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**The Number of Plagues in Egypt**

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**Introduction**

A well-known section in the Pesach Haggada deals with the number of plagues that God brought upon Egypt:

These are ten plagues that the Holy One, blessed be He, brought upon the Egyptians in Egypt. These are they: blood, frogs, lice, swarms, pestilence, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, the death of the firstborn.

Rabbi Yehuda used to refer to them by a mnemonic:

*Detza"kh ada"sh be-acha"v* (first letters of all the plagues).

Rabbi Yossi the Galilean says: From where do we deduce that the Egyptians suffered ten plagues in Egypt, but at the sea they suffered fifty plagues? Concerning Egypt, what do we read? "The magicians said to Pharaoh: It is the finger of God." And what do we read concerning the sea? "Israel saw the great hand with which God had acted upon Egypt, and the nation feared God and believed in God and in Moshe, His servant." How many plagues did they suffer by a "finger"? Ten plagues. Hence we may deduce that if they suffered ten plagues in Egypt, they suffered fifty plagues at the sea."

Rabbi Eliezer says: From where do we deduce that every plague that the Holy One, blessed be He, brought upon the Egyptians in Egypt was composed of four plagues? As it is written: "He cast among them the fierceness of his anger: wrath, indignation and trouble, a band of evil angels." "Wrath" is one, "indignation" is two, "trouble" is three, "a band of evil angels" is four. Hence we deduce that in Egypt they suffered forty plagues, and [therefore] upon the sea they suffered two hundred plagues.

Rabbi Akiva says: From where do we deduce that each and every plague that the Holy One brought upon the Egyptians

in Egypt was in fact five plagues? As it is written: "He cast among them the fierceness of His anger, wrath, indignation and trouble, a band of evil angels." "The fierceness of His anger" is one, "wrath" is two, "indignation" is three, "trouble" is four, "a band of evil angels" is five. Hence we deduce that in Egypt they were struck with fifty plagues, and at the sea they were struck with two hundred and fifty plagues.

This midrash offers three different ways of counting the plagues that befell Egypt.

The opinion of the author of the Mishna, as well as Rabbi Yossi and Rabbi Yehuda, is that God struck Egypt with ten plagues. This is the most well-known and prevalent view.

According to Rabbi Eliezer, there were forty plagues in Egypt; according to Rabbi Akiva –fifty.

The opinions of Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva are generally considered to belong to the category of *derash* – insightful homiletical explanations whose meaning must be sought - while the opinions of the earlier Tannaim are perceived to be the literal truth. In other words, that is what the Torah says and that is what actually happened. Perhaps Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva sought to amplify the miracle, or perhaps to convey the immense deliverance of Israel, but they did not mean their words literally.

It is also quite understandable how the later Tannaim – Rabbi Yossi and Rabbi Yehuda –could express disagreement with their illustrious predecessors, Rabbi Akiva (who was their teacher) and Rabbi Eliezer; they were addressing matters as they actually were, while their teachers had expounded in order to teach certain lessons, but not to convey the accurate reality.

In this *shiur* I propose that perhaps the picture is more complex. The debate here gives rise to a fundamental and serious question about the number of the plagues and the significance of this number. For the purposes of this study we shall refer back to the text in *Sefer Shemot*, as well as other sources that make mention of the plagues, and try to trace the roots of this controversy. My aim is to show that the question of the number of plagues is not a merely informative one, but rather is dependent on the nature of the

description and its intended purpose. All of this will become clearer in the course of the *shiur*.

## Part 1 – The Story of the Plagues in *Sefer Shemot*

The story of the plagues as recorded in *Sefer Shemot* opens, officially and ceremoniously, in Chapter 7, with God commanding Moshe and Aharon to go to Pharaoh. He tells them, "I shall harden Pharaoh's heart, that I may multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt...."

Immediately thereafter, there follows a competition between Aharon and the Egyptian magicians, all turning their staffs into reptiles, and then the plagues begin.

How many plagues were there, according to the literal text in *Sefer Shemot*? The reader will undoubtedly answer, "Ten." Actually, this number is not mentioned in *Sefer Shemot* – nor, indeed, anywhere else in *Tanakh* – in relation to the plagues. Nowhere are we told that there are going to be ten plagues, nor do we read that there were ten. Why, then, is there such a widespread general consensus that there were ten plagues? Not only because of the stories retold by generations of kindergarten teachers, and not only because of what we read in the Haggada. The number ten is the result that we obtain by counting. But here we must ask: what, exactly, are we counting? In order to count, there must be clear and defined units – but the Torah presents no list of plagues like the one we find in the Haggada. Why, for example, should we not count the hail that devastated the fields as one plague and the death of the livestock by hail as a separate plague in its own right? By the same token, perhaps the lice should not be viewed as an independent plague, but rather as the result of the diseases created by mountains of dead frogs? Perhaps, after all, there are more than ten plagues, or less. After all, events that follow upon each other's heels are not given to easy division and definition like items on a shelf, or pages of a book. What, then, is the justification for the count of exactly ten?

The answer is simple: the number ten arises from the literary proportion that the Torah itself creates between one plague and the next. All of the plagues share a common literary structure (aside from the plague of the firstborn, which is indeed fundamentally different from the others), and this structure organizes them into defined units. The clear boundaries between one plague and the next arise from the shared framework, which includes an introductory command from God to Moshe and a closing comment as to the end of the plague and Pharaoh's refusal to release Israel, which leads to the next plague. Beyond this common structure the plagues differ from one another in many details, but the framework nevertheless

remains clear. When we count the number of specific commands to Moshe, and the number of descriptions of Pharaoh's heart being hardened, we arrive at a total of nine; together with the death of the firstborn – ten. Thus, for example:

Plague of blood:

"God said to Moshe: Pharaoh's heart is hard; he refuses to let the people go.

Go to Pharaoh in the morning...

The magicians of Egypt did the same with their secret spells, and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them – as God has spoken." (14, 15, 22)

- And so on, for each plague.

Thus, it is the Torah's literary division in accordance with the various commands and the conclusion of the plague with a hardening of Pharaoh's heart, justifying the next plague, which produces a total of ten plagues.

Is it essential that we describe what happened in Egypt in this way? To sharpen the question: did the Egyptians – or, for that matter, the Israelites who were witness to that wondrous period of the plagues and looked back on what had happened as each concluded – did they, too, count ten plagues? It is highly improbable. They likely had no clear knowledge of the Divine commands, nor of what was going on in the confrontations with Pharaoh. It is possible, for example, that the Egyptians perceived what was going on as a single catastrophic event, with no reprieve. Between the plague of blood and the plague of frogs a week passed; "Seven days were complete, after God had struck the river." But in the other plagues no such break is explicitly mentioned. Were the Egyptians actually aware of the break between one plague and the next? Most likely not. Alternatively, their subjective perception may have led them to think that they were suffering a much greater number of plagues. Perhaps the plague of blood, which was ubiquitous, was viewed by them as a series of different phenomena?

We have no way of answering these questions because we have no source other than the account that the Torah itself offers. But the questions nevertheless help us to understand that the descriptive approach adopted by the Torah is not the only possible documentation of the events. Another view of the same period of time may have organized the events differently, perhaps even in a different order.

In truth, the possibility of speaking about a different description of the plagues is not just hypothetical. We have two other descriptions in *Tanakh*, in two different chapters of *Tehillim*, each presenting a slightly different perspective. We shall now examine these alternative descriptions.

## Part 2 – The Descriptions of the Plagues in *Tehillim*

There are several chapters of *Tehillim* that may be defined as "historiographic" – i.e., they contain a sort of summary of periods in Jewish history. In two such chapters – 78 and 105 – we find independent descriptions of the plagues in Egypt.

Let us first examine Chapter 78:

(42) They did not remember His hand on the day when He redeemed them from the enemy,

(43) when He wrought His signs and His wonders in Egypt, in the field of Tzo'an.

(44) He turned their rivers to blood; their waters became undrinkable.

(45) He sent wild swarms among them that consumed them, and frogs, which destroyed them.

(46) he gave their produce to the locust; the results of their toil to the locust swarms.

(47) He killed their vines with hail, and their sycamores with frost.

(48) He gave over their cattle to the hail, and their flocks to fiery thunderbolts.

(49) He sent among them His fierce anger: wrath, indignation, trouble, a band of evil angels.

(50) He leveled a path for His anger, He did not spare their soul from death, but gave their lives over to the pestilence.

(51) He smote every firstborn in Egypt; the first of their strength in the tents of Cham,

(52) and brought out His people like sheep, leading them like a flock in the desert.

We may enumerate the following plagues, according to the order of their appearance in the above verses:

1. blood
2. swarms
3. frogs
4. locusts ("*chasil*" and "*arbeh*")
5. hail, frost, hail, fiery thunderbolts
6. pestilence
7. death of firstborn

The division that I propose above is based on the assumption that there are some parallel expressions for the same plagues, therefore they are listed together. It is the verbs that create discrete phenomena. There is only one instance where two verbs describe the same plague: in the case of hail, where it is clear that the description is of one plague.

If we pay attention, we note the range of seven verbs in the descriptions of the plagues:

"He turned," "He sent," "He gave," "He killed," "He gave over," "He leveled," "He smote."

Thus, this chapter speaks of a seven-fold rather than a ten-fold division. Does this represent a contradiction with *Sefer Shemot*? It would seem so. This list appears to be missing three plagues – lice, boils, and darkness. According to the list in *Shemot*, these are the third, sixth, and ninth plagues. Why does this chapter of *Tehillim* enumerate specifically seven plagues? And why is it those three specific plagues that are omitted?

\* One way of resolving the contradiction is by pointing to the lyrical, rather than literally precise, nature of the psalm. Psalms and poetry are not meant to be precise. However, while poetry is not interested in historical accuracy, this does not mean that it is not thought-out. The choice of this description cannot be coincidental.

\* Critical scholars would suggest that the author of the psalm (Assaf, according to its heading) had a different tradition concerning the plagues that was independent of the one recorded in *Sefer Shemot*. But we must assume that *Sefer Shemot* was familiar to a person who was the king's poet, and that the psalm reflects too close a proximity to the original account for us to speak of two separate traditions.

\* It appears that the explanation must be sought in a change in the purpose of the psalm. It is simple enough to explain the number seven (plagues), which (like ten) is a typological number, and is not surprising at all as a number of whole units. Moreover, we encounter here the verse, "He sent among them His fierce anger: wrath, indignation, trouble...." This is the very same verse upon which the tannaitic debate in the Haggada turns, with the argument as to whether there were 40 or 50 plagues. For many years I ignored the location of this verse in *Tanakh*. *Chazal's* teaching here is not mere exegesis. That is precisely the intention of the psalmist: he means to say, "Must I recount each and every plague? There were certainly more than these, and God struck Egypt with great wonders. Here the psalm recounts only that which is significant for the message of the psalm." I do not know if this refers to the exact

number according to the literal text, but what he means is that there were certainly many more plagues than those that we know about.

We have still not yet explained why it is specifically the third, sixth, and ninth plagues that are omitted. Here we must go back and analyze the text in *Shemot*, and we shall do that shortly.

In the meantime, let us look at *Tehillim* Chapter 105:

He sent Moshe, his servant; Aharon, whom He chose.

(27) They placed His signs among them, and wonders in the land of Cham.

(28) He sent darkness and made it dark; and they did not rebel against His word.

(29) He turned their water to blood, and caused their fish to die.

(30) He made their land swarm with frogs, in the rooms of their kings.

(31) He spoke, and there came wild swarms, lice in all their borders.

(32) He made their rain – hail, flaming fire in their land.

(33) He struck their vines and their fig trees, and broke the trees of their borders.

(34) He spoke, and there came locusts, and hopping locusts without number.

(35) And they consumed all the vegetation of their country, and consumed the fruit of their land.

(36) He smote every firstborn in their country, the first of all their strength.

The plagues mentioned here, in order of their appearance, can be enumerated as follows:

1. darkness
2. blood
3. frogs
4. wild swarms- lice
5. hail
6. locusts
7. firstborn

Here, too, we find what appears to be a description that assumes seven, rather than ten, plagues. Admittedly, there is room for question with regard to the fourth plague on this list: wild swarms (*arov*) and lice are two separate plagues in the account in the Torah. Nevertheless, the psalmist seems to combine them here into a single plague. The swarms turn out to be lice. We actually have no clear idea what the swarms were. (The view that describes them as wild animals is a possibility, but it is far from proven.) Perhaps the

swarms were identical to lice. After all, in the account of the Torah, too, these two plagues are consecutive. The parallel in the verse is clear, and further support for the idea that they are the same plague lies in the fact that there is no second verb: "There came wild swarms, lice in all their borders." Hence, the text here seems to be speaking of one plague – leading us, once again, to the number seven. The list of verbs here is less well defined than in the previous chapter examined above, and it is not entirely clear whether the verbs refer to God's actions, or to the plagues themselves.

As in the previous chapter that we examined, here too there are three plagues that are missing. Which are they? The pestilence and boils are certainly missing; I propose that the third plague that is omitted is the swarms (*arov*) as an independent plague, because this psalm identifies them with the lice. Thus, the three plagues that are missing here, in comparison with the list in *Sefer Shemot*, are the fourth, fifth and sixth plagues.

Thus, we have two alternative accounts of the plagues in Egypt. Both enumerate seven plagues rather than the ten that appear in *Sefer Shemot*. In Chapter 78, we see that the psalmist himself declares that there were certainly many other plagues, which he omits.

On the assumption that the description in *Sefer Shemot* is well known to the psalmists, the question is why they omit three plagues from their respective psalms, and why the specific three that are missing in each case?

As noted, the answer cannot be found on the factual level: what we have before us is not a regular documentation of facts, but rather the literary molding of series of historical events, which itself creates meaning.

In order to answer our questions, let us go back to the description of the plagues in *Sefer Shemot* and try to understand how the Torah molds the story and what significance is given to the plagues by that given mold; this in turn will serve to illuminate the changes in the chapters of *Tehillim*.

### **Part 3 – The Description of the Plagues in *Sefer Shemot* – Structure and Significance**

Plagues 1, 2, 3 – first series (Chapter 7)

**(14) God spoke to Moshe: Pharaoh's heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go.**

**(15) Go to Pharaoh in the morning – behold, he goes out to the water – and you shall stand in front of him upon the bank of the river, and you shall take in your hand the staff that turned into a snake.**

(16) You shall say to him: "The Lord God of the Hebrews has sent me to you to say, Let My people go, that they may serve Me in the desert, for behold – you have not listened thus far.

(17) So says the Lord: *By this shall you know that I am the Lord:* behold, I shall strike - with the staff that is in my hand – upon the water that is in the river, and it shall turn to blood.

(18) And the fish that are in the river will die, and the river will stink, and the Egyptians shall no longer be able to drink water from the river.

(19) And God said to Moshe, Say to Aharon: Take your staff and stretch your hand over the waters of Egypt – over their streams, over their canals and over their ponds, and over all their pools of water, that they shall become blood, and there shall be blood throughout the land of Egypt, and in vessels of wood and vessels of stone.

(20) So Moshe and Aharon did so, as God had commanded; he lifted his staff and struck the water that was in the river, in the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants, and all the water in the river turned to blood.

(21) And the fish that were in the river died, and the river stank, and the Egyptians could not drink water from the river, and there was blood throughout the land of Egypt.

(22) But the magicians of the Egypt did likewise with their magic arts, and PHARAOH'S HEART WAS HARDENED AND HE DID NOT LISTEN TO THEM, AS GOD HAD SAID.

(23) AND PHARAOH TURNED AND WENT INTO HIS HOUSE, AND DID NOT TURN HIS HEART EVEN TO THIS.

(24) And all the Egyptians dug around the river for water to drink, for they could not drink of the water of the river.

(25) And seven days were completed after God had struck the river."

Plagues 4, 5, 6 – second series (Chapter 8)

**(16) God said to Moshe: Arise early in the morning and stand in front of Pharaoh –behold, he comes out to the water – and say to him: So says the Lord: Let My people go, that they may serve Me.**

(17) For if you do not let My people go, behold, I shall cast upon you and your servants and your people and your

houses wild swarms, and the houses of Egypt shall be full of wild swarms, and also the land upon which they are.

(18) On that day I shall set aside the land of Goshen, upon which My people stand, so that no wild swarms shall be there, *in order that you may know that I am the Lord in the midst of the land.*

(19) I shall place a division between My people and your people; tomorrow this sign shall come about.

(20) So God did so, and there came heavy wild swarms into Pharaoh's house and into the houses of his servants, and throughout the land of Egypt the land was destroyed by the wild swarms.

(21) Then Pharaoh called to Moshe and Aharon and said, Go, sacrifice to your God in the land.

(22) But Moshe said: It is not proper to do so, for it is the abomination of Egypt that we sacrifice to the Lord our God; if we then sacrifice the abomination of Egypt before their eyes, shall they not stone us?

(23) Let us go a journey of three days in the desert, and we shall sacrifice to the Lord our God as He shall command us.

(24) So Pharaoh said: "I shall let you go, and you shall sacrifice to the Lord your God in the desert; only do not go far away; pray for me.

(25) Then Moshe said: "Behold, I am leaving you, and I shall pray to God that He should remove the wild swarms from Pharaoh, from his servants and from his people – tomorrow; only let Pharaoh not continue to be deceitful in not letting the people go to sacrifice to God.

(26) Moshe left Pharaoh, and prayed to God.

(27) Moshe did according to Moshe's word, and He removed the wild swarms from Pharaoh, from his servants, and from his people; not a single one remained.

(28) BUT PHARAOH HARDENED HIS HEART THIS TIME, TOO, AND DID NOT LET THE PEOPLE GO.

Plagues 7, 8, 9 – third series (Chapter 9)

**(13) God said to Moshe: Arise early in the morning and stand in front of Pharaoh, and say to him: So says the Lord God of the Hebrews: Let My people go, that they may serve Me.**

(14) For this time I shall send all of My plagues upon your heart, and upon your servants and your people, *in order that you may know that there is none like Me in all the earth.*

(15) For now I shall send My hand and smite you and your people with pestilence, and that you may be cut off from the earth.

(16) Indeed, it was for this purpose that I raised you – to show you My power, and in order that My Name may be proclaimed in all the land.

(17) If you continue to exalt yourself against My people, not letting them go,

(18) then behold, at this time tomorrow I shall rain down a very heavy hail, the likes of which have never happened in Egypt from the day of its foundation until now.

...

(22) God said to Moshe: Stretch out your hand towards the heaven, and there shall be hail throughout the land of Egypt, upon the people and upon the animals and upon all the vegetation of the fields in the land of Egypt.

(23) So Moshe stretched out his staff towards heaven, and God sent thunder and hail, and fire emanated to the ground, and God rained hail upon the land of Egypt.

(24) And there was hail with fire flaring within the hail, very heavy – such as had never happened in all of the land of Egypt since it became a nation.

...

(27) Then Pharaoh sent and called for Moshe and Aharon, and he said to them: This time I have sinned; God is righteous and I and my people are wicked.

(28) Pray to God that there be no more of God's thunderings and hail, and I shall set you go and you shall stay no more.

(29) Moshe said to him: When I depart from the city I shall spread my hands to God; the thundering will cease and there shall be no more hail, *in order that you may know that the earth belongs to God*.

(30) But as for you and your servants – I know that you will not yet fear the Lord God.

(31) Now, the flax and the barley had been struck, for the barley was ripening and the flax was budding.

(32) But the wheat and the spelt had not been struck, for these ripen late.

(33) When Moshe went out of the city from Pharaoh, he spread his hands towards God and the thundering and the hail ceased, and the rain no longer pounded to the ground.

(34) WHEN PHARAOH SAW THAT THE RAIN AND THE HAIL AND THE THUNDERING HAD CEASED, HE SINNED AGAIN AND HARDENED HIS HEART – BOTH HE AND HIS SERVANTS.

(35) PHARAOH'S HEART WAS HARDENED, AND HE DID NOT LET THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL GO, AS GOD HAD SPOKEN BY MOSHE.

**(1) Then God said to Moshe: Come to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, in order that I may show these signs of Mine in his midst.**

(2) And in order that you shall recount to your son and to your son's son what I brought about in Egypt, and the signs that I showed there, and you shall know that I am the Lord.

(3) Moshe and Aharon came to Pharaoh and said to him, So says the Lord God of the Hebrews: how long shall you refuse to humble yourself before Me? Let My people go, that they may serve Me.

(4) For if you refuse to let My people go, behold, tomorrow I shall bring locusts into your borders.

(5) And they shall cover the face of the land, such that the land will not be able to be seen, and they shall consume the residue that escaped and remained to you from the hail, and they shall consume every tree that grows for you from the field.

(6) And they shall fill your houses and the houses of all your servants, and the houses of all the Egyptians, such as their fathers and their fathers' fathers have never seen from the day they were upon the land until today. And he turned and went out from Pharaoh.

... [Here Pharaoh agrees to allow the men to go, and Moshe refuses]

(12) God said to Moshe: Stretch out your hand over the land of Egypt for the locusts, that they may ascend over the land of Egypt and consume all the vegetation of the land, all that was left from the hail.

(13) So Moshe stretched out his staff over the land of Egypt, and God drove an eastern wind in the land all of that day and all the night; in the morning, the eastern wind brought the locusts.

(14) The locusts came upon over all of the land of Egypt, and they rested throughout the borders of Egypt, very heavy; there had never been locusts like this, nor would there ever be again.

(15) And they covered the face of the land, and the land grew dark...

(16) Pharaoh hurried to call for Moshe and Aharon, and he said: I have sinned to the Lord your God, and to you.

(17) Now, please forgive my sin just this time, and pray to the Lord your God that He remove from me just this death.

(18) He went out from Pharaoh and prayed to God.

(19) And God turned a very strong western wind, and it carried away the locusts and cast them into the Red Sea, and there remained not a single locust in all the borders of Egypt.

(20) BUT GOD HARDENED THE HEART OF PHARAOH, AND HE DID NOT LET THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL GO.

(21) God said to Moshe: Stretch out your hand towards the heaven, that there be darkness over the land of Egypt – that the darkness may be felt.

(22) So Moshe stretched his hand towards heaven, and there was thick darkness throughout the land of Egypt for three days.

(23) One person could not see another, nor did anyone get up from his place for three days, but for all of the children of Israel there was light in their dwelling places.

(24) Pharaoh called for Moshe and said: Go, serve the Lord, only let your flocks and your cattle remain behind; let even your children go with you.

(25) Moshe said: You must also give us sacrifices and burnt offerings, and we shall offer them to the Lord our God.

(26) And our cattle must also go with us; not a hoof shall be left behind, for we must take of these to serve the Lord our God, and we will not know with what we shall serve the Lord until we get there.

(27) BUT GOD HARDENED PHARAOH'S HEART AND HE DID NOT AGREE TO LET THEM GO.

(28) Pharaoh said to him: Go out from me; take heed – you shall not see my face again, for on the day you see my face you shall die.

(29) And Moshe said: You have spoken well; I shall not see your face again.

The triadic structure of the plagues is clear from the above presentation, and we will not dwell on all of its aspects since at least some of them are assumed to be known.

It is important that attention be paid to the fact that each section (or series of plagues) opens with an elaborate and ceremonious warning, conveyed – in accordance with God's command – in the morning, as Pharaoh stands at the bank of the river. This warning includes a definition of the purpose of both the coming plague and – I believe – the triad of plagues that it introduces. Let us examine these specific purposes as defined by God in His commands to Moshe:

- first triad: "by this you shall know that I am the Lord"

- second triad: "in order that you may know that I am the Lord in the midst of the land"
- third triad: "in order that you may know that there is none like Me in all the earth"

Our impression is that the plagues included in each triad do indeed fulfill the purpose that it defines for itself:

- In the first triad, the purpose is to reveal the existence and power of God before the eyes of the Egyptians – for Pharaoh says, "I do not know God." Hence, the Egyptians must come to realize that Israel, too, have a God – and He is stronger than theirs. Therefore the first three plagues are of the sort that the Egyptians know from their own powers – but on a much greater and more impressive scale. Thus, what characterizes the first three plagues is that in each case the magicians attempt to compete with or fight against God's actions, and in each case the active personality is Aharon. Rashi explains Aharon's activity here as resulting from Moshe's gratitude towards the river for having saved him as a baby. But, perhaps the reason relates to the tension and competition between the priests of Egypt and the *kohen* of Israel, who is similar to them in terms of status, but who stands on the side of purity. Moshe – God's prophet – is altogether different from them, since Israelite prophecy is unique.

- In the second triad, the purpose is to reveal God's presence in the world – or, simply, Divine Providence. Pagan divinity is power; it can, as it were, be "activated." But it involves no concepts of justice, individual Providence, reward and punishment. God distinguishes between the righteous and the wicked, and therefore the plagues include a description of the discrimination that God practices between Israel and Egypt. It should be noted that the fact of this discrimination is mentioned for the first time in the plagues of swarms and pestilence. It is not mentioned at all in the first triad. We cannot know, from the literal text, what the situation actually was in the case of the blood and the frogs; *Chazal* teach that there, too, the plague struck only the Egyptians. But the Torah makes no mention of this, because this is the objective that characterizes the second group of plagues - not the first. It is for this reason that it is specifically the fourth and fifth plagues, highlighting God's presence, that emanate directly from Him rather than being mediated, since this is their principal message: to reveal God's own presence in the land.

- The third triad is characterized by the grandiose nature of the plagues that it includes: "There is none like Me in all the land." God's rule of the world is absolute; it has no boundaries and no limitations. All of nature submits to Him. The Torah heaps superlatives in the descriptions of these plagues: "Behold, I shall send all of My plagues," and thereafter, "There had never been

anything like it, nor would there ever be." The darkness, too, is described as a fantastic, extreme event, not just as a painful one.

Moreover, in the third triad we learn of God's activity via the prophet – His emissary. Moshe sets everything up, and God strikes. Elsewhere I shall address this at length. Here we shall note only the instructive fact that the plagues of hail and locusts do not come immediately and directly from God, but rather only after Moshe points with his staff. Only then does God bring about the plague: "God made thunderbolts and lightning," "God made an eastern wind in the land." When Aharon uses his staff, he strikes with it or points it towards the place where the plague will come from, and the plague then comes as though on its own.

For the purposes of our discussion, the distinctions indicated here will suffice. The intention behind the organization of the plagues is discernible. The fact that the plague comes after a warning makes it more than a plague. It is more than just a punishment or a means of persuasion, it is an act with a lesson which is given to it in the preceding speech. Let us remember God's words in the expositional section of the plagues:

I shall harden Pharaoh's heart and I shall multiply my signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt.

Pharaoh will not listen to you, and I shall set My hand upon Egypt and I shall take out My hosts, My people, the children of Israel, from the land of Egypt, with great judgments.

AND THE EGYPTIANS SHALL KNOW THAT I AM THE LORD when I stretch My hand over Egypt and take the children of Israel from their midst. (7:3-5)

That is the purpose of everything: the knowledge that "I am the Lord." Afterwards, just prior to the plague of locusts, there appears another purpose: to teach Israel, for all generations, faith in and knowledge of God, "In order that you will recount to your son...."

The faith lesson that is to be learned from the plagues is conveyed, in the usual fashion of the Torah, in stages rather than all at once. First the Egyptians must come to recognize the existence of a Power that is different from and stronger than theirs – in their terms. Later they will learn that the Divinity that they have now encountered is altogether different from their own concept of divinity. This is the purpose of the second set of plagues: to teach of Divine Providence. In the third set, they learn of God's ability, and of the essence of prophecy. Together with them, *Bnei Yisrael* are learning too – since at this stage they have certainly not yet adopted the Rambam's thirteen principles of faith!

The exceptions to this rule are the plagues of lice, boils and darkness – the third plague of each set – which are not preceded by any warning, and which, we must therefore assume, are not meant to teach any lesson on their own. Rather, they simply join those plagues that precede them. Hence we sometimes find, in the third plague of each set, some deviation from the triad's central motif. (The boils do not come directly from God, but rather are brought about by Moshe casting soot; the plague of darkness does not describe God's activity as, for example, in the plagues of hail and locusts.)

Hence we deduce that the third plague of each set merely continues its predecessor, and is meant only to cause further distress to Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

Indeed, we must ask ourselves: if there is no prior warning, how do Pharaoh and the Egyptians know that what they are experiencing is a plague that the God of Israel has brought upon them? They would likely interpret it as bad luck, or natural disaster. Only a plague that is preceded by a warning is clearly connected to Israel, to Moshe, and to God.

It is also possible that there is a natural connection between the second and third plagues of each set. (I once heard Rabbi Yaakov Medan hypothesize that there is a development between each plague and the one that follows. I believe that there is support may be found for this view only between the second and third plagues of each triad.) The land's "stink" (8:10) that emanates from the dead frogs leads, via a degeneration of hygiene, to lice. Otherwise it is difficult to understand why the Torah would bother to describe the land's "stink" once the plague has already ended and God has answered Moshe's prayer. Likewise, the plague of boils follows another plague – pestilence, this too being a well-known phenomenon. The darkness comes in the wake of the darkness caused by the locusts: "They covered the face of the land, and the land grew dark." From darkness to deeper darkness. Scientists explain that the locusts in Egypt were the result of eastern desert winds, which brought sandstorms - carrying locusts. It is possible that another sandstorm, quite extraordinary in strength, made the land dark; therefore we read, "the darkness could be felt" – for a darkness that can be felt is one that comes in the wake of a sandstorm. The essence of the miracle, in this plague, was not necessarily the bursting through the boundaries of nature; rather, it was an extreme natural phenomenon whose timing was brought about by Moshe, and which served the purpose of uplifting Israel and punishing the Egyptians.



We have not exhausted every aspect of the structure of the *parasha*, but for the presents*hiur* we shall suffice with the above. Now we shall return to the descriptions in *Sefer Tehillim*.

## Chapter 4

In Chapter 78, we recall, the last plague of each of the three triads was missing: lice, boils, darkness. Their absence may be understood on the basis of their function in the progression of the plagues and from a study of the purpose of the chapter. This chapter, as we noted, presents a historiographic overview – but it is not history for its own sake. The purpose of the overview is to teach us about God's Providence over His nation throughout the generations, and – in the face of that goodness – the indifference and ingratitude of Israel:

- (1) A lesson of Assaf: Listen, my people to my Torah; lend your ears to my utterances.
- (2) I shall open my mouth with a parable; I shall utter riddles from ancient times
- (3) of that which we have heard and known, and which our forefathers told to us.
- (4) We shall not hide them from their children, recounting to the last generation the praises of God and His strength, and the wonders that He performed.
- (5) He established a testimony among Yaakov and gave a Torah to Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to make known to their children.
- (6) In order that the last generation may know; the children who would be born should arise and tell to their children.
- (7) that they might set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments.

It is against this backdrop that the psalmist arrives at his description of the plagues:

The wonders that He wrought in Egypt, His signs and His wonders in the field of Tzo'an. (43)

The psalmist's purpose is to describe the signs and wonders performed by God and to emphasize His Providence. In this context, any mention of the plagues that were not meant to serve as any sort of sign or wonder – i.e., which did not come to teach any lesson and may possibly not even have been perceived as expressions of Divine Providence – has no place. "It is true," says the psalmist, that "He cast upon them His fierce anger: wrath, indignation, trouble, a band of evil angels. The Tannaim who insisted that there were many plagues were right – but I am interested in

talking about those that conveyed some sort of sign or wonder to Israel or to the nations; those which were unquestionably recognized as the work of the Holy One. Therefore the three plagues that were plagues and nothing more – mere punishment – are omitted."

With regard to the order of the plagues, I see no connection to *Parashat Shemot*. The plagues are divided, rather, in accordance with their typology: first mentioned are those plagues that are an annoying disturbance, but do not represent any real harm: blood, frogs, wild swarms. These are followed by the plagues that destroy the crops – hail and locusts – and, finally, those that endanger life: pestilence and the death of the firstborn. (Incidentally, it is possible that according to the literal text the description here assumes that people, too, died in the plague of pestilence; the expression, "He gave over their livestock to pestilence" can sometimes mean "their lives." The parallel in the verse testifies to this: "He did not spare their lives, and gave over their livestock to pestilence.")

In *Tehillim 105*, the situation is different. Here, the main purpose of the chapter is to describe God's watchfulness over His chosen people – the forefathers and the prophets: "He allowed no man to do them wrong; He rebuked kings on their account: Do not touch My anointed ones...."

The psalm first describes the forefathers, then Yosef, and finally Moshe and Aharon:

**Give thanks to God, call upon His Name, let His deeds be known among the nations.  
Sing to Him; offer psalms to Him, speak of all of His wonders.  
Glory in His holy Name; let the heart of those who seek God rejoice. (1-3)**

Here the psalmist arrives at the description of the plagues. He begins:

He sent Moshe, His servant; Aharon – whom He had chosen.

They performed His signs among them, and wonders in the land of Cham. (26-27)

In other words, here the purpose is not to describe specifically the deeds of God, but rather the help that He gives to His servants – for our purposes, the plagues where Moshe and Aharon act with Divine assistance. Hence, it is clear that the plagues that are mentioned here are specifically those that are brought about by

Moshe and Aharon, and not those that God brought about "alone," as it were: the wild swarms (subordinated to the lice), pestilence, and boils.

All in all, the order of the plagues in Chapter 105 matches the order of the Torah in *Sefer Shemot*, with the exception of the fact that darkness is mentioned first. I can offer no convincing explanation for this phenomenon. It is possible that two unique characteristics pertain to the plague of darkness: "For all of the children of Israel there was light in their dwelling places," and also – the fact that the plague is brought about by Moshe, such that this plague especially teaches of God's Providence over Israel and His actions through the agency of His prophets.

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