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**Two Groups of Plagues: The Difference Between Va'era  
and Bo**

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The first seven plagues appear in *Parashat Vaera* and the last three in *Parashat Bo*. This division is very significant. In *Parashat Vaera*, the struggle between Moshe and Pharaoh relates to the very recognition of God, and it is toward this objective that the plagues are directed. In *Parashat Bo*, on the other hand, the goal of the plagues is to take Israel out of Egypt. The moment that Pharaoh declares at the end of *Parashat Vaera*, "The Lord is righteous, and I and my people are wicked," the first objective is achieved and the plot advances to the next stage, i.e., bringing Pharaoh to send Israel out of his land.

In light of this development, the very nature of the plagues changes in accordance with the new objective. Thus, the plagues in *Parashat Bo* are utterly different from those in *Parashat Vaera*. The plagues in *Parashat Vaera* are characterized by the following:

- 1) plagues whose purpose was to harass, rather than to destroy;
- 2) removal of the plague, in the wake of Pharaoh's request, only on the next day;
- 3) the magicians' serving as Pharaoh's aides.

In *Parashat Bo*, all this changes. From the very beginning of the *parasha*, we encounter harsh plagues that are meant to destroy the Egyptian economy. The locusts do not merely vex Egypt, but rather they destroy the Egyptian food stocks. In their wake, there is no food left from vegetable sources. As opposed to what happened with the plague of blood, the grain does not become repulsive, but rather it disappears; as opposed to what happened with the plague of hail, there is no surviving remnant, but rather the entire crop is destroyed. It is not by chance that Pharaoh describes the plague of locusts as "this death." The plague of darkness brings life to an absolute standstill, and is like temporary death. As for the killing of the firstborns and the destruction that it wreaks, nothing needs to be added. To summarize, we are talking about the threat of total destruction of the country and plagues that involve death.

The reason for this is simple. In *Vaera*, it was necessary to bring Pharaoh to internal recognition, and therefore it was impossible to exert excessive force that would have broken him immediately. In *Bo*, God wishes to cause Pharaoh to send Israel out, and for that purpose great force is used to subdue Pharaoh and break him immediately.

### **SERVANTS INSTEAD OF MAGICIANS**

In light of this, we can discern a number of changes that take place in *Bo* in contrast to *Vaera*.

First of all, the magicians leave the picture, and in their stead we encounter Pharaoh's servants. Pharaoh's servants constitute the civil administration that runs the country and worries about Egypt's day-to-day functioning. They do not concern themselves with theological questions, but rather with the welfare of the kingdom and its resources. Thus, as long as

Pharaoh contended with Moshe about the question who is God, and as long as no damage was being done to the state, they did not intervene. But as soon as the state began to suffer harm, and the center of the plagues' gravity shifted to the attempt to destroy the economic and human foundations of Egypt, they entered into the thick of things, and their words reflect the efficacy of the plagues. Already at the time of the plague of hail - which contains a certain element of the vanquishing of Egypt, in addition to the struggle over the recognition of God - Pharaoh's servants make their appearance and begin to reflect the concern about the price extracted by the plagues. In the plague of locusts, with which *Parashat Bo* opens, their presence assumes critical importance and they reflect the process of achieving the objective of the plagues:

And Pharaoh's servants said to him, How long shall this man be a snare to us? Let the men go, that they may serve the Lord their God: know you not yet that Egypt is destroyed? (*Shemot* 10:7)

In their eyes, the theological struggle is not worth the destruction of Egypt. Their non-intervention in the proceedings until that point stemmed from the fact that the previous plagues did not threaten to destroy Egypt, whereas the plagues of *Parashat Bo*, which were meant to bring about the exodus of Israel from Egypt extracted a very heavy cost.

### **IMMEDIATE REMOVAL**

The very same reason underlies another change in comparison to *Parashat Vaera*, namely, the immediate removal of the plagues, without waiting until the next day, as in the past. It is in connection with the plague of locusts that it says for the first time that Pharaoh called for Moshe and Aharon "in haste"; previously, it had merely said that Pharaoh called them, but from that point on there is great urgency.<sup>[6]</sup> The climax is reached, of course, in the plague of the smiting of the firstborns when Pharaoh is forced to run to Moshe in his house and plead before him.

### **THE NEGOTIATIONS**

The negotiations between Pharaoh and Moshe in the aftermath of the plagues of locusts and darkness should also be understood against this backdrop. Following the threat of the locusts, Pharaoh proposes to Moshe that he would be willing to allow the men alone to go out into the wilderness to serve God, but Moshe refuses the offer and demands that the entire people be allowed to go. Later, during the plague of darkness, Pharaoh agrees to send the children as well, but Moshe insists that even the sheep and the cattle must go with them. We are not dealing here with the sort of haggling that takes place between two merchants, with Moshe raising the price at every turn, and Pharaoh being forced into ever greater concessions, but rather with Pharaoh's misunderstanding of the change that has taken place in the objective of the plagues. Since Moshe had originally spoken of a three-day journey into the wilderness followed by Israel's return to Egypt, Pharaoh proposed that they go in partial formation in order to observe their religious feast. At first he thought that his proposal that only the men should go would suffice, for they are the ones who would be offering the sacrifices; even afterwards, his readiness to agree that the children would go but not the animals, assumed that in question was a religious feast at the end of which Israel would return to Egypt. He insisted that the animals stay behind not because

of their economic value, but because that served as a sign that Israel was planning to return to Egypt. This, however, is precisely the reason that Moshe refuses to agree. Pharaoh's proposal to leave for three days was valid in *Parashat Vaera*, when the matter in dispute was recognition of God. From the moment that this objective was achieved, Moshe's demand became that Israel be sent out from Egypt. Thus, it is clear that he insists on the departure of all of Israel, including their sheep, cattle and other property.

## THE HAFTARAH

The *haftarah* of *Parashiyot Vaera* and *Bo* also reflect this distinction that we saw in the *parashiyot* themselves. The focus of the *haftarah* of *Vaera* (*Yechezkel* 28:25–29:21) is "And all the inhabitants of Egypt shall know that I am the Lord" (*Yechezkel* 29:6). The *haftarah* for *Parashat Bo* (*Yirmiyahu* 46:13–28) deals with the price that Egypt will pay and the human angle of the smiting of Egypt.

The background for the *haftarah* is found in the previous prophecy, where the prophet Yirmiyahu prophesies the ascent of Bavel and the geo-political failure of Egypt to halt Bavel's takeover of the entire region. That prophecy relates to a battle fought on the shores of the Euphrates River, where Egypt tries to take the initiative and stop Bavel in the north. The *haftarah* of *Bo* relates to the next stage in the process; the war is not at the Euphrates, but in Egypt where Nevuchadnetzar comes to strike at Egypt itself.

What this means is that behind every political and military decision there is a human price that will be extracted from Egypt. Pharaoh's struggle over his geo-political standing will not end with Egypt's decline but with the conquest of Egypt itself.<sup>[7]</sup> The prophet's concern, however, is not with the significance of the conquest on the standing of Egypt, but with the sword that will devour the Egyptian people. The situation is described by the words "for the sword shall devour round about you" (*Yirmiyahu* 46:14), and Egypt's feeling is "Arise, let us go again to our own people, and to the land of our nativity, from the oppressing sword" (v. 16). In addition to the sword, they are also threatened by exile and the destruction of their country: "O you daughter dwelling in Egypt, furnish yourself with the baggage of exile: for Nof shall be waste and desolate without inhabitant" (v. 19). The contrast with Yechezkel who also prophesies about the desolation and destruction of Egypt ("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"; *Yechezkel* 29:8-9) is striking. Yechezkel's argument is "and they shall know that I am the Lord," whereas Yirmiyahu ignores all that and focuses exclusively on the destruction itself.

## THE COST OF POPULAR SUPPORT

On this point there is a similarity between the *haftarah* and the *parasha*. In the *parasha* as well, the Egyptian man on the street pays the price for Pharaoh's war against the people of Israel: his grain and sustenance are destroyed, his life comes to a halt, and his firstborn son dies. In this context, it is fitting to cite what I once heard from Rabbi Soloveitchik, *ztz"l*. The Rav asked why is it that God killed all the firstborns in Egypt and did not suffice with that which was said in *Parashat Shemot* that God would kill Pharaoh's firstborn son. He answered as follows: "As a child in Russia, who suffered from constant anti-Semitism – from whom did I suffer? When I ran home from those who wished to hit and humiliate me – from whom was I running? Not from the czar, but from the neighborhood bully." Without the support and cooperation of the Egyptian people, Israel would not have suffered as they did in Egypt, and they would not have been struck down as they had been struck down. The popular support is what allowed for the

oppression of the people of Israel, and the people of Egypt were full partners in the subjugation.<sup>[8]</sup> In the *haftarah* as well, "the daughter dwelling in Egypt" is perceived as identifying with Pharaoh and assisting him, and therefore she too is punished along with him.

## THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE CROCODILE AND THE FAIR HEIFER

Regarding this point, let us contrast the two main metaphors found in the two *haftarah*. In Yechezkel's prophecy, the main metaphor is the crocodile, whereas Yirmiyahu prophesies about a very fair heifer, and describes Egypt as "fatted bullocks." The crocodile symbolizes power and primality, and as such it is a fitting symbol of the creation, but it has no importance for human consumption. The heifer, on the other hand, is identified with human survival, and supplies man with his basic needs. As a domesticated animal, it does not radiate power and energy, but rather the human economy. The heifer is not a force in nature that rules over animals, but rather it is ruled by others. All this turns the heifer into a poor metaphor for Yechezkel's purposes, but a very good one for the issue that Yirmiyahu is dealing with. So too, the heifer symbolizes the sated middle class, and its slaughter at the hand of Bavel ("But destruction comes; it comes out of the north"; *Yirmiyahu* 46:20) symbolizes the destruction of the easy life of the Egyptians.

## A MODEST PROMISE

The *haftarah*'s conclusion with the promise to Israel is also focused on the perspective of the suffering individual, rather than on the theological or national ramifications of redemption:

But fear not you, O My servant Yaakov, and be not dismayed, O Israel; for, behold, I will save you from afar, and your seed from the land of their captivity; and Yaakov shall return, and be quiet and at ease, and none shall make him afraid. Fear you not, O Yaakov My servant, says the Lord: for I am with you, for I will make a full end of all the nations where I have driven You: but I will not make a full end of you, but correct you in due measure; yet will I not utterly destroy you. (vv. 27-28)

The emphasis here is on the fact that the people will enjoy peace and ease and that their fears will disappear. No mention is made here of the raising of Israel's horn or a declaration that the nations will recognize God, but merely that the people will enjoy peace. If we examine the second verse, we see that its promise is minimal, its essence being that God will not utterly destroy Israel. So too, both verses emphasize "Fear you not, O Yaakov My servant" – the fear and concern about the very existence of the sword. The consolation in this prophecy is directed not only at Israel's survival as a nation, but also towards its individual members.

We might add that it is possible that the redundancy in these two verses corresponds to the two prophecies that Yirmiyahu prophesied about Egypt. The first verse is directed toward the prophecy that precedes it, and it focuses on the peace promised to the individual member of Israel. The second verse relates back to the previous prophecy which dealt with the political fall of Egypt as a nation, and it prophesies by way of consolation about the destiny of Israel as a nation that it will not be utterly destroyed, but rather that it will survive as God's people.

<sup>[6]</sup> It is interesting to note that here too the plague of hail stands somewhere in the middle between the two groups of plagues. On the one hand, it does not state merely, "And Pharaoh called," as in the previous plagues, but on the other hand, it does not say that Pharaoh made haste, but only that "Pharaoh sent and called for Moshe and Aharon." This means that Pharaoh was concerned about the cost of the plague of hail, so that he pursued Moshe so that he would stop it, but it is not so bad and damaging as the plague of locust and those that followed it.

<sup>[7]</sup> Rashi creates a certain time gap between the two events, but it would seem that the prophet presents the second as coming in the aftermath of the first, so that even if there is a chronological gap, the prophet still perceives them as one continuum.

<sup>[8]</sup> Needless to say, this difficult truth is well-known to us from the Holocaust that we suffered in the previous generation.

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