

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Themes and Ideas in the Haftara
Yeshivat Har Etzion

**This haftara series is dedicated in memory
of our beloved Chaya Leah bat Efrayim Yitzchak
(Mrs. Claire Reinitz), zichronah livracha,
by her family.**

PARASHAT VAERA

"And They Shall Know that I am the Lord" - The Seven Plagues in Parashat Vaera

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The two upcoming *parashiyot*, *Vaera* and *Bo*, deal with Israel's struggle to leave Egypt and with Moshe's encounters with Pharaoh. It goes without saying that their corresponding *haftarot* (*Vaera*: *Yechezkel* 28:25– 29:21; *Bo*: *Yirmiyahu* 46:13-28) also deal with

these issues. In order to understand the two *haftarot* and their respective perspectives, we must open with a discussion of the *parashiyot* themselves and the relationship between them.

A simple question that arises when we read these *parashiyot* is why were ten plagues necessary in order to redeem Israel from Egypt. Could not the King of kings have achieved his goal with fewer plagues and without all the cat-and-mouse games with Pharaoh and his magicians? Truth be said, one mighty plague should have sufficed to subdue Pharaoh, as is implied by the verses that open the campaign against him:

And you shall say to Pharaoh, Thus says the Lord, Israel is My son, My firstborn; and I say to you, Let My son go, that he may serve Me: and if you refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay your son, your firstborn. (*Shemot* 4:22-23)

The message sent to Pharaoh is simple: the threat of an awesome and decisive blow that would bring him to his knees. There is no mention of ten plagues, but merely a single plague that will solve the problem. Why, then, did the process drag out to ten plagues?

To understand the matter, we must take note of the difference between *Parashat Vaera* and *Parashat Bo*, and the function of the plagues in each of them. There are seven plagues in *Parashat Vaera* and three in *Parashat Bo* (like the numerical value of the Hebrew letters comprising the word *Bo* [*bet* and *alef*]). This division is not accidental, but rather we are dealing with two different sets of plagues, as we shall explain.

Pharaoh's initial reaction to Moshe's demand to set Israel free is not merely refusal to send them out but categorical denial of God: "I know not the Lord, nor will I let Israel go" (ibid. 5:2). As is plainly evident, there are two elements to what he says:

- 1) Denial of God.
- 2) Refusal to let Israel go.

From the very moment that Pharaoh denied God, thereby shifting the discussion from the historical-national plain to the theological plain, it was no longer possible to suffice with a single blow that would subdue Pharaoh on the historical field, but rather it was necessary to bring him to theological recognition of God.

This is explicit in the verses: "Thus says the Lord, **In this you shall know that I am the Lord:** behold, I will smite with the rod that is in My hand upon the water in the river, and it shall be turned to blood" (ibid. 7:17) – and this is what underlies the phenomena that accompany the plagues. First, the recurring demand throughout the two *parashiyot* to allow the people to celebrate for three days in the wilderness and then to return to Egypt can only be understood in light of this insight. Does anybody think that God needs such an intrigue in order to take Israel out of Egypt, or that it is to His glory to utilize such a scheme? But if we understand that the plagues operate on two levels and that from the outset they were exclusively meant to bring Pharaoh to recognize God, the idea of going out to the wilderness to celebrate before God and then returning to Egypt is absolutely reasonable. In this way, Pharaoh will recognize God, irrespective of the struggle over Israel's departure from his land, and this will be the achievement of the three day celebration in the wilderness. Afterwards, of course, in the second stage, Pharaoh will be presented with the demand that he let Israel go forever, as indeed happens at the beginning of *Parashat Bo*.

According to this, we also understand the full significance of the role of the magicians. When they appear in the argument between Moshe and Pharoah, the issue in dispute is not Israel's exodus from the house of bondage, but the question who rules over nature – the God of Israel or magic. Were it true that the plagues revolved around Israel's exodus from Egypt, "Pharoah's servants," i.e., his advisors on matters of state administration, should have taken part in the discussions, and the magicians whose status stemmed from their religious-magical strength should not have had a central role in the confrontation. It is precisely because the first seven plagues were meant to lead to knowledge of God, that the struggle with the magicians was of critical importance, and that it was their help that Pharoah sought.

The third point relates to the intensity of the plagues. In truth, the first plagues were a nuisance, but not life-threatening. Turning the water into blood did not endanger the population, for it is possible to drink blood. But it troubled them and was laden with great symbolic meaning. Likewise the frogs were a terrible nuisance, but they did not endanger the Egyptians, or bring to an economic crisis.[1] The same is true regarding the plague of lice. This is even stated explicitly in our *parasha*:

For now if I would stretch out My hand, I might smite you and your people with pestilence; and you should be cut off from the earth. And in very deed for this cause have I raised you up, to show in you My power; and that My name may be proclaimed throughout all the earth. (9:15-16)

Pharoah is being told here that with the pestilence God could have struck a mortal blow against all the vital systems in Egypt, but He waived this option in order that "My name may be proclaimed throughout all the earth." We see here that the plagues did not bring about, and that they were not supposed to bring about, a full systems collapse. Rather, their importance lay in the disturbance of those systems and in the demonstration of God's control over nature. Were the

plagues' role to bring about the emancipation of Israel from the bondage of Egypt, harsher plagues would have achieved that goal in a much more efficient manner. But for the purpose of sending a message regarding Divine providence, troublesome plagues were better suited.

This is also the reason that there does not appear to be any great urgency to remove the plagues. Even when Moshe promises Pharaoh that a particular plague will cease, this does not come about immediately, but only the next day. The principle that Moshe wishes to demonstrate to Pharaoh is control over nature, and he achieves this by showing how he is capable of pinpointing the hour as he pleases. On the other hand, extending the plague another day is not so problematic, because it does not cause Egypt insufferable damage.

In light of what we have said, we can understand why Egypt was not smitten with one decisive plague that would have brought their immediate submission. Such an approach would have achieved the objective of taking Israel out of Egypt, but it would not have succeeded in bringing Egypt to recognize God. For that purpose, it was necessary to send a series of plagues that would gradually persuade them, and not by force of the coercion of a powerful plague. That which is stated in the verse cited earlier regarding the killing of the firstborns relates to the demand presented there about setting Israel free, and it was said prior to Pharaoh's proclamation, "I know not the Lord." Until this declaration, the struggle was over Israel's exodus, and a single powerful plague would have sufficed for the declared purpose of taking Israel out of Egypt. However, the moment that Pharaoh brought the theological factor into the struggle, providence required a whole series of plagues in order to confront the religious issue.

In truth, we are dealing with two series of plagues against Pharaoh. The first, the plagues of *detzakh* – *dam* (blood), *tzefarde'a* (frogs), and *kinim* (lice) – was meant to establish the very recognition of God, and therefore its goal is defined as "in this you shall know that I am the Lord." This series came to an end the moment that it achieved its goal and Pharaoh and his magicians said: "This is the finger of God" (8:15). The second series, the plagues of *adash* –

arov (beasts), *dever* (pes) and *shekhin* (boils) – and the plague of *barad* (hail), was meant to establish the principle that Divine providence acts in history, and its purpose was "that you may know that there is none like Me in all the earth" (9:14). These plagues are characterized by the distinction that they make between Israel and Egypt, a clear sign of Divine providence. In contrast to the previous plagues, they have the power to bring to utter destruction, but they do not do so. Rather, they serve as a threat, as is stated explicitly in the verse regarding pestilence. This series ends with the plague of hail when Pharaoh declares: "The Lord is righteous, and I and my people are wicked" (9:27). Thus, the second objective of Pharaoh's admitting to Divine providence is also achieved.

At this point, *Parashat Vaera* comes to an end. Its plagues achieved the goal of subduing Pharaoh in the wake of his declaration, "I know not the Lord," but they did not deal at all with the second objective of overcoming the second part of his statement, "nor will I let Israel go." This role is assigned to the third group of plagues, those that appear in *Parashat Bo*. Here we have reached the distinction between *Parashat Vaera* and *Parashat Bo*.^[2] The plagues in the first *parasha* came to sanctify God's great name before His blasphemers; they were never intended to subdue Pharaoh and force him to let Israel go, but only to bring him to recognize God. The plagues in *Parashat Bo*, on the other hand, served as a tool in the hands of providence to bring Israel to their historical-national destiny. They are altogether different in nature than the previous plagues.

Let us now approach the *haftara*. Just as *Parashat Vaera* focuses on God's war with Pharaoh from the theological perspective, so too the *haftara* deals with this dimension.^[3] Yechezkel comes to fortify the principle of "that you may know that I am the Lord," and his prophecy is directed toward this goal. Therefore, the prophet opens by turning to Pharaoh in his capacity as king-god, rather than to the people as a people. The claim against Pharaoh does not deal with the feelings of military and political power that lead to human pride and arrogance, but rather with Pharaoh's far-reaching declaration, "My river is my own, and I have made it for myself" (*Yechezkel* 29:3). The importance of the Nile in Egyptian life brings Pharaoh to weave a creation myth that sets him up as creator and leader. The symbol of the

crocodile (*tanin*) in this context is significant; both because of its primality and its strength and because of the symbiosis between it and the river, Pharaoh identifies himself with the crocodile in order to present himself as master of the river. If the crocodile is king of the river who lived there from ancient times, it is the most fitting symbol for Pharaoh to use to illustrate in idolatrous manner "My river is my own, and I have made it for myself." In this context, it should be noted that in *Parashat Bereishit* the Torah emphasizes the fact that it was God who created the crocodiles ("And God created the great crocodiles" [*Bereishit* 1:21]). Besides man, the crocodile is the only creature regarding which Scripture uses the verb *-bara*, "create." In light of our *haftara* and Pharaoh's claim brought therein, it is reasonable to assume that Scripture was precise here, and that it used the term "create" in order to clarify that God is the sole Creator and to refute those who claim otherwise.

Because of the use that Pharaoh makes of the crocodile as a symbol, the prophecy against him adopts the same approach and speaks of undermining the status of the crocodile, the words being directed at Pharaoh. The metaphors that the prophet uses come to undermine the power of the crocodile as ruler ("I will put hooks in your jaws" [v. 4], which refers to the ring placed on the animal's snout as a rein and bridle), and to sever the connection between it and the river: "And I will bring you up out of the midst of your streams, and all the fish of your streams shall stick to your scales. And I will cast you unto the wilderness, you and all the fish of your rivers: you shall fall upon the open fields; you shall not be brought together, nor gathered: I have given you for food to the beasts of the earth and to the birds of the sky" (vv. 4-5). Removing the crocodile from the river and sending it to the wilderness does not only impair its strength and cause its death, but it severs the connection to the river upon which the creation myth was based. The crocodile lying in the river and its place as part of the primeval river symbolize the creation, and its removal to the wilderness proves that the river is merely an appropriate habitat for it, but nothing more, the crocodile and the river being separate entities.

The conclusion of the process, which appears in the next verse, is "And all the inhabitants of Egypt shall know that I am the Lord" (v. 6). This, of course, is the conclusion familiar to us from *Parashat Vaera* as the objective of the plagues. We see then that both *Parashat Vaera* and

the prophecy of Yechezkel describe plagues brought by God against Egypt, when in both cases the primary objective is not military subjugation, but bringing Egypt to recognize God.

The prophet emphasizes this point again later in the *haftara*:

Therefore, says the Lord God; Behold, I will bring a sword upon you, and cut off man and beast out of you. And the land of Egypt shall be desolate and waste; and they shall know that I am the Lord: because He has said, The river is mine, and I have made it. (vv. 8-9)

As is evident, Yechezkel speaks of a powerful plague against Egypt, but it does not focus on the subjugation of Egypt on the political plain as an evil nation, in and of itself, but rather on the principle of "I am the Lord," and this is "because He has said, The river is mine, and I have made it." In the terminology of *Parashat Vaera*, the destruction under discussion is an expression of the potential in the second group of plagues, and the realization of that potential, but for the same objective "that you may know that I am the Lord." And it is possible, that just as in our *parasha* there is a two-fold process of recognizing God and afterwards recognizing His providence, here too the redundancy points to a similar objective, though there is no real expression of this in the verses other than the fact of the redundancy.

The end of the *haftara* continues along these lines. The exile of Egypt, the ingathering of their exiles and their return to their land are reminiscent of similar terms used regarding Israel and parallel them. This, of course, is very surprising, for what is the connection between Egypt and Israel? God's concern for Israel, His commitment to the patriarchs and His desire to return Israel to their land are not relevant factors regarding Egypt. Why not let history do what it does without special Divine intervention, as is the case with the other nations? More than this, even when they return, they do not return to their former greatness, but rather they remain a lowly

kingdom. Thus, we do not seem to be dealing here with concern for the Egyptian people as a great nation in and of itself.

The answer to this question lies in what we have seen. Egypt's exile and their return to their land were meant to illustrate God's providence in the world, and for this purpose it is important to God that He demonstrate His control over their destiny. In other words, we are not dealing with a human need, but rather with a Divine need. The common denominator between the ingathering of the exiles of Israel and Egypt lies in this point of Divine intervention, and this explains why the same wording is used for the two processes. The lowliness of Egypt fits in to the picture in that it illustrates God's will in their regard. This is the goal of their restoration to their land, and not concern for the destiny of Egyptian history.

All this is stated explicitly in the *haftara* in the concluding verse of this section:

And it shall be no more a safe standby for the house of Israel, bringing their iniquity to remembrance, when they shall turn after them: but they shall know that I am the Lord. (v. 16).

In this context it is important to add that in similar fashion to the *parasha* where there is progress from recognition of God's very existence to His providence, here too the prophecy concerning the ingathering of the exiles certainly fills the same role, because it focuses not on the question of the creation, but on control and providence over history.

In the light of all that has been said, we are not surprised to discover that the concluding verse of the *haftara* also returns to this motif:

On that day will I cause the horn of the house of Israel to put out shoots, and I will open your mouth in the midst of them; and they shall know that I am the Lord. (v. 21)

No less than four times over the course of the *haftara* does the prophet repeat the key sentence, "And they shall know that I am the Lord." This is undoubtedly the essence of the *haftara*, for Yechezkel's prophecy regarding Egypt is directed at the theological element in the struggle with Egypt, and thus it serves as a most appropriate *haftara* for *Parashat Vaera*.

(Translated by David Strauss)

[1] Of course, if we adopt the view cited by Ibn Ezra and Abravanel that the "*tzefard'im*" were crocodiles, rather than frogs, the picture changes...

[2] One point must be addressed here, namely, the classification of the plague of hail. In the outline presented here, the plagues are divided into a group of seven versus a group of three, when the group of seven sub-divides into groups of three and four, so that we are left with three groups of plagues. This, of course, is the famous model of Rabbi Yehuda who gave the plagues signs: *detzach*, *adash*, *be'achav*, thus dividing them into three groups. Rabbi Yehuda's division, however, which was inserted into the *hagada* recited on the night of the *seder*, differs from that which follows from the *parashiyot*, for it assigns hail to the third group, whereas the *parashiyot* assign it to the second group. As stated above, this is not merely a matter of convenience, but rather a basic characterization regarding the nature of the plague.

On second thought, however, this need not surprise us, for the key to understanding the plague of hail and its place among the plagues as a whole, lies in the double role that the verses assign to it. On the one hand, it is the plague that brings Pharaoh to proclaim God's righteousness and to the recognition that accompanies it regarding God's actions in this world. Thus, it belongs to the second series of plagues in *Parashat Vaera*, and the division of the *parashiyot* saved it a place as the concluding plague of *Vaera*. On the other hand, hail is the first plague that causes substantial damage to Egypt's economy, as is spelled out at the end of our *parasha* and in the description of the plague of locusts described in the next *parasha*. Thus begins the struggle to free Israel and in this sense hail belongs to the third series of plagues, and thus the *Hagada* assigns it to the plagues that conclude the whole process.

[3] As we shall see next week, the division of labor between the *parashiyot* of *Vaera* and *Bo* is found also in their respective *haftarot*. Just as *Parashat Bo* does not deal with the struggle regarding the recognition of God, but only with the struggle regarding the exodus of the people from Egypt, so too its *haftara* focuses on the smiting of Egypt as a people, rather than on the theological struggle with Pharaoh.