

שמות י:יד

ויעל הארבה על כל ארץ מצרים וינח בכל גבול מצרים כבד מאד לפניו לא היה כן ארבה כמהו ואחריו לא יהיה כן:

יואל פרק ב:ב

יום חשך ואפלה יום ענן וערפל כשחר פרש על ההרים עם רב ועצום כמהו לא נהיה מן העולם ואחריו לא יוסף עד שני דור ודור:

אבן כספי לשמות י:יד

"כמוהו" – הטעם ברבוי המספר.

"ואחריו לא יהיה כן" – אא"ע: בדרך נבואה.

ובאמת אין זה טבע מין זה המאמר, אבל הוא בכלל מה שאמרו "דברה תורה בלשון הבאי", כמו שבארו המורה ז"ל.

והנה אמרו על יאשיהו "וכמהו לא היה לפניו מלך אשר שב וכו' ואחריו לא קם כמוהו" – היחשוב אדם שזה נאמר בדקדוק ובצמצום, עד כי שקלו במאזנים כל המלכים העוברים והעתידים?! ועוד, הנה קדם אמרו על חזקיה "ואחריו לא קם כמוהו בכל מלכי יהודה ואשר היו לפניו", ואיך יצדק אמרו על חזקיה "ואחריו לא היה כמהו" אם אמרו על יאשיהו "כמהו לא היה לפניו"? ואם תאמר מצד אמרו על יאשיהו "כמהו לא היה לפניו אשר שב", אין זה טענה כלל, כי לא ספר כלל כי יאשיהו עשה רעה מעולם, אבל תיכף בואו "ויעש הישר בעיני ה'".

ועוד, מה לו לשם יתברך למספר הארבה- להודיענו בצמצום ובדקדוק שבכל זמן הרב העבר וגם העתיד, שהוא אולי לאין תכלית, לא היה ארבה כמו זה, עד שיתכן שמספר הארבה הוא עולה על דרך משל ששים רבוא, וכבר היה או יהיה ארבה שיעלו מספר ששים רבוא חסר אחד, וחלילה שיגיע לששים רבוא בשלימות למען יצדק זה הפסוק?!

ועוד, אלו יכון נותן התורה להודיע לנו זה, היה ראוי שימסור לנו בכתוב מספרם, עד שבהתחדש העתים יום יום ויבא ארבה, נחתור לעמוד על מספרם, למען נדע בחוש ובנסיון כי זה הפסוק צודק. והנה יאמר עוד "לא נשאר ארבה אחד" – היחשוב אדם שזה שלילה מדקדקת בתכלית עד שבכל מצרים, שהיא ארץ גדולה מאד, לא נמצא ארבה אחד באחד מן הנעצוצים?! ומה תכלית לזה הדקדוק? והנה באמת אין כח כללות השלילה יותר מופלג מכח הכללות למחייבת, רצוני תיבת 'כל', וכבר קדם לנו כמה משלים לזה, וההתר לכולם 'דברה תורה לשון הבאי', גם 'דברה תורה כלשון בני אדם', כי גם ההבאי לשון בני אדם, וכן אף אצלנו היום. ולמה אאריך והאמת עד לעצמו.

Exodus 10:14

The locusts went up over all the land of Egypt, and rested within all the boundaries of Egypt, very heavily – before it there had been no [plague of] locusts equivalent to it, and after it there will not be such

Ibn Caspi to Exodus 10:14

“Equivalent to it” – the meaning is in number.

“And afterward there will not be such” –

Ibn Ezra said: This was said prophetically.

But the truth is that this is not the nature of this type of statement, rather it is in the category of the rabbinic statement “The Torah spoke using hyperbole”, as the Guide explained.

Now Scripture says about Yoshiyahu: “And equivalent to him there was no king before him who returned . . . and afterward there arose none equivalent to him” – would any person think that this was written with precision and exactitude, to the point that they weighed in a balance all kings past and future?!

Moreover, Scripture earlier said about Chizkiyah “and after him there arose no one equivalent to him among all the kings of Yehudah, and among those who were before him”, and how can you justify it saying about Chizkiyah “and after him there arose no one equivalent to him” together with it saying about Yoshiyahu “And equivalent to him there was no king before him”?!

If you were to say [that they can be reconciled] by pointing to it saying about Yoshiyahu “And equivalent to him there was no king before him who returned”, this is no argument at all, since it never told at all that Yoshiyahu had ever done anything bad, rather immediately upon his arrival “He did the straight in the eyes of Hashem”.

Moreover, what need does Hashem have to tell us the number of locusts – to tell us with exactitude and precision that in all the extended time both past and future, which perhaps is infinite, there was no [plague of] locusts like this, so that if possibly these locusts amounted for example to six hundred thousand, there might already have been or will be a [plague of] locusts that will amount to six hundred thousand less one, and Heaven forbid that they reach six hundred thousand complete, so that this verse can be justified?!

Moreover, had the Giver of the Torah intended to tell this to us, it would have been appropriate for him to give over the number to us in Scripture, so that as the times change day by day and locusts come, we would endeavor to accurately number them, so that we could now by our sense and by experiment that this verse is justified.

Now see that it says further “not one locust was left over” – would any person think that this is a perfectly precise negative, to the point that in all Egypt, which is a very large land, not one locust was found in one of the bushes! What would be the purpose of this precision?!

Now in truth the power of the general negative is not greater than the power of general positive, by which I mean the word “all”, and we have already given several examples of this, and what releases us to say this about them all is [the rabbinic statement] “The Torah spoke using hyperbole”, also “The Torah spoke using human speech”, because hyperbole is also a form of human speech, as is the case among us today.

But why should I go on at length? when the truth is its own witness.

One of the central contributions of Brisker thought is the concept of the *matir* for mitzvot – the idea that religious acts are Divine property, and therefore cannot be performed without first asking Divine permission, in the same way that eating without first blessing is considered theft.

Now there are times when even a blessing is insufficient to permit eating, say on Yom Kippur, or before praying (unless necessary to enable prayer), because G-d does not allow us to use His property when that would distract us from more immediately necessary tasks. In that context, it can be asked whether we have permission to engage in Talmud Torah with no socially immediate implications while Haiti lies in ruins. Perhaps we only have permission to study the laws of interhuman responsibility in the face of disaster (and ensure that our community sees them as relevant to Gentiles, even Gentiles who subscribe to religions whose metaphysical tenets and worship practices we strongly deprecate), or to study the theology of natural disasters (and ensure that our community does not use the troubles of others to bolster a sense of superiority and spiritual hauteur, or to indulge its baser prejudices). Or perhaps we should spend all our time in prayer rather than study.

I am still too much of a yeshiva bochur to accept these contentions, if not enough of one to dismiss them cavalierly. The circumstances of disaster may generate practical obligations that override “Torah purely for the joy of Torah”, but in the absence of such obligations, our spiritual life and priorities should not be wholly reactive.

That said, it is a particular challenge to study the Plagues of Egypt while Haiti digs out from under an earthquake that can fairly be described as “of Biblical proportions”. I am not bothered by any parallel between them, such that I wonder whether by helping Haiti I’m undoing G-d’s demonstration of power – I prefer to think, following Ramban as I understand him, that the Exodus is not designed to explain the motives of history generally, but rather to explain, via unique example, what G-d thinks ought be the motives for human action in history. But nonetheless the sense of compassion for the Egyptians, which is generally a submerged although certainly significant undercurrent in the Biblical and Rabbinic readings of the Exodus, is legitimately much closer to the surface now than usually.

Ibn Caspi notes that the phrase “of Biblical proportions” might seem problematic, particularly with regard to locusts, as the Plagues are a more compelling demonstration of Divine intervention in history if they were unique individually and not just in the aggregate, and the Torah specifically says that no past or future plague of locusts could match this one. He responds, however, that the verse regarding locusts is mere hyperbole, and that the Torah uses hyperbole as it uses all the other devices of human rhetoric. That hyperbole is a feature of Biblical style is explicitly stated on Tamid 29a regarding the phrase “cities fortified up to the heavens”, but Ibn Caspi makes a strong argument from internal Biblical evidence that this principle applies specifically to claims of historical uniqueness. I’m a little puzzled by his failure to cite Yoel 2:2, which apparently describes a future plague of locusts as the greatest in history, thus apparently contradicting Exodus, but perhaps he did not feel it worthwhile to challenge the popular solution to that contradiction, that Yoel refers to multiple species whereas the Egyptian Plague was of one species alone.

But the real core of his argument is theological – how can anyone claim that the Torah would bother to make an empirical claim about such a trivial issue? Are we to be in agonies of suspense over every future plague of locusts, lest it grow too large and falsify Exodus?

Ibn Caspi himself, of course, is here using exaggeration and other tools rhetorically – for example, by declaring unilaterally upfront that the Torah’s claim of the Plague’s uniqueness is purely numerical, he shortcircuits the easy reply to his second question, that the Torah is making a qualitative claim that, at least once the last survivor of Egypt dies, will not be empirically reviewable. The same circularity applies to his claim that if the Torah had been interested in claiming actual uniqueness, it would have numbered the Egyptian Plague locusts.

Nonetheless, the idea underlying his rhetoric, that it is undignified for the Torah to leave itself open to empirical falsification, at least with regard to facts that are not foundational for its messages, has enduring value, and should be kept in mind in all religion-science issues. I note also that my dear friend R. Yitzchak Blau years ago offered a cogent and compelling corollary with regard to the “Bible Codes”, that G-d would not lower Himself to prove Himself through statistical trivia.

Shabbat Shalom!