



GOD

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Weekly Parsha

Bo

RABBI BERNIE FOX

The Plague of Locusts

"And the locusts invaded all of the land of Egypt. And they settled within all of the boundaries of Egypt. It was a severe plague. Never before had there been a comparable infestation of
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(Bo cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

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locusts and never again would there be such an infestation." (Shemot 10:14)

This pasuk describes the plague of Locusts. The locusts covered the Land of Egypt. They consumed all of the grain and vegetation that had survived the previous plagues. The Torah asserts that an infestation of this magnitude had never previously occurred. Furthermore, an infestation of such magnitude would never occur again.

Rashi raises an interesting question. The Navi tells of an infestation of locusts in the Land of Israel, during the time of the prophet Yoel. The Navi describes it as greater than any previous infestation or any that would occur in the future.[1] This seems to clearly contradict our passage. Our passage asserts that the plague in Egypt was the greatest infestation.

Rashi answers his question with a simple distinction. The plague in Egypt involved the infestation of a single species of locust. The plague of Yoel involved a combination of species. Both statements are true. The plague in Egypt was the greatest infestation by a single species. The plague described in Yoel was the greatest infestation involving a combination of species.[2]

Rabbaynu Chananel offers a different solution to Rashi's question. Essentially, he argues that the passage is merely asserting that no equivalent plague ever occurred in Egypt. However, our pasuk does not claim that greater infestations would not occur elsewhere in the world. The plague of Yoel's time occurred in the Land of Israel. This resolves the contradiction. Rabbaynu Chananel adds that Egypt's climate does not favor locusts. They are rarely found in Egypt. Therefore, a major infestation is remarkably out of the ordinary.[3]

Nachmanides offers a third answer. His explanation is the simplest. He explains that our pasuk merely states that no natural infestation ever occurred that can be compared to this plague. The passage is not comparing this infestation to other miraculous plagues. The plague of Yoel's time was a punishment. By definition, a punishment is an act of divine intervention and therefore, it is a miracle. The Chumash is not comparing the Egyptian infestation to other miraculous infestations.[4]

What is the basis for this dispute between the commentaries? It seems that each answer suggests

a different approach to understanding the intended message of our passage. In order to understand the dispute, we must identify these various interpretations of the pasuk.

As mentioned above, Nachmanides offers the simplest explanation of the Torah's claim. Also, he seems to adopt the most obvious understanding of the pasuk's intended message. According to the Nachmanides, the pasuk is providing the evidence that the plague was a miracle. The infestation can be judged as miraculous if it exceeded the norm. In other words, if no natural explanation of the infestation is plausible, it is obviously a miracle. The pasuk asserts that this infestation was of tremendous magnitude. The magnitude could not have been the result of normal causes. Therefore, it could only be a miracle!

According to Rabbaynu Chananel, the pasuk has a



deeper message. The infestation was far greater than any that had ever occurred in Egypt. It was beyond the experience of the Egyptians. The Torah is telling us that the plague was specifically designed to impress the Egyptians. In order to impress the Egyptians, their experience and their assessment were essential. It was important for the Egyptians to appreciate that a miracle was occurring. Rabbaynu Chananel's further comments confirm this interpretation. Locusts were uncommon in Egypt. Therefore, a plague of locusts had a special significance to the Egyptians.

Rashi sees a different message in the passage. The pasuk is stressing the degree of divine intervention implied by the plague. Beyond communicating that the plague was miraculous, the pasuk stresses the magnitude of the miracle. The plague in Egypt involved a single, specific species. Other similar species of locust did not participate in the plague. This demonstrates the high degree of providence involved in the event. An example will help illustrate this concept. Assume there are five locusts sitting in the grass. Suddenly, a strong wind blows. We can expect all five locusts to be snatched up by the wind and delivered to a new location. If the five locusts are members of different species, they will still share the single experience of being swept up by the wind. Imagine only one of the locusts is swept up by the wind. The other four are members of another species. They are unaffected by the wind. Such a phenomenon would clearly involve some sort of unusual intervention. This example exactly

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describes the plague experienced by the Egyptians. One species reacted to the stimulus and infested Egypt. Other similar species remained undisturbed. This demonstrated the high degree on providence involved in the plague.

Bnai Yisrael Left Egypt with the Wealth of Their Masters

"Speak now into the ears of the nation. And they should borrow, every man from his neighbor and every woman from her neighbor, silver vessels and gold vessels." (Shemot 11:2)

Why did Hashem command Moshe to instruct the people to borrow from their Egyptian neighbors? Rashi explains that Hashem had promised Avraham that his descendants would experience four-hundred years of exile and affliction. At the end of this period they would be redeemed and leave the land of their exile with great wealth. The first portion of this promise had been fulfilled. Bnai Yisrael had experienced the bondage of Egypt. Now was the moment for the realization of the second portion of Avraham's prophecy. The gold and silver that Bnai Yisrael would take from the Egyptians would fulfill the promise of great wealth.[5]

Rashi's comments explain Hashem's command. However, these comments raise a related question. Why, in the first instance, did Hashem promise Avraham that his descendants would amass wealth?

Rashi, in commenting on the promise made to Avraham, notes that the promise was fulfilled with the despoiling of Egypt. Rashi stresses the loss of the Egyptians, not only the gain of the Jews. This perhaps implies that the plundering of Egypt was not only intended as a repayment to Bnai Yisrael. It was also a punishment of the Egyptians. The message in Hashem's promise was that Avraham's descendants would be tormented but ultimately the wicked would be judged. The tormentors would be deprived of the wealth they had gained through the exploitation of Bnai Yisrael.[6]

Gershonides seems to indicate another possibility. Hashem was communicating to Avraham the miraculous nature of the promised redemption. Slaves sometimes achieve emancipation through the gradual enlightenment of their masters or through upheaval or uprising. However, the masters do not suddenly transfer their wealth to their former servants. This sudden reversal in the relative economic conditions of the masters and slaves is an expression of providence. Hashem promised Avraham that His intervention would not be subtle or hidden. Providence would be clearly

revealed. It would be demonstrated through a redemption that would be remarkable and profound.[7]

Rabbaynu David Kimchi suggests that these riches were payment to Bnai Yisrael for their labor on behalf of the Egyptians. Hashem promised Avraham that although his descendants would be afflicted, they would not escape slavery in destitution. They would acquire the wealth of their masters.[8] Based on this explanation, Rav Shlomo Ephraim Luntshitz – Klee Yakar – explains an enigmatic discussion in the Talmud.

Our Sages were concerned with a second aspect of Hashem's instruction to Moshe. 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 that Bnai Yisrael loot Egypt.[9]

It is unusual for Hashem to express Himself in the context of a request. Instead, He commands and instructs. Why then is this strange mode of expression used here? 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 Hashem had not completely fulfilled His covenant. He had subjected the nation to suffering. But He had not provided the promised reward.[10]

This entire discussion is difficult to understand. The Talmud seems concerned with the implications of the omnipotent Hashem making a request rather than a demand. Yet, the response seems inadequate. If Hashem wanted to fulfill His promise to Avraham, let Him command Bnai Yisrael to loot Egypt. Furthermore, should Hashem be preoccupied by human perceptions? He should be true to His commitments regardless of human perceptions? In other words, the important issue in fulfilling His promise is not that He meet Avraham's expectations. The issue is that Hashem has made a promise and He must be true to His word!

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 their attitude. First, they were escaping bondage. A person rescued from such terrible suffering does not think about wealth; freedom is sufficient

achievement. Second, the people knew that they were to travel to the Land of Israel and would be required to transport any possessions they took out of Egypt. Understandably, the people wished to minimize their burden.[11]

In order to appreciate the relevance of these comments to the above problem, these comments must be carefully analyzed. The people did not want the wealth of the Egyptians. Why was Hashem concerned with the fulfillment of His promise that Bnai Israel leave with all of Egypt's wealth? The people's disinterest in the wealth of their masters relieved Him of any obligation to provide them with this wealth. Klee Yakar responds that we must better understand the promise that Hashem 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 compensation to Bnai Yisrael for their labor. This has two implications. First, it was important that Bnai Yisrael receive payment. Second, the compensation must come from those who owed the payment – 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 Hashem use this term? He was acknowledging that the wealth of the Egyptians was intended as compensation. Therefore, the nation had the right to decline this payment. However, declining would create a perception of injustice.

Now Hashem's concern with perceptions is understood. Hashem promised Avraham that Bnai Yisrael would receive compensation. Because the spoils were intended as compensation, Avraham's descendants had the right to refuse them. 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 of injustice, it was essential that Bnai Yisrael confiscate the wealth of the Egyptians.[12]

Declaring the New Moon with the Appearance of Its Crescent

"This month shall be for you the head of the months. It shall be for you the first of the months of the year." (Shemot 12:2)

There is an interesting midrash on the above

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Weekly Parsha

pasuk. An introduction is needed to understand the midrash's comments. The Torah calendar is lunar. The new months are declared on the basis of the appearance of the new moon. Ideally, the new month is declared on the basis of the testimony of two witnesses. These witnesses appear before the high court in Yerushalayim and declare that they have seen the crescent. It is true that the appearance of the new moon can also be calculated mathematically. However, in the ideal situation, the mathematical calculations play only a secondary role. The primary basis means for declaring the new month is through eyewitness testimony.

Today we do not have a high court. Therefore, we cannot determine the advent of a new month on the basis of testimony. Instead, we rely on mathematical calculations. The Jewish calendar is the product of these calculations.

Now, the midrash's comments can be introduced. The midrash explains that Moshe had difficulty understanding this mitzvah. In order to solve Moshe's problem, Hashem showed Moshe the exact crescent shape that must be seen by the witnesses. He explained to Moshe that when this specific shape is seen, the new moon is declared.[13]

The apparent meaning of the midrash is that Moshe could not visualize the amount of a crescent that the witnesses must see. He wanted to know how much of a crescent must be seen in order for the new month to be declared.

This interpretation of the midrash and Moshe's question presents a problem. It seems from this interpretation that the new month cannot be declared on the basis of the appearance of any crescent of minimal size. Hashem instructed Moshe that the crescent must reach a required size before a new month can be declared. However, this interpretation of the midrash cannot be reconciled with actual halachah. According to halachah, any visible crescent – regardless of its size – is adequate. When the witnesses report that they have observed the crescent, the new month is declared. The court does not require the witnesses to report the dimensions of the observed crescent.[14]

In order to understand the meaning of this midrash, another question must be considered. Because there is now no court in Yerushalayim, the new month is determined through mathematical calculations. What event or phenomenon is calculated to determine the new month? In other words, mathematical calculation is used to determine the time that an event occurs and the new month is initiated by this event. What is this crucial event?

The obvious answer is that the new month is defined by the appearance of the new moon. Therefore, the new month begins on the first evening that the new moon appears. The calculations need only determine this date. However, this answer ignores an important problem. In order to understand this problem, some background information is needed.

The moon does not generate its own light. The light of the moon is actually the reflected light of the sun. When the moon and sun are in exact alignment, the illuminated side of the moon faces away from the Earth. As the moon begins to stray from its alignment with the sun and Earth, the crescent of the new moon appears. However, the crescent does not appear immediately. After the disjunction of the alignment of the Earth, sun, and moon, some amount of time is required for the crescent of the new moon to be visible. The amount of time depends on the location of the observer on Earth. In Yerushalayim, six hours are required. Therefore, if the disjunction occurs before midday, the crescent will appear immediately with nightfall. If it occurs after midday, the crescent will not appear directly after nightfall.[15]

Now we can appreciate the problem posed by mathematically calculating the date of the new

month. When does the new month begin? This requires an exact definition. Is the new month initiated by the disjunction of the moon and sun's alignment with Earth or is it determined by the actual appearance of the new crescent in the skies above Yerushalayim?

Maimonides deals with this issue. He explains that the calendar calculations determine the moment that the crescent appears. This answers our question. The new month is not defined by the disjunction of Earth's alignment with sun and moon. It is defined by the appearance of the crescent.[16]

Rav Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik Zt"l explains that this was Moshe's question: How would the precise definition of the new month be determined? Hashem showed Moshe the crescent of the new moon. He told Moshe this crescent must be seen in order to sanctify the new month. Hashem explained that the disjunction of the Earth's alignment with the sun and moon does not create a new month. The actual appearance of the new crescent creates the new month. In other words, He was not telling Moshe that a specific size or dimension was required. He was communicating to Moshe that a visible crescent is required.[17]

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Why is a visible crescent required? In order to answer this question, a well-known principle of halachah must be considered. This principle is that the Torah was not given to "the ministering angels." Loosely explained, the principle dictates that halachic standards correspond with realistic expectations, and that an unrealistic level of exactitude is not appropriate. The following example will illustrate this principle and its application.

It is prohibited to derive personal benefit from hekdesch – the property of the Bait HaMikdash. This law applies to the garments worn by the kohen. However, there is an important exception regarding these garments. The prohibition only applies once the garments are no longer fit for use in the Bait HaMikdash. As long as the garments are fit for use, the prohibition against deriving personal benefit from them does not apply.[18] This is an odd exception. We would expect to be required to treat the serviceable garments with greater deference than those no longer serviceable. Retired garments should have less sanctity than those in use!

The Talmud deals with this issue in Tractate Kiddushin. The Talmud offers an amazing explanation for this law by evoking the principle, "The Torah is not given to the ministering angels".[19] How does the application of this principle explain why the kohens' garments require greater deference when they are rendered unserviceable?

Rashi explains the Talmud's comments. The garments of the kohen are initially sanctified with a qualification. This qualification is that their sanctity is not violated through inadvertent personal use. Why does this qualification accompany the initial sanctification? This is because inadvertent personal use is inevitable. The kohen cannot be expected to immediately remove his garments upon the completion of his sacred tasks. In the intervening time required to remove the garments, it is quite likely that some personal benefit may occur. In order to avoid a violation of the garments' sanctity through such use, the initial sanctification is qualified. Inadvertent personal benefit does not violate the garments' sanctity. Of course, once the garments are retired, this qualification does not apply. Once retired, the sanctity of the garments is violated through any personal use. This is the meaning of the Talmud's comment that the Torah was not created for angels. The Torah was given to human beings. It must conform to reasonable standards of human behavior. The Torah does not legislate laws that are inconsistent with reasonable expectations for human behavior.[20]

This principle – that the Torah was not given to the ministering angels – seems to be a common sense notion. However, the requirement for declaring a new moon provides an important insight into this concept. As explained, the new month does not begin with the actual disjunction. The month begins with the appearance of the crescent. Why is the appearance of the crescent required?

Gershonides offers many reasons for this law, yet we will only consider one. He explains that the Torah was given to be observed at all times. The calculation of the moment of disjunction is difficult to perform. It is not reasonable for a mitzvah to depend upon such a calculation. Gershonides argues that such a dependency on complicated mathematical calculations would create an obligation that many less-educated generations would not be able to perform. Simply expressed, the term mitzvah, or commandment, implies an expectation. The directive will be observed. This expectation implies that the commandment is formulated in a manner that is realistic.[21]

We can now better understand the principle discussed by the Talmud in Tractate Kiddushin. The Torah was not given to the ministering angels. The Torah was given to people. The recipients are expected to observe the commandment of the Torah. Therefore, its mitzvot must be formulated in accordance with reasonable expectations. ■

[1] Sefer Yoel 2:2.

[2] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 10:14.

[3] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 10:14.

[4] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 10:14.

[5] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 11:2.

[6] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 15:14.

[7] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1994), p 116.

[8] Rabbaynu David Kimchi (Radak), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 15:14.

[9] Mesechet Berachot 9b.

[10] Mesechet Berachot 9b.

[11] Mesechet Berachot 9b.

[12] Rav Shlomo Ephraim Luntshitz, Commentary Klee Yakar on Sefer Shemot 11:2.

[13] Michilta, Parshat Bo, Chapter 1.

[14] Rav Yechiel Michal HaLeyve Epstein, Aruch HaShulchan HaAtede, Hilchot Kidush HaChodesh 88:12.

[15] Mesechet Rosh HaShannah 20b.

[16] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Kiddush HaChodesh 7:2. See also Rav Yechiel Michal HaLeyve Epstein, Aruch HaShulchan HaAtede, Hilchot Kidush HaChodesh 88:12.

[17] Rav Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik, Chidushai MaRan RIZ HaLeyve on the Torah, Parshat Bo.

[18] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Me'eilah 6:14.

[19] Mesechet Kiddushin 54a.

[20] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on the Talmud, Mesechet Kiddushin 54a.

[21] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer Shemot, (Mosad HaRav Kook), p 45.

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Weekly Parsha



DON'T FOLLOW THE LEADER

“And the astrologers could not stand before Moses because of the boils; for the boils were on the astrologers and all of Egypt.” (Exodus 9:11)

What is problematic with that statement? It says the astrologers couldn't stand before Moses. Now I wonder: if the issue is that the boils crippled them – which itself sounds odd – of what relevance are the boils on "other" Egyptians? Why mention that "all Egyptians" had boils, if the verse's message concerns only the "astrologers" inability to stand? Furthermore, of what significance is the astrologers' inability to stand before Moses? Let them sit! But "stand" has another meaning...

I believe we are being taught many lessons here. The primary lesson is not concerning the posture of lying mystics...this adds no great wisdom to God's Torah. The real lesson must address the basic theme of the Ten Plagues, as the plague of boils was delivered together with the other nine.

Standing also means to "present" one's self...to appear before others. The astrologers attempted to reproduce the plagues, only to expose their inability to do so. This is significant, since God records their feeble attempts. So significant is this point, that it appears from the very few words concerning boils, that the objective of this plague was precisely to disarm their claims to superiority



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through astrology and magic. Torah verses are selective in their messages, not merely recounting every single historical occurrence. Our verse means to teach that boils purposefully targeted the astrologers.

"And the astrologers could not stand before Moses because of the boils; for the boils were on the astrologers and all of Egypt." This refers not to posture, but to their ability to sustain their dignity...they could not "appear" before Moses who outperformed them. They were ashamed. But why were they any more ashamed during the plague of boils? The answer is the second part of the verse: "...for the boils were on the astrologers and all of Egypt". Here, God hints to us...

Let the Words Talk

What might we derive from this latter half of the verse? These words appear to make a comparison. Both, the astrologers and the Egyptians possessed boils. We must now ask this: what about this comparison prevented the astrologers from appearing before Moses? Why was their "equal" status with all other Egyptians an embarrassment to them? We see the answer quite readily! It was the very equality of their condition to that of all other Egyptians that disarmed their claims to greatness. They were no better! They could not defend themselves from boils. What type of powerful astrologer allows painful blisters to afflict them over days? It is the liar who allows this to happen, since in fact, he has no more defense from boils than any other Egyptian.

It was this diminution of status that was their embarrassment, and why they could not "appear" before Moses.

How God Teaches Us

As a wise Rabbi said, and as I have quoted numerous time, the Torah's words are carefully selected. Our verse is just one example of hundreds of thousands. With His meticulously crafted texts, God provides us with just enough information to discern a problem, and that hint being the very opening to the answer. "Its answer is by its side" is a Rabbinic statement describing this very phenomenon.

Knowledge is endless, but written words are limited. How then can God direct all generations to continuously uncover new truths? If knowledge was limited to the written word, when we concluded any text, we would have nothing more to gain. This is only true of human works. But Divinely inspired works are different. The Torah's and Rabbis' "apparent" inconsistencies, exaggerations and contradictions force the mind into the world of induction and deduction, and other forms of reasoning. Wisdom has a design. It has layers and curtains...where truths are only unveiled with the method of questioning.

We must appreciate the "Chocmas haKasuv", the "wisdom of the written words", and search for God's intended teaching by listening to the words with a great deal of sensitivity and awe. "For God gives wisdom, from His lips [come] knowledge and understanding". (Proverbs 2:6) This verse teaches two matters: 1) to be cognizant that God is the "source" of all wisdom, and 2) that His "lips" offer an additional benefit. "Lips" refer to the written word - that which has been articulated. These articulations or Pasukim can reveal great insights if we spend the necessary time considering the problems in each verse.

God's messages embedded in the Ten Plagues are numerous. Clearly, the act of unveiling the astrologers' lies through boils was precise. For only with a plague that attacks the "body" would all others derive the lesson that one person is equal to another. This explains our previous question why boils caused the astrologers' shame, as opposed to any other plague. For it was boils alone that

made a comparison between all Egyptians, exposing the astrologers as no different. The very fact that God chose to include this comparison as the exclusive effect of this plague, indicates the very purpose of this plague.

But why was the demotion of astrologers so essential that a separate plague was required to address it?

Leaders: For Study, not Deification

From their inability to reproduce the Plague of Lice and from their silence regarding all subsequent plagues, we realize God's primary lesson is, as He said, "There is none like Me in all the land". God wished to educate the Egyptians away from idolatry and astrology. And He did so by showing His exclusive reign over the universe and all of its laws.

We must then ask what more was achieved when demoting the astrologers' status via boils. We already know that astrology is false, since from the Plague of Lice and onwards, the astrologers could not reproduce any miracle brought by Moses. What more was added in boils?

The verse says the astrologers could not stand before Moses. Again, we see a comparison: the astrologers are contrasted against Moses. I believe this lesson is to force us to consider what we must value, and what we must disregard.

Although in a much higher social status than Moses, the astrologers realized their lowly state. It matters none that they were in positions of power, and that Moses and his people were slaves.

Roles must play no role.

Pharaoh and the Egyptians – as well as all other human beings – attribute more credence to a person in a higher status, simply because he or she possesses that status. Even the empowered person dupes himself into accepting his "greater" abilities. The lesson here is to ignore reputations, and view one's actions or ideas alone. The Torah says "do not fear man", and "do not respect the rich or the poor". In all cases, human emotions of favoritism will lead to corruption, not God's justice.

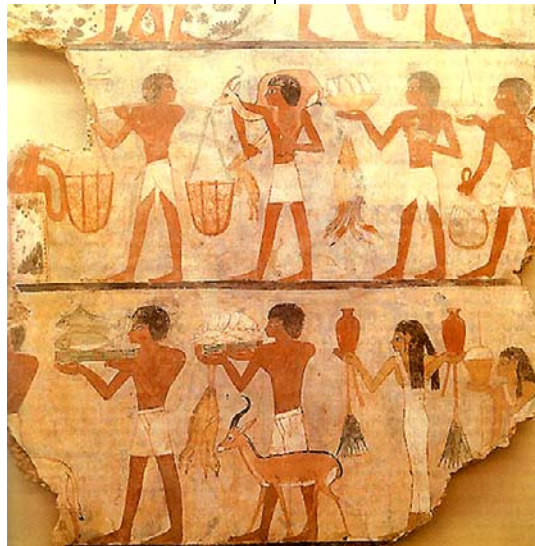
Moses was unaffected by the boils that reached the astrologers. This directed the Egyptians to the realization that although in high office, a person can be a fake. It is clear from all civilizations, that man enjoys subjugation to a director – people want

a leader. But we must be so careful and accept as a leader, only he who is guided by reason and Torah truths. We must be sensitive to this human frailty of insecurity and the desire for a father figure. We are to abandon that need, and mature into intelligent people. In no way should we respect a leader's words or actions alone: they must pass the litmus test of reason and Torah. The leader too must not fall prey to seeking popularity. That must not be his objective. He must lead only with the desire to educate others towards a life of reason, Torah, and ultimately a love of God...not a love of himself. Rabbi Reuven Mann once mentioned the Talmudic portion that says "Any leader whose subjects like him, is doing a poor job". This means, that a true leader admonishes his followers and risks losing his post. He cares more for truth, than for money or fame.

Summary

We conclude that the Torah teaches in a very subtle style. It takes time to master this style, but it can afford us great insights. We learn that every plague offered deeper lessons than meet the eye. And we learn that we are not to follow the leader, but we must use reason to determine truths. Moses, although of a slave population, spoke truth, while the astrologers attested to their lies by their inability to stand before him.

Don't follow the leader. Follow the truth. ■



the Shema and our Unknowable God

the Talmud



Scriptural Philosophy

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

FUNDAMENTALS

Judaism...a religion based on proofs and reason. A religion where each and every law reflects the infinite wisdom of the Creator. All other religions without exception ask mankind to place his intelligence on hold, and blindly accept unreasonable and even harmful tenets. In truth, God's acts cannot be futile. He created human reason so that it be applied...certainly in this most primary area of religiosity: our relationship to the Creator.

At the core of Judaism are the fundamentals contained in the Shema: God's unity, and our obligation to love God in all ways possible. We must treasure truth above all else, and treasure God above all truths. And the Shema teaches how we achieve this: Torah study. For this act of study reveals marvels and continued insights that amaze us. Nothing like wisdom can astonish man and captivates us so completely...what we call enjoyment. With each new insight, we gain another glimpse at God's wisdom.

And as Shema is part of the Torah system, why not start here to increase our appreciation for God's wisdom, and simultaneously give greater meaning to one of the most basic parts of prayer.

An interesting debate is found in Talmud Pesachim 56a. Three views are presented regarding the Shema:

1) One view says we recite "Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokaynu Hashem Echad", but we do not recite "Baruch shame k'vod malchuso l'olam va-ed" (Baruch Shame). Nor do we pause after the Shema. Rather, we continue in one fluid recital from Shema through V'Ahavta Ase.

2) The second view agrees with the first, differing only in that we pause after the Shema – before V'Ahavta Ase – but again we do not recite Baruch Shame.

3) The last view is ours: we recite the Shema, we recite the Baruch Shame in an undertone, and we continue on to V'Ahavta Ase.

From where did the Shema and Baruch Shame originate? The Talmud teaches that at the end of his life, Jacob (Israel) desired to reveal the Messianic Era to his sons, but God hid it from him. Jacob then thought this was due to one of his children harboring an incorrect notion about God. But his sons all responded, "Just as you (Israel) accept the One true God, we too accept this One God", and the sons said this as the original "Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokaynu Hashem Echad", "Listen Israel, God is our God, God is one". Jacob then responded "Baruch shame k'vod malchuso l'olam va-ed", "Blessed is the honored name of His kingdom forever". A number of questions arise...

1) If Jacob said Baruch Shame, why do the first two views above reject our recital? Why aren't we duplicating exactly what occurred?

2) Why does the third view say that it must be recited in an undertone?

3) What is the fundamental meaning of Baruch Shame...what is Jacob trying to say to his sons, and to no other? For if the sons responded properly according to Jacob's inquiry, what more was necessarily added by Jacob saying the Baruch Shame?

Baruch Shame

"Blessed is the honored name of His kingdom forever". This statement is profound. As a wise Rabbi said years ago, man cannot know God, and therefore, we must only refer to Him by name ("shame" in Hebrew). In fact, this Rabbi taught that when we read God's name in the Torah, we are not allowed to pronounce it as it is written, for this would imply we fully understand God, which is impossible: "For man cannot know Me while alive" (Exod. 33:20) was stated by God to Moses, the most perfect intellect. If Moses could not know what God is, no man can. Therefore, we demonstrate our ignorance of God's true nature by abstaining from reading His name as written. By doing so, we demonstrate that we cannot know His true essence (His true name) but we merely refer to Him as "Hashem", which means "the name".

Jacob too possessed this fundamental of man's complete ignorance of God. Therefore, when his sons positively stated they accepted the same "One" God as their father with their recital of the Shema, Jacob responded, "Although you have avoided accepting foreign gods or wrong notions of the true God, you must be careful not to assume this idea that God is one, is "positive" knowledge of God. For all we can know about God is His name, and nothing more."

Thus, Jacob said, "Blessed is the honored name of His kingdom forever". With this statement, Jacob intimated this principle to his sons: we only know His name.

He also taught that God's perfection demands that He is 'eternally' perfect. For that which can be altered from perfect to another variation, is in fact imperfect. "Perfect" by its very definition means it can never be other than perfect. Thus, Jacob's Baruch Shame ends with "forever".

(continued on next page)

(Shema cont. from previous page)

Fundamentals



God is One

When we say God is "one", we rely on a physical sense of "one"...for we have no other choice but to comprehend "one" within the physical world in which we exist. But as God is unrelated to the physical, our concept of "one" cannot truly apply to God. Why then can we say He is one? This is to negate any plurality predicated of God. Meaning, when we say He is "one", this means that He and His abilities are not two or more things...that He and His knowledge are not added or components. For such a structure of "components" is of the physical, created world. And God is not akin at all to His creations. Thus, He has no parts, and He is a complete unity. We cannot imagine this type of "one", since we always associate our ideas to some physical semblance. But as we must know that He is not plural, we say He is one.

This idea that God is not related at all to the physical is a Torah fundamental, and a reasonable idea. For as God created the physical universe, He preceded it, and cannot in any way be subject to its design or characteristics, which only came in to being subsequent to Himself! He controls His creation; He originated all physical objects and their traits like shape, color, density, location, and weight. Thus, these characteristics cannot be attributed to God. And since division too is a physical trait, it cannot be said that God possesses

parts, components, or any change. For this reason, we cannot say "part of God", as many wrongly feel "part of God" is in man. That is a heretical notion. Parts or division can only exist in physical entities, which God is not.

Ramban teaches that the Shema is placed in Deuteronomy after the Ten Commandments, as Shema explains the first command: "I am God". Meaning, God's existence (command #1) is explained as "God being one". That is, God defines His existence as oneness. He is the only existence that is truly one.

Talmudic Debate

So what are our three Rabbis debating above in the very opening of our discussion?

The Talmud says that if the Baruch Shame were recited, it would be adding to what Moses wrote in Deuteronomy, and wrong to do, as we cannot alter the Torah. That is the first and second position: the Baruch Shame is omitted and we read the Shema and the V'Ahavta Ase exactly as in Deuteronomy, one after the other, and without interruption. The talmud then says if we do not recite Baruch Shame, then we reject these words of Jacob. That is position three...our practice. What is the deeper meaning behind the Talmud's concern over following Moses or Jacob'?

The Talmud means to say that both Moses' and Jacob's positions have much merit: Moses' Torah was written word-for-word from God's dictation, and there is no Baruch Shame in the Torah. The sequence of verses is the Shema, then V'Ahavta Ase immediately follows.

The first position is that although now in prayer (Shema) and not engaged in Torah study, we still must duplicate Torah verses exactly. Prayer is not a more lofty act than Torah study, and thus, does not give man license to change the verses. We cannot even pause between the verses according to the first opinion. Furthermore, the Torah's verse may have been based on Jacob and his sons' words. But now that Moses has received God's ordered verses, this structure overrides Jacob's declarations. God imbued Jacob's words with a higher character, and therefore we must not alter God's arrangement. Why? Because His arrangement of Jacob's words offers man greater perfection. So although Jacob said baruch Shame right after his sons said Shema, we do not, since God omitted it from the formal Torah text.

Of course, we have now made the position that we follow quite difficult to justify! How can there be a Talmudic position that suggests that we do not follow God's verses, and interrupt Deuteronomy's sequence with Baruch Shame?



Prayer

Prayer is a human right. As such, it predates Torah, and we see the patriarchs and matriarchs prayed, despite the fact that prayer is not one of the Noachide laws. Thereby, prayer emerges as a unique institution, whose character does not rely on Torah. As one Rabbi put it, its character stems from man's innate right and need as a creature of God, to reach out to God. Viewing prayer as something that originated prior to Torah, we now find support for our third opinion, the very manner in which we recite the Shema: including the Baruch Shame.

Since prayer's original form was pre-Torah, the Talmud views Jacob's formulation including the Baruch Shame, as equally tenable to Moses'. Justification for both formulations of the Shema now emerge – with and without the baruch Shame.

Human perfection is the objective and both Talmudic views embody it. The question is, what framework do we discuss? If we analyze the correctness of Shema through the lens of Torah, then we must side with the first two opinions that prohibit any alteration of the verses. But if we assess prayer through the lens of its original form...how it is truly defined, then this would be modeled after the initial form in which prayer was instituted.

The Talmud's solution that we follow is to accept both views: we recite the Baruch Shame in an undertone, thereby differentiating those words from Moses words so as not to alter his Torah, while also retaining the Baruch Shame so as not to differ with Jacob. ■

Letters



Letters

from our

READERS



Letters

Mesora invites your questions, letters in response to articles, your own thoughts, or your suggestions for the JewishTimes.

"The only poor question is the one not asked."

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Burial

Reader: Genesis 47:29,30: "Bury me not, I pray thee, in Egypt. (Requested Jacob) But when I sleep with my fathers, thou shalt carry me out of Egypt, and bury me in their burying place."

Do we not learn here, that Jacob acknowledges, that after he dies his soul will be already sleeping with his fathers. Yet, he is concerned with where his body will be buried?

Genesis 50: "And Joseph took an oath of the children of Israel, saying: "G-d will surely remember you, and ye shall carry up my bones from hence."

Both of our ancestors were very concerned where they would be buried.

What is so important as to where we are buried? Once we cross over, our bodies become just dust and are likened to withered grass. Since the mass of Jewish immigrants from Russia, Germany, Hungary, and Poland have now filled up the old Jewish cemeteries in Brooklyn and Queens, the new tenants are unable to join their families' resting plots, and are forced to be carried to far out locations in Long Island or New Jersey.

I have been involved in serious discussions with seniors, who are very disturbed about this dilemma. They have expressed feelings of sadness and frustration because they will not be resting nearby their loved predecessors.

Does it really matter, where we are buried, once we are dead? What can I tell them, to offset their sadness? Is there a hidden message in the above Torah passages?

Thank you,
Chaim

Mesora: Your question is on target, as is your observation that Jacob was already "lying with his fathers" prior to burial in Machpelah. For the verse first says "when I lie with my fathers", and this precedes his burial with them.

Our first lesson: one does not require close proximity in death, to share the next world with one's forefathers. Why then did Jacob desire to be buried "with" them?

But this question is not on Jacob alone: why did Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca desire to be buried together? I would suggest as follows...

Jacob realized that once he dies his body would decay, and he would no longer have any use or care about it. If so, he must have desired burial with his ancestors not for himself, but for whom? For all others.

Jacob did not wish his lessons to end, with his life's end. He desired that even after his death to promote true ideas.

Being buried alone would cause the visitor at his grave site to reflect on "him". But that was not his goal...he desired people to reflect on God. The institution initiated by Abraham – the Maaras HaMachpelah – conveys a message which emerges from the philosophy shared by all three couples buried there. The visitor to this mass burial plot reflects not on the individual, since there is more than one person buried here. The visitor reflects instead on what theme bonds these couples. The visitor arrives at the commonality: they all sought to follow God. This I believe is the primary intention that Abraham initiated through a mass grave site. The visitor must reflect on all three couples, and this will inevitably cause the visitor to be inspired not by the individuals, but what they shared: a life devoted to God's will.

Thus, those people with whom you discovered were saddened by the lack of sites close to their deceased loved ones, can be taught to follow Jacob's lessons: 1) there is not proximity to our loved ones after we die; 2) sharing a plot with other Torah followers can inspire the living towards a Torah lifestyle. This would benefit others, whereas being buried with ancestors who may not have been observant does no one any good at all, other than the convenience of visiting two grave sites at once. But of course, if one's relatives were observant, then close burial plots could achieve what Abraham, Isaac and Jacob taught.

Joseph may have desired that his bones be carried out of Egypt for a separate lesson. At the end of genesis, he initially informed the Jews that God will "certainly remember them" and take them out. Perhaps Joseph wished to concretize this reality of the forthcoming Exodus, by commanding that his bones be taken out with the Jews. Such a command conveys to all Jews in Egypt just how convinced Joseph was about the ultimate redemption. This gave hope to the Jews, and perhaps was Joseph's lesson. ■

Plaguing Question

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Did God select all Ten Plagues as an absolute plan...or were the plagues selected and administered based on Pharaoh's actions? Interesting...

We must appreciate that each Torah verse has great meaning. For example, after Pharaoh's astrologers mimicked the plague of blood, Exod. 7:23 says, "And Pharaoh turned and came to his house...". Why must this necessarily be taught? Do I really need to know Pharaoh "turned" and "came to his house"? The answer must be 'yes', since it's in the Torah. But what is the vital lesson of this seemingly unnecessary verse?

Why did the plague of frogs follow the plague of blood? We also learn that the frogs infested every square inch of Egypt, not mentioned by the other plagues. I believe our first verse teaches why frogs had to be sent next.

Rabbi Reuven Mann once taught that Pharaoh's turning aside after the blood plague was an act of denial. Based on this, we can suggest that Pharaoh found enough justification in his astrologer's sleight of hand to reject Moses' miracle of blood. But Pharaoh sensed some truth in Moses, that is why he went home...a place of escape. Therefore, the next plague did not allow Pharaoh any escape, for the Torah teaches that the frogs infested every room of every home. This was in direct response to Pharaoh's action, not necessarily planned from the outset. The frogs emerged from the very location that Pharaoh initially rejected – the Nile – forcing Pharaoh to reconsider

his original dismissal of the plague of blood. The frogs also croaked, and I am sure quite loud. Again, offering Pharaoh no psychological escape from the reality of God's miracles.

If the astrologers were able to duplicate the frogs, why does Pharaoh call Moses to remove them? Ask the astrologers to do so! We must say that Pharaoh realized a difference in Moses, that only he could remove the frogs. God was teaching Pharaoh that his astrologers were frauds. Eventually, God sent boils to completely eliminate all credibility of the astrologers. But God takes small steps, not deploying a death blow until necessary. God originally desired Pharaoh to use his mind to discern the difference between his fraudulent magicians, and Moses.

This was God's plan: to force Pharaoh – a mystic – to start engaging his mind. For only if Pharaoh would switch gears and "think", would he be able to see the true God, and the nature of Moses' miracles as supreme to his astrologers. Yes, God could have made any miracle He desired that would have been undeniably clear...but that would not engage Pharaoh's mind. Pharaoh would – in such a case – be forced by his emotions to release the Jews, but not to any credit of his intelligence. God wants man to use his mind.

If we allow our ears to become sensitive to every nuance and distinction of the plagues' descriptions, we will continue to uncover more hints like these, and a greater appreciation for God's ways. ■

