

The locus of the locusts will inform us of His greatness

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And the Lord reversed a very strong west wind, and it picked up the locusts and thrust them into the Red Sea. Not one locust remained within all the border[s] of Egypt. (Shemot 10:19)

Parshat Bo continues the narrative of the 10 Plagues that Hashem brought upon Egypt. Rashi quite literally explains the above quoted passuk that not one locust remained in Egypt. So much so that, “Even the salted ones [locusts] which they [the Egyptians] had salted for themselves [to eat].” quoting from Shemot Rabbah.

This midrash seems a little odd for a few reasons. Number one, why is there any concern related to what is in one’s kitchen? It is quite miraculous that Hashem should bring a plague of locusts to Egypt with a strong wind and then remove said locusts from the outside areas. However, wouldn’t it suffice to leave the locusts inside the houses that were collected? It doesn’t seem that any power would be taken away from the Almighty to leave a few locusts around. However, the midrash is highlighting the passuk that expressed that Hashem didn’t want to leave even one around. The Ralbag explains that this was a delicacy not local to Egypt, hence the wind bringing them. Therefore there would have been some benefit remaining if even a single locust resided in Egypt.

What becomes apparent from this midrash is that Hashem is in complete control. He literally took every single locust out of Egypt. A reader of the text might think that Hashem took

out at least most of what He brought to Egypt, leaving a few around. One could imagine after a party that there is a little garbage left over, perhaps a few locusts got caught in the street or in some corners. This midrash is highlighting that Hashem is in complete control of the wind and locusts. The scene would look as if no locust had been there before. That is a qualitatively superior control over these items of nature than one would might imagine at first if they were to try to contemplate His actions.

So we see from this midrash absolute control, highlighting an aspect of the text that might be overlooked. However, an oddity is that during these ten plagues Egyptians are worried about luxurious treats. Aren't they afraid? I understand that they need to survive, they need to eat. But this seems to be a lengthy process, with regards to salting and waiting. Let's put that aside for now.

From what we have seen from the midrash about the locusts, we see that the Torah is showing Hashem's complete mastery over nature and the Torah's apt description of said control. In last week's Parshah, "And there was hail, and fire flaming within the hail" (Shemot 9:24). Both fire and ice were intermingled, yet it did not melt. This showed a mastery of both items. "Only in the land of Goshen, where the children of Israel were, there was no hail." (Shemot 9:26). There was no hail in a specific location, again displaying a mastery of space. Throughout the ten plagues, the Torah continues to show Hashem's mastery over these individual aspects. Which is why we would be confused when we get to the end of the plagues, the highlight if you will, and it seems that there is a contradiction to this very important principle.

"Moses said, "So said the Lord, At the dividing point of the night, I will go out into the midst of Egypt." (Shemot 11:4). Moshe explains that at *about* midnight Hashem will smite the first borns, performing the tenth plague. Does Hashem not know exactly when midnight is? Rashi, quoting the gemara, explains that Moshe was afraid that the Egyptian astrologers would make a mistake with their human calculation and might err in *their* calculation. They would witness the nine plagues and then the death of the first borns at either a few seconds before midnight, or a few seconds after midnight, and they would come to the conclusion that this Power was not all powerful. This was the concern Moshe was worried about. Weren't the astrologers busy by then? Weren't they afraid? When would they have the time to make their calculations?

Lo and behold, the Torah later describes that exactly at midnight, Hashem performed the tenth plague. "It came to pass at midnight, and the Lord smote every firstborn in the land of Egypt," (Shemot 12:29). What seems clear, for some reason, is that Hashem and Moshe are concerned with misrepresenting Hashem. So much so, that if there were to be a minimal concern for a misrepresentation of an idea, Moshe would leave it out.

This is why I am bothered by the midrash quoted by Rashi during the final plague to explain, "...for there was no house in which no one was dead." (Shemot 12:30). The Torah explains that during the tenth plague there wasn't a single house without a death in it. What if there was no first born in the house? Rashi quotes, "Some Egyptian women were unfaithful to their husbands and bore children from bachelors. Thus they would have many firstborn;

sometimes one woman would have five, each one the firstborn of his father.” (Mechilta 13:33). The Torah then continues a few pesukim later, “So the Egyptians took hold of the people to hasten to send them out of the land, for they said, “We are all dead.”” Rashi Explains that, “They said, “This is not in accordance with Moses’ decree, for he said, ‘And every firstborn in the land of Egypt will die’ (Exod. 11:5), but here, the ordinary people too are dead, five or ten in one house.” -[from Mechilta] See Rashi on verse 30.” According to this midrash, as quoted by Rashi, there would be a plague that misrepresented Moshe’s knowledge. This would have likewise misrepresented the power of the Almighty. If a sharpshooter attempts to hit one person and he hits two, this is seen as a detriment in their aim, power, etc. This is the message that was being communicated via the ultimate plague. The entire ten plagues were being built up, step by step, and now we have the worst situation revealed presented about Hashem. The alternative seems better. Had Hashem not killed the other first borns, no one would have been the wiser. The wives who cheated could have reasoned that the plague was merely for the first borns to the men, or they probably would have not even thought about it, and there would have been no confusion spread.

How can we end all the plagues with a confusion about Hashem when the Torah would constantly focus on the specific and diverse powers of the Almighty?

So to begin to answer this question, I would wonder what exactly resulted from this confusion. The people now feared that the Lord might kill them. They did not think that Hashem was not in charge, rather they recognized that the Almighty was in power. Their error was in understanding the application of His power, not His power. As such, the kind of base line message revealed here was that Hashem is in charge of humanity and could choose to take the life of those He deems fit. By the case of the timing of midnight, the perceived mistake would be in a calculation of a precise point in time. You either get that right or you don’t. By the first borns, the plague is one of choosing who to kill, but the criteria is artificial. It doesn’t matter per se from a power perspective who would be chosen, just that the message was clear that anybody could be chosen at any time. As such, the error involved that man could make from this plague is a very different type of error than the mistaken midnight error.

As such, if we look to the mind frame of the Egyptians. What kind of state of mind were they in? They were either in fear or not. According to the midrash, it seems that they were not in a state of fear. If they were, then they would not be salting the locusts or worrying about the animal hides if the animals were to die in Egypt (see Rashi from last week’s Parshah). One of two options exist to explain their lack of fear. Either they had become numb to the plagues by the time of the locusts, so they were just moving on and focusing on their delicacies. Or, we can see they were in a state of thinking. They were constantly being elevated in thought and were not in a state of fear for their lives, but in a sense of awe witnessing these plagues.

When Moshe and Aharon initially come, they present plagues, and the magicians attempt to match them. They succeed but they don’t really succeed, yet there is no panic. The people could see that the plagues were far superior to what the magicians performed, and their minds were intrigued. As such, by each plague their curiosity continued to grow, until finally the magicians couldn’t even copy, then they couldn’t even show up, and then finally they admitted

that the Jews should be sent out. As such, even though the night of the tenth plague was still shocking, the people were used to nine plagues, of gradually developing their observations and thoughts concerning the world.

The wives who had cheated would certainly know right away that this plague could only have been brought by a power that is Omniscient, as how would He know about each first born? The Egyptian men, after having experienced the first nine plagues, including many who may have already had suspicions about their wives, would contemplate after the night, thinking about the child they always thought didn't really look like them, didn't act like them. There was always a strange way their wife looked at the neighbor. So from the contemplation, the previously held thoughts about the subjects, and the conversations that were sure to ensue between friends and neighbors, it would become clear that the Egyptians would come to solve the "too many deaths" dilemma and realize how many actual first borns there were. Even after that, no man would be able to ascertain the exact amount and which ones. This would allow the Egyptians to recognize a being whose knowledge surpasses and contains all, whose power knows no limits or bounds.

So at first glance it seems that it might have been better to suppress the truth in order to avoid a misconception. However, it seems that by allowing for potential immediate confusion, far superior clarity and insights could be achieved by needing to first swim through that murky water. Perhaps that is a lesson for learning, that sometimes you need to really dig through the confusion to piece together the puzzle and perhaps we can take this insight to heart for our relationships and realize sometimes sharing a difficult truth may in fact be much more advantageous than we realize.