



For what reason did God command Moses to initiate the last 3 plagues, and that Aaron should initiate the first 3? Why did they together perform Boils? Were there additional messages in each plague, aside from the manifest message?

Discussed in this issue.

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Weekly Parsha

VaEyrarah

RABBI BERNARD FOX

“And Hashem spoke to Moshe and Aharon and He appointed them regarding Paroh – the king of Egypt – to take Bnai Yisrael out of Egypt.” (Shemot 6:13)

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TIP Plagues

Ibn Ezra

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Exodus, 8:12, Ibn Ezra directs our attention to the performers of the Ten Plagues:

“Know, that by the hand of Aaron were the first three plagues and these signs were in the lower matter as I explained earlier, because two (of them) were in water, and the third was in the dust of the earth. And the plagues performed by Moses with the staff were in the higher elements, just as his (Moses) status was higher than Aaron’s status. For example, the plague of hail and locusts were brought by the wind, and (so too) the darkness, it was in the air; also the plague of boils was through him (Moses). Only three (plagues) were without the staff; the wild animals, the disease of the animals, and the death of the firstborns. And one (plague) with no staff was through Moses, with a little connection with Aaron, and it was the plague of boils.”

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Idolatry is an outgrowth of a crippled infantile psyche: one does not mature towards independence, and therefore, seeks security from the external world.

One function of the plagues was to dispel all notions of any power other than God.

Ibn Ezra focuses our attention on his first word, "Know", which urges the reader to think into this specific commentary. He intimates that there is more here than meets the eye. He does not simply list each plague with its performer, or describe the involvement of the staff. We are not interested in dry statistics when studying God's wisdom. Here, Ibn Ezra is teaching important principles. Beginning with the word "Know", Ibn Ezra is teaching an important lesson.

Each of the Ten Plagues was used as a tool to teach Egypt and the world the following: 1) Aaron and Moses were each assigned specific plagues, in the lower and higher realms respectively, and they performed a similar number of plagues independently, 2) The staff was present in only certain miracles, 3) Moses joined with Aaron in a single plague of boils, 4) God distinguished between Egypt and the Jews through two plagues, in which no staff was used, and which was placed in the center of the series of plagues.

In his Laws of Idolatry, 1:1, Maimonides teaches that early man already began projecting greatness onto the heavenly bodies. Man thought, since the planets, stars and spheres minister before God, they too are worthy of man's honor. Eventually, man's sin increased as he replaced simple honor of stars with his worship of them as deities, until God was no longer recognized. Star worship reveals man's false estimation that the heavens deserve to be worshipped. Man feared not only the spheres, but also the heavens. Jeremiah 10:2-3 reads, "So says God, 'To the ways of the nations do not learn, and from the signs of the heavens do not fear, because from them the nations fear. Because the statutes of the peoples are false, because a tree from the forest they cut, fashioned by an artisan with an adze.'" Jeremiah teaches that man did in fact fear the heavens. But their fear stemmed from a false projection
- not based in

reality. Jeremiah's lesson is insightful: he equates the fear of heavens with the idolatrous practice of prostrating to wooden idols. He wished to teach that the heavens do not hold any greater powers than wooden sculptures. Man's idolatrous emotions project the same imagined authority onto both, the heaven and the trees.

The primitive view of the heavens determining man's fate, was not alien to the Egyptians. God corrected this error with one aspect of His plagues. Commanding Aaron to perform the plagues limited to the earthly realm, and for Moses to perform those of the "higher", heavenly realm, God discounted the dangerous esteem man held towards the heavens. God showed that the only difference between the heavens and Earth is the level of understanding required to comprehend their natures, as the wiser man - Moses - addressed the heavenly plagues, and Aaron addressed the earthly plagues. Laws controlled both realms, and both could be understood. Understanding a phenomenon removes one's false, mystical estimations. Realizing they are 'guided' means they are subordinate to something greater. These realms did not "control", but were "controlled", teaching the Egyptians that their views were false. The Egyptians erred by assuming that the heavens were a governing and mystical realm. Earth, to Egypt, was not divine. God corrected this disproportionately high, heavenly grandeur. God did so in two ways: 1) by showing the heavens' subordination to a Higher will, God demoted heaven's status from the divine to the mundane, and, 2) by aligning the plagues with Moses' and Aaron's participation, Egypt would understand that not only are the heavens not divine, but they are in equal realms, just as Moses and Aaron are of somewhat equal status. Additionally, Moses and Aaron each performed three miracles independently to equate heaven and earth, dispelling a false

supremacy of heaven and meteorological phenomena. Hopefully, the Egyptians would comprehend that both heaven and Earth are equally under God's control, and that neither one is significantly greater. Egypt would then realize that Something higher was responsible for all creation. God wanted the good for the Egyptians. The 'good' means knowledge of what is true. As it says in the Torah (Exod. 9:16) with regards to these plagues, "...in order that they tell of My name in the whole world."

Interestingly, the three plagues designed in the heavens were hail, locusts and darkness. Why these three? Perhaps to address three errors of the Egyptians. Egypt assumed meteorological phenomena to be divine, so God responded with a



hail/fire plague to display His exclusive control in this area. Wind was also a heavenly phenomena, but now they experienced an unnatural wind blowing the entire day, the entire night, until the next morning when it delivered the terror of locusts destroying all vegetation remaining of the hail's previous destruction (Exod 10:13). Finally, with the plague of darkness, God displayed control over the primary focus in heaven - the sun. Weather, the atmosphere and outer space were all shown as false deities and under the exclusive control of Israel's God. Additionally, the plague of "darkness" had one other facet - it was palpable, perhaps to show that it was not a simple solar eclipse.

Ibn Ezra also made specific note of two plagues where no staff was used. These two also included the lesson of national distinction: Exod. 8:18, "And I will distinguish on that day the land of Goshen that My people stand on it, to prevent from being there the wild beasts..." Exod. 9:4, "And God will distinguish between the cattle of Israel and the cattle of Egypt, and nothing will die of the Israelites." Why were both of these plagues designed to distinguish Egypt from Israel? I believe the answer is that by designing not just one plague - which could be viewed as a freak incident, but two plagues which differentiated "Egyptians" and "Jews" - the goal was to teach that God works differently than Egypt's view of the 'divine'. The Egyptians thought that to please their gods was man's correct obligation, and precisely how gods operated - a natural outgrowth of a child/parent relationship. How would such an infantile idea be corrected in order to teach God's true system? By Egypt witnessing punitive measures only on their 'side of the river', they were awakened to a new idea: objective morality. They were held accountable. They also realized something even more essential: their relationship to their gods was one where their gods benefited from man's actions. Egypt felt that their gods need man to serve their needs, which were projections of man's own needs. But Judaism teaches that relating to God is not for God, but really only for man. God does not need man. Man must do that which is proper for himself, and if he does not, he will not only be punished, but he will lose the true good for himself. The Egyptian's exclusive receipt of these two plagues - a system of "reward and punishment" - awoke them to a realization that service of God means not catering to a god's needs, but rather, an alignment with proper ideals and morality. This is a drastic difference from Egypt's primitive notion of worship.

Simultaneously, these two plagues attacked the very core of Egyptian gods; animals. Their own animals died, and then, wild animals attacked them. It was a devastating blow to their esteemed deities. Their deification of animal gods was destroyed. Pharaoh's response (Exod. 8:21), "sacrifice to your God" confirms his lowered estimation of animals, to the point that he encourages Moses to slaughter them, and to do so to his God. In other cases, Pharaoh does gesture to free the Jews, but only here in connection

with the animal plagues does Pharaoh say "sacrifice to your God." I believe the Torah includes these words of Pharaoh to inform us that the plague had the desired effect on Pharaoh. God understands what will affect man, and so it does. The Egyptians were all the more confused when they saw that Israel was not affected, even though they did not serve animals. In Exod. 9:7, Pharaoh himself sends messengers to see if Israel was harmed. This plague of the animal's death concerned him greatly.

Why were these two animal plagues bereft of the staff? Perhaps the staff carried with it some element of cause and effect; man would hit something, and only then would the plague commence. Perhaps, God wished to teach that He is in no way bound by the physical. A plague may occur with no prior cause. Removing the staff might effectively teach this lesson, as nothing was smitten to bring on the plague.

I heard another explanation for the use of the staff: Although God did not need it (He needs nothing) for Moses and Aaron to initiate the plagues, it's presence was to remove any divinity projected by Egypt onto Moses and Aaron, lest onlookers falsely believe these two mortals possessed some powers. By seeing the staff incorporated into the miracles, Moses' and Aaron's significance was diluted in Egypt's eyes. But wouldn't people then believe the staff to have those powers? I believe for fear of this erroneous notion, God created a miracle where the staff itself turned into a snake. This was to show that it too was under the control of God.

Why did the plague of boils require Moses and Aaron to work together? My friend Jessie made a sharp observation. She said that just as Moses and Aaron addressed both the higher and lower forms of matter in their respective plagues, the plague of boils executed by both Moses and Aaron included the higher and lower matter - ashes are from Earth, and they were commanded to be thrown towards the heavens (Exod. 9:8). Her parallel revealed another facet of the boils, as God's plagues contain many strata of insights. I believe the boils' combination of realms was to teach that heaven and Earth do not operate in two separate, encapsulated systems. The very act of throwing ashes towards the heavens teaches that both Earth and heaven work together. This was a necessary lesson in the reduction of the heaven's exaggerated status. By showing this further idea that the heavens participate in earthly phenomena, the heavens' false, divine status was stripped that much further. Just as his subjects will view a king who spends time with commoners in a less regal light, so too the heavens now lost their reputation by participating in Earthly matters. Moses could have collected the ashes himself, but by working with Aaron, together, they underlined this point.

One question remains: Why are the two animal-related plagues placed in the middle of the series of the Ten Plagues? ■

*Heaven and Earth
are equally
"created".*

*Neither one possesses
greatness deserving
of man's worship.
Egypt required
this lesson.*

Weekly Parsha

I do not know why but at least a few times each year some individual or group of individuals will approach me in the street and proselytize me. Sometimes I just try to politely ignore the appeal. But occasionally, I will engage the would-be missionary in conversation. I am curious as to why this person feels that I should abandon my faith for another. I generally, find that the appeal is not based upon some objective argument that one religion is superior to the other. Instead, the would-be missionary assures me that his or her faith is so strong that on this basis I should abandon my false beliefs. I find it remarkable that the missionary feels that this argument should sway me. Certainly, this is not the Torah's outlook.

In this week's parasha Moshe goes into action and the redemption of Bnai Yisrael begins to unfold. In this process of redemption Moshe will perform wonders that surpass those of any other prophet. As we read the Torah's account of Moshe's actions we can appreciate the meaning of the Torah assessment of Moshe. The closing passages of the Torah tell us that there no other arose in Bnai Yisrael that was Moshe's equal. No other knew Hashem as intimately or performed wonders on the same scale as Moshe.[1]

However, Maimonides makes an astounding assertion regarding Moshe. Maimonides explains Moshe was the first true navi – prophet.[2] This is an amazing statement. The Torah tells us that others – who lived before Moshe – spoke with Hashem. Adam, Noach Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov and others received prophetic visions. How can Maimonides contend that Moshe was the first true navi?



“And Hashem said to Moshe, “Now, I have appointed you as a lord over Paroh and Aharon your brother will be your navi.” (Shemot 7:1)

Before we begin to explore Maimonides' position, it will be helpful to consider this passage.

Hashem tells Moshe that he has been appointed as a lord over Paroh. Through Moshe, Hashem will punish Paroh and eventually Paroh will be forced to yield to Hashem's will. Hashem adds that Aharon – Moshe's older brother will act as his navi. The description of Aharon as Moshe's navi must be understood. The term navi is generally understood to mean prophet. It is clear that this interpretation of the term navi is not appropriate in this context. In no sense was Aharon Moshe's prophet. On the contrary – Moshe was Aharon's prophet. Hashem communicated with Moshe – not Aharon – and Moshe provided Aharon with instructions. Targum Unkelus responds to this problem. He translates the term navi – in this instance – to mean spokesperson. Hashem is telling Moshe that he will yield the power but Aharon will be the spokesperson. However, Unkelus' interpretation of the term navi requires further explanation. How can the term navi – which generally means prophet – have a different meaning in this instance?

Rashi responds to this difficulty. After quoting Unkelus' explanation of the term navi, Rashi explains the basis for Unkelus' novel interpretation. Rashi explains that the term navi actually has a consistent meaning. It describes a person that makes announcements to the people and provides public rebuke.[3] According to Rashi, a navi is not merely a prophet. A navi is a person that speaks on behalf of Hashem, and speaks to the people in Hashem's name. In other words, every navi is a spokesperson. Generally, the term navi is used to refer to a person who speaks in the name of Hashem. In this instance the term is used to describe Aharon – who acted as a spokesperson for Moshe.

This is an important point. According to Rashi's interpretation of the term navi, not everyone who receives a prophecy deserved to be regarded as a navi in the fullest sense of the term. For example, if Hashem communicates with an individual but does not instruct the individual to share the communication, then the person is not a navi in the full sense. So, although Hashem spoke with Yitzchak, He did provide Yitzchak with commandments or instructions that he was to share with humanity. It follows that according to Rashi's reasoning, Yitzchak cannot be referred to as a navi in the same sense that the term is used in relationship to Moshe.

Now, we can return to Maimonides' comments. Maimonides explains that although there were individuals who communicated with Hashem prior to Moshe – for example, the forefathers – these prophets did not speak to humanity in the name of Hashem. Maimonides discusses the distinction between Avraham and Moshe. He explains that Avraham did not communicate commandments to humanity from Hashem. Instead, he provided instruction to humanity based upon rational argument and proof. In contrast, Moshe

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communicated commandments in the name of Hashem. Avraham was a prophet – in the sense that he communicated with Hashem. He was also a teacher to humanity. However, he was not a navi – a person who speaks in the name of Hashem.

Maimonides concludes that this is the reason that Moshe is the first person provided with wonders that he would perform. Moshe was required to establish his credibility as a navi – a spokesperson of Hashem. Avraham had no need for such miracles. He did not speak to humanity as Hashem's spokesperson. So, there was no need for him to provide proofs of his prophecy.[4]

Maimonides acknowledges that his position presents a number of problems. One problem is that it would seem that there were a number of people – before Moshe – that acted as spokespeople for Hashem provided direction to humanity. Did not Noach warn his generation of the impending Deluge and urge the people to repent?

Maimonides offers a bold answer. He suggests we carefully read the Torah and we will find that the text of the Torah does correspond with this popular impression. The Torah does not describe Noach speaking to the people in the name of Hashem. Furthermore, the Torah seems to tell us that Hashem did not send a messenger to forewarn humanity of His designs. The Torah describes Hashem as “grieved to His heart.”[5] According to Maimonides, this phrase means that Hashem's decision to destroy humanity was not announced. It was held in His heart. Only Noach was told and he was not instructed to share this knowledge.[6]

Maimonides raises other questions. In some cases his answers are not clear. However, his main point is completely unambiguous. Moshe was the first prophet provided with wonders. This is because any person who speaks in the name of Hashem should expect to be required to establish his credibility. Hashem would not expect Bnai Yisrael to believe that Moshe was Hashem's spokesperson, without evidence that this was the case.

Furthermore, Maimonides' description of the work of Avraham is consistent with this outlook. Avraham did not perform wonders in order to establish himself. This was not necessary for a teacher that did not claim to speak on Hashem's behalf. However, Avraham did not merely urge the people of his time to change. He offered proofs and arguments. Again, Maimonides is asserting that it is not appropriate for us to expect a person or group to change religious beliefs without basis. Just as Moshe was required to provide proof of his status as Hashem's spokesperson, Avraham provide proofs of his religious teachings. This is very different from the attitude of the would-be missionaries described above who expect a person to radically reassess one's faith without any evidence. ■



Pharaoh's Failed Escapism

RABBI REUVEN MANN

Written by student

After Pharaoh's magicians use sleight of hand to imitate the blood miracle performed by Moses, we read (Exod. 7:23) “And Pharaoh turned and he came to his house and he didn't give heart also to this.” Why do we need to know that Pharaoh returned to his house?

Later, we read (Exod. 7:28) that the frogs entered everywhere, including one's house. It would appear that this is not unrelated to Pharaoh's entering his house subsequent to the magician's performance of blood.

Pharaoh was disturbed by Moses' feat of blood, and sought to dilute the significance of Moses by having his own magicians do the same. Nonetheless, Pharaoh left, and “returned to his house”. Why? He sought a place where he could deny the truth of Moses' miracles. He sought a geographical escape, to assist in his philosophical denial. As long as Pharaoh did not have to confront Moses' miracles, he felt a certain haven of security in his false beliefs. What was God's response? A plague wherein there was no escape, to help Pharaoh confront the truth of Moses' gen u i n e miracles. The frogs entered Pharaoh's house, leaving him no further room for denial. ■

[1] Sefer Devarim 34:10-11.

[2] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Moreh Nevuchim, volume 1, chapter 63.

[3] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 7:1.

[4] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Moreh Nevuchim, volume 1, chapter 63.

[5] Sefer Beresheit 6:6.

[6] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Moreh Nevuchim, volume 1, chapter 29.

God Desires We Use Our Minds to Know Him

RABBI REUVEN MANN

In this week's Parsha Vau-era, we read about the encounter between Moshe and Pharaoh. God instructed Moshe that when Pharaoh demanded proof that God had spoken to him, he should throw down his staff and it would turn into a snake. Moshe proceeded to do this before Pharaoh. Then something strange and unexpected occurred. Pharaoh summoned his magicians and they did the exact same thing. As might be expected, Pharaoh was unimpressed with what Moshe had done and obstinately refused to obey God. The episode concludes with the words, "And Pharaoh hardened his heart and did not listen to them as God had spoken."

The question arises: What was sinful about Pharaoh's behavior? He certainly had a right to demand proof that God had appeared to Moshe. Moreover, he was correct to ascertain that the deed was truly miraculous. Thus he summoned his magicians and they were able to achieve the same result. We must ask: Why did God give Moshe a sign, which could be duplicated by others? Isn't a miracle by definition a supernatural phenomenon, which is beyond the scope of human power and thus can only be attributed to Divine intervention?

If we study the text carefully, we can find the answer. Superficially, the act of Moshe and that of the magicians appear to be similar. However, they were different. The Torah says, "And the Egyptian magicians did this with their "secret devices". When a skilled magician performs a trick, he controls the environment in which it is executed. He sets up a stage, keeps the audience at a certain distance and manages all of the "props". It is very impressive but we know it is an illusion based on a very skillful sleight of hand. The miracle of Moshe was done in the open without any secret devices. A truly honest observer would recognize and acknowledge the difference. The Pasuk also points out that

the staff of Moshe swallowed those of the magicians. Thus the act of Moshe was clearly superior to his opponents. If Pharaoh was genuinely interested in the truth, he would have investigated the matter carefully and recognized the difference between the genuine miracle of Moshe and the deceptive magic of the illusionists.

Yet we may ask: Why did God give Moshe a miracle that could be somewhat duplicated? Why not give him something, which could not be imitated at all? The answer is that God wants man to recognize Him through the use of his mind and exercise of his free will. He doesn't want us to be emotionally coerced into accepting Him. Great miracles impress the emotions but since they don't engage the mind, their effect soon dissipates. Real change is achieved only through genuine knowledge and understanding. God wants us to use our minds in searching for Him, discovering Him and serving Him. Pharaoh sensed the significant difference between the miracles of Moshe and the counterfeit displays of his servants. That is why the Pasuk says that "he hardened his heart and did not listen..." Had he not been stubborn, he would have seen the truth.

Judaism is unique in affirming the supreme value of knowledge in the service of our Creator. We must, therefore, strive to cultivate a love and appreciation for the Divine Wisdom contained in our Torah.

Our Parsha has great relevance to the contemporary situation. In every area of significance; religion, societal morality, rightful ownership of Israel, we are challenged by false philosophies which masquerade as truth and ensnare the unlearned. Like Pharaoh, we must choose between the authentic and the illusory. May we fulfill the ideal of the Havdala prayer. May we have the wisdom to discern between the true and the false, the holy and the profane, Israel and the nations. ■



Weekly Parsha

the Plague *of* Hail

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

In Parshas Vau-Ayra, at the end of the ninth chapter, we find Moses (Moses) not only responding to Pharaoh's plea to halt the plague of hail, but also giving Pharaoh rebuke: Exod. 9:30, "And you and your servants, I know that you have yet to fear God." Why, during the plague of hail, unlike other plagues, does Moses suddenly rebuke Pharaoh? Is there something we may derive from this story that may explain Moses' behavior? It doesn't appear that God instructed Moses to rebuke Pharaoh, so Moses' words here could be his own. What did Moses see in this plague, and what was his purpose in this dialogue?

We must understand that each plague was not randomly selected, but God carefully designed each one. Each one contained some unique idea. Moses understood better than any man, the depth that can be discovered by studying God's creations, including these plagues. I am certain Moses pondered each plague, but saw something unique in hail.

After Moses says "And you and your servants, I know that you have yet to fear God", these two

verses follow, "The flax and the barley were struck, for the barley was ripe and the flax was in its stalk. And the wheat and the spelt were not struck for they ripen later." There is a question as to who said these two verses. Ramban says Moses spoke these words. I agree, and would like to offer my own interpretation, based on Ramban.

God intended to awaken the Egyptians and Pharaoh to His unique distinction as the Creator of heaven and Earth, Exod 9:16, (God instructing Moses what to tell Pharaoh) "However because of this have I sustained you, on account that I shall show you My strength, and that you shall declare My name throughout the land." God desired not only to show His might, but also to counter obstacles in this society's corrupt nature so they may arrive at the truth.

What obstacle did Pharaoh have? Moses said, "You and your servants have yet to fear God". Pharaoh's obstacle was obstinacy. Moses was first telling Pharaoh his exact flaw in recognizing God. Moses then viewed the hail, and pondered the different affects it had on various crops.

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Weekly Parsha

Moses saw that stiff plants broke, while flexible ones survived. He then thought to himself why God created a plague with such a characteristic of affecting plants in two manners. Perhaps Moses gained insight into this specific plague and into God's approach in reprimanding the Egyptians. God designed the specifics of each plague. But we may question whether these specific plagues were pre-designed from the outset, or did God design each plague in line with what was needed at each juncture, depending on Pharaoh's current response.

Pharaoh was now being obstinate, as Moses pointed out to him "you have yet to fear God". Obstinance had to be pointed out to Pharaoh if he was to understand Moses' next statement, which was in direct response to his character. Stripping Pharaoh of his defenses would be the best method for him to finally recognize God. Perhaps God included other messages in the plagues for Moses to derive through his own keen analysis of their unique properties. Moses therefore intimated to Pharaoh his character flaw via a parallel: "The flax and the barley were struck, for the barley was ripe and the flax was in its stalk." Meaning, "you Pharaoh are going to be broken" as you are stiff like the flax and barley. "And the wheat and the spelt were not struck for they ripen later." Again a parallel, "you Pharaoh would be spared if you were flexible", as are the wheat and spelt.

Moses attempted to teach Pharaoh this: "this current plague was designed as a parallel to you". The goal being that Pharaoh repent and follow God, as God wishes this for all mankind, "For I do not desire the death of the dead (the wicked) says God, but (in his) repentance and in his living." Moses was teaching Pharaoh that there is in fact a God Who knows all man's thoughts. Hopefully Pharaoh would be impressed and acknowledge the Creator.

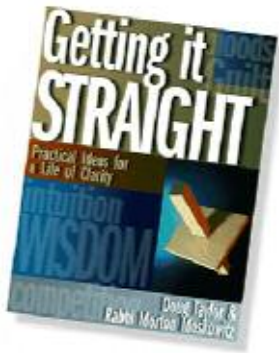
This taught Pharaoh an essential lesson about God: He not only recognizes man's thoughts and actions, but He "interacts" with man. How else could God design a plague to address a single man's (Pharaoh) specific nature? This is a great lesson.

The proof that this was a central theme in God's plagues is Moses' and Aaron's initial address to Pharaoh. In Exodus 5:1-3, Moses and Aaron approach Pharaoh for the first time: 1) "So says God, the God of Israel, send My people that they may celebrate Me in the desert. 2) And Pharaoh said, 'Who is God that I should listen to His voice, to send Israel, I do not know God, and Israel I will not send.' 3) And they (Moses and Aaron) said, 'The God of the Hebrews called unto us, let us go a journey of three days in the desert and we will sacrifice to God our God, lest we be afflicted with plague or the sword.'"

Pharaoh responds in verse 2, and then in verse 3, Moses and Aaron attempt to clarify something to Pharaoh. What point is repeated in verse 3? They now state "The God of the Hebrews called unto us..." This reiterates their initial address of "So says God, the God of Israel..." Moses and Aaron wished to communicate a new idea to Pharaoh: the Jewish God "calls" to man. He is unique, and far above the lifeless Egyptian gods. However, Moses and Aaron saw that their initial attempt to deliver this novel concept to Pharaoh was ignored. They repeated their words, but now with more clarity, "God called to us". This time, in verse 3, they did not use the passive "God said" as in verse 1, but the active "(God) called to us". The God of Israel actually communicates with man. This was what Moses and Aaron wished to impress on the leader of a culture, whose idols were lifeless stone and metal. A "knowing" and "powerful" God was Moses and Aaron's message. Thus, if they disobeyed, this "powerful" God would bring plague or death (sword). Moses and Aaron wished to teach Pharaoh the two most primary concepts that distinguish God from all other deities: He is omniscient and omnipotent, all-knowing and all-powerful. God's system of reward and punishment is also based on this idea, and Pharaoh was taught reward and punishment through God's distinction between the Jewish and Egyptian livestock. Only the latter were plagued. We see a theme permeating the plagues.

Returning to the metaphor used by Moses about the stiff and soft crops, why did Moses tell Pharaoh this through metaphor, and not directly? When someone is faced with a self-realization that conflicts with his ego, he will not be able to tolerate such a stark reality, and he will deny it in defense. To allow Pharaoh a path to accept this idea, Moses used a method, which does not evoke a strong, defensive response, but one wherein the listener may ponder. Moses used a metaphor, which can, after time, appeal to the person more casually, thereby avoiding a direct onslaught of the person's self image. A direct approach would only result in Pharaoh's reluctance to hear God's message, and the loss of any good for Pharaoh.

We see a clear proof against those self-righteous Jews who falsely assume they have more purpose than Gentiles. If this were so, God would not be so concerned with Pharaoh and the Egyptians, that they obtain knowledge of God. God told Moses at the very outset that Pharaoh will not hearken to him. Yet, God instructs Moses to perform the plagues, "on account that I shall show you My strength, and that you shall declare My name throughout the land." God is concerned that all nations recognize the truth of His existence. ■



*Taken from "Getting It Straight"
Practical Ideas for a Life of Clarity*

Questions

DOUG TAYLOR & RABBI MORTON MOSKOWITZ

"But does all this rational thinking stuff apply to the Bible too?"

I had waited a long time before asking him this question since religion is a touchy subject with some people. But the King of Rational Thought and I were having a good discussion over lunch, so I took the plunge, got the words out, and then took a big bite from my sandwich just in case I encountered a long silence. To my surprise, he answered without hesitating.

"Of course," he replied. "Here. I'll give you an example from the book of Proverbs. 'He who hides hatred is lying lips, and he who utters slander is a fool.'"

"Well, that's easy," I said, all prepared to demonstrate that I knew how to think rationally just as much as he did. "It means--"

"Wait a minute," he interrupted. "First tell me what the questions are."

"The what?" I had no idea what he was talking about.

"The questions," he said. "You want to jump right into interpretation without asking questions."

I stuck my toe in the water. "What kind of questions?" I asked.

He responded matter-of-factly, graciously avoiding making me feel like an idiot.

"Questions that guide you to the true meaning of the proverb," he said. "For example, why is someone who utters slander called 'a fool'? And why is someone who hides hatred called 'lying lips'?"

I bit into my sandwich again, hoping he

wouldn't notice I was stalling.

"Asking good questions," he continued, "is one of the keys to gaining knowledge. It's part of the practice of rational thought. Asking good questions is often more important than struggling for answers, because good questions will guide you to the answers."

I could only fake looking contemplative so long. Besides, I was running out of lunch. "So what does the proverb mean?" I asked.

"Well, let's take the questions one at a time," he said. "Why would someone who utters slander be called 'a fool'?"

He paused, waiting for an answer.

"Uh, because I'll sue them?" I offered.

"Sort of," he replied. "If someone is angry at you and slanders you, you know to be careful of that person. You can take steps to protect yourself."

"So now let's look at the second question," he continued. "Why is someone who hides hatred called 'lying lips'?"

"Well," I said, "they really hate me, but they're pretending to be nice to me. Isn't that lying?"

"Right," he said. "But why would they do that?"

"Because they want to hurt me in some way?" I tried.

"Exactly," he said. "When someone is angry at you and wants revenge, they'll do one of two things. If they're foolish, they'll slander you publicly. That's foolish because now you know to protect yourself. But the more cunning person will pretend to be nice to you while



secretly plotting against you."

"So," he concluded, "the proverb is about protecting yourself from hatred."

I took all this in and reached for my sandwich, unaware that I'd finished it.

"Do you see how asking the right questions leads you to the answer?" he added.

"I see it," I said. "But I'm not sure I could have gotten there on my own."

"Asking good questions takes practice," he replied. "Just like any skill."

He was right, and I was eager to do more. But when I suggested questioning my boss about why he doesn't give me a raise, the King of Rational Thought, having observed how deeply I appear to think while eating, had a better idea.

He recommended I have another sandwich. ■

RABBI REUVEN MANN



THE PLAGUE OF HAIL

The plague of hail was the first plague, of the third group of plagues in Egypt. This third group included plagues taking effect in the heavens: hail, locusts (via the wind), and darkness. God wished to demonstrate His control in all areas of the universe.

God said, "I will send all my wonders to his heart" (Exod. 9:14) meaning, all subsequent plagues – commencing with hail – will have new effect. To what effect does God refer? Moses instructed Egypt to "send all animals into your house". We learn that the plagues were not punitive measures. Moses offered Pharaoh and Egypt an escape route. "Those who feared the word of God" (ibid, 9:20) removed them from field. Those who "didn't take to heart God's word", left his slaves and animals outside, and they were harmed. Moses' warning prior to the plague teaches that the plagues were instructive, and not intended for harm.

We notice in these two verses, that the second, contrasting verse does not say, those who "didn't fear God"...instead, it says, those who "didn't take to heart" God's word. Why isn't the terminology consistent? Why isn't fear contrasted to those who "didn't fear"? We may also ask why we need to know that some Egyptians heeded Moses' warning, and some didn't.

We read further and find Pharaoh saying, "this time I have sinned, God is righteous, and I am my nation are wicked." (Exod. 9:27) What may we derive from the Torah recording this response? Further, verse 9:30 reads, "You and your servants do not yet fear God." Ramban interprets this verse as Moses addressing Pharaoh, "...it is only before the removal of the plague that you possess fear". Meaning, once the plague is removed, you will again revert to your old, stubborn ways. What is Moses' purpose in telling this to Pharaoh? And

why even remove the plague if Pharaoh doesn't truly maintain his fear?

"The flax and the barley were struck, for the barley was ripe and the flax was in its stalk. And the wheat and the spelt were not struck for they ripen later." (Exod, 9:31,32)

Why does the Torah deem it necessary to narrate the devastation? Ramban says this is no narration, but the verses are a continuation of Moses' dialogue with Pharaoh. If so, what is Moses telling Pharaoh by referring to the status of the grain?

I would suggest the following answer: The Plagues were not to save the Jews. If so, God could have saved them with one plague. The prevalent view is that the 10 Plagues were punitive measures. It appears from this plague, that this is not so. The plagues were "Chasdei Hashem", "kindness of God". Their purpose was to be a clear-cut, unequivocal demonstration of God's power. For this reason, the plagues became progressively stronger. Teaching Egypt the fallacy of idolatry and the reality of the Creator was the purpose in each successive plague.

"For this time I will send all my wonders to your heart, and in your servants and in your people, in order that you shall know that there is none like Me in all the land." (Exod. 9:14) The plagues were not a punishment, but rather, an education. The fact there were "fearers of God" teaches us that the objective was realized, some Egyptians did fear God through His education via the plagues. But those "who did not give heart to the matter" is to teach that there are none that "didn't fear", but only those who deny reality. "Didn't give heart", means that in order to oppose God's absolute truths, they had to shut their hearts and minds from any investigation. It is not the absence of fear, but a more primary block: they denied any

investigation into the plagues.

Moses never used the pressure of the plagues to obtain concessions from Pharaoh. The plagues' purpose was to teach Egypt knowledge of God. Moses always removed the plague upon Pharaoh's request, and Moses did not hold out on removing the plague until Pharaoh conceded to Moses' requests. Moses wished that Egypt recognized God through wisdom, not coercion.

This explains Moses words: He informed Pharaoh that his superficial relenting to the plagues was worthless. Pharaoh merely swung between two emotional states, with no repentance: under the pressure of the plagues, he swore freedom, but once removed, Pharaoh reverted to obstinacy.

"The flax and the barley were struck, for the barley was ripe and the flax was in its stalk. And the wheat and the spelt were not struck for they ripen later."

With these words, Moses directs Pharaoh to an analog: God is the source of both nature, and man: "God has been compassionate to you, (flexible crops) but at a certain point, this kindness will no longer be extended. When sin is matured, (stiff crops) there is no turning back, and you will snap as do stiff crops." This was Moses' message to Pharaoh. Man sins by nature, and therefore, God affords man opportunities to correct his ways. But once sin captivates the whole personality and values of any given man or people, God will destroy that person or people. This plague was a warning to Pharaoh - in the form of an analogy.

Man feels he may sin and repent later, but there may not be a later. The opportunity to repent is a Divine gift, and must be seized when presented, lest we lose the chance. There is a point of no return.

We learn of the compassion of God on His creations: on mankind. God allows man time to exert his free will to bring himself in line with truth. "Those who He loves, God rebukes". The plagues were an attempt to remove Egypt's false ideas, enabling them to embrace God's absolute truths. ■

