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PHARAOH'S FREE WILL, AND OURS

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I cannot find any pattern in Pharaoh's reactions to the plagues. Let me show you what I mean, and then we'll talk about whether the absence of any such pattern affects our understanding of the narrative, rather than simply reflecting a lack of imagination on my part.

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 and ten being FIRSTBORNS. (Rabbi Yehudah would have given you 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 condition of his 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 his heart gain strengthen or harden itself, or does he consciously do this, or does G-d do it?
   0. itself 1. itself 2. he 3.itself 4.he 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 clear patterns almost jumps off the page.

What does this mean? One option is that the Torah is written loosely, so that different roots can be used interchangeably, and 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 is that the story is not, in its details, the inexorable unfolding of a Divine plan. G-d and Mosheh and Aharon do not know in advance how Pharaoh will react to their provocations; sometimes he 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. Here's the relevant text (9:4-7):

וְהִפְלָה יְקֹוָק בֵּין מִקְנֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל וּבֵין מִקְנֵה מִצְרָיִם
וְלֹא יָמוּת מִכָּל־לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל דָּבָר׃
וַיָּשֶׂם יְקֹוָק מוֹעֵד לֵאמֹר
מָחָר יַעֲשֶׂה יְקֹוָק הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה בָּאָרֶץ׃
וַיַּעַשׂ יְקֹוָק אֶת־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה מִמָּחֳרָת
וַיָּמָת כָּל מִקְנֵה מִצְרָיִם
וּמִמִּקְנֵה בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא־מֵת אֶחָד׃
וַיִּשְׁלַח פַּרְעֹה
וְהִנֵּה לֹא־מֵת מִמִּקְנֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד־אֶחָד
וַיִּכְבַּד לֵב פַּרְעֹה
וְלֹא שִׁלַּח אֶת־הָעָם׃

G-d will distinguish between the cattle of Israel and the cattle of Mitzrayim
*and nothing (*davar*) from anything belonging to Israel will die.*
Hashem set a time, saying:
Tomorrow Hashem will do this thing in the land.
Hashem did this thing 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 see whether G-d's prediction that not even one Jewish head of cattle would die. The report he receives confirms the miracles. 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 between these reports are significant. And while I have not 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*), the commentaries have a plethora of explanations for the difference between *echad*and *ad echad*, most of which assume that *echad*is the Divine perspective while *ad echad* is Pharaoh's.

Let's start with Shmot Rabbah 11:4. "What is the meaning of '*ad echad*?' Even a head of cattle belonging half to a non-Jew 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." A key difficulty with this midrash is that Shemot 14:28 states that the waters of the Reed Sea covered over the charging Egyptian troops such that *ad echad* of them was not left, and it seems implausible to suggest that the phrase was intended to emphasize that even ambivalent Egyptians died. (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.) Nonetheless, the sociological assumption of the midrash is fascinating. Jews and Egyptians owned cattle together, as formal partners!

Netziv points out that this midrash can be used to explain the continuity of the verse. Pharaoh was looking for a way to avoid facing the implications of the plague. What if there were cattle of ambiguous identity that 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 did 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 therefore suggests that *ad echad* includes animals that were owned by Egyptians but **rented** by Jews for their milk or shearings.

Ibn Ezra notes that a midrash takes *ad echad* in the opposite direction in Shemot 14:28, saying that it leaves 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 presumably contends that Pharaoh was drowned along with his men, but not drowned to death. But what then would *ad echad* mean in our context? Which animal uniquely survived, and thus fooled Pharaoh? Various commentators come up with ways for one Egyptian to have illicitly possessed one animal that G-d considered Jewish, but none of them are compelling.

Malbim takes *ad echad* back the other way. Pharaoh **expected** one animal to survive that did not. There was one human being who was half-Jewish and half-Egyptian; the son of Shlomit bat Divri and an Egyptian man, who ends up cursing G-d (Vayikra 24:10-12). Since before Sinai the halakhah used patrilineal descent, G-d treated him as Egyptian, and killed his animal. But Pharaoh saw 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. But Pharaoh used the Nuremberg standard.)

All these approaches beg an important question. They all 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 assumptions, and thus brought the Jews out five plagues earlier? Maybe not. Maybe G-d cannot act unjustly even for a just end.

Or: Perhaps 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 the gap. Ultimately, we are only convinced when we are willing to be convinced. This of course 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. 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.