

JewishTimes

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Hebrew Bible

Ishmael MAN VS. GOD

The Only Version with God's Clues



Bible's Hidden Messages:

THE 10 PLAGUES

God's details clue us in to purposes for each one

R. MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Moses' Staff

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R. MOSHE BEN-CHAIM
& DANI ROTH

Dim Lights

SETBACKS BEFORE SALVATION

RABBI REUVEN MANN

LETTERS

Love God: Head or Heart? Mysticism: Any Truth?

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LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Loving God: With Heart or Head?

FRIEND: If we know that thought comes from our head and not our heart, why does the Torah perpetuate this inconsistency of "loving God with your entire heart and your entire soul?" ["Heart" should not be mentioned].

RABBI: Yes, "thought" is solely a matter of the mind. But "love"—as in love of God—refers not to thought alone, but to devotion. And one can devote himself to God partially, or wholly. To comply with Torah, one must devote himself

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wholly to God with his 2 faculties: his mind, and his emotions. As you rightly cited, the Shema prayer demands we love God with all our emotions (heart), all our soul (mind), and all our “strength” (meaning we devote our utmost—all our strength—with both our emotions and our minds). So, although thought is a function only of mind, love of God—meaning devotion—is achievable with our minds as well as our emotions. Full dedication to God via mind means we exert our thinking to arrive at a clear and conclusive understanding of His will for man. We toil in Torah to uncover the beautifully-formulated halachic structures of Jewish law and Talmud. We delve into philosophy to arrive at truths. Over time, our mental knowledge grows, followed by an emotional appreciation for truth. Our emotions follow our minds, as God designed man to be more impressed with truth than with desires. As our minds see truth and attach to it, we also love God’s truths with our emotions. ■

Mysticism: Forbidden Knowledge?

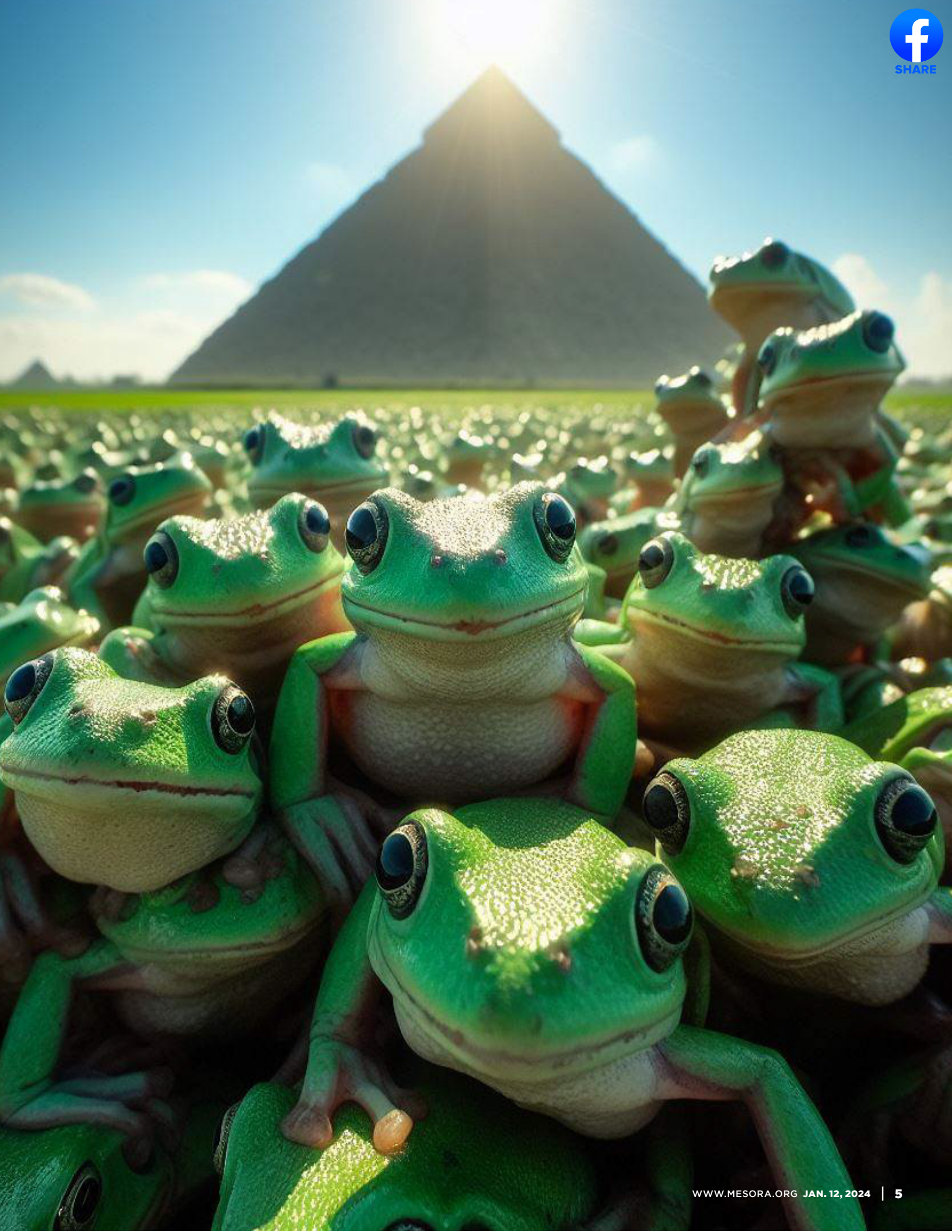
RABBI: A recent Torah website posted an essay entitled, “Divine Wisdom Over Divination: The Jewish Stance on Necromancy and Forbidden Knowledge.” This title misleads, as it suggests that what is forbidden to a Torah follower contains “real knowledge,” albeit forbidden knowledge.

But our great sages say otherwise:

“Those with empty brains say ‘Were it not that fortune tellers and magicians were true, the Torah would not prohibit them.’ But I (Ibn Ezra) say just the opposite of their words, because the Torah doesn’t prohibit that which is true, but it prohibits that which is false. And the proof is the prohibition on idols and statues” (Ibn Ezra, Lev. 19:31).

Thus, Ibn Ezra discounts as false all mystical matters: magic, necromancy, astrology, idolatry, superstition, omens and the like...explaining why God prohibited them. God wants man to follow what is real and true, and reject what is fantasy and false. And Ibn Ezra is right: none of these practices or beliefs have ever been witnessed by our senses or confirmed by the mind, which are precisely Maimonides’ words to the people of Marseilles: “One must accept as truth, only 1 of 3 matters: matters witnessed by the senses, matters dictated by the mind, and matters based on the Torah.” As all these beliefs mentioned herein comply with none of these three criteria, belief in any of them violates God’s will and reality.

God granted man physical senses, and the mind, precisely to determine what is real and what is not. God wants man to have a category of disbelief in all that does not comply with the senses and the mind. And when our senses do not detect a claimed phenomenon (viz., ghosts), or our mind says a claim is false (matter creates itself), God desires we reject such notions as false. ■



Hidden Messages The 10 Plagues

R. MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Ibn Ezra directs our attention to the performers of the Ten Plagues (Exod. 8:12):

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

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Ibn Ezra catches our attention by his first word, “Know,” urging us to think more into this commentary than others. What here is of such significance? Ibn Ezra does not simply list dry statistics, but directs us towards important principles. Beginning with the word “Know,” Ibn Ezra is teaching an important lesson.

Each of the Ten Plagues was a tool to teach Egypt and the world the following: 1) Aaron and Moses were each assigned 3 specific plagues each, in the lower and higher realms respectively, 2) the staff was absent in certain miracles, 3) Moses joined with Aaron in a single plague of boils, 4) God distinguished (v'hifla, v'hiflaisi) between Egypt and the Jews through two plagues, in which no staff was used, and which was placed in the center of the series of plagues. These 2 plagues were also not performed by Moses or Aaron, but by God alone, as the verses says, “And God performed” (Exod 8:20, 9:6).

In his Laws of Idolatry, 1:1, Maimonides teaches that early man already began projecting greatness onto the heavenly bodies. Man erred by thinking the planets, stars and spheres “minister before God.” Man erred a second time assuming that by such ministering service to God, by association with God, the heavenly spheres too are worthy of man’s honor. Eventually, man’s corrupt thinking—and sins—increased, as he replaced simple honor of stars with worship of them as deities, until God was no longer recognized.

Star worship reveals man’s false estimation that the heavens deserve to be worshipped. Man feared not only the spheres, but also the heavens. Jeremiah 10:2-3 reads, “So says God, ‘To the ways of the nations do not learn, and from the signs of the heavens do not fear, because from them the nations fear. Because the statutes of the peoples are false, because a tree from the forest they cut, fashioned by an artisan with an adze.’” Jeremiah teaches that man did in fact fear the heavens. But their fear stemmed from a false projection, not reality. Jeremiah’s

lesson is insightful: he equates the fear of heavens with the idolatrous practice of prostrating to wooden idols. He wished to teach that the heavens do not hold any greater powers than wooden sculptures. Man’s idolatrous emotions project the same imagined authority onto both heaven and trees (wood). But the underlying message is that man fears the skies, as Maimonides taught above. Based on man’s first error that God occupies space and “lives in the skies,” man erred again, ascribing greatness to the spheres and stars that are assumed to be “in close proximity” to God and minister to Him.

Heaven vs. Earth

Egypt accepted the primitive view of the heavens as determining man’s fate. God corrected 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 discounted Egypt’s dangerous esteem of the heavens. God showed that the only difference between the heavens and Earth is the level of understanding required to comprehend their natures, as the wiser man—Moses—addressed the heavenly plagues, and Aaron addressed the earthly plagues. Laws control both realms, and both could be understood. Understanding a phenomenon removes one’s false, mystical estimations. Realizing that all corners of the natural world—including the heavens—are “guided,” means they are subordinate to something greater: God. These realms do not “control,” but are “controlled,” teaching the Egyptians that their views were false.

The Egyptians erred by assuming that the heavens were a governing and mystical realm. God rejected their assumed divine grandeur. God did so in two ways: 1) by showing the heavens’ subordination to a Higher will, God demoted heaven’s status from the divine to the mundane, and, 2) by aligning the plagues with Moses’ and Aaron’s participation, Egypt would understand that not only are the heaven’s not divine, but they share the



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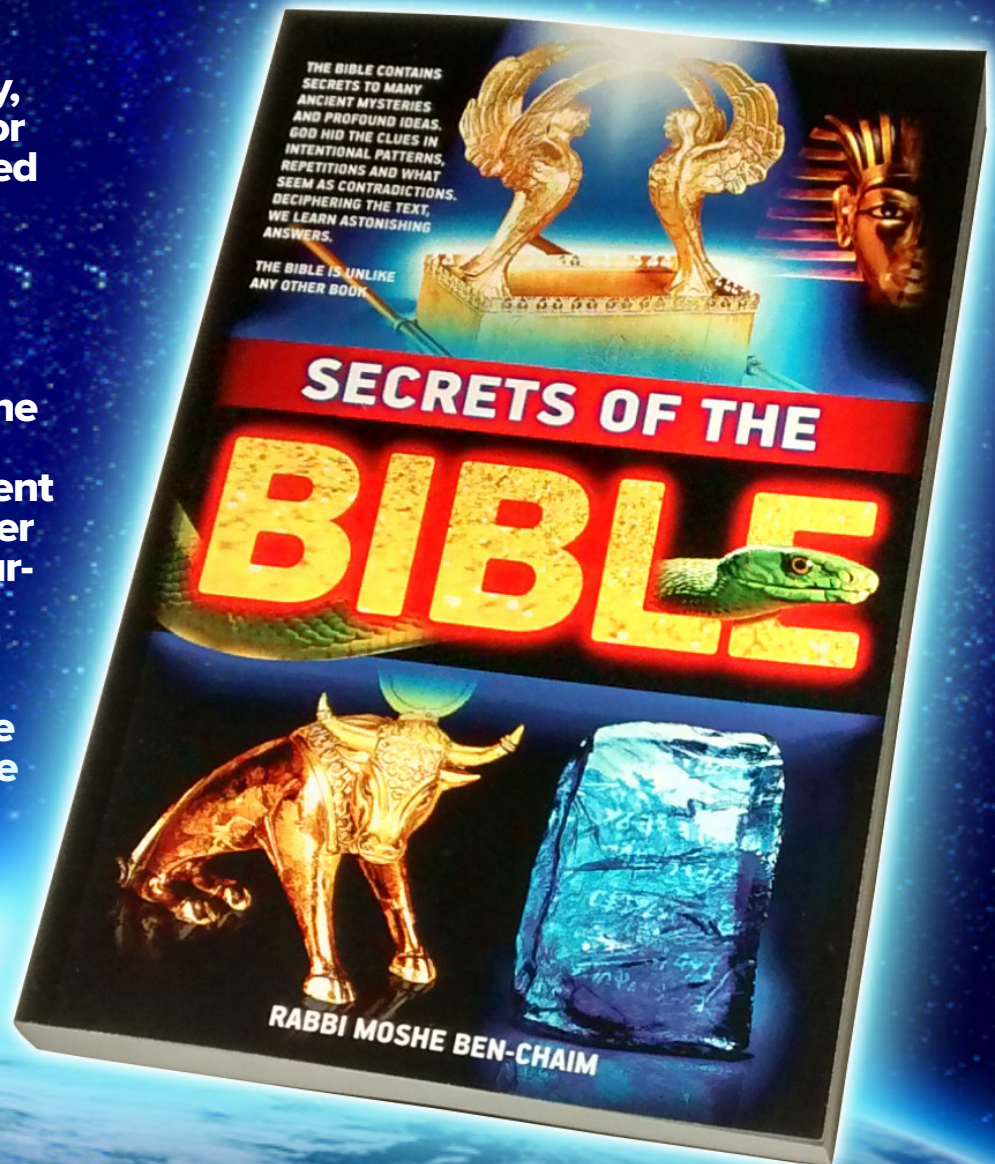
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status as created and subordinate entities. Additionally, Moses and Aaron each performed three miracles independently to equate heaven and earth, dispelling a false supremacy of heaven and meteorological phenomena. Hopefully, the Egyptians would comprehend that both heaven and Earth are equally under God's control, as Jeremiah taught, and that neither one is greater or divine. Egypt would then realize that something higher was responsible for all creation. God wanted the good for the Egyptians. The good means knowledge of what is true. As Torah says with regards to these plagues, "in order that they tell of My name in the whole world" (Exod. 9:16).

Deified Heavens

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—believed to be controlled by Egypt's god "Shu"—was also a heavenly phenomenon, 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, and thus control over their sun god "Ra." Weather, the atmosphere and outer space were all shown as false deities and under the exclusive control of Israel's God. Additionally, the plague of "darkness" had one other facet: it was palpable, perhaps to show that it was not a simple solar eclipse.

Justice is God's Alone

Ibn Ezra noted 2 plagues—the attacking animal mixture and livestock deaths—where no staff was used, meaning that man was absent. These 2 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..." and Exod. 9:4, "And God will distinguish between the cattle of Israel and the cattle of Egypt, and nothing will die of the Israelites." What is the purpose of distinguishing Egypt from Israel? And why did God restrict Moses and Aaron's involvement in these 2 plagues, performing them Himself? And primarily, we must understand the unique nature of these 2 plagues.

Distinguishing Egypt from the Jews by afflicting Egypt alone with these 2 plagues expressed God's system of reward and punishment: "justice." God performed these 2 plagues Himself as administering justice is exclusively God's domain. Therefore, Moses and Aaron could not be involved.

Animal mixtures attacking Egypt intended to reject animal deities and their favoring of Egyptians. With this plague, God administered justice regarding Egypt's view of God: God does not have intermediaries (animals).

God's next plague was killing Egyptian livestock, also a judgment through reward and punishment, but here addressing God's providence, and not who God is as a deity. Thus, with these two plagues God rejected Egyptian's view of deities, and of providence.

The Egyptians thought that to please their gods was man's correct obligation; an expression of a child/parent relationship. How would such an infantile idea be corrected in order to teach God's true system? By Egypt witnessing punitive measures only on their "side of the river," they were awakened to a new idea: objective morality. They were held accountable. They also realized something even more essential: their relationship to their gods was one where their gods benefited from man's actions. Egypt felt that their gods need man to serve their needs, which were projections of man's own needs. But Judaism teaches that relating to God is not for God, but truly only for man. God does not need man. Man cannot affect God, as if God does not previously know our actions. Man must do that which is proper for himself, and if he

does not, he will not only be punished, but he will lose the true good for himself. The Egyptian's exclusive receipt of these two plagues—a system of "reward and punishment"—awoke them to a realization that service of God means not catering to a god's needs, but rather, an alignment with proper ideals and morality. This is a drastic difference from Egypt's primitive notion of worship and pleasing their gods.

Simultaneously, these two plagues attacked the very core of Egyptian gods: animals. Their own animals died, and then, wild animals attacked them. It was a devastating blow to their esteemed deities. Their deification of animal gods was destroyed. Pharaoh's response (Exod. 8:21), "sacrifice to your God" confirms his lowered estimation of animals, to the point that he encourages Moses to slaughter them, and to do so to his God. In other cases, Pharaoh does gesture to free the Jews, but only here in connection with the animal plagues does Pharaoh say, "sacrifice to your God." Torah includes these words of Pharaoh to inform us that the plague had the desired effect on Pharaoh. God understands what will affect man, and so it does. The Egyptians were all the more confused when they saw that Israel was not affected, even though they did not serve animals. In Exod. 9:7, Pharaoh himself sends messengers to see if Israel was harmed. This plague of the animal's death concerned him greatly.

God displayed His control of the complete universe: the first three plagues showed His control of the Earth, the last three over the heavens, and the middle three displayed His control over man, meaning an expression of justice: only Egypt's population was attacked by animals, only their herds were killed, and their astrologers were exposed as charlatans when they could not remove boils from their own bodies, just like average Egyptians.

Moses, Aaron and the staff are not employed in the 2 plagues, since these

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were more clearly God's measures of justice, distinguishing Egypt from Israel as the verses state. As such, human participation through directing these plagues (the staff) would suggest God does not exact justice alone. Therefore, God did not instruct Moses or Aaron to employ the staff. God must be viewed as the only one who determines man's justice.

An additional reason suggests itself why these two animal plagues were 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 teaches this lesson, as nothing was smitten to bring on these plagues.

I heard another explanation for the use of the staff. Its presence was to remove any divinity projected by Egypt onto Moses and Aaron, lest onlookers falsely believe these two mortals possessed some powers. The staff might have been employed as a redirecting agent, a pointer. By seeing the staff incorporated into the miracles, Moses' and Aaron's significance was diluted in Egypt's eyes. But wouldn't people then believe the staff to have those powers? I believe for fear of this erroneous notion, God created a miracle where the staff itself turned into a snake. This was to show that it too was under the control of God. Had there been no use of a staff, focus would have remained on the announcers of the plagues (Moses and Aaron) thereby deifying man, not God. But I feel the first possibility is most correct, i.e., that God must be viewed as the sole cause of human justice.

Why did the plague of boils require Moses and Aaron to work together? Jessie Fischbein taught that just as Moses and Aaron addressed the higher and lower forms of nature in their respective plagues, the plague of boils executed by both Moses and Aaron included the higher and lower matter: ashes from Earth, and they were commanded to be thrown towards the heavens (Exod. 9:8). Her parallel



revealed another facet of the boils, as God's plagues contain many strata of insights. I believe the boils' combination of realms was to teach that heaven and Earth do not operate in two unrelated systems. The very act of throwing ashes towards the heavens teaches that both Earth (ash) and heaven (air) work together. This was a necessary lesson in the reduction of the heaven's exaggerated status. By showing this further idea that the heavens participate in earthly phenomena, the heavens' false, divine status was stripped that much further. Just as his subjects will view a king who spends time with commoners in a less regal light, so too the heavens now lost their reputation by participating in earthly matters. Moses could have collected the ashes himself, but by working with Aaron, together, they underlined this point.

Why are the two animal-related plagues placed in the middle of the series of the Ten Plagues? Perhaps, as these plagues specifically intended to distinguish Egypt from Israel, the

evildoers from the victims, this theme of "justice" is placed smack in the middle of the set of 10 Plagues. Thereby, justice emerges as a highlighted message of all the plagues. A story or an awards dinner does not commence with the primary plot or the guest of honor...in both, they are placed at the midway point. Here too, perhaps God placed His plagues of justice in the midway point of all the plagues, to underline the theme that all the plagues were in fact an expression of justice, not viciousness.

We now appreciate Ibn Ezra's identification of the 10 Plagues' clues, and his message that we "know" their precise design. He means that God is sharing much wisdom with His 10 warnings to Egypt, and that much analysis is essential to unveil God's many lessons, if we are to "know" their meaning. ■



“The staff created in the twilight [of the first Friday] was handed down to Adam in Eden, and Adam handed it to Chanoch, and Chanoch handed it to Shame, and Shame handed it to Abraham, and Abraham handed it to Isaac, and Isaac handed it to Jacob, and Jacob brought it to Egypt, and [in] Egypt [he] handed it to Joseph. And when Joseph died, his entire household took it and placed it in Pharaoh’s palace.

And Jethro was one of Pharaoh’s astrologers and he saw the staff and coveted it in his heart. And he took it and brought it, and planted in his garden, but he could not approach it, until Moses came to the land of Midian and went into the garden of Jethro’s house, and saw the staff and read the letters which were on it, and he stretched out his hand and took it.

Jethro saw this and said, ‘This is the man who will redeem Israel from Egypt,’ therefore Zipporah his daughter he gave to him as a wife, as it is said, ‘And Moses was pleased...’

And it was with that staff that Moses shepherded and lead the sheep of Jethro for 40 years, and the beasts of the field did not consume them, and the flock proliferated a lot, as Scripture says, ‘like holy lambs’.”

The level of God’s Torah (Bible) brilliance is astonishing. Even the Rabbis are lightyears ahead of us in their wisdom. But not only are they wise in their ideas, but in their abilities to script allegories and write riddles.

At the burning bush, God tells Moses the Jews will believe God designated Moses as His emissary. Moses disagrees, saying, “They will not believe me...(Exod. 4:1).” In response, God gives Moses three signs as proof. The first sign is the staff that turns into a snake. A few verses later God tells Moses, “And take this staff in your hand with which you will perform the miracles (Exod. 4:17).” On this verse the Rabbis scripted a medrash (allegory) containing profound but hidden meanings:

There is much detail in this riddle; each detail offering additional insight.

The questions:

What was the vital nature of this staff?

Why was it created at twilight?”

What is the idea of it being handed down; why not simply give it to Moses at the appropriate time?

Why were these men — and not others — the one’s who passed down the staff?

Why did Joseph’s household place it in Pharaoh’s palace, instead of keeping it?

Why did Jethro covet the staff?

What is the meaning of Jethro “placing it in his garden?”

If Jethro could take the staff out of

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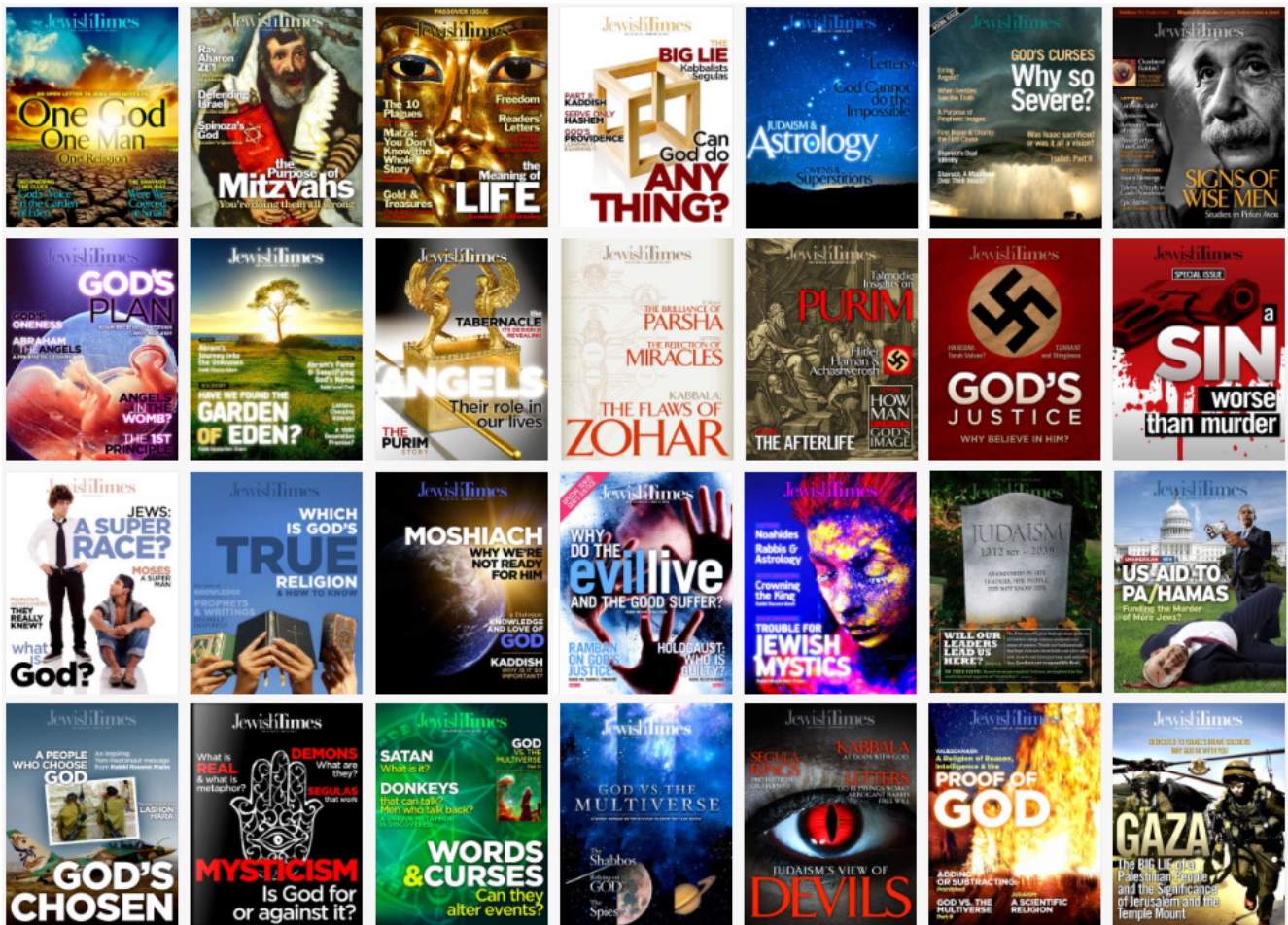
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Pharaoh's palace, what is meant by "he could not approach it?" He already carried it from Egypt to Midian!

What is meant by Moses entering Jethro's garden, reading the letters, and taking the staff?

How does this qualify Moses to emancipate the Jews?

Finally, what does the staff have to do with the flock going unharmed and proliferating?

What's the key that unlocks this midrash (i.e., from which clue do we start)?

There's much talk about the men who passed down the staff, perhaps intentionally elaborated upon so as to focus us. Once in focus, the Rabbis scripted a contrasting point: Jethro could not approach the staff, but all these others could.

The Rabbis are directing us to a distinction between Jethro and the patriarchs. The patriarchs passed down "something" (the staff is a metaphor) but Jethro was alienated from it. Another clue to the staff's meaning is that the Jews no longer possessed it after Joseph died. And this had something to do with Egypt's leadership (Pharaoh's palace).

Jethro coveted the staff, i.e., something pertaining to the Jews. But all Jethro knew at that point was the Jews were in bondage, and they proliferated. Typically, an oppressed people do not thrive, but the Torah teaches "as they were oppressed, so they proliferated (Exod. 1:12)." This was unnatural. Interestingly, the very staff was unnatural: it was an inanimate object that converted into a living animal. These are the keys...

The Medrash Deciphered

"The staff created in the twilight [of the first Friday] was handed down to Adam in Eden, and Adam handed it to Chanoch, and Chanoch handed it to Shame, and Shame handed it to Abraham, and Abraham handed it to Isaac, and Isaac handed it to Jacob, and Jacob brought it to Egypt, and [in] Egypt [he] handed it to Joseph."

On Ethics 5:6, Maimonides teaches that during Creation, God embedded literally all miracles in the substances that would ultimately become miraculous, or "unnatural." And God did this on the respective day of each substance's creation. For example, God built into the Earth on its day of creation, the property to halt its rotation at Joshua's word. When water was created, God

built into its nature the property to pile up in heaps at the parting of the Reed Sea. This is reasonable. For God is above time (He created it) and He need not "wait" until man requires help, that He might only "then" respond a miracle for man. God knows the future, so the concept of responding is inapplicable. He planned the world at Creation including all future concessions (miracles) to save or help man at precise moments. God built all miracles into nature...except 10. 10 miracles were not programmed into creation on the day of the object's creation, but only at the last moment of Creation, at sunset on the primordial Friday. Why?

The reason is because it was impossible. Maimonides teaches that God does not perform the impossible, as this is the meaning of "impossible." God cannot create a square that is a circle. He cannot make my day of birth tomorrow. And this is not a flaw in God. It is His perfection, that He abides by what is true. Reality has a static and real nature.

Now, all miracles except 10 are not contradictions in their substances. Water possesses a property of surface cohesion, that is, a droplet of water seen up close, forms a pile. It is not flat. This property was miraculously exaggerated to "pile up" the Reed Sea waters (Exod. 15:8) making an escape route for the Jews. The Earth's motion is separate from itself, so its cessation of motion so the sun appears to stop, is not a contradiction to its substance. But a staff is inanimate; it cannot also be created as animate. That is a contradiction. Thus, when God created sapphire (the staff was sapphire) He did so as an inanimate mineral. Subsequent to the formation of sapphire as a mineral, God could then embed in a small quantity of sapphire the law that it becomes a snake. But if God created sapphire as a snake in its very formative stage, then all sapphire would be living, and this was not God's will. Again, Miriam's well (the rock) was one of the 10 miracles created at sunset. God desired "rock" to be hard and arid. Had He created rock at its formation as containing water, the Earth would be unstable. Therefore, as God knew the Jews would require water in the desert for 40 years, He selected 1 rock, "after" rock was created as hard and arid", and embedded in that single rock the property of generating moisture. But this could not have been embedded in the species of rock, since God desired the earth be suitable for man to walk upon it and build heavy structures. (CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

The Staff: Literal & Figurative

We now appreciate that Moses' staff embodied God's control over nature: it was both a real staff, and also contained the lesson of Divine Providence (the plagues). But this knowledge that nature can be overridden cannot possibly be seen "from nature." Studying the world, we witness only natural laws. But certain perfected individuals obtained unique knowledge outside of nature...through prophecy. Who were these people? They were Adam through Moses as stated in this list above.

Knowledge of divine providence is what the "staff" means in this allegory. There was no staff that literally "passed through the hands" of these prophets; Moses alone possessed it. The allegory is that certain men transmitted knowledge of providence. Without belonging to this chain of transmission, Jethro "could not approach" this area of knowledge. This explains why he was attracted to it...he saw a people thriving unnaturally, but he could not explain it.

"And when Joseph died, his entire household took it and placed it in Pharaoh's palace."

Through the Jews' sin of idolatry, divine providence ceased to assist them, as if the staff was "placed in Pharaoh's palace." In other words, Divine providence was removed from the Jews due to what was in Pharaoh's palace: a culture of idolatry the Jews followed removing them from God's providence.

"And Jethro was one of Pharaoh's astrologers and he saw the staff and coveted it in his heart. And he took it and brought it, and planted in his garden, but he could not approach it, until Moses came to the land of Midian and went into the garden of Jethro's house, and saw the staff and read the letters which were on it, and he stretched out his hand and took it."

Jethro carrying the staff home yet not able to "approach" it is an intended contradiction to alert the student of its metaphoric value. Jethro's coveting the staff refers to Jethro's intellectual intrigue: "Why do these beaten Jews thrive?" His mind told him matters should be otherwise, but he couldn't "approach" the matter. "Placing the staff in his garden" means that he retained the matter in his mind. (Genesis' account of the "Garden" of Eden parallels man's psyche... "garden" represents the mind)[1].

Moses' reading of the letters on the staff means Moses explained this concept of Divine providence to Jethro. Jethro then realized how the Jews thrived, and how they will be saved; God overrides natural law to relate to the Jews. It is also due to Divine providence over Moses that the natural order of flocks being eaten by predators was suspended by a miracle; as well, they proliferated like "holy lambs," meaning outside of the natural order.

Summary

The staff represents knowledge of Divine providence. It was handed down, meaning, this knowledge required transmission from God to man, and then man-to-man, and could not be obtained through any other means.

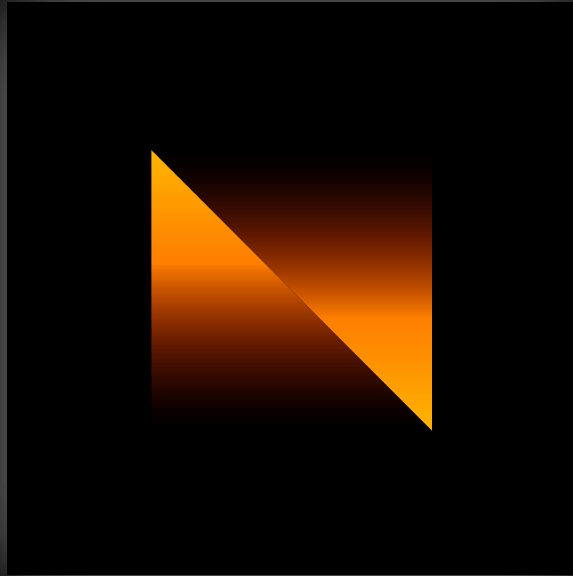
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Addendum

We find support for this theory in Abraham's surprise (Gen. 17:17) that he would be granted a child in his old age. He was a very wise man and assumed nature would be consistent. Ancient philosophers too viewed the world with unchanging laws. ■

[1] See www.mesora.org/genesis2014.html





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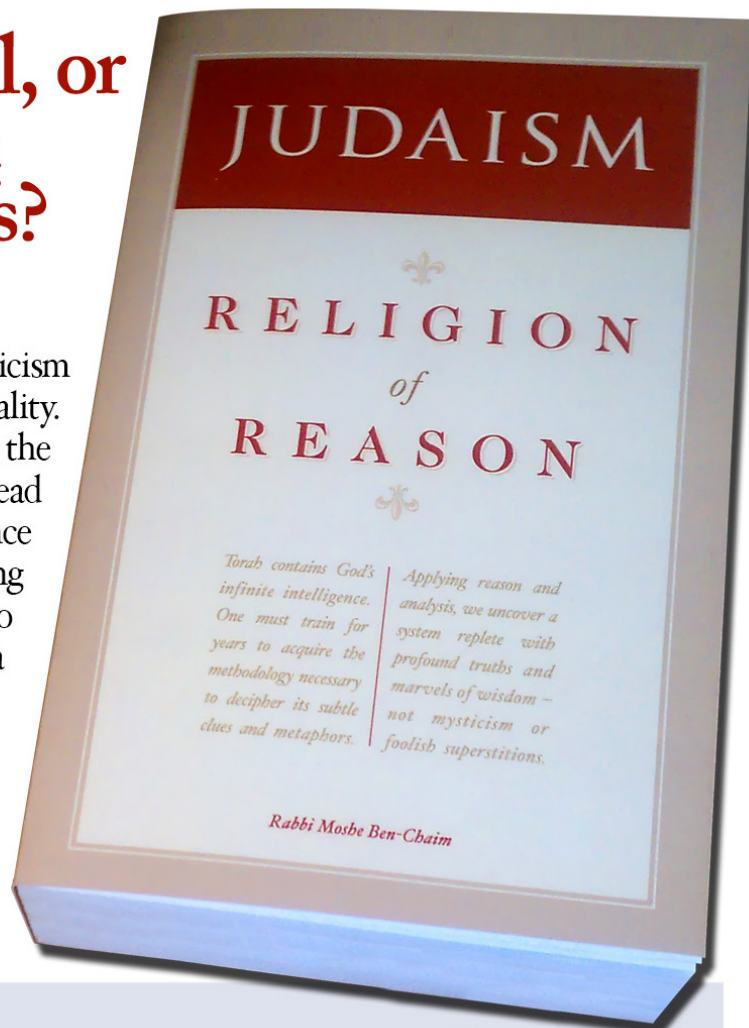
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When Lights are Dim

Rabbi Reuven Mann

This week's Parsha, VaEira, continues the account of Moshe's interaction with Pharaoh. His initial engagement with the ruler had the effect of worsening the plight of the Jewish slaves and undermining his own position with the people whose support he needed. He had complained to Hashem about this unexpected turn of events and G-d had said, "Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh; for with a strong hand, he will send them and with a strong hand he will drive them from his land" (Shemot 6:1).

Apparently, Moshe had been missing something, for he had believed that the inception of his mission meant that the time for the liberation had begun. Why would G-d send him if there was still some suffering that the people had to endure? And what is the meaning of the idea that now the process of redemption could ensue? It seems as if things had to get worse before they could get better. But why?

I have an explanation (which I recently saw in the commentary of Rabbi S.R. Hirsch) that I would like to share. A major purpose of Hashem in redeeming the Jews was to make his Existence known, primarily to the Jews, but to all mankind as well. The Exodus was to serve as the basis for every Jew's acceptance of the "Yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven" i.e., our commitment to keeping the Torah. In order for that to happen, the Jews had to be thoroughly convinced of Pharaoh's total mastery over Egypt and his iron-willed determination to subjugate and enslave them.

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Therefore, if things had begun to improve immediately with Moshe's intervention, the people might have thought that the redemption was brought about by ordinary political means and did not reflect divine intervention. Only when it was absolutely clear that Pharaoh was a complete tyrant who couldn't be defeated by ordinary means could the revelation of Hashem commence.

Hashem now issued new instructions to Moshe as the next phase in the negotiations, the advent of the "plagues", unfolded. Pharaoh was not to be influenced by abstract arguments alone. Moshe would arrange happenings that would convincingly demonstrate the existence of Hashem.

The brothers appeared before Pharaoh, and Aaron cast his staff on the ground, whereupon it turned into a snake. Pharaoh was no fool, and he called upon his magicians to do the same thing. The verse then states; "They cast each one his staff, and they were turned into serpents; and the staff of Aaron swallowed their staffs" (Shemot 7:12). Predictably, "Pharaoh hardened his heart and did not listen to them as Hashem had said" (Shemot 7:13).

It remains to be seen whether Pharaoh was sinful in refusing to be convinced by this performance. After all, his magic workers were also able to turn staffs into snakes, so what did Moshe's gesture accomplish? Well, if we look closely, we can see that the staff of Aaron swallowed the other staffs. Didn't that imply that there was something unique about the staff of Aaron that the staffs of the magicians didn't possess? Yet it doesn't seem that this blatant fact made any impression upon the Egyptian ruler.

We may ask, why did Hashem instruct Moshe to perform a "miracle" before Pharaoh whose purpose was to prove Hashem's existence, but which (seemingly) could be duplicated by his own magicians? Doesn't that defeat the entire purpose?

You may respond that there was something unique that could not be replicated, namely the capacity of Aaron's staff to swallow the serpents. But still, why didn't Hashem provide Moshe with a miracle so profound that the magicians of Pharaoh could not have imitated it, in even the slightest of ways?

We can learn something very important

from this. Hashem wants man to recognize and worship Him. But to do so he must use his mind and the capacity to reason and reach logical conclusions that Hashem has endowed him with. He provides many opportunities for people to accomplish this. G-d reveals Himself in the natural order, which operates according to the greatest wisdom and understanding. If a person were to study nature, he would see that it functions on the basis of a system of laws that exhibits the most profound design and rationality—all of which bespeak a Designer.

Hashem provides man with the necessary tools to discover Him, but man must play his part. He cannot sit back passively and wait for G-d to miraculously plant the awareness of His existence in his brain. If he diligently searches for the Creator in a dedicated energetic way, he will find Him.

In a display of infinite compassion, Hashem sent His greatest prophet to personally instruct Pharaoh about G-d's Will for man. How many people in history have had the opportunity that was within Pharaoh's grasp? But the tyrant's massive ego prevented him from taking advantage of this blessing and learning the truth.

So Aaron cast down his staff, and it changed into a snake. When the magicians seemingly, (I say seemingly because they did not produce an actual live snake, but through sleight of hand made it appear as if they had) did so, Pharaoh should have noticed the unique character of what Aaron had done, and pursued the matter further, until he arrived at the truth. The failure was his.

There is much that we can learn from the account of Moshe's interaction with the Egyptian tyrant. We are instructed to use all of the spiritual gifts Hashem has given us to search for Him in the world He has Created and in the Torah He has Revealed. We cannot be passive or lethargic in this endeavor, for it constitutes our fundamental purpose in life. Man was created to discover his Creator.

And we must internalize the lesson of Moshe's disappointment when initially Pharaoh made the situation worse for the Jews. All of that was to prepare the Jews for the miracle of redemption which was at hand. In response to Moshe's complaint, Hashem reminded him of the example of the Avot (Patriarchs) to whom He had given assurances that were not fulfilled in

their lifetimes. Still, they had absolute faith that whatever G-d had promised would come about.

The pure faith of the Avot is a source of inspiration for us. Sometimes, for no apparent reason, we experience painful and unexpected setbacks, and it may cause us to lose hope. It is especially at those times that we need to renew our trust in the promises of Hashem. If we remain steadfast and do the things we are supposed to do, we may emerge from our trial on a higher level than we were before.

And there are people who are lonely because they can't seem to find that "right one" and establish a meaningful relationship. A great deal of courage is required to stick to one's path and not yield to all the social pressures one faces. Nor should anyone be dismayed by how things "look" or be pressured to settle for a situation that he knows deep down will not be right for him. Every person must live his life according to its own unique timetable and trust his judgment and be uplifted by his authentic Emunah (Faith).

The message of "Now you will see" has profound meaning for Klal Yisrael as well. Sometimes, just when we imagine that the process of redemption has begun, we face an awful setback like the one that occurred on October 7. This need not deter us from our forward movement. Rather, this must confirm for us what Pharaoh's treachery made clear to the slaves in Egypt; the redemption cannot come about without assistance from the One Above.

And this is so true for us. We must engage in the building and settling of the land and its transformation into a leading society in all areas of endeavor. And we must employ all of our resources to produce the best military in order to protect the people and the Holy Land.

But we must never imagine that we can effectuate the true and ultimate Geula (Redemption) on our own. We must renew and repair our relationship with Hashem and strive to reach a higher level in terms of our loyalty to the Torah and compassionate treatment of our fellow Jews and the "righteous of the nations". Our goal is that Israel should become a spiritual beacon of light to all of civilized mankind, to all who seek Hashem in truth.

Shabbat Shalom. ■



Moses' Staff

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim & Dani Roth

Dani Roth asked this excellent question, which I never heard asked even by adults: “Why did Moses need to wave a staff when announcing the plagues? Couldn’t he just announce the plagues, since it was God who really made the plagues?”

Once I heard Dani ask this, I recognized this is an important question. I immediately started thinking and researching the Torah for clues. Dani is correct: God has no needs, so whether Moses waved a staff, or simply announced to Pharaoh the next plague, or even if Moses did nothing, God can cause the plague to start independent of Moses’ actions. Furthermore, what difference is it to Pharaoh and Egypt if they see Moses waving a staff or not? The plague alone is the impressive event.

To answer Dani’s question and learn the significance of Moses’ staff, we must study the first instance of the staff found in Exodus 4:2 during Moses’ first prophecy at the burning bush on Mount Sinai. During this prophecy (which commenced in chap. 3), God outlines His plans to send Moses to address Pharaoh to answer the cries of Abraham’s descendants and deliver them to freedom, also giving them the land of Israel.

Moses was the most humble man on Earth[1], and therefore when God summoned him to lead the Exodus, he replied to God, “Who am I that I should address Pharaoh and take out the Jews?” God then assures Moses He will be with him. Moses then asks what name of God he should use, and God says, “I am, that I am.” God then instructs Moses to gather the Jewish elders and inform them of His plan, and God assures Moses “they will listen to your voice” (Exod. 3:18). God concludes that He knows Egypt’s king will not initially release the Jews, and that He will bring the plagues. Ultimately the Egyptian king will release the Jewish nation, and the Jewish women will ask the Egyptian women for gold, silver and clothes and they will despoil Egypt. This apparently ends God’s address to Moses.

However, we notice that in God’s initial presentation to Moses about how these events will take place, God does not command Moses to use his staff. This is significant.

In the next verse Moses says, “...they [the Jews] will not believe me and they won’t listen to my voice for they will say ‘God did not appear to you’” (Exod. 4:1). Moses says this, despite God’s earlier assurance that the Jews would in fact believe Moses (Exod. 3:18). Some Rabbis[2] critique Moses for this disbelief, while Maimonides teaches[3] Moses was merely asking “how” God intended His plan will cause the Jews to accept Moses’ words, as God stated in verse 3:18. (I will soon propose a third possibility.) Nonetheless, God responds, “What is in your hand?” Moses replied, “A staff.” God told Moses to cast it downward. Moses did so, and it became a snake. Moses then fled from the snake. God then told Moses to grab its tail and it returned to a staff. God explained this miracle was “in order that the Jews will believe that the God of the patriarchs appeared to you” (Ibid 4:5). In 4:17 God commands Moses to use this staff to perform the miracles and the plagues[4]. But we must ask, as God already told Moses “they will listen to your voice” (Exod. 3:18) even without the staff, how can God now say that due to the staff miracle,

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“the Jews will believe that the God of the patriarchs appeared to you”? The Jews’ belief is independent of the staff’s miracle!

God then performed another miracle of Moses’ hand becoming leprous. God continued:

“And if they do not believe you, and they don’t listen to the voice of the first sign, they will listen to the voice of the second sign. And if they don’t believe also to these two signs, and they don’t listen to your voice, then you shall take of the Nile’s water and pour it on dry ground and that water you take from the Nile will become blood on dry land” (Exod. 4:8,9).”

What is this “voice” referred to here? Furthermore, Moses too says “They will not believe me, and they won’t listen to my voice.” What is this “voice” in addition to Moses himself?

Now, while it is true, as Dani’s father said, regardless of Moses’ apparent initiation of the need God could have ultimately planned Moses to use the staff, it is equally tenable that God’s instruction to Moses to use the staff was only a concession to Moses and not part of God’s original plan. A few other considerations lead me to this assumption.

First, after Moses pleads with God to find another emissary and God concedes to allow Aaron to speak instead of Moses, God includes in His concession, “And this staff take in your hand with which you will perform the miracles” (Exod. 4:17).” Why is the command to take the staff joined to Aaron’s appointment? Second, in verse 4:20 the staff is mentioned again, “So Moses took his wife and sons, mounted them on an ass, and went back to the land of Egypt; and Moses took the staff of God with him” (Exod. 4:20) but now it is called the “Staff of God.” Further, “And God said to Moses, when you go and return to Egypt, behold all of the signs which I have placed in your hand” (Exod. 4:21). I will explain...

display His greatness to the Egyptians and the Jews, a humble man would ensure that the focus remains on God, and not allow leadership to corrupt him towards stealing the spotlight as it affects most other leaders.

The purpose of the staff is connected to Moses’ humility: God gave Moses this staff to equip Moses with complete confidence. Holding the staff throughout the signs and plagues—the staff that turned into a snake and back again—Moses was thereby emboldened to carry out God’s mission confidently. He would be able to speak with a “voice” of confidence. Perhaps God grouped together His concession of sending Aaron with His command to take the staff (Ibid 4:17) to say in other words, that both were concessions—for Moses—not for others. And Moses’ reference to the staff in 4:20 as “God’s staff” is another way of saying that Moses viewed the staff as a surety from God: Moses’ sentiment of satisfaction that he will succeed.

This explanation of the staff also explains why the staff was a “response,” and not in God’s original plan: the staff was for Moses, not the Jews, as God already said the Jews will believe Moses “prior” to the staff’s miracle. When God says the staff will be used “in order that the Jews will believe that the God of the patriarchs appeared to you” (Ibid 4:5), God does not mean the staff is what convinces the Jews, for God said “they will listen to your voice” (Exod. 3:18) without the staff. Thus, the staff was to provide Moses with the necessary assurance that “he” feels confident that the Jews will listen. The staff was to embolden Moses, and was unnecessary for the Jews or Pharaoh.

“And God said to Moses, when you go and return to Egypt, behold all of the signs which I have placed in your hand” (Exod. 4:21). Here God refers to the staff as a tangible means for Moses to be mindful of God’s assurance.

Dani, thank you once again for this question that has lead me to learn new Torah ideas. ■

The Purpose of the Staff

Moses was most humble, viewing himself as no one special. He did not wish leadership. Moses’ very humility made him perfect for this role in God’s plan. As God wished to

[1] Numbers 12:3

[2] Rashi, Ramban

[3] Guide for the Perplexed, book I, chap. lxiii

[4] Ibn Ezra, Exod. 4:17

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ISHMAEL

A LIFE OF CONTENTION

R. MOSHE BEN-CHAIM
& DANI ROTH

Abram said to Sarai, “Your maid [Hagar] is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right.” Then Sarai treated her harshly, and she ran away from her. An angel of God found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the road to Shur, and said, “Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?” And she said, “I am running away from my mistress Sarai.” And the angel of God said to her, “Go back to your mistress, and subjugate yourself to her treatment.” And the angel of God said to her, “I will greatly increase your offspring, and they shall be too many to count.” The angel of God said to her further, “Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for God has paid heed to your suffering. He shall be a wild ass of a person: his hand will be against everyone, and everyone’s hand will be against him. He shall dwell alongside of all his kin.” (Gen. 16:6-12).

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God wished to elicit a precise statement from Hagar. God told the angel to ask Hagar concerning 2 matters: 1) her point of departure, and 2) her destination. God also tells the angel to address Hagar as “slave of Sarai.” Meaning, God wants Hagar to recognize that her capacity as a servant still remains, even after she fled. That is, God wants this capacity to remain.

Hagar replies only about her departure; destination is of no concern to her. God wants this emphasized, that Hagar’s state of mind was not a destination, but only to flee Sarai. It is this fleeing from conflict God wishes to highlight. But why?

God tells the angel to tell Hagar to return and submit to Sarah, instead of following her emotions (cowering to fear) by fleeing Sarah’s presence. This must be significant, as God commanded His angel to redirect Hagar back to Abraham’s house. What is the importance?

Subjugation to others often times is distasteful, but it is not necessarily wrong, or evil. Torah permits slavery. But what greater good was served by Hagar returning? It would appear the birth and child rearing by Abram of Ishmael her son was the objective. If so, there must be some significance to Ishmael’s life. But all we are taught of Israel here is “His hand will be against everyone, and everyone’s hand will be against him. He shall dwell alongside of all his kin.” Meaning, he is in conflict with all others, they are intolerant of him, and Ishmael lives isolated, apparently due to his conflict with others.

God does not interfere in free will. When the angel says that Hagar’s son Ishmael will be wild and will raise his hand against everyone, the angel is stating what her son and his descendants will decide of their own free will.

Hagar’s son Ishmael will embody the same incorrect trait Hagar expressed in fleeing Sarai: preoccupation with man over God. His descendants will follow this wrong preoccupation.

However, our purpose is to be preoccupied not with man, but with God, where social status and human acceptance is of no concern. Ishmael will become a lesson to mankind that living emotionally with contention is the incorrect life, as no one will tolerate Ishmael for “everyone’s hand will be against him” in response.

Hagar first caved in to her conflict with Sarai and fled. But she followed God’s angel and exemplified perfection by overcoming her conflict and subjugating herself to God’s will. His will is that Ishmael exist and flourish into a nation that displays the improper life of contending with man, of following petty emotions of rivalry.

God wished Hagar to choose between an emotional life seeking avoidance of interpersonal grief, and between following God’s will of educating mankind. Hagar rose to the occasion, she accepted the grief and subjugation under Sarai, and accepted her son’s role to teach man this very lesson.

“Remove yourself from man, whose soul is in his nostrils, for what [little grandeur] is his value?” (Isaiah 2:22). Here, the prophet appeals to man to abandon seeking approval from mortals, a lifestyle most people find hard to leave. People live primarily for ego satisfaction. Human ego depends on how man thinks his friend views him. Our strivings for beautiful homes, cars, clothes and extravagant affairs are all attempts to give man the imagination of his friends’ approval. Isaiah instructs man to abandon such a life of mere imagination, and turn to Torah and seek God instead, the life that man truly finds deep satisfaction. ■

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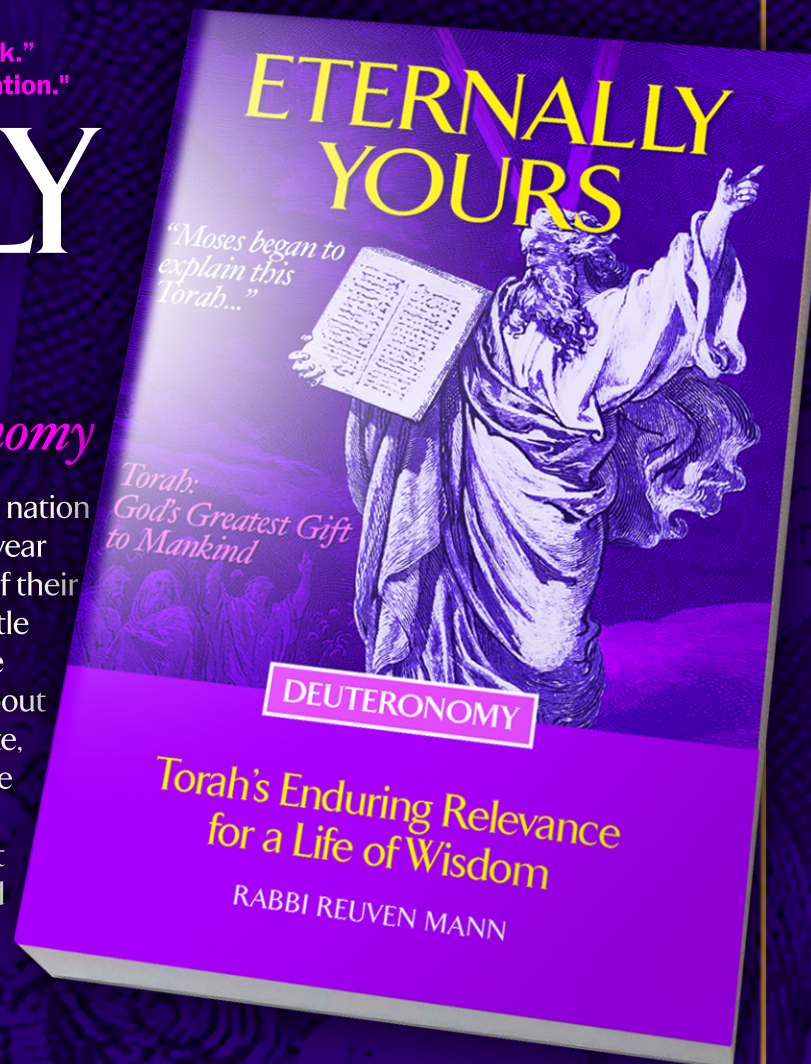
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