt during the 10 plagues. The plagues were basically a punishment for the Egyptians but the splitting of the sea was in essence a Hatzalah for the Jews and so it wasn't in line with *Teva Elyon*. See, however, the *Mesech Chochma* who has a different answer for this problem.