

**Reader:** Time magazine claimed that the plagues were natural occurrences. What's your response? **Mesora:** Plague-critics will not be able to explain such miracles naturally. God created hail mixed with fire. The waters of the sea "piled like heaps", described as "walls on their right and their left". Regarding the Death of Firstborns, how can this be explained naturally...a plague against bodies, but not based not on genetics, germs or cell damage, but on the order of one's birth? This is equivalent to saying that only those wearing leather belts will die. There is no biological connection between one's belt and his health. So too, there is no biological connection between one's order of birth and his health. This is certainly a Divine phenomena. Each plague happened exactly as Moses predicted, and precisely when he forecasted each. How could a man predict that frogs will engulf a city, or that lice, locusts, hail, darkness, blood, beasts, boils, and all the rest will actually occur when he says, and as he says. The only explanation is that the Creator of all natural law intervened and altered these laws, what we refer to as a "miracle".

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# JewishTimes

Volume II, No. 15...Jan. 10, 2003

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## Parshas Bo

RABBI BERNARD FOX

**"And he said to them, "May Hashem only be with you. Just as I send you with your children. See that evil is before you". (Shemot 10:10)**

Moshe tells Paroh of the plague of Locusts. This plague will consume all grain and vegetation that survived the preceding plagues. Paroh agrees to allow Bnai Yisrael to leave Egypt to serve Hashem. However, only the adults may leave. The children must remain. In our pasuk, Paroh tells Moshe that he acquiesces to the request to leave

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## The 10 Plagues

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

On the verse in Exodus, 8:12, Ibn Ezra outlines the structure of the Ten Plagues of Egypt:

*"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."*

Ibn Ezra catches our attention with his first word, "Know", an urgent call to think into this specific commentary. He intimates there is more to these words than meets the eye. He does not intend to simply list each plague with the performer, or to monitor the involvement of the



Ancient art depicting Egyptian priest readying the dead for his sepulcher

staff as ends in themselves. We are not interested in dry statistics when studying God's wisdom. Here, Ibn Ezra is most certainly teaching important principles. Additionally, not often does he commence with "Know..."

In the Ten Plagues, what did God wish to teach Egypt and the world with 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 presence of the staff only in certain miracles - its absence in others, 3) Moses joining with Aaron in a single plague of boils, 4) Distinguishing between Egypt and the Jews through two plagues, in which no staff was used, and placed in the center of the series of plagues.

In his Laws of Idolatry, 1:1, Maimonides' teaches that early man

already began to project 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 their worship as deities, until knowledge of God was lost. Star worship reveals man's estimation that the heavens deserve reverence. (We see man did not say this of our lower, sublunary Earth and its elements, only regarding heavenly bodies.) Man feared not only the spheres, but the heavens. Jeremiah 10:2-3 reads, "So says God, 'To the ways of the nations do no 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

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# The 10 Plagues

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

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stemmed from a false projection - not reality.

The primitive view of the heavens determining man's fate was not alien to Egypt. I feel God wished to correct this error with one aspect of His plagues. Commanding Aaron to perform the plagues limited to the earthly realm, and Moses to perform those of the "higher", heavenly realm, God wished to discount 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. But both realms were controlled by laws, and both could be understood. Understanding a phenomena 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 view was false. The Egyptians erred in assuming the heavens to be a governing and mystical realm. Earth, to Egypt, was not divine. God therefore wished to correct 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. 2)By aligning the plagues with Moses' and Aaron's participation, Egypt would understand that not only are the heaven's 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, Egypt would comprehend that both heaven and Earth are equally under God's control, and that one deserves no

greater significance over the other. Egypt would then realize that Something higher was responsible for all creation. God wished 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 the Israelites' 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 nought 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 recognized "Egyptians" and "Jews" - the goal was to teach that



God works differently than Egypt's view of the 'divine'. Egypt thought that pleasing 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 so to teach of 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. But they realized something even more essential: Their relationship to their gods was one where the gods benefited from man's actions. Egypt felt the 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 the opposite, it can be only for man. God does not need man. Man must do that which is proper, and if he does not, he will not only be punished, but he will lose the true good for himself. So the Egyptian's exclusive receipt of these two plagues awoke them to a realization that service of God means not a catering to a gods needs, but an alignment with proper ideals and morality. This is a drastic difference from Egypt's primitive notion of worship.

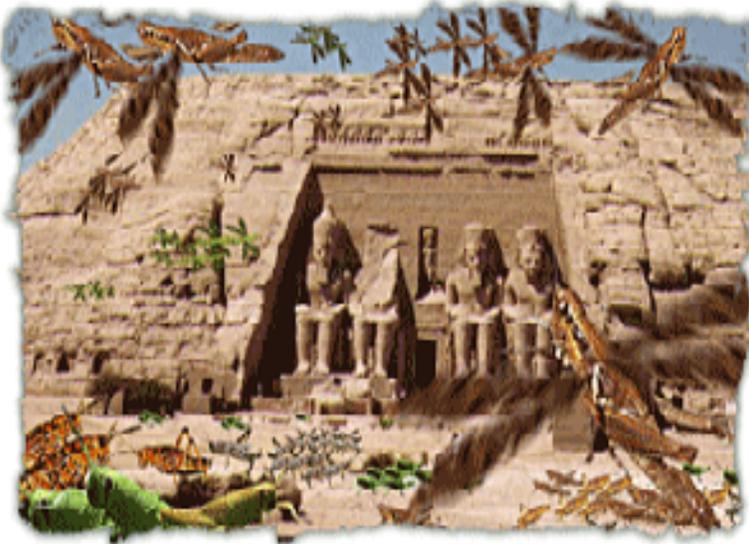
Simultaneously, these two plagues attacked the very core of Egyptian gods; animals. Their own animals died, and next, wild animals attacked them. It was a devastating blow to their esteemed deities. Their theory of animal gods was destroyed. They were all the more confused when they saw that Israel

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 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 something else, of God.

Two questions remain: Why are the two animal-related plagues placed in the middle of the series of the Ten Plagues? Why did the plague of boils require Moses and Aaron to work together? ■



# THE TEN PLAGUES

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

*Written by a student*

What was the reason for G-d plaguing Egypt with the Ten Plagues?

**D**am-Blood  
**T**zefardea-Frogs  
**K**inim-Lice

**A**rov-Wild animals  
**D**evar-Animal's Plague  
**S**hchin-Boils

**B**arad-Hail mixed with Fire  
**A**rbeh-Locusts  
**C**hoshech-Darkness  
**B**echoros-Death of Firstborn

You notice that they are broken up into three sets. As well, the plagues were given an acronym, "**DTZaK, ADaSH, BACHaB**". Why was this done? Not simply for memory's sake. It was given to teach us that there is a specific grouping and method to the plagues.

The first three plagues took place on the Earth itself: Blood was in the Nile, Frogs came from the Nile, and the Lice came from the dust of the

Earth. The second three occurred upon the Earth's surface: Wild animals roamed free, Animals were plagued and Boils smote all. The third set dealt with the heavens: Hail fell from the sky, Locusts were blown in from the sky, the sky turned Dark.

The last plague - death of Firstborn - was really for a different purpose, that being the termination of the disseminators of the Egyptian culture and beliefs - the firstborns.

What was the reason for this categorization? It is in line with the philosophy of the Torah, to show all that G-d is the only Source of power in the universe. G-d was thus showing Pharaoh and the rest of Egypt that He alone commanded all areas of creation: The Earth, the Heavens, and all in between.

G-d's intent is that all human beings recognize Him, as we say in Alenu everyday, "v'col b'nei basar yikriu shmecha", "all flesh should call your name". Therefore G-d desired to demonstrate His power to relate to the Egyptians as well as the Jews, His level of Supreme power over the universe. □

## Firstborns

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

**Question:** I have been told that Exodus 13:2 & 24:5 were originally interpreted to mean that the first born son of each Jewish family was intended to be deemed a Cohen to serve as his family's representative to the Holy Temple. I have read the passages and it seems a stretch, is this the way it was before Hashem changed it when only the Levites crossed the line to accept the Torah? Thank you.

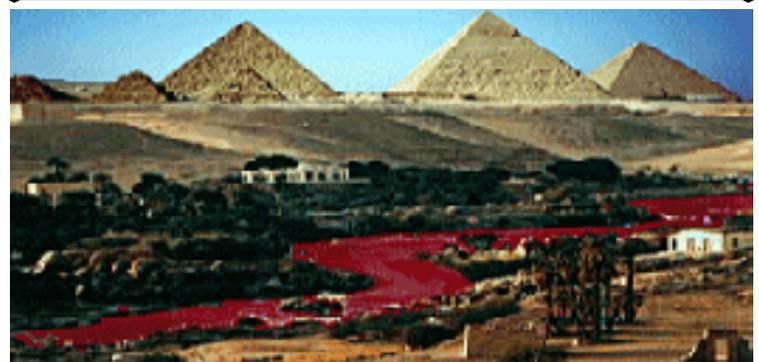
**Mesora:** Rashi says that when all the Jews sinned by the Golden Calf, except for the Levites, the Levites then replaced the firstborns' designation of Temple service. The firstborns received the priesthood to promulgate Torah ideology, much like the Egyptian firstborns carried the status of passing down their philosophy. We see that the Egyptian firstborns were killed, and as a rabbi once mentioned, it was in order to sever the lineage of those who would teach the corrupt, Egyptian philosophy.

Perhaps it is inherent in the position of first born male, that he commands respect and status. He is then the most fit to act as leader since he carries inherent reverence. Just as killing the Egyptian first born would terminate those leaders, God sought Jewish firstborns as natural Torah leaders. However, when they sinned, they were no longer fit to minister to God. They showed weakness towards alien gods. This contradicts the monotheistic perfection required in Temple worship. Only those perfectly devoted to God can relate to God in Temple service. Knowledge of His undeniable status as the only God is essential for relating to what is truly "Him". □

## The Death of Egyptian Firstborns

RABBI REUVEN MANN

Rabbi Chait said Macas Bechoros was unique. Every other maca came through an angel, i.e., a visible, physical force. For example, a great wind preceded the Arbeh, and the first maca - plague - (Nile River turning into blood) involved producing some change in the water and so forth. Every maca expressed itself via a change in some visible physical phenomenon. Macas Bechoros however was direct. There was no medium through which it expressed itself that was apparent to the Egyptians. Until now all they saw was that G-d had some type of control over the physical forces of nature but that He was limited in that He had to operate through them. Thus, there was some measure of safety and possible escape. He couldn't just will me dead with no apparent cause which I could trace to some element in nature. So before, G-d always operated within nature, so to speak, but in Macas Bechoros, He revealed an entirely new dimension - outside of nature - by which He can strike you down at will. Hence, the terror of that night was different than that which attended any other maca. This is my understanding and explanation of what I heard on the taped shiur. □



# Parshas Bo

RABBI BERNARD FOX

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Egypt. However, he adds that evil awaits Bnai Yisrael. In other words, he predicts that Bnai Yisrael are destined to suffer. What was Paroh's basis for this prediction?

The commentaries offer various explanation of Paroh's prediction. One of the most interesting is provided by Gershonides. He explains that Paroh could no longer deny the existence of a deity that caused these plagues. However, he claimed that this powerful god could only produce destruction. His proof was that all of the plagues were destructive. He warned Bnai Yisrael that if they chose to follow this god they would be doomed. Ultimately, they too would suffer the wrath of the god of destruction. Based on this interpretation of Paroh's prediction, Gershonides answers a number of other difficult questions. At Sinai, Hashem threatened to destroy Bnai Yisrael. Moshe pleads with Hashem to spare the nation. He tells Hashem that the annihilation of Bnai Yisrael will confirm the claims of the Egyptians. We can now understand Moshe's argument. According to the interpretation of Gershonides, Paroh had claimed that a deity only capable of destruction had redeemed the Jewish nation. The destruction of the nation would lend credibility to the Egyptian's claim.

This also explains another incident. Upon leaving Egypt, Bnai Yisrael came to Marah. The water in Marah was too bitter to drink. The nation came to Moshe. "What will we drink?" they asked. Hashem showed them a tree. This tree was placed in the water. The water became potable. Moshe then spoke to the nation. He told them that they must follow the laws of Hashem. If they are faithful, they will not suffer the afflictions experienced by the Egyptian. He concluded by

referring to the Almighty as the healer of the nation. This is a very difficult incident to understand. First, why did Hashem lead the nation to a location that was without water? Certainly, He knew they would need water to survive. Why wait until the nation appealed to Moshe before providing potable water? Second, what is the meaning of Moshe's speech? He tells the nation that if they observe the mitzvot, they will not suffer. This would seem self-evident! Why did Moshe need to make this point? Finally, why does Moshe refer to Hashem as a healer? Of all the characteristics of Hashem, why mention this one?

According to the insight of Gershonides, all of these questions are answered. Hashem realized that some members of Bnai Yisrael would be concerned with Paroh's prediction. They had been rescued from Egypt but only through the destruction of the Egyptians. This reinforced Paroh's claim. Hashem wished to indicate that He also does good. Therefore, he brought them to Marah. Here, He performed a miracle that did not involve any element of destruction. Moshe's comments can now be understood. Moshe told the people that Paroh's concept of Hashem was wrong. True, Hashem had destroyed the Egyptians. But this was not because Hashem's only tools are suffering and destruction. The Egyptians were destroyed because they were evil. If Bnai Yisrael observed the mitzvot, they would not experience this suffering. Moshe then proves his point. Hashem had "healed" the water. This proved that far from being a god of destruction, the Almighty removed suffering and healed. A god that removes imperfection and heals cannot be the god envisioned by Paroh.

**"Speak now to the nation. And each man should ask from his neighbor and each woman from her neighbor vessels of silver and vessels of gold."** (Shemot 11:2)

Hashem tells Moshe that Bnai Yisrael should ask the Egyptians to give them their valuables. This will fulfill the promise that Hashem

made to Avraham. He told Avraham that his descendants will be afflicted in a strange land. But at the end of this exile they will leave the land of their bondage with the wealth of their former masters. Hashem tells Moshe that he should address Bnai Yisrael with this command "now". The actual word used in the pasuk is nah. Unkelus and others provide this translation for the term. However, the Talmud offers a different translation for the term nah. In Tractate Berachot, the Sages explain that the term means please. According to this translation, Hashem was asking Moshe to request from the Bnai Yisrael that they loot Egypt. It is unusual for Hashem to express Himself in the context of a request. Why, here, is this strange mode of expression used? The Talmud responds that Hashem did not want to be criticized by Avraham. If the nation did not leave with the Egyptian's wealth, Avraham could complain that the Almighty had not completely fulfilled His covenant. He had subjected the nation to suffering. But He had not provided the promised reward.

This entire discussion is difficult to understand. The Talmud seems concerned with the implications of the omnipotent Hashem making a request. Yet, the response seems inadequate. If Hashem wanted to fulfill His promise to Avraham, let Him command Bnai Yisrael to loot Egypt. Furthermore, should not the Almighty be true to His commitments regardless of human perceptions? The issue is not that Avraham will feel that Hashem's promise is unfulfilled. The issue is that, in fact, the promise is not fulfilled! The Talmud provides some assistance in answering this question. It explains that Bnai Yisrael were perfectly content to leave Egypt without these spoils. There are a number of reasons offered for this attitude. First, they were escaping bondage. A person rescued from such terrible suffering does not think about wealth. Freedom is sufficient reward. Second, the people knew that they were to travel to the land of Israel. They would be required to transport any possessions they took from

Egypt. Understandably, the people wished to minimize their burden. These comments seem to suggest an additional question. Why was Hashem concerned with the fulfillment of His promise? The people did not want the wealth of the Egyptians!

Klee Yakar responds that we must better understand the promise that the Almighty made to Avraham. Hashem had promised that Bnai Yisrael would leave the land of their affliction with wealth. Why was this wealth necessary? Klee Yakar explains that this wealth was intended as some level of compensation to Bnai Yisrael for their labor. This has two implications. First, it was important that Bnai Yisrael receive the payment. Second, the compensation must come from the Egyptians. Both of these requirements must be met to avoid any perception of injustice. Now our questions can be answered. The use of the term nah is designed to communicate an important message. Literally, the term means now. However, it also can mean please. Why did the Almighty use this term? He was acknowledging that the wealth was a form of compensation. Therefore, the nation had the right to decline this payment. However, declining would create a perception of injustice. We can also understand Hashem's concern with perceptions. As compensation, the Jews had a right to refuse the spoils. However, a perception of injustice would result. Bnai Yisrael would have worked without payment. The Egyptians would have benefited from their evil actions. In order to avoid this perception it was essential that Bnai Yisrael confiscate the wealth of the Egyptians. ■

Sefer Shemot 32:12.  
Sefer Shemot 15:22-26.  
Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer Shemot, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1994), pp. 41-42.  
Mesechet Berachot 9b.  
Rav Shlomo Ephraim Luntshitz, Commentary Klee Yakar on Sefer Shemot 11:2.

# All Miracles Were Part of Creation

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

God's perfection and His complete knowledge dictate that God knew at the very outset in Creation, when specific miracles would need to unfold to achieve various goals. Maimonides explains in *Avos*, 5:6, that with this knowledge, God instilled precise laws timed exactly to unfold and enact all miracles in their proper hour. For example, miracles dealing with earth were created in the fabric of earth in its creation; All miracles dealing with water were created in the fabric of water on its day of creation. This rule applies to all matter created during the six days of creation. As matter was created, specific miracles destined to unfold in the future were built into that matter. This principle attests to God's supreme and complete knowledge of all events which are to unfold throughout all time. To assume that God performed miracles only at "the time" in history, assumes that God could not anticipate the exact moment the miracle would need to be performed. It assumes ignorance on God's part.

Maimonides' explanation on the mishna quoted demands that man attribute complete knowledge to the Creator. Man must affirm God's wisdom and ability to create matter in such a way that specific, short term alterations in natural law would occur at exact, defined moments throughout time.

The question arises from the text of the mishna which states: "Ten things were created at dusk on the sixth day of creation, the mouth of the earth (which swallowed Korach), the mouth of the well (during the 40 years in the desert), the mouth of the donkey (the account of Bilam), the rainbow, the Manna, Aaron's staff, the Shamir (the worm used to miraculously cut stones) the Hebrew letters, the tool used to write the Ten Commandments, the Ten Commandments (the actual sapphire

tablets) and some say even Mazikim, the burial site of Moses, the ram of Abraham, and some say even the first tongs (metal instruments used to forge other instruments)."

The question is, why weren't these miracles also created in their respective days like all other miracles? What is the concept taught that they were created at dusk on day 6 of creation?

Understanding the mark of distinction held by these few miracles will lead to the answer. So how are these miracles different than all others?

I believe the distinction is that these miracles incorporate that which is antithetical to the substance in which it resides. For example, the mouth of the rock which gave forth water. Rock is a purely arid substance - water is the opposite. The donkey is the most stubborn and stupid creature, yet it spoke, implying intelligence. The first tongs by definition are a contradiction. How does one make the 'first' tongs, if there are no others with which to forge that first set? The shamir worm is a tiny insect, a weak creature, yet it had the capacity to split huge stones. And the tool to write the Ten Commandments, made for sapphire. Sapphire being one of the hardest substances, the existence of the tool used to cut such a substance would be a contradiction, i.e., how can something else be harder than the hardest thing?

In contrast, the splitting of the Red sea for example does not incorporate a direct contradiction to water's nature, but as the passage states, God blew a strong wind to break open the waters. This means that something external to the water itself provided the separation. When Joshua caused the sun and moon to stand still, again, motion of heavenly spheres is external to the spheres themselves. Again, no inherent contradiction.

So why didn't God incorporate inherent contradictory miracles into their respective days of Creation? What is the purpose of their delay until dusk?

The answer is that it was not a 'delay', but it was an impossibility for these few miracles to inhere in a substance before the substance became complete, with all its laws. I will explain. As an example, had God brought stone into existence in a state containing moisture, the entire definition of stone would be different than what is needed for an inhabitable planet. God first had to create substances, which are defined as how they first come into existence. This is what took place on each of the 6 days of creation, i.e., matter coming into existence in distinct forms, each containing specific, essential properties. Once a certain substance exists in a desired form with its essential properties, only then can God make aberrations in its nature, without altering the actual substance. God desired that stone exist - this means an arid, hard substance. So God brought stone into existence as stone, and not as a moist object, which would not be stone. Subsequent to its creation, God can make aberrations. This is what is meant by dusk. Meaning, first, God defined matter by giving each substance specific, unique properties. This occurred during the 6 days. Only subsequent to the completion of many substances, could God incorporate a "suspension" of those properties. But suspension means, altering that which already exists.

Certain miracles were needed for future events, without which, catastrophe would occur. As it is God's wish to benefit man, the suspension of a specific few laws at a few times was essential to preserve mankind. God therefore made concessions to man (implied by making these miracles at the "last moment possible") by altering laws of created matter.

In summary, all miracles were already built into all of created matter. Miracles on the whole do not contain contradictions in material substance, but are rather multiple forces operating simultaneously. Due to the need for substance to

maintain essential, structural properties, matter needed to come into existence as a defined entity. Only once existing in an essential form could God "alter" it to assist man.

A friend had asked how the rainbow fits into this theory. The answer is that it cannot, as it is not a suspension in a substance's laws. But it does fit into our theory if we make an amendment: We stated before that all miracles which were designed at sunset on the primordial Friday had one thing in common, i.e., they were all suspensions or contradictions in the very laws governing and actually making that substance what it is. Therefore, these few miracles, by definition, had to arrive subsequent to the creation of all matter. But we can include a rainbow into our theory if we suggest that what these few miracles had in common was something else; the impossibility of existing simultaneously with the creation of all matter. Meaning, just as in the miracle of the rock - Miriam's well - moisture had to be created subsequent to the very creation of an arid rock. So too, a rainbow could only exist subsequent to the existence of water and light, the two elements which combine to create a rainbow. A rainbow is not a new creation. A Rabbi once pointed out, God said the rainbow I "place" in the clouds as a sign. God does not say at Noah's time, "My rainbow I "created". Meaning, the rainbow always existed, even before Noah's time. But, it was created subsequent to water and light, and therefore included in the few items which had to be created last. It could not come into existence at the time of the creation of light, or at the creation of water, but subsequent to both.

So our revamped theory will read; All miracles created at sunset on the first Friday share the common theme that they could not be created earlier, for one of a few reasons; Either, 1) All substances had to be fixed (complete) in order that these few miracles can be alterations of these fixed substances, or 2)The miracle is not an alteration in preexisting matter, but the miracle cannot exist without the preexisting matter. Such is the case of the rainbow. □

# Parshas VaEra II

RABBI BERNARD FOX

"When Paroh will say to you, "Provide for yourself a mofait (wonder)." And you will say to Ahron, "Take your staff and throw it before Paroh. It will become a tanin (serpent)." (Shemot 7:9)

The wonders that Moshe and Ahron performed in Egypt are referred to with two terms. These terms are ote and mofait. What is the difference between these terms? Sforno explains that these terms have very different meanings. These meanings can be understood through better appreciating Moshe's situation. Moshe claimed to be the messenger of a G-d. This G-d was represented as the absolute ruler of the universe. Moshe's credibility depended upon his response to two issues. He must prove that he was the messenger of Hashem. He must also prove that Hashem is omnipotent. The term mofait is best translated as wonder. A mofait provides evidence of the Almighty's authority over the physical universe. Paroh denied that Hashem possessed this power. Paroh required a mofait. He could only be convinced by a wondrous act that would testify to the awesome power of the Almighty. The transformation of Ahron's inanimate staff into a living creature served this purpose.

The term ote means sign. Bnai Yisrael accepted the existence of a Creator. The Creator rules the universe He formed. However, Moshe was required to establish that he was the messenger of Hashem. They needed an ote or sign that Moshe was Hashem's servant. Moshe's ability to alter nature indicated that he had been empowered by Almighty. Sforno notes that the same act can function both as an ote and mofait. The purpose of the act will determine the term by which it is described. Therefore, the transformation of the staff before Paroh was a mofait. The same act performed in front of Bnai Yisrael was an ote.(1)

**"And the magicians said to Paroh, "It is the finger of the L-rd." And Paroh's heart became hard and he did not listen to them as Hashem had spoken." (Shemot 8:15)** Paroh's magicians could not duplicate the plague of Lice. They told Paroh that this plague was the "finger of the L-rd." Rashi seems to indicate that the magicians were attesting to the authenticity of Moshe's claims. This plague was caused by the G-d of the Jewish people. Moshe was His agent. Hashem was intervening in nature to save His people.(2) Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra disagrees with this interpretation. The magicians did not say that the plague was from

Hashem. They counseled that the cause was the L-rd. Ibn Ezra explains that the Egyptians did not deny the existence of a Creator. They understood that this Creator ruled the universe through a system of natural law. The issue in dispute was the Torah concept of a Creator with a providential relationship to His people. This understanding of G-d is expressed by the Tetragrammaton-the name we pronounce as "Hashem."

The Creator fashioned a universe in which natural disasters occur. Floods, earthquakes, terrible storms destroy cities and even civilizations. The magicians did not understand such phenomenon to be providential. The magicians acknowledged that this plague was not merely an illusion or impressive trick. It was the work of the Creator. But, they claimed, it did not support the concept of Hashem.(3)

Nachmanides offers a third interpretation. The magicians accepted Moshe's claim that the plague was from Hashem. They did not use this name. It was a foreign term to the Egyptians. Speaking among themselves, they would not refer to G-d with an unfamiliar name. However, they claimed it was only the "finger" of G-d. The plague caused discomfort and some suffering. However, it was not catastrophic. They advised Paroh to be calm-to recognize the limited effect of the plague and maintain his resolve.(4)

**"And I will separate on that day the land of Goshen, that my nation stands upon, so that there will not be there wild beasts; so that you will know that I, Hashem, am in the midst of the land." (Shemot 8:18)**

G-d tells Paroh, through Moshe, that the upcoming plague of Wild Beasts will affect only the Egyptians. Bnai Yisrael will be protected from the infestation. Nachmanides explains that Bnai Yisrael were also spared the suffering caused by the previous plagues. The waters of Goshen were not affected by Blood and Frogs. There was no outbreak of Lice in Goshen. However, this aspect of these plagues was not stressed. Moshe could not point to this localization as proof of the plagues' Divine origin. It was understandable that these plagues were localized phenomena. However, the infestation of Wild Beasts should not have been localized. There was no natural reason for the beasts to stop at the border of the Jewish province. Only providence could explain this behavior.(5)

Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra disagrees. He maintains that the Jews were not exempt from the effects of the previous plagues. Bnai Yisrael also suffered from lack of water and infestations of frogs and lice. These plagues did not threaten lives. Hashem did not insulate His people. However, the wild beasts were an actual danger. This infestation would result in death, not mere suffering. In order to protect the lives of His people, G-d shielded the Jewish people from this plague.(6)

"And Moshe said to him, "When I leave the

city, I will spread my hands to Hashem. The thunder will cease. There will not be any more hail. This is so you will know that the land is Hashem's." (Shemot 9:29)

Our pasuk describes the conclusion of the plague of hail. Paroh beseeches Moshe to pray to Hashem. He should appeal to the Almighty to end the plague. Moshe responds that he will comply. However, he adds an important phrase. He tells Paroh that, first, he will leave the city. Only then will he spread his hands to Hashem in prayer. Why did Moshe stipulate that he must first leave the city?

Rashi quotes the Midrash Michilta in response to this question. The Midrash explains that the city was permeated with idols. Moshe would not pray in this abominable environment. First, he would remove himself from this city of idolatry. Only then, would he pray to Hashem.(7)

Moshe was waging a battle against idolatry. He was asserting that Hashem is the only true G-d. The deities of Egypt were false gods. He would not pray in a place dominated by these idols. Perhaps he feared that his prayers might be misinterpreted as appeals to the abominations of the Egyptians. He would leave the city and its idols. He would pray to Hashem only in a place free of these false gods.

The commentaries are troubled by the Midrash's comments. This was not the first occasion on which Moshe prayed on behalf of Paroh and the Egyptians. On these other occasions, Moshe did not stipulate that he must first leave the city. Why, now, does Moshe add this requirement?

Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin Zt"l – the Netziv – offers an answer to this question. His answer is based upon a previous passage. Let us consider this pasuk. As we have explained above, Moshe was not immediately successful in winning the support of Bnai Yisrael. His initial appeal to Paroh resulted in an intensification of the bondage. Bnai Yisrael sharply criticized Moshe for this outcome. Moshe sought an explanation from Hashem. The Torah uses an interesting phrase in describing Moshe's communion with the Almighty. The Torah says that Moshe "returned to Hashem" and sought His counsel.(8) Netziv asserts that this phrase should be understood somewhat literally. Moshe actually went somewhere. He went to a place that he had designated for prayer and prophecy. He had established a synagogue – a Bait HaKeneset. Moshe retreated to this sacred place to commune with the Almighty.(9)

Netziv explains that this provides a partial answer to our question. Actually, each time Moshe prayed to Hashem, he carefully considered his environment. He was consistently concerned with the problem of praying to Hashem in place associated with idolatry. In order to address this issue, Moshe established a special place that was sacred and devoted to the worship of the Almighty. Each

time Moshe prayed or sought prophecy, he retreated to his Bait HaKeneset.

Netziv acknowledges that this insight does not completely answer our question. Why did Moshe now insist on leaving the city? Why did Moshe not follow his established practice? He should have entered his synagogue and prayed to Hashem?

Netziv explains that the answer is provided by another stipulation made by Moshe. He told Paroh that his prayers would be accompanied by a physical demonstration. Moshe would spread his hands to Hashem. Netziv explains that Moshe intended to spread his hands towards the heavens. This could not be done inside a building. Moshe intended to pray outside.

Moshe could not fulfill this requirement in his Bait HaKeneset. Therefore, he was confronted with a problem. He would not pray to Hashem in a place associated with idolatry. Yet, his accustomed refuge was indoors and, consequently, inappropriate for the prayer he planned. Moshe solved his dilemma by leaving the city. In this manner, he was able to pray outside in a proper environment.(10)

Netziv's insight provides an explanation for an amazing halacha. Tur explains that one should always pray in a Bait HaKeneset. He adds that the synagogue must have a minyan, a quorum of ten males. Bait Yosef observes that there is an obvious implication in Tur's formulation of this halacha. If a synagogue does not have a minyan, one is not required to pray there. Bait Yosef questions this formulation. He explains that many Sages maintain that one should pray in a Bait HaKeneset regardless of the presence of a minyan. He explains the reason for this position. A synagogue is designated for prayer.(11)

Why is this designation important? According to the comments of Netziv, we can answer this question. Prayer involves making an exclusive commitment to the service of Hashem. Like Moshe, we live in an environment that is dominated by the expressions of other religions. It is appropriate for us to remove ourselves from our ambient surroundings when demonstrating our exclusive devotion to Hashem. The synagogue provides this opportunity. It is our refuge. It is a place completely designated for the service of the Almighty. □

(1)Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer Shemot, 7:9. (2)Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 8:15. (3)Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra, Commentary on Sefer Shemot, 8:15. (4)Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 8:15 (5)Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 8:18 (6)Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra, Commentary on Sefer Shemot, 8:18. (7)Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 9:29. (8)Sefer Shemot 5:22. (9)Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (Netziv), Commentary Hamek Davar on Sefer Shemot 5:22. (10)Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (Netziv), Commentary Hamek Davar on Sefer Shemot 9:29. (11)Rabbaynu Yaakov ben HaRash, Tur Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chayim 90.