

Breaking Down the False Image of Self

The scenes of destruction and chaos throughout Egypt taking place in the Torah portion of Vaera dominate much of the narrative. However, throughout the entire sequence of events, we find critical conversations taking place between Moshe and Pharaoh. These back-and-forth moments are in many ways of greater importance than the actual physical phenomenon engulfing Egypt. An example can be found in the conversation that takes place at the end of the plague of frogs.

As the plague of frogs is unleashed, the Torah notes that Pharaoh's magicians are able to duplicate the results. At this point, Pharaoh turns to Moshe and Aharon (Shemot 8:4):

"Thereupon, Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron, and said, 'Entreat the Lord that He remove the frogs from me and from my people, and I will let out the people [of Israel] so that they may sacrifice to the Lord.'"

Moshe interprets Pharaoh's request as a taunt of sorts (ibid 5):

"And Moses said to Pharaoh, 'Boast [of your superiority] over me. For when shall I entreat for you, for your servants, and for your people, to destroy the frogs from you and from your houses, [that] they should remain only in the Nile?'"

When given the chance to stop the plague, Pharaoh opts to keep the frogs around for just a bit longer (ibid 6):

"And he [Pharaoh] said, 'For tomorrow.' And he [Moses] said, 'As you say, in order that you should know that there is none like the Lord, our God'."

Many commentators jump on this demonstration of cruelty on the part of Pharaoh. Rather than attempting to end the plague at that moment, Pharaoh chooses the following day as the stopping point. Why?

There are two approaches offered by Ramban. In the first, he explains that Pharaoh assumed that natural forces had brought about the frogs. His mindset was as follows:

"Moshe knew [through his knowledge of these forces that] the time of their departing had arrived, and that is why Moshe is saying to me 'glorify yourself over me', thinking I will tell him to excise them immediately"

Due to this assumption, Pharaoh responded by asking for an extra day, which would demonstrate that Moshe's powers were nonexistent.

Ramban offers his own interpretation, beginning with Pharaoh's interpretation of Moshe's offer of bringing the plague to a close:

“Pharaoh thought he was requesting time before [ending the plague], therefore he gave him a short [period of] time, and said ‘tomorrow’. Moshe answered, ‘as you say’, for [although you misunderstood my question], since you did not request for [the frogs] to depart immediately, they will not depart until tomorrow’.”

Both explanations are attempting to clarify what Pharaoh was thinking when he decided to push off the end of the plague. Why is this so important to understand?

Before attempting to delve deeper into Pharaoh’s mind, it is critical to see how the arc of the plagues reflected an evolution of Pharaoh from his self-conception as man-god to recognizing the truth of God. For Pharaoh to come to a clear idea about God, a process of breaking down his current outlook had to take place. In other words, the truth of God could not be “forced” upon Pharaoh. That said, within each plague we see another presumption destroyed and another step forward by Pharaoh.

In this ideological evolution, Pharaoh could not even at first consider a concept of a Creator. Our Sages point to various instances where it is clear Pharaoh saw himself as a deity, and this was the first mentality that required evisceration. Moshe presented a threat to this vision, but not because Moshe was representing God. Pharaoh had no mechanism at this stage to accept a notion of God. Instead, Pharaoh first views Moshe as someone who would replace him.

Ramban sets up this outlook with the first interpretation. Witnessing his magicians duplicating the plague, Pharaoh concluded the onset of frogs as some type of aberrant yet natural event. It was possible that Moshe had a greater understanding of the natural world than Pharaoh and was able to divine both the initiation and termination of the plague. Thus, Pharaoh suspected that Moshe was asking him for the time of cessation as a bluff. Of course, anyone would want the plague to end immediately; yet Pharaoh would not fall into the trap, thereby elevating Moshe to a higher stature than Pharaoh. Exposing Moshe as a fraud would help cement his stature as the true deity. It is evident at this point that Pharaoh placed his belief in his own divinity over anything else.

Ramban suggests a second interpretation, where Pharaoh misreads Moshe’s offer. Why did Pharaoh come to his erroneous conclusion? Like the first approach, Pharaoh is threatened by Moshe and his ability to “summon” the plague. His primary objective was to trip up Moshe. He assumed it would take a significant amount of time to clean up the mess of the plague, so to speak. However, Pharaoh never would consider Moshe having the power to make the frogs disappear in an instant; this would mean Moshe had true supernatural power. Rather, Pharaoh wanted to demonstrate that he was giving Moshe time to rid the country of the frogs, but not nearly enough time to succeed had this been a natural event. When Moshe would inevitably fail, lacking the requisite time needed to get rid of all the frogs, the people of Egypt would see

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Moshe as a failure, and Pharaoh would retain his elevated status. Ramban sees Pharaoh's maneuvering here at an attempt to buttress his image as a deity among the Egyptian populace. The crux of the debate between the two approaches lies in whether Pharaoh was considering his view of himself, or of his image to the Egyptian people as a whole.

The second plague was another step forward for Pharaoh in coming to realize the truth of God. Once the plague came to an end, Pharaoh began to contemplate his misguided and incorrect view of himself. To initiate the recognition of God, one must begin developing a more realistic view of the self. For Pharaoh to take the necessary steps forward, he had to destroy the self-propelled image of himself as a deity. While we may not see ourselves as deities, a heightened sense of self importance can act as a stumbling block in our ability to perceive God.