

The Three Signs and the Ten Plagues

(Shemot 7:17-21)

By Rav Meir Spiegelman

We are used to thinking that God struck Egypt with ten plagues. It is interesting, therefore, to discover that this number is mentioned nowhere in Torah (unlike the Ten Commandments, whose number is explicitly noted), although it is mentioned by Chazal on several occasions.

At the burning bush, when God entrusts Moshe with the mission of bringing Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt, He gives him three signs: the staff turning into a serpent, the hand that becomes leprous, and the water that turns into blood. These signs are given, originally, so that Bnei Yisrael will believe Moshe, but God commands him explicitly to display them before Pharaoh, too:

"See all the wonders that I have placed in your hand – and you shall perform them before Pharaoh." (Shemot 4:21)

Surprisingly, our parasha reveals that Moshe showed Pharaoh only the sign of the staff and that of the blood; he never showed him the sign of leprosy. Moreover, even the two signs that are displayed do not match the command concerning them. At the burning bush the staff turns into a snake, while before Pharaoh it becomes a crocodile. At the burning bush Moshe is commanded to take some of the water from the Nile and to pour it onto the dry land; when Moshe actually carries out the plague of blood, all the water of the Nile (and all the other water in Egypt) turns into blood.

THE PLAGUE OF BLOOD AND THE SIGN OF BLOOD

Close examination of the plague of blood reveals that it is described in the text three times, with slight differences each time. The first time it is mentioned is when Moshe describes the plague of blood to Pharaoh; the second time, God commands Moshe as to how to carry out the plague; and the third time, the Torah describes how the plague was actually performed:

"So says God: By this shall you know that I am God; behold, I SMITE with the staff that is in my hand UPON THE WATER IN THE RIVER and it will turn to blood..."

"God said to Moshe: Say to Aharon, Take your staff AND STRETCH YOUR ARM UPON THE WATER OF EGYPT, upon their streams, upon their rivers, upon their ponds and upon all their pools of water, and they shall be blood. And there shall be blood throughout the land of Egypt, and in vessels of wood, and in vessels of stone."

"Moshe and Aharon did so, as God had commanded. He lifted the 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 THAT WAS IN THE RIVER turned to blood... AND THERE WAS BLOOD THROUGHOUT THE LAND OF EGYPT."

Moshe is commanded to tell Pharaoh that he will STRIKE the water of the RIVER with his staff, but in the actual event God commands him to tell Aharon to STRETCH his staff over ALL THE WATER OF EGYPT. When the plague is actually performed, the Torah tells us that Moshe and Aharon did "as God had commanded" (Shemot 7:20), but they struck the water of the river and did not stretch their arms over all the water of Egypt. This lack of clarity continues: the Torah testifies that all the water of the river turned into blood and that the Egyptians were forced to dig wells around the river for water. At the same time, however, we are told explicitly that there was blood throughout the land of Egypt! Was it just the river that turned to blood, or was it all the water of Egypt?

All the difficulties that we have raised above seem to point to the idea that the plague of blood was actually comprised of two parts.[1] Indeed, the plague of blood has a dual character. On the one hand, this is the final sign that Moshe is commanded to perform before Pharaoh; on the other hand, it is the first plague. Therefore, it is the only plague that is performed in the sight of Pharaoh and his servants. The plagues need not be performed before Pharaoh, but the signs must be displayed specifically in his presence.

In the SIGN of blood, Moshe strikes the river, turning its water into blood. In the PLAGUE of blood, Aharon stretches his staff over all the water of Egypt and turns it to blood. By means of the distinction between Moshe and Aharon, the Torah emphasizes the difference between the sign (turning the river into blood) and the plague (turning all the water of Egypt into blood).

The plague of blood fits in well with the other signs. In general, the purpose of the signs was to prove the existence of God. Moshe claims that "The Lord of the Hebrews has appeared to us," while Pharaoh counters: "I do not know the Lord." The first sign – the staff becoming a snake – proves that God exists, and that His power is greater than that of the gods of the magicians: Aharon's staff swallows up the staffs of the Egyptian magicians. The plague of blood is the next stage in the same direction: the entire river turns to blood, proving that God is able to prevail over the Egyptian god.

THE PLAGUE OF BOILS, AND THE SIGN OF LEPROSY

Similarly, we can understand the disappearance of the third sign – the sign of leprosy. Clearly, this sign cannot be performed before Pharaoh in its original form: the signs must be directed towards Pharaoh, and a sign that causes Moshe himself to contract leprosy is not appropriate.[2] Thus, the sign of leprosy, too, seems to be absorbed into a plague that is performed in front of Pharaoh – the plague of boils.

Indeed, the plague of boils is unique among the plagues in several respects. God commands Moshe and Aharon to take soot in their hands, but only Moshe is commanded to throw it skywards. Aside from the cooperation between Moshe and Aharon, which is exceptional and appears elsewhere only in the plague of blood, the obvious question arises: why must Aharon take soot in his hand, if he is not going to throw it? Furthermore, the text states explicitly that the magicians were struck with the plague of boils, although no mention is made of this in the other

plagues. Another point: this is the first plague in which we are told that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, and this is the only plague – other than blood – which is performed in Pharaoh's sight.

It appears that the plague of boils, too, had a dual character. The PLAGUE of boils affected all of Egypt, while the SIGN of boils attacked, first and foremost, Pharaoh and his magicians - in order to prove God's power. The dual nature of the plague of boils is hinted at – just as in the plague of blood – through the cooperation between Moshe and Aharon in performing it, although Aharon plays no role in its actual effects.

The sign of boils is the climax of all the signs. God not only swallows up the serpents "created" by other gods, and not only harms the River (the god of Egypt), but actually stretches out His hand, as it were, and attacks Pharaoh's own body. Thus far, all the plagues have only affected the environment: the water has been turned to blood, swarms of frogs and lice that have infested Egypt and wild beasts have invaded. The plague of boils caused direct harm to the bodies of the Egyptians as a whole – and of Pharaoh in particular. Therefore, this sign is postponed to the end of the series, in contrast to the order in which they were given to Moshe.[3]

UNIQUENESS OF THE PLAGUE OF BOILS

If, indeed, the sign of leprosy was combined with the plague of boils, we are faced with a difficult problem: why were the three signs not performed consecutively? Why did God command that only two signs be performed, waiting with the third until after the plague of wild beasts? In fact, we have already provided one explanation: because the sign of leprosy represents a direct assault on Pharaoh's body. God wanted first to bring upon Egypt all the plagues that represented indirect harm, and only afterwards to strike them with a direct blow – the plague of boils.[4] However, it seems that this is not the only reason for delaying the plague of boils.

The plague of boils is the first in the second half of the plagues that befell Egypt. As many of the copoint out, this plague indicates a fundamental change. So far, Pharaoh has hardened his heart; from now onwards, it is God Who hardens Pharaoh's heart. God chooses the third sign as the introduction to the second stage of the plagues, just as the second sign introduced their first stage.

DIVISION OF THE PLAGUES

As we know, the plagues can be categorized into three groups, with each group representing a different aim. Each group begins with two plagues for which Pharaoh is given advance warning, and concludes with one plague that appears without warning.[5] An additional characteristic of each group concerns the personality responsible for its performance:

Blood – Moshe and Aharon

Frogs, Lice – Aharon

Wild Beasts, Pestilence – God

Boils – Moshe and Aharon

Hail, Locusts, Darkness – Moshe

Death of Firstborn – God

The clear exceptions, in this division, are the plagues of blood and boils. Were it not for these, the plagues could be organized into three straightforward triplets:

(Blood), Frogs, Lice – Aharon

Wild Beasts, Pestilence, (Boils) – God

Hail, Locusts, Darkness – Moshe

Death of Firstborn – God

It is appropriate that the plague of blood (like those of frogs and lice) be performed by Aharon, and indeed – as explained above – Moshe performs only the SIGN of blood, not the plague. The plague of boils should have been performed by God, but instead it is performed by Moshe and Aharon.[6] We may explain this in light of what was said above: the plague of boils comprises a plague and a sign which are combined, and in order to emphasize this, it is performed jointly by Moshe and Aharon. But in fact, it is really God Who performs the plague. In the course of performing the sign, Moshe takes soot, throws it over all of Egypt in Pharaoh's sight, and afflicts all of Egypt with boils. In the course of performing the plague, Aharon takes soot, but does not throw it upwards. Since this plague should be performed by God, Aharon only takes the soot in his hand, but the plague of boils comes about by itself, without Aharon taking any action.[7]

THE NUMBER OF PLAGUES

In conclusion, let us return briefly to the number of plagues. As we have seen, the plagues of blood and boils are each composed of a sign and a plague. This fact leads us to the possibility that perhaps there is actually no difference between a plague and a sign, for the miraculous nature of each is the same. There is, admittedly, a difference in the purpose of the miracle: the sign serves as a warning and as proof of God's existence, while the plague serves as a punishment. However, there is clearly a connection between them: "No punishment is meted out unless there was a warning first."

It is possible, then, that the series of plagues begins with the sign of the snake, rather than the plague of blood. Similarly, the plague of the death of the firstborn may not be the final plague. The splitting of the Red Sea was also a blow to the Egyptians, and was performed in a similar way to the plagues (stretching the staff over the water). The only difference between the splitting of the sea and the preceding plagues is its totality: the swallowing of the Egyptians in the sea caused the death of all of them, while the previous plagues had not caused the Egyptians such a mortal blow.[8]

If we add the sign of blood and the splitting of the sea to the count of the plagues, we reach a total of twelve signs. This number is quite fitting: it is as though the Egyptians are punished with a sign for each tribe that suffered at their hands. We may add that the sign of the snake parallels the tribe of Yosef: since the Egyptians were not responsible for his enslavement (because they bought him as a slave from the Yishmaelites), this sign was not accompanied by any punishment.[9]

If we adopt this enumeration of the plagues, we must categorize them differently from the traditional grouping described above. The twelve signs may be categorized into four groups of three plagues. Aharon brought about the sign of the snake, the frogs and the lice; God performed the plagues of the wild beasts, the pestilence and the death of the firstborn; Moshe caused the plagues of blood, boils and darkness. The remaining plagues –

hail, locusts and the splitting of the sea – were carried out by Moshe, but it is noted explicitly that God is a partner to their execution.[10]

NOTES:

[1] The verses would seem to "cry out" for interpretation in accordance with Rav Breuer's theory of "aspects," such that they are viewed from two different perspectives. In light of the limited framework of this shiur, I have chosen not to employ this exegetical system.

[2] a. To a certain degree, there is a problem even in performing a negative sign before Bnei Yisrael, for the negative signs represent criticism of Moshe.

b. Chazal, sensing the lack of the sign of leprosy, maintain that Pharaoh was struck with leprosy. In their usual fashion, they omit to mention the motive for their explanation – the fact that the sign of God's existence cannot be Moshe contracting leprosy!

[3] This may be the reason that God calls the sign of leprosy "the last sign," although the sign of blood comes later (Shemot 4:8-9). The sign of blood was the last one performed for Bnei Yisrael, but the sign of leprosy – i.e., the plague of boils – was the last one performed in the sight of Pharaoh.

[4] In fact, none of the plagues, up to that of boils, represents a mortal danger. Concerning the wild beasts, it is not clear what exactly this plague involved, but we are not told explicitly that there was a danger to human life. It may have involved a certain kind of animal or insect that bothered people, like the frogs or the lice.

[5] Nechama Leibowitz discusses this division at length.

[6] Instead of the plague of boils, God brought about the death of the firstborn.

[7] The fact that the plague of boils is attributed to God is emphasized by Moshe's actions: he does not cast the soot over all of Egypt, but rather throws it heavenwards – thereby "transferring" the performance of the plague, as it were, to God.

[8] In a future shiur I shall explain why it was necessary to strike Egypt with plagues, rather than simply delivering Bnei Yisrael immediately.

[9] We may look at it from the other direction – it was the death of the firstborn, the "11th plague," that parallels Yosef – the 11th son.

[10] In accordance with this categorization, Aharon is a partner in the plagues that Moshe carries out. It may be that Moshe was unable to carry them out alone, for he had refused to accept the mission of delivering Bnei Yisrael from Egypt. But there is nothing to prevent him from carrying out the plagues together with Aharon, or with God.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)