

The Plague of Hail

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

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Moshe see in this plague, and what was his purpose in this dialogue?

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

After Moshe 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 these words are spoken by Moshe. I agree, but I would like to pose my own interpretation.

As God intended to awaken the Egyptians and Pharaoh to His unique distinction as the Creator of heaven and earth, God desired not only to show His might, but to counter obstacles in this society's corrupt nature so they may arrive at the truth. What obstacle did Pharaoh harbor? Moshe said, "You and your servants have yet to fear God". Pharaoh's obstacle was obstinacy.

Moshe was first telling Pharaoh what his exact flaw was in recognizing God. Moshe then viewed the hail, and pondered the different affects it had on various crops. Moshe saw that stiff plants broke, while flexible ones survived. He then thought to himself why God created a plague which didn't destroy all crops. Perhaps Moshe saw God's approach to reprimanding the Egyptians: God created each plague - not necessarily pre-designed from the outset - but God meted out what was needed at each juncture, depending on Pharaoh's current response. Pharaoh was now being obstinate, as Moshe pointed out to him "you have yet to fear God". Obstinacy had to be pointed out to Pharaoh if he was to understand Moshe's next statement which were in direct response to his character. Stripping Pharaoh of his defenses would be the best method for him to finally recognize God. Moshe therefore intimidated 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.

Moshe was intimating to Pharaoh, "this current plague was designed as a parallel to you". The goal being that you 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."

This also taught Pharaoh an essential lesson about God, that He recognizes man's thoughts and actions. How else could God design a plague to address a single man's (Pharaoh) specific nature? This is a great lesson. I believe the Egyptians would be surprised if an idol talked to them although they desired the idols to recognize and respond to their actions. Now however, Pharaoh was being taught by Moshe that there is in fact a God Who does know all man's thoughts.

Why did Moshe tell Pharaoh this through metaphor and not directly? Perhaps in general, when someone is faced with a principle which completely counters his current philosophy, he will push it away with both hands in defense. No one likes feeling the carpet is pulled out from under them. So to leave Pharaoh with some room to digest the ideas, Moshe used a metaphor which can, after time, appeal to the person more casually, thereby avoiding the defensive onslaught of the ego, and offering the best possibility for acceptance. □

Pharaoh's Astrologers

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

When reading Shmos, we come across a Rashi (Exod. 1:22) which states that Pharaoh's astrologers told him that the Jewish messiah had been born, but they weren't sure as to whether this messiah was born of the Jews or of the Egyptians.

Later, Rashi (Exod. 2:3) states that the reason why Moses' mother Yocheved couldn't hide him anymore, was because the Egyptians counted the months from when Yocheved and her husband remarried to determine when a new baby would be born, in order to slay him. Since Moses was born 3 months premature, his mother was able to hide him that length of time. But at the ninth month, she knew that the Egyptians would be visiting to take her child.

A number of questions surface:

1) Did the Egyptians know when Moses was born or not? From the first Rashi, they seemed to know based on astrology, but from the second Rashi, they miscalculated by 3 months. 2) How can humans know something outside of their sense perception? Is astrology fact or fiction?

3) Why were these astrologers only certain about one aspect (that he was born) but they were ignorant of his nationality?

On the one hand, one could side with the Egyptians and state that when they predicted Moses' birth, it was indeed his birthday. But since he was born three months premature, they didn't bother searching his mother's tent, as they assumed whoever was born, was born at nine months. This still shows ignorance.

On the other hand however, one would seem more correct to state that the Egyptians really didn't know anything, and when they stated that the messiah was born, it was a guess, perhaps to maintain their position. Previously, they suggested that Pharaoh's dreams of the 7 cows represented 7 daughters who would be born and die. They were wrong here, and in many other cases. But it wasn't objectively proven that their theory was impossible, so they remained at their posts.

A Rabbi suggested that this may not have been the first time the Egyptian astrologers predicted the birth of a messiah. The astrologers, as in the past, had to produce information to make themselves credulous, and to keep their positions. If they never inform Pharaoh of news, Pharaoh might dismiss, or even kill them. Thus, they were under pressure regularly to provide information to Pharaoh. They also had to be sure that any information couldn't be proved 100% wrong, so when they would state matters, they would do so either in generalities, or in areas that one can never prove impossible. Alternatively, the astrologers saw that Pharaoh was now subjugating the Jews, as the Jews were more numerous, and possibly could pose a threat to the Egyptians. The astrologers surmized the possibility of an uprising, and weren't sure whether it would be spearheaded by a Jew or an Egyptian sympathizer. They therefore used rational deduction in their forecast to Pharaoh and told him that it could be either a Jew or Egyptian saviour.

The fact that the astrologers couldn't determine Moses' nationality, and that the second Rashi implies miscalculation, uncovers their ignorance, and removes any credibility of their astrology.

Perhaps this is why Rashi recorded

these two stories, to teach that astrology is a farce. Just as people today cannot read palms, or foretell events with any accuracy, so also was the case in Egypt. Pharaoh had his astrologers as a source of security for areas wherein he was doubtful. All that was needed was that Pharaoh believed them. Objective reality was not a concern of Pharaoh. Emotional security was.

The Radak, as well as all the Rabbis, dismiss any truth to the Baales Ovee (the female conjurer) in Samuel I, 28:7-19. They unanimously deny any reality to this story, and call it all "futility, void, lies, and mockery".

King Saul had visited the Baales Ove to bring up Samuel from the dead. The story on the surface says she did, and that King Saul talked with Samuel. The Radak however quotes the Rabbis and states, "the Rabbis said three things in regards to conjurers, 1) the one who brings up the dead sees but doesn't hear the dead person, 2) the one who is in need hears, but sees not the dead, and 3) the ones who do not care either way neither see nor hear anything. Such was the case with King Saul, he was in need, so he heard Samuel talking, the Baales Ove saw, but didn't hear, and the two who Saul traveled with, Avner and Amasa, neither saw nor heard a thing."

What does this prove? That King Saul's discussion with Samuel was a daydream, a fantasy, or an illusion. Just as sometimes we think we hear someone talking to us or calling our name, all but to turn and see nobody there, so also according to Radak and all the Rabbis was this case with King Saul and the Baales Ove. He was in such need, that he thought he heard Samuel. His two men didn't care, so they heard nothing. And the Baales Ove needed to keep her status, so she feigned seeing him.

As Jews, a rational people, we do not believe knowledge emanates from sorcerers. They are all false. Knowledge emanates from G-d, and there are specific ways of uncovering this knowledge - careful analysis, and rational thinking. Just as the study of physics and all other sciences which are based on principles embedded in the tangible universe require methodology to arrive at concepts, so much more so, the abstract world of ideas disclosed to us through the Torah requires a refined, rational approach.

It is relatively easy to detect when something is an accurate science. If it follows rational principles, it can be a science. If however, we hear statement such as, "this crease in your palm is long, therefore you will live long", we

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