

A Taste of Text: Source based learning for Shabbat

This weekly sheet is brought to you by Rabbi Dr. Moshe Freedman of Northwood United Synagogue in conjunction with Shapell's/Darché Noam

PARSHAT VAERA

DVAR TORAH: ELIAHU HANAVI PUNISHED FOR REVEALING SECRET

The Gemara (Bava Metzia 85b) tells us that Eliahu Hanavi used to frequent the beit midrash of Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi. One Rosh Chodesh he was extremely late, and Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi inquired about the cause of Eliahu's lateness. Eliahu's reply was: I had to go to the Cave of the Machpelah, wake up Avraham Avinu, wash his hands, and, after he finished praying, put him back to sleep; then I had to do the same for Yitzchak Avinu, and the same for Yaakov Avinu. By that time it was too late to come.

Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi followed up with a question: Why didn't you wake up all of them together? It only took so long because you had to wait for each one of them to finish davening before you woke up the next. Why couldn't they all pray together? Eliahu's reply was that if Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov would have all prayed together the prayers would have been so powerful that the Mashiach would have been forced to come – but the time for that has not yet come, so I am instructed to wake them separately.

Rabbi Mordechai Eliahu, zt"l (Divrei Mordechai Shemot, pp. 55-56) points out the importance of having all three of the Avot together. Each one of our forefathers developed different qualities, and, as great as each one was, only their combined and unified prayer was able to bring the redemption.

With this he explains a two word comment by Rashi that sparked the interest of a number of the super-commentators. At the beginning of our parshah God says, "Vaera – I appeared," and Rashi adds, "el haavot - to the forefathers," even though the verse clearly continues "to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov." What does Rashi add? Rav Mordechai Eliahu suggests that Rashi here emphasizes the forefathers as a threesome, not just three individual great spiritual figures, but a unified whole to which each contributed their qualities.

But Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi continued and asked another question: Is there anyone in our present world that is similar to them? And Eliahu answered – yes, Rabbi Chiya and his sons. When there was a drought and Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi had to declare a fast day, he kept this in mind and asked Rabbi Chiya and his sons to lead the prayers. When, in Shemoneh Esrei, Rabbi Chiya said the words mashiv haruach – that God causes the wind to blow – a great wind began to blow, and when he said the words morid hagashem – that God brings down the rain – the rain began to fall. But then, when he said the words mechayei hametim – that God revives the dead – the world began to tremble, signaling that the resurrection of the dead was imminent. Then, up in Heaven, the Gemara tells us, a voice on high asked, "Who is revealing heavenly secrets?" And when it was revealed that Eliahu was the guilty one, he was punished with "sixty flaming lashes" and had to come down to earth as a fiery bear to distract the prayer gathering and prevent a premature redemption.

Based on this aggadta, Rav Mordechai Eliahu adds a message for our own generation. Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi got Eliahu Hanavi to reveal that the Avraham-Yitzchak-Yaakov powerful prayer combination lives on through their descendants. We must cultivate and carry on their qualities – Avraham's chesed, pioneering spirit, connection with God and ability to pass it on to later generations; Yitzchak's personal might, fear of God, joy, and self-sacrifice; and Yaakov's truthfulness, harmony, and resilience in the face of adversity – as, apparently, Rabbi Chiya and his sons did. Perhaps then we will also be able to pray as a unified force, and be blessed with the redemption coming speedily in our days.

SOURCE GUIDE: SWARMING FROG, WHISTLING FROG

The plague of frogs is the most offbeat and bizarre of the makot. Most of the other makot (with the possible exception of darkness) seem like standard plagues: pestilence, wild animals, lice, and locusts, boils, hail, and the death of the firstborn, and it makes sense that the water of the Nile should turn into blood. But why did God choose to plague Egypt with frogs? (We are following here the commonly held approach, that tzefard'im are frogs – see, however, Ibn Ezra, Rabbeinu Bechayei, and the Netziv). Frogs are small, usually soft, and not known as especially aggressive towards humans. What was the goal of this plague? What is just to make the Egyptians feel uncomfortable?

This source guide is built on an offbeat discussion about this offbeat plague, between two of our greatest Tannaim, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya.

A. The Verses:

The boldfaced word sparked their discussion:

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| <p>1. Shemot 7:26 – 8:2</p> <p>(26) God said to Moshe, “Come to Pharaoh and say to him, ‘Thus says God: Send forth my nation and they will serve me.</p> <p>(27) And if you refuse to send them out, behold I will smite your entire border with frogs.</p> <p>(28) And the Nile will swarm with frogs and they will come up and enter your house, your bedroom, and your bed, and the houses of your servants, and those of your nation, and in your ovens and kneading troughs.</p> <p>(29) And in you and your nation, and in all of your servants the frogs will come up.</p> <p>(1) God said to Moshe, “Say to Aharon, ‘Stretch out your hand with your staff over the rivers, the canals, and the lakes, and bring the frogs up upon Egypt.’”</p> <p>(2) And Aharon stretched forth his hand over the waters of Egypt and the frog came up and covered the land of Egypt.</p> | <p>ספר שמות פרק ז:כו – ח:ב</p> <p>(כו) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה בֹּא אֶל פַּרְעֹה וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו כֹּה אָמַר ה' שְׁלַח אֶת עַמִּי וְיַעֲבֹדוּנִי:</p> <p>(כז) וְאִם מָאן אַתָּה לְשַׁלַּח הַנֶּה אֲנֹכִי נֹגֵף אֶת כָּל גְּבוּלְךָ בַצִּפְרָדִּים:</p> <p>(כח) וְשָׂרִיץ הַיָּאֵר צִפְרָדִּים וְעָלוּ וַיָּבֹאוּ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְחֲדָר מִשְׁכַּבְךָ וְעַל מִטְתְּךָ וּבְבֵית עַבְדֶּיךָ וּבְעַמֶּךָ וּבְתַנּוּרֶיךָ וּבְמִשְׁאָרוֹתֶיךָ: (כט) וּבִכְּהָ וּבְעַמֶּךָ וּבְכָל עַבְדֶּיךָ יַעֲלוּ הַצִּפְרָדִּים:</p> <p>(א) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה אָמַר אֶל אַהֲרֹן נִטֵּה אֶת יָדְךָ בְּמִשְׁפָּחָ עַל הַנְּהָרוֹת עַל הַיָּאֵרִים וְעַל הַגְּאֻמִּים וְהָעַל אֶת הַצִּפְרָדִּים עַל אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:</p> <p>(ב) וַיִּט אַהֲרֹן אֶת יָדוֹ עַל מִימֵי מִצְרָיִם וַתַּעַל הַצִּפְרָדִּים וַתִּכַּס אֶת אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:</p> |
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B. The Passage in the Gemara

Here is the discussion between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah as it appears in the Gemara:

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| <p>2. Sanhedrin 67b</p> <p>“The frog came up and covered the land of Egypt” – Said Rabbi Elazar: There was one frog that then brought forth swarms and it filled all of the land of Egypt.</p> <p>This (statement of the Amora Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat) follows one side of a Tannaitic dispute: Rabbi Akiva said – There was one frog and it filled all of the land of Egypt.</p> <p>Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah said to him, “Akiva, why are you getting involved in aggadah. Stop speaking on this topic and get back to the topics of Negaim and Ahalot (laws of purity and impurity dealing with the tzaraat plague and death). There was one frog and it whistled to them (the other frogs) and they came.</p> | <p>סנהדרין סז:</p> <p>"ותעל הצפרדע ותכס את ארץ מצרים" אמר רבי אלעזר צפרדע אחת היתה השריצה ומלאה כל ארץ מצרים.</p> <p>כתנאי: רבי עקיבא אומר צפרדע אחת היתה ומלאה כל ארץ מצרים.</p> <p>אמר לו רבי אלעזר בן עזריה עקיבא מה לך אצל הגדה כלה מדברותיך ולך אצל נגעים ואהלות צפרדע אחת היתה שרקה להם והם באו:</p> |
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C. Difficulties

1. Both of their approaches seem to build on the singular form of the noun הצפרדע. But why don't they say that the singular refers to the group of frogs, not one individual one? We have such words, like כנפ, נפש, כנפ where a singular refers to a group. Rashi on the Chumash brings this approach.
2. Why is Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah so bothered by Rabbi Akiva's approach? It can't be that Rabbi Akiva's approach seems fanciful to him, that one frog gave birth to so many, for his own approach, that one frog whistled to the rest of the frogs, is no less fanciful.
3. Why does Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah think that Rabbi Akiva is so fundamentally wrong about this verse? Why does he suggest that Rabbi Akiva give up the discipline of Aggadta?
4. In the version that Rashi on Chumash brings, the Egyptians would hit the frog, and each time they hit it, swarms of frogs came out of it. What does that special effect add to this makah?

D. Two Approaches to the Frogs

As the Torah Temimah points out, what motivated these Tannaim's comments is not merely the use of the singular, but the **shift** from the plural צפרדעים used throughout the section, to the one singular usage in the entire passage. Why was the Torah not consistent in using either the singular or plural throughout? It must, says the Torah Temimah, be alluding to one of these two Tannaitic explanations.

Suggestion: Perhaps Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah not only have a local argument about what this word means, but two entirely different approaches to this plague. Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah not only objected to Rabbi Akiva's *pshat* in this word but his entire approach.

According to Rabbi Akiva – especially with Rashi's addition, that the frog was hit by the Egyptians – the frogs represented Israel. The more the Egyptians afflicted them, the more they multiplied. The same verb שרץ, swarming, is used to describe the Jews' fantastic reproduction in the beginning of Shemot. The Egyptians resorted to throwing Jewish babies into the river, and, sure enough, out of the river years later come swarms of little, cute, crying, jumpy, infant-like frogs. The Egyptians are, in effect, watching the Jewish babies come back to haunt them. They should get the message, repent, and Pharaoh should free the Jews.

But Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah takes a view exactly the opposite of Rabbi Akiva's, and sees the frogs as representing the Egyptians themselves. One frog – Pharaoh – whistles to all the rest of them, and they all come and join him. This recalls the early stages of the enslavement:

3. Shemot 1:8-10

(8) A new king rose up over Egypt who did not know Yosef.
(9) He said to his nation, "Behold, the nation of the Children of Israel is greater and more powerful than us.
(10) Let us act wisely with them, lest they increase, and when there will be a war they will join up with our enemies, fight against us, and [we'll be forced to (Rashi)] leave the land."

שמות א:ח-י

(ח) וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ חָדָשׁ עַל מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדַע אֶת יוֹסֵף:
(ט) וַיֹּאמֶר אֵל עַמּוֹ הִנֵּה עַם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל רַב וְעֲצוּם מִמֶּנּוּ:
(י) הֲבֵיָה נִתְחַכְמָה לוֹ כִּי יִרְבֶּה וְהִנֵּה כִי תִקְרָאנָה מִלְחָמָה וְנוֹסַף גַּם הוּא עַל שְׂנְאֵינוּ וְנִלְחַם בָּנוּ וְעָלָה מִן הָאָרֶץ:

Pharaoh succeeded in getting the entire Egyptian nation to enslave the Jews. In the plague of frogs the Egyptians watched themselves, in a cartoon-like way as frogs, playing follow-the-leader.

E. Additional Learning

- See the Maharal in Gevurot Hashem Chapter 32 and in the Chidushei Agadot on Sanhedrin 67b, where he explains the two approaches to the singular noun – one referring to the swarm and one to the collective.
- Rashi on this Gemara says that the one frog called "all the frogs in the world." How might that enrich our understanding of the plague of frogs?

Might these two visions of the plague of frogs – whether the plague represents the Jews or the Egyptians – apply also to other plagues?

SURPRISE MIRACLES BY RABBI YAKOV HABER

What constitutes a miracle? And which types are recorded in the Torah?

Our parshah presents us with the first seven makot (plagues) in Egypt. The makot follow a pattern. The first two were preceded with a warning to Pharaoh. The third of the set was without warning. Why was the warning omitted in the third plague of each set?

Perhaps we can suggest an explanation based on a principle formulated by Ramban. The midrash states that Yocheved gave birth to Moshe at the age of 130. Ramban explains why the Torah records the miraculous birth of Yitzchak to Sarah at the age of 90, but omits the even more miraculous birth of Moshe to Yocheved at 130. Only miracles that are predicted by a prophet are described in the Torah. Other events, however miraculous they may be, are not recorded.

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz, ztl, the Mirrer Rosh Yeshiva, explains the reason for these omissions: Only miracles predicted accurately by a prophet would unquestionably be attributed to Hashem by all. Other unpredicted miracles might be explained away through a variety of rational explanations, however far-fetched these explanations might be. Rav Shmuelevitz gives several modern-day examples, from the miraculous rescue of his own Mirrer Yeshiva through Shanghai China during World War II, to the lightning victory of the Israeli Defense forces over the million strong Arab invading armies in 1967.

To those looking beyond the veil of nature these were overt miracles; for the skeptic these were lucky breaks. Thus, man himself chooses to see Hashem in the seemingly natural. He is not forced to do so.

Pharaoh was presented with two distinct opportunities to see Hashem's hand. The first two makot of each set were predicted by Moshe. Recognition of God under such circumstances would have been much easier and therefore less significant. Another, more meaningful opportunity was presented in the third makah in each set. These were without a prior prediction. Seeing these as acts of Hashem would be more penetrating and lasting.

In Shemoneh Esrei we state, "... and on the miracles that are with us every day." We are charged to unmask nature and history and to see the hand of Hashem both in our individual lives and in the history of the Jewish nation.

This issue is dedicated in memory of
Alex Colchary z"l

*This publication is compiled by the staff and Rabbonim at **Shapells/Yeshivat Darché Noam** for men and **Midreshet Rachel v'Chaya Seminary** for women in Jerusalem. Find out more about the **married couples' programme** and the **Pathways Israel** and **Pathways Plus** programmes offered at www.darchenoam.org +972-2-651-1178, 5 Beit Hakerem Street, Jerusalem.*

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