

## The Confrontation of Moshe and Pharaoh

By Rav Ezra Bick

The ten plagues are divided into two parashiot - the first seven in parashat Vaera and the last three in parashat Bo. Is this merely a division of convenience, or is there an important distinction between these two groups of plagues?

1. Parashat Bo begins with God explaining to Moshe what the purpose of the plagues is:

Come to Par'o, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, IN ORDER that I set my signs in his midst; and IN ORDER that you recount to the ears of your son and your son's son that which I have wrought in Egypt and the signs which I have placed in it, and you shall know that I am Hashem.

This is clearly a break in the continuous narrative of the plagues, and, more importantly, nothing has occurred which seems to warrant this interruption. Several commentators surmise a reluctance on Moshe's part to keep coming to Par'o, seeing that Moshe's warnings do not have any apparent effect on him, to which God's explanation here is addressed - You are commanded to go to Par'o, God tells Moshe, not to convince him to let the Jews go, but in order to demonstrate the opposite and justify continued plagues and signs of God's might. However, there is no evidence in the verses for this hesitation on Moshe's part, nor any explanation why it takes place precisely after the seventh plague.

2. What's more, this explanation is qualitatively different from similar explanations given in the past. Before the first plague, in parashat Vaera, God told Moshe:

And I shall harden the heart of Par'o, and will multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt. But Par'o will not listen to you, and I shall set my hand against Egypt... And Egypt shall know that I am Hashem, when I stretch out my arm over Egypt and take out the Jews from their midst (7,3-5).

Similarly, when Moshe removes the frogs, he tells Par'o to choose the hour, "so that you know that there is none like Hashem our God" (8,6). Finally, before the plague of wild animals, Moshe tells Par'o that there will be a dividing line between the land of Egypt and Goshen, "in order that you know that I am Hashem in the midst of the land."

In all these instances, the purpose of the plague, or at least some aspect of the plague, is that EGYPT, or PAR'O, recognize God's power and presence. In our parasha, before the eighth plague, we find a new emphasis - "in order that you recount to the ears of your son and your son's son that which I have wrought in Egypt and the signs which I have placed in it,

and you shall know that I am Hashem." The target of the signs and wonders is Israel, that THEY should know that He is Hashem. Something has changed at the beginning of our parasha!

3. The most striking change, I think, is also the key to understanding what has happened. God commands Moshe to "come to Par'o." This is the first time such a command appears before a plague without the message that is to be delivered. Before all previous plagues, we find one of two forms: Either Moshe is told to accost Par'o somewhere (usually on the Nile) and warn him of the impending plague, or Moshe is told to simply perform an action which brings on the plague. Consider:

- a) 6,11 - "Come and speak to Par'o king of Egypt...."
- b) 6,29 - "Speak to Par'o king of Egypt...." Both of these verses are before the onset of the plagues.
- c) Blood (7,15-16) - "Go to Par'o in the morning when he goes out to the water... and say to him...."
- d) Frogs (7,26) - "Come to Par'o and say to him...."
- e) Lice (8,12) - "Tell Aharon: stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth...."
- f) Arov (8,16) - "Rise up in the morning and appear before Par'o - Lo, he is going out to the water - and say to him...."
- g) Pestilence (9,1) - "Come to Par'o and say to him...."
- h) Boils (9,8) - "Take handfuls of soot from the oven...."
- i) Hail (9,13) - "Rise up in the morning and appear before Par'o, and say to him...."

Now it is true that in some cases God does not tell Moshe to first speak to Par'o. But of course, in those cases, there also is no command to "come to Par'o." In our case, we have the anomalous situation of God telling Moshe to visit Par'o, without telling him what to say, followed immediately by Moshe going to Par'o and delivering a speech warning of the next plague, the locust. The Ramban (10,2) explains that it must be assumed that if Moshe speaks to Par'o, God had first told him what to say, just as previously in the case of the hail we must assume that Moshe does tell Par'o what God had commanded him to say, even though it is not explicitly stated. The Torah, claims the Ramban, does not have to repeat both the command and the fulfillment. This strengthens my question. Had the original command been totally absent, we would have a conversation of unnecessary repetition. But the Torah here does have both the command and the fulfillment - it is merely that they are not parallel. God does command Moshe to go to Par'o, followed by Moshe's explicit fulfillment of that command - it is just that in the command, there was no mention of the content of the speech; and instead, we find the totally unexpected explanation of God's purpose in artificially lengthening the Egyptian ordeal by hardening the heart of Par'o.

In fact, starting with this plague of locust, we find a noticeable stress on the comings and goings of Moshe, beyond merely as a necessary detail to explain where he is. It seems as though the coming before Par'o, and the leaving his presence, is an independent focus of the story, without reference to what happens or is spoken during the encounter.

First, the opening command - "Come to Par'o," with no particular content to the visit explicated by God. I think the Ramban is undoubtedly correct - God must have told Moshe what to say, and this is the opportune time to do so. But filling in that lacuna does not in itself explain the structure of the verse, which gives the appearance that God did not tell Moshe what to say. So, having accepted the Ramban's comment, we still have to explain why the EXPLICIT structure of the verse has God commanding Moshe to make an appearance, to go, without telling him what to do. The unavoidable impression is that there is now special importance in the visit itself, regardless of the content of Moshe's speech.

This is mirrored and emphasized in the actual events of the following three plagues.

a) Moshe delivers the warning about the locust, and "he turned and left the presence of Par'o."

b) After hearing his servant's fears, Par'o has Moshe returned, only to "drive them away from the presence of Par'o."

c) Moshe is called to Par'o after the plague of locust and then "goes out from the presence of Par'o" in order to pray to God.

d) After calling Moshe in response to the plague of darkness, Par'o tells him, "Get away from me; be careful not to see my face again, for on the day you see my face you shall die." Moshe answers, "So be it, as you have spoken; I shall not again see your face." I think it is clear now - it is not I who is seeking to draw your attention to the significance of the face-to-face meetings between Moshe and Par'o, but the two of them. The tension here is palpable, and it centers, not around the content of the communication between Par'o and Moshe, but the direct personal confrontation between them. It is not hard to imagine the scene - these two men staring at each other, the grim hardness of their words, the challenge in the supercharged air.

e) Apparently before leaving, Moshe continues and gives Par'o the final message of God, the impending plague of the first-born. The final line of this warning is: "And all these, your servants, will come down to me and bow down before me, saying, 'leave, you and all the people at your feet, and then shall I leave;' and HE LEFT THE PRESENCE OF PAR'O WITH CONSUMING ANGER." The circle begun with "bo el Par'o" - come to Par'o - has been finally closed with Moshe walking out on him.

Of course, we all are familiar with the final scene:

f) "And Par'o rose in the night, he and all his servants.... and he called to Aharon and Moshe in the night and said: Get up and leave from my people, you and the children of Israel...." The midrash (Rashi 11,8; see also 12,31 where the midrash strengthens the picture of the personal defeat of Par'o and breaking of his pride), based on the closing line of Moshe in his last meeting with Par'o, claims that Par'o came to the house of Moshe to plead with him to leave. Again, another closing of the circle of "bo" - Par'o comes to Moshe rather than Moshe coming to him.

I think now the nature of the parasha break of Bo is clear - starting with this plague of locust, God is telling Moshe that the

confrontation with Par'o is to be a personal one - he is to go to face Par'o directly and engage in a test of wills with him. The verbal content of Moshe's speeches is now secondary in importance to the actual personal appearance that he must make. Moshe is to overcome Par'o on the personal level - as Moshe says, "all your servants shall come and bow down to me." (Rashi explains that "servants" was a respectful way of hinting at Par'o himself.). Moshe "squares off" with Par'o, in a battle of wills, and eventually wins - of course, the reason is that God's miracles are behind him.

Before we get to the reason for this personal confrontation, let us place it in a wider perspective. In a previous shiur, [<http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.58/14vaera.htm>] Rav Kahn claimed that Moshe is being introduced through the filter of the lineage of the Jews at the beginning of Vaera as a member of the Jewish nation rather than as an extraordinary individual possessing unique talents. Because he is to represent God, rather than himself, he is placed in the context of the genealogical tree of Bnei Yisrael. If I can widen that idea slightly, the genealogy which eventually reaches Moshe (and Aharon) basically has the effect of assimilating Moshe - he is just another Jew, so to speak. The reason is that it is the Jews as a whole who are demanding of Par'o that he let them go - Moshe is just a representative Jew. Moshe's own personality is submerged - what is important is the message he carries in the name of Hashem, God of Israel.

By the time we get to Bo, the message is really unimportant, for at least one very simple reason. Par'o will not in any event listen to the message, for his heart is hardened by God. Indeed, I think the conversations between Par'o and Moshe in parashat Bo are characterized by a lack of anything approaching genuine communication, unlike parashat Vaera, where at least at times, Par'o seems to be wavering or genuinely considering the power or truth in Moshe's demands. In Bo, although Par'o asks Moshe for his position, he then rejects it out of hand without any hesitation. Moshe's position, even backed by the plagues, makes no impression on Par'o. I am arguing that the purpose of the conversation was not to persuade Par'o, was not in fact to communicate with him at all, but should be found in the confrontation itself. Moshe is not presenting the Jewish position - he is locking himself in battle with Par'o, facing up to him, waiting, as it were, for him to blink. These are not negotiations any more, this is confrontation for the sake of confrontation.

Why? The answer is given by God:

Come to Par'o, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, IN ORDER that I set my signs in his midst; and IN ORDER that you recount to the ears of your son and your son's son that which I have wrought in Egypt and the signs which I have placed in it, and you shall know that I am Hashem.

The purpose of God's elaborate plan is that "you (pl.) shall know that I am Hashem. Now we all know who is the ultimate protagonist of the battle with Par'o; it is not Moshe but God Himself. As this verse says, "that which I have wrought in Egypt." Chazal expressed this most clearly in the passage from the haggada:

"And I shall pass through the land of Egypt - I and not an angel - and I shall strike every firstborn - I and not a saraf - and I shall pass judgment on all the gods of Egypt - I and not an agent - I am Hashem, I am He and no other."

The final confrontation, the plague of the firstborn, takes place with the Jews locked in their homes, and God Himself, alone passing through Egypt. (The same theme is explicitly repeated in Beshalach - "God shall fight for you and you shall be still.") But it is striking, however, that during the prelude to the last plague, Moshe openly identifies himself with God Himself.

Moshe said: Thus sayeth Hashem: At midnight I shall go forth in Egypt. And every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die.... And all these, your servants, will come down to me and bow down before me, saying, 'leave, you and all the people at your feet, and then shall I leave.'

Who is the reference of the pronoun 'I' in this sentence? Since Moshe's speech begins with the very formal opening "ko amar Hashem," which is also immediately followed by the statement "I shall go forth in the land of Egypt," it would seem to clearly be God. Yet the last line - "and then I shall leave," seems to be clearly referring to Moshe, and was undoubtedly understood that way by Par'o. The previous line - "will bow down before me" - would also seem to refer to Moshe. I would like to suggest that these lines are deliberately equivocal. It is indeed God who is speaking, and ultimately, Par'o's subservience is before God. But this will be fulfilled when Par'o comes down to look for Moshe on that last night and humbles himself before Moshe. Par'o began his conversations with Moshe by dismissing God - "who is Hashem that I should listen to His word?" Now Par'o will "go down to Him" and bow down before Him."

But why is this necessary? Not, God tells Moshe in the beginning of the parasha, so that Par'o should know that Hashem is God - for that will have been accomplished earlier, during the original plagues. Now the purpose is that "you should know that I am Hashem." God sends Moshe to battle Par'o, and strengthens Par'o in the doing, so that Moshe should experience first-hand the clash of titans, the battle of God's word against the vainglory of human power, of emperors and tyrants. This is qualitatively different than merely observing the battle from the side-lines, as the Egyptians and the Jews were doing. God wants Moshe's personal involvement, and he switches Moshe's role from the representative of the Jewish people, speaking in God's name, to the representative of God Himself. For this it is necessary to divinely empower Par'o as well, giving him the added strength to represent the powers of resistance to God, beyond what Par'o the mortal could have mustered on his own, though perhaps not beyond what he would have wanted to muster. The parasha is intensely personal, so that Moshe should feel personally the involvement of God in this struggle. Ultimately, God will take on the last blow completely alone, leaving even Moshe at home to await the coming of Par'o to surrender.

The moment that this identification of Moshe with the personal struggle of God is, I think, when he "turns and leaves in CONSUMING RAGE." The anger Moshe feels at Par'o is rooted in his complete identification with God who has been belittled by Par'o. Until now, Moshe did not have such a

spontaneous reaction despite all the words of Par'o. And Par'o, I think, recognized this change in Moshe as well. Right before that moment, Par'o threatens Moshe with death. It is striking that never before had Par'o sought to silence Moshe. At first, he treats Moshe with disdain - "Why, Moshe and Aharon, do you disturb the people from their work" (5,4). Later he treats him with respect, but never before did he feel personally threatened by Moshe. Par'o reacts at this moment with anger and fear, and threatens Moshe personally - "If I see you again, you shall die. Now that the confrontation is personal, now that Par'o has felt the power that is in Moshe, God tells him of makat bekhорот, of the ultimate encounter, and Moshe in turn walks out in anger.

But why, you will ask again, why does God want this to take place. The answer is, once again, "that you should know that I am Hashem." This has two levels. One is for all Jews. The pronoun "you" is in plural form ("VIDATEM ki ani Hashem"). But I think that there is also a hinted goal for Moshe alone. The verse combines singular and plural pronouns: "In order that you (s.) should tell your son and your son's son.... and you (pl.) should know that I am Hashem. Moshe will, it is hinted, have a personal story to tell. This is the personal identification that he experienced when God struck Par'o. I would like to suggest that this is the moment when Moshe becomes more than a leader. This is when he begins to become "ish ha-elokim," who will bring the Torah down from the mountain.

Further study:

1. The Abarbenel points out that the three plagues of Bo are all associated with darkness. The locust "cover the eye of the earth" (which is dark enough if it means the face of the earth, but the Abarbenel interprets it to mean the sun), darkness is of course darkness, and makat bekhорот takes place at midnight. Why?

2. In parashat Beshalach, the Egyptians are regularly called "mitzrayim," in a singular grammatical form. This is repeated several times poetically in the song of Moshe; e.g., - "a horse and its rider he has thrown in the sea." Explain.

3. Perhaps today's shiur helps to explain the creation of the golden calf when Moshe did not descend as expected from Mt. Sinai. Explain.

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