

The Methodology of Teaching the Pesach Story

Adults

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EASY COME, NOT SO EASY GO REFLECTIONS ON THE REMOVAL OF THE MAKKOS

The Haggadah provides a framework through which we fulfill the mitzvah of *sippur yetzias Mitzrayim*. In the “Arami Oved Avi” section, pesukim from Sefer Shemos are referenced. These citations do not constitute a comprehensive survey of the core narrative texts, nor do they preclude a closer examination of them. On the contrary, by stating *kol hamarbeh le’saper biyetzias Mitzrayim harei zeh meshubach* — whoever expands on the story of the Exodus is praiseworthy — the Haggadah encourages us to delve into the story’s many details as recorded in the pesukim of Sefer Shemos. Ironically, “expanding on the story” typically takes the form of

divrei Torah that inform the text of the Haggadah, but rarely includes a closer examination of pesukim contained within the narrative itself. As we shall see, broadening the discussion to include a focus on these pesukim can greatly enhance our fulfillment of the mitzvah of *sippur yetzias Mitzrayim*.

One of the highlights of the Haggadah is the listing of the Ten Makkos (Plagues). The mention of these makkos, along with the *detzach adash be’achav* acronym coined by Rabbi Yehuda, beckons us to explore patterns embedded within the Torah’s description of the plagues. To cite one example: All the makkos, except for three (*kinim, shechin, chosech*), were

preceded by warnings heralding their imminent arrival. These warnings were delivered to Pharaoh either by the Nile River (*dam, arov, barad*) or in his palace (*tzefarde’a, dever, arbeh, makas bechoros*). These differences are noted by many of the classic commentaries (see, for example, Ramban to 8:15 and Malbim to 7:14), and their insightful answers can generate lively discussions.

This article will focus on a lesser known pattern relating to the removal of the plagues. As will be noted, Pharaoh’s demand that Moshe intercede with Hashem to bring an end to the plagues appears in connection with four makkos —

tz'farde'a (frogs), arov (swarm of wild beasts), barad (hail), and arbeh (grasshoppers). Additionally, the way the Torah describes Moshe's prayers for the plagues' cessation and how it describes the negotiations regarding their removal varies from case to case.

The goal of this essay is to "frame the conversation" surrounding these nuances. For this purpose, it will adhere to the following format: citations of the relevant texts, thought questions relating to the phraseology of the texts, sources and guiding questions that can help resolve some of the textual peculiarities, theological considerations relating to Moshe's acquiescence to Pharaoh's request that he pray for the plagues' removal. It is my hope that this essay will challenge the readers to further "connect the dots" at the Seder and beyond, in the spirit of kol hamarbeh le'saper biyetzias mitzrayim harei zeh meshubach.

צפרדע / Frogs

ויאמר פרעה למשה ולאהרן ויאמר העתירו אל ה' ויסר הצפרדעים ממני ומעמי ואשלחה את העם ויזבחו לה'. ויאמר משה לפרעה התפאר עלי למתי אעתיר לך ולעבדיך ולעמך להכרית הצפרדעים ממך ומבתיך רק ביאר תשארה. ויאמר למחר ויאמר כדברך למען תדע כי אין פה אלקינג. וסרו הצפרדעים ממך ומבתיך ומעבדיך ומעמך רק ביאר תשארה. ויצא משה ואהרן מעם פרעה ויצעק משה אל ה' על דבר הצפרדעים אשר שם לפרעה. ויעש ה' כדבר משה וימתו הצפרדעים מן הבתים מן החצרות ומן השדות.

Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "Plead with Hashem to remove the frogs from me and my people, and I will send out the people so that they may sacrifice to Hashem." And Moses said to Pharaoh, "Glorify yourself over me: for what time shall I plead on behalf of you and your servants and your people, that the frogs be cut off from you and your houses, to remain only in the Nile?"

And he said, "For tomorrow." And he [Moses] said, "As you say — that you may know that there is none like Hashem, our God; the frogs shall depart from you and your houses, and from your servants and your people; they shall remain only in the Nile." Then Moses and Aaron left Pharaoh's presence, and Moses cried out to Hashem concerning the frogs which He had inflicted upon Pharaoh. And Hashem did as Moses asked; the frogs died out in the houses, the courtyards, and the fields.

Shemos 8:4-9

Swarm of Wild Beasts / ערוב

ויאמר פרעה אנכי אשלח אתכם וזבחתם לה' אלקיכם במדבר רק הרחק לא תרחיקו ללכת העתירו בעדי. ויאמר משה הנה אנכי יוצא מעמך והעתרת אל ה' וסר הערב מפרעה מעבדי ומעמו מחר רק אל יסר פרעה התל לבתי שלח את העם לזבח לה'. ויצא משה מעם פרעה ויעתר אל ה'. ויעש ה' כדבר משה ויסר הערב מפרעה מעבדי ומעמו לא נשאר אחד.

Pharaoh said, "I will send you and you shall sacrifice to Hashem, your God, in the wilderness; but do not go very far. Plead, then, for me." And Moses said, "When I leave your presence, I will plead with Hashem — and the swarm will depart tomorrow from Pharaoh and his servants and his people; but let not Pharaoh continue to mock, by not sending out the people to sacrifice to Hashem." So Moses left Pharaoh's presence and pleaded with Hashem. And Hashem did as Moses asked: He removed the swarm from Pharaoh, from his servants, and from his people; not one remained.

Shemos 8:24-27

Hail/ ברד

וישלח פרעה ויקרא למשה ולאהרן ויאמר אליהם חטאתי הפעם ה' הצדיק ואני ועמי הרשעים. העתירו אל ה' ורב מהית קלת אלקים וברד ואשלחה אתכם ולא תספון לעמו. ויאמר אליו משה כצאתי את העיר אפרש את כפי אל ה' הקלות יחדלון והברד לא יהיה עוד למען תדע כי לה' הארץ. ויצא משה מעם פרעה את העיר ויפרש כפיו אל ה' ויחדלו הקלות והברד ומטר לא נתפך ארצה.

And Pharaoh sent for Moses and Aaron and said to them, "I have sinned this time. Hashem is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong. Plead with Hashem that there may be an end of Godly thunder and hail. I will send you out; you need stay no longer." Moses said to him, "When I go out of the city, I shall spread out my hands to Hashem; the thunder will cease and the hail will no longer be, so that you may know that the earth is Hashem's. ... Leaving Pharaoh, Moses went outside the city and spread out his hands to Hashem: the thunder and the hail ceased, and no rain reached the earth.

Shemos 9:27-29,33

Grasshoppers / ארבה

וימהר פרעה לקרא למשה ולאהרן ויאמר חטאתי לה' אלקיכם ולכם. ועתה שא נא חטאתי אף הפעם והעתירו לה' אלקיכם ויסר מעלי רק את המות הזה. ויצא מעם פרעה ויעתר אל ה'. ויהפך ה' רוח ים חזק מאד וישא את הארבה ויתקעוהו ימה סוף לא נשאר ארבה אחד בכל גבול מצרים.

Pharaoh hurriedly summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "I have sinned to Hashem your God, and to you. Forgive my offense just this once, and plead with Hashem your God that He but remove this death from me." He left Pharaoh's presence and pleaded with Hashem. Hashem turned back a very strong west wind, which lifted the locusts and hurled them into the Sea of Reeds; not a single locust remained in all the territory of Egypt.

Shemos 10:16-19

Points to Ponder

Here are a number of questions to consider:

- Why did Pharaoh only ask Moshe to pray for the removal of these four makkos? Why don't we find him making the same request regarding the other makkos?
- The term used to describe these prayers is "*ha'atiru*," from the root "*atar*." Rashi, Bereishis 25:21, writes that this term connotes repeated pleading. Why does the Torah use this term to describe these prayers?
- The first three times that Pharaoh asked Moshe to pray, he added that once the plague is removed he would let the people go. Regarding *arbeh*, he didn't make such an offer. Why the difference?
- The first two times that Pharaoh asked Moshe to pray, Moshe also used the term "*atar*." The third time (*barad*), Moshe said that he will spread out his hands (*efros es kapai*). The fourth time, Moshe takes leave of Pharaoh without mentioning anything about prayer. How do we explain the differences?
- When Moshe actually prays, the term "*atar*" is used for *arov* and *arbeh*. For *tz'farde'a*, the term "*vayitzak*" (he cried out) is used, and regarding *barad*, the term "*vayifros kapav*" (he spread out his hands) is used. What might account for these differences?
- After Moshe prays for the cessation of *tz'farde'a* and *arov*, the Torah states that Hashem acted in accordance with Moshe's prayers. Why is this mentioned only regarding *tz'farde'a* and *arov* and not in connection with *barad* and *arbeh*?
- Why does Moshe leave the city to pray for the cessation of *barad*? Why doesn't he do so for the others?
- We normally think of prayer as a request of Hashem to change His decree. Why was prayer, and specifically intense prayer, necessary in order to remove the plague? Was Moshe trying to accomplish something that wasn't part of Hashem's original plan?

Sources that Address the Textual Inconsistencies

When faced with multiple questions on the same topic, an insight that answers all the questions in one fell swoop can be very gratifying and compelling. However, more often than not, the rigors of Torah study require us to answer the questions individually or in smaller groups. Here are a number of sources that deal with these questions:

Source #1 – Shemos Rabbah no. 10

כיון שהתחילה הפורענות בגופו מיד הרגיש והתחיל צועק העתירו לה' ויסר הצפרדעים.

Once the plagues began inflicting bodily harm, [Pharaoh] immediately felt it and began to scream "Plead with Hashem to remove the frogs."

Questions:

- 1) Does the Midrash's explanation as to why Pharaoh asked Moshe to pray apply to all four of the aforementioned makkos?
- 2) How do we explain why Pharaoh didn't ask Moshe to pray for the end of other makkos where bodily harm was inflicted — *kinim* (lice) and *shechin* (boils)?

Source #2 – Ramban 9:30 (commenting on Moshe's response to Pharaoh's request to end barad)

והנכון עוד שנפרש כי ירמוז גם לפעמים הראשונים, יאמר, כבר ידעתי מכם כי בטרם אתם יראים ובאחרית אתם מורדים, כי לעולם טרם סור מכם המכות אתם יראים את ה' כאשר עשיתם בצפרדעים (לעיל ה' ד) ובערוב (שם שם כד), ותשובו ותמרו את פי ה', וכן תעשו לעולם, ומפני זה לא הזהירו עוד בשובו, אבל התפלל עליו בארבה על דעת כדו שיוסיף לחטוא.

The correct explanation is that this also refers to the previous instances, as if Moshe was saying, "I have come to know about you that beforehand you fear [G-d] and in the end, you rebel. Because every time, before the plague is removed, you fear G-d as you did with the frogs and with the swarm of wild beasts and then you return to rebelling against the word of G-d, and

this is what you will always do.” For this reason, [Moshe] didn’t warn him when he reneged again, but he prayed for him during [the plague of] grasshoppers, knowing that [Pharaoh] would continue to sin.

Questions:

- 1) How do the Ramban’s comments explain the differences in the language of the negotiations concerning the removal of *tz’farde’a*, *arov* and *barad* and the language regarding the removal of *arbeh*?
- 2) If Moshe knew that Pharaoh wasn’t going to listen, why did he continue to pray to end the makkos?

Source #3a – Ibn Ezra, Shemos 8:8-9

טעם ויצעק כי בטח בשם שלא יביישהו, כי אמר אל פרעה מעצמו כדברך יהיה בלא רשות השם. *The reason why the term “vayitzak” (he screamed) was used was because [Moshe] had faith in Hashem that he would not be embarrassed because he spoke to Pharaoh on his own, without Hashem’s permission, saying that he will follow [Pharaoh’s] request.*

Source #3b – Abarbanel, Shemos ch. 8

הנכון בעיני בזה הוא שמה רבינו מעצמו ומבלי צווי אלקים אמר לפרעה התפאר עלי למתי אעתיר לך וגו’ ופרעה השיבו למחר ולכן פחד משה אלו היה רצון השם יתברך שתתמיד מכת הצפרדע שבעה ימים כמו שהתמידה מכת הדם ושהוא מהר את הקץ שלא ברשות גבוה ומפני זה הוצרך לצעק אל ה’ שיקיים דבר עבדו בזה.

It seems to me that Moshe Rabbeinu said to Pharaoh on his own, without a divine command, “Glorify yourself over me: for what time shall I plead on behalf of you, etc.,” and Pharaoh replied “tomorrow.” Therefore, Moshe was afraid that perhaps Hashem’s will was that the

plague of frogs should last for seven days, just as it did for the plague of blood, and that Moshe truncated its length without divine permission. For this reason, he needed to scream to Hashem that He fulfill the words of His servant.

Questions:

- 1) How does Abarbanel’s answer compare to Ibn Ezra’s?
- 2) Why do you think Moshe guaranteed removal of the plague without first consulting with Hashem?
- 3) Can these explanations be applied to the other plagues? Why or why not?

Source #4 – Ramban, Shemos 9:29

כצאתי את העיר — על דרך הפשט יתכן לומר שהיה משה מתפלל בביתו, רק בפעם הזאת רצה להיות כפיו פרושות השמים ויחדלו הקולות והמטר מיד, ולא יתכן לעשות כן בעיר, על כן אמר כצאתי את העיר ... ורבותינו אמרו שלא היה מתפלל בתוך העיר לפי שהיא מלאה גלולים, וכל שכן שלא היה נדבר עמו אלא חוץ לכרך. אם כן נאמר כי בעבור שהיה פרעה מבקש עתה שיסור הברד מיד, הוצרך משה לפרש לו כי יצטרך לצאת את העיר, ואחרי כן יפרוש כפיו אל ה’ ויסור בתפלתו, והוא האמת.

When I go out of the city — One can explain on a basic level that Moshe ordinarily prayed in his home, but this time, he wanted to have his palms spread out toward the heavens so that the thunder and the rain should end immediately. This couldn’t be done inside the city. Therefore, he said “when I go out of the city.” ... Our Rabbis said that he didn’t pray in the city because it was full of idols and certainly [G-d] didn’t speak to him inside the city. If so, we can say that because Pharaoh was now requesting that the hail cease immediately, Moshe had to explain to him that he had to exit the city and only then could he spread out his hands

to G-d and the plague will be removed when he prayed. This is the truth.

Questions:

- 1) According to the Ramban, what is the significance of Moshe spreading out his hands? Is there a difference between the Ramban’s first explanation and his second?
- 2) According to the second explanation, did Moshe spread out his hands for the other plagues?

Source #5 – HaKesav VeHaKalah, Shemos 8:29

אפרש את כפי. לא יתכן שיעלים התפלה העיקרית ויזכיר פרישת כפים לבד שהוא כטפל אל העיקר. לכן נ”ל כי לשון פרישת כפים משמעותו ג”כ תפלה ... וראיתי להרא”ש שכתב דלענין הסרת הברד שאינו רק בשב ואל תעשה, כמו שנאמר הקולות יחדלון לא הוצרך תפלה רק רמז בעלמא, ובפרישת כפים זולתי תפלה יספיק. ואין זה נכון כי בכל מקום ענין פרישת כפים המכוון בו תפלה.

I shall spread out my hands. It is inconceivable that prayer, which is primary, was absent and only spreading of the hands, which is secondary, is mentioned. Therefore, it seems to me that the phrase “spreading of the hands” also implies prayer ... I saw that Rabbeinu Asher wrote that with regard to the removal of the hail, which was only passive, as it states “the thunder will cease,” there was no need for prayer, just a mere symbolic act, and the spreading of hands without prayer was sufficient. This explanation is not correct because any time that spreading of the hands is mentioned, it refers to prayer.

Questions:

- 1) How would you describe the dispute between the opinions mentioned in this source?
- 2) How do each of these explanations deal with why “spreading of the hands” is only mentioned at *barad*?

Theological Considerations

Along with exploring the Torah's language relating to the removal of the four aforementioned plagues, we must consider a broader theological question as well. Namely, if Moshe did not receive divine permission to pray for the plague's removal (see sources 3A and 3B above), what justified his doing so at Pharaoh's behest? After all, if the plagues were meted out as divine retribution for the Egyptians' wickedness, why relieve them of the suffering that they so justly deserved?

While this question is not directly addressed by the early commentaries, several suggestions present themselves.

First, perhaps we learn from here that even when a harsh judgment is imposed by divine decree upon an individual or nation, it is still appropriate to pray for the alleviation of human suffering. However, it is possible that this might only apply when the afflicted individual or nation acknowledges Hashem as the source of the suffering and expresses some level of guilt and/or a desire to change, as was the case with Pharaoh.

A second possibility is that Moshe felt that honoring Pharaoh's request

to pray for the plagues' removal was consistent with the divine imperative to accord Pharaoh an extra measure of respect in deference to his royal status (see Rashi's comments to Shemos 5:3; 6:13; 11:8).

Third, Moshe's prayers may have been necessary to avert a *chilul Hashem* — a desecration of G-d's name. This is because remaining passive in the face of Pharaoh's request could be misconstrued as an indication that Hashem lacked the power to end the plagues, thus creating the erroneous impression that the curse of their existence was merely a matter of coincidence.

Alternatively, Moshe's acceding to Pharaoh's request may have been designed to bring about a *kiddush Hashem* — a sanctification of G-d's name — since it illustrated that Hashem can bring a plague and remove it at will. Moreover, it demonstrated the trust that Hashem places in His devoted servants, whose bidding He chooses to follow even when doing so serves to override a preexisting Divine decree — in the spirit of *tzadik gozer veHakadosh Baruch Hu mekayem* — a righteous person decrees and Hashem follows suit. [See Abarbanel Devarim ch. 34,

who writes that Moshe Rabbeinu didn't normally need *tzadik gozer veHakadosh Baruch Hu mekayem* in bringing about miracles because he knew G-d's will in advance. He only needed it for the removal of the plagues. See also, the *Tanchuma Yashan* cited in *Torah Sheleimah*, Shemos 9:112, which indicates that Hashem stopped the plagues after Moshe's prayers because of *tzadik gozer veHakadosh Baruch Hu mekayem*.]

Finally, Moshe's prayers on behalf of Pharaoh may be viewed as a vehicle to establish a new paradigm for prayer, with its primary beneficiaries being the Jewish people throughout the course of history. [See *Sefas Emes*, Shemos 5653.]

These approaches reflect a range of perspectives on a profound theological issue. The merit assigned to any one of these perspectives would best be determined by the degree to which it finds support within the text and/or the comments of Chazal and the traditional commentaries. Needless to say, each approach carries far-reaching philosophical and hashkafic implications, and may be a catalyst for continued discussion — *le'hagdil Torah ule'ha'adira*.



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