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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

SoBFLaBMoBHoLDoF AND FREE WILL

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

There is no discernible pattern in Pharaoh's reactions to the plagues. Let me show you what I mean.

There really are (at least) ELEVEN DEMONSTRATIONS rather than TEN PLAGUES. Mosheh's first appearance before Pharaoh involves his and Aharon's staffs turning into snakes. Everything about that episode formally matches the structure of the plagues; it's just that the audience is limited to the Egyptian Court. So we'll number the elements of the narrative 0-10, with zero being SNAKES, one being BLOOD, and ten being FIRSTBORNS. (Rabbi Yehudah would have generated the acronym: SoBFLaBMoBHoLDoF.)

Here are what I see as the four key elements of the Torah's descriptions of Pharaoh's reactions.

A. What is the root of the verb which describes the effect on Pharaoh's heart?

- 0) **chzk** 1) **chzk** 2) **kbd** 3) **chzk** 4) **kbd** 5) **kbd** 6) **chzk** 7) **chzk** 8) **chzk** 9) **chzk** 10) NA

B. Does Pharaoh's heart *chzk*/*kbd* itself; does Pharaoh *chzk*/*kbd* his own heart; or does G-d *chzk*/*kbd* Pharaoh's heart?

- 0) **itself** 1) **itself** 2) **Pharaoh** 3) **itself** 4) **Pharaoh** 5) **itself** 6) **G-d** 7) **itself** 8) **G-d** 9) **G-d** 10) NA

C. Does the Torah say that Hashem predicted Pharaoh's reaction?

- 0) **Yes** 1) **Yes** 2) **Yes** 3) **Yes** 4) **No** 5) **No** 6) **Yes** 7) **Yes** 8) **No** 9) **No** 10) NA

D. Does Pharaoh at first make an admission of guilt or a concession?

- 0) **No** 1) **No** 2) **Yes** 3) **No** 4) **Yes** 5) **No** 6) **No** 7) **Yes** 8) **Yes** 9) **Yes** 10) NA

The absence of patterns almost jumps off the page even within each variable, let alone if one tries to correlate the variables. What does this mean?

One possibility is that the Torah uses different roots interchangeably, there is no significance to whether a verb is passive or active, and so on. We might call this an Ibn Ezra approach.

A second possibility is that the story is not, in its details, the inexorable unfolding of a Divine plan. G-d and Mosheh and

Aharon don't know in advance how Pharaoh will react to their provocations. Sometimes Pharaoh confounds His and their expectations and sets the whole process back, and they have to retrace the steps of his conditioning.

I have a bias toward the second approach. Let's see what opportunities it opens for interpreting Demonstration 5, the plague of MURRAIN/*dever*. Here's the relevant text (9:4-7):

G-d will distinguish between the cattle of Israel and the cattle of Mitzrayim and there will not die from all that belongs to Israel anything (*davar*).

Hashem set a time, saying:

Tomorrow Hashem will do this thing (*davar*) in the land.

Hashem did this thing (*davar*) on the morrow

All the cattle of Egypt died

but from the cattle of the Children of Israel not one died (*lo meit echad*).

Pharaoh sent

and behold! There did not die from among the cattle of the Children of Israel even one (*ad echad*)

Pharaoh's heart hardened

and he did not send forth the nation.

The psychological difficulty in the passage is evident. Pharaoh sends to verify G-d's prediction that no *davar* belonging to a Jew would die. The report he receives confirms the miracle; *lo meit ad echad*. Yet he does not free the Jews!

Literarily, the best reading would have Pharaoh reaffirming his defiance **because** of the report. But can that make any psychological sense?

The passage has three descriptions of what happened to the Jewish cattle. G-d predicts to Mosheh that no *davar* from among them will die; the narrator confirms that not one (*echad*) among them died; and then Pharaoh receives a report confirming that not even up to one (*ad echad*) among them died. It seems plausible to suggest that the differences among these reports are significant.

I have not however found any explanations of the difference between *davar* and *echad* (other than suggesting that *davar* is a play on the potential cause of death, the murrain/*dever*). But the commentators offer a plethora of explanations for the difference between *echad* and *ad echad*. Most of these assume that *echad* expresses the Divine perspective while *ad echad* expresses Pharaoh's.

Let's start with Shemot Rabbah 11:4.

“What is the meaning of ‘*ad echad*’?

Even a head of cattle belonging half to a nonJew and half to a Jew did not die”.

The semantic claim of this midrash is that *ad echad* means “even less than one”, with *ad* perhaps translated as “approaching”. The sociological framework is fascinating. Jews and Egyptians owned cattle together, as formal partners!

A semantic difficulty is that Shemot 14:28 states that the waters of the Reed Sea covered over the charging Egyptian troops until *ad echad* of them was not left; does this mean that even half-Egyptians died? If yes - patrilineals, matrilineals, or both?

(The same difficulty applies to Judges 4:16, where Sisera's army has not *ad echad* left, and 2 Samuel 17:22, where David's entire entourage escapes across a river.)

Netziv points out that this midrash can explain the continuity of the murrain demonstration. Pharaoh sought a way to avoid facing the implication of the plague's differentiation between Jewish and Egyptian cattle. What if jointly owned cattle survived? Pharaoh could regard them as Egyptian, and thus as evidence that the plague had not gone as Mosheh predicted.

However, Netziv does not agree that *ad echad* includes animals owned by partners. Perhaps the existence of such a partnership would not match his conception of a master-slave society, or perhaps he thought that Pharaoh would understand that Mosheh's prediction would come down on the side of such animals surviving. Netziv suggests instead that *ad echad* included animals that were owned by Egyptians but rented by Jews for their milk or shearings.

Ibn Ezra notes that a midrash to Shemot 14:28 takes *ad echad* in the opposite direction, leaving open the possibility of one survivor – Pharaoh himself. Ibn Ezra rejects this out of hand because Tehillim 106:11 states that “*not echad of them was left over*”, and Tehillim 136:15 states that G-d drowned “*Pharaoh and his soldiers*”.

The midrash might reply that Pharaoh was drowned along with his men, but not drowned to death. But how would it understand *ad echad* in our context? Which animal uniquely survived, and thus justified Pharaoh's disbelief?

Various commentators come up with ways for one Egyptian to have illicitly possessed one animal that G-d considered Jewish, but none of these are compelling.

Malbim takes *ad echad* back the other way. On the basis of Mosheh's prediction, Pharaoh **expected** one animal to survive that did not. Recall the existence of one human being who was

half-Jewish and half-Egyptian; the son of Shelomit bat Divri and the Egyptian man who ends up cursing G-d (Vayikra 24:10-12). Since before Sinai the halakhah used patrilineal descent to determine Jewishness, G-d treated him as Egyptian at this stage, and killed his animal. But Pharaoh regarded him as Jewish, and therefore saw his animal's death as undoing Mosheh's prediction that no Jewish cattle would die.

(We could easily reverse Malbim's argument, and have the animal confound Pharaoh by surviving. But Malbim thinks that Vayikra makes clear that the Jews did not see the man as Jewish without conversion, and he thinks the way to explain that is by saying that matrilineality was the law only for children born post-Sinai. Pharaoh may have used the Nuremberg standard.)

All these approaches beg an important question. They assume that the plague failed to convince Pharaoh because he made an error of fact or law, whereas G-d knows all. But couldn't G-d have solved the problem by acting in accordance with Pharaoh's erroneous assumption, and thus brought the Jews out five plagues earlier? Maybe not. Maybe G-d cannot act dishonestly even for a just end.

Or: Maybe human beings have an infinite capacity to find linguistic loopholes in predictions. No matter how closely G-d tried to match Pharaoh's expectations, he would have found a gap. Whichever way G-d intended, he would have interpreted the facts as defying the prediction.

Ultimately, we are only convinced when we are willing to be convinced. This is true of the Jews as well as Pharaoh.

This seems to me the best explanation of the psychological messiness of the plague narrative. G-d cannot manipulate Pharaoh absolutely, or else He would be able to manipulate us absolutely.

A perfectly linear Exodus narrative would have taught the Jews that G-d's grant of human free will is not sincere. Watching Pharaoh struggle with G-d teaches us instead that He **is** sincere, and that we cannot blame Him for our own choices.

This does not mean that all interpretations are equally likely. Room for interpretation equals room for free will. But we are responsible for our misinterpretations, as Pharaoh was responsible for his. This is the case for both history and halakhah.

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