

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Va'eira

In this week's parsha, Hashem tells Moshe to go to Pharaoh and command him to "send Bnei Yisroel out of Mitzraim" (Shemot 6:11). This is Moshe's first time confronting Pharaoh directly and Moshe is afraid. In last week's parsha, we saw that Moshe's attempt to help the Hebrews backfired: instead of seeing relief from Moshe's return to Egypt, Pharaoh only intensified the work. The Hebrews complained that Moshe made their lives worse. Moshe is fearful that if the Hebrews did not believe in him, how much more so will Pharaoh ignore him (Shemot, 6:12).

Hashem gives Moshe a sign to help him out: "When Pharaoh will say 'give me a sign', you should tell Aharon, take your staff and send it before Pharaoh, and it will become a snake" (Shemot 7:9).

Sure enough, Moshe and Aharon do as they were told. They come to Pharaoh and Aharon turns his staff into a snake. In response, Pharaoh calls his magicians and they too transform their sticks into snakes. Aharon's snake then swallows all the Egyptians' snakes, however Pharaoh is not impressed. He "hardens his heart" and does not listen to them (Shemot 7:13).

The commentaries have a hard time with the fact that Hashem commanded Moshe to turn his staff into a snake as a "wondrous sign" for Pharaoh since this was something all his magicians were capable of doing easily. Not only that, but the Midrash tells us that Pharaoh brought four and five year old children and they were also able to transform their sticks into snakes. What was therefore the point in Hashem telling Moshe to do a sign that did not impress Pharaoh in the slightest?

R' Yisroel Salanter answers that the purpose of the sign with the snake was not to demonstrate Hashem's strength, nor was it to show His ability to change nature. Rather, this sign was supposed to serve as hint to Pharaoh in several areas, as explained in the Midrash.

Firstly, the transformation of the staff into a snake was in order to demonstrate to the Egyptians the reason they were ultimately punished. How so?

The Rambam asks a "burning" question. The Rambam wants to know why Hashem punished the Egyptians since, after all, it was all part of Hashem's decree that He revealed to us several hundred years earlier during the Brit Bein HaBetarim (Covenant of the Parts). Hashem clearly told Avraham, "Your children will be strangers in a land that is not their own, and they will be enslaved..." (Beraishit, 15:13). Does it not seem that the Egyptians were just carrying out the word of Hashem and therefore should not deserve to be punished?

The Ravad answers: Hashem said, "And they will afflict them" and the Egyptians not only enslaved them with back breaking labor, but also murdered and drowned them. If the Egyptians would have only caused the Jews the amount of harm Hashem decreed, they would not have gotten punished. However, because the Egyptians increased it, and did it so wickedly, they were deserving of punishment.

This is one thing that was hinted to in the sign of the staff and snake. The staff was supposed to serve as a lesson to the Egyptians that they should have just been like "a staff in G-d's hand". A stick does not have the ability afflict more damage than what the person hitting with



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continued ...

it intends. However, the Egyptians acted instead like a snake, adding to what Hashem decreed.

The Talmud in Arachin asks why specifically the snake was chosen to be the symbol out of all the animals. The Talmud tells us, “In the future all the animals will come to the snake and say, ‘the wolf hunts and eats its prey, so too with the lion, tell us, what pleasure do you get (from your wickedness)?’” (Arachin 15b).

Just as the snake gains no pleasure from the damage it causes, so too the Egyptians did not benefit from the Jews’ hard labor. The Talmud in Sotah tells us that Pitom, the city the Jews were commanded to build, was a “bottomless pit that swallowed the building” and Ramses, another city the Jews were forced to build would also “disintegrate its buildings until nothing was left” (Sotah 19b).

The snake was supposed to show the Egyptians not only how they abused the Jews above what Hashem decreed, but they also caused the Jews to do pointless labor. The Egyptians’ wickedness did not even benefit them.

We learn an additional lesson from the fact that Aharon’s staff swallowed the Egyptian’s staffs. The Midrash tells us that a miracle happened: when Aharon’s staff swallowed the Egyptian’s staff it maintained the same appearance as before, instead of increasing in size. This was like Pharaoh’s dream with the cows and the bundles of wheat in Parshat Mikeitz. Hashem was hinting to the Egyptians that in the future, the) מטה אלוקים (G-d’s staff) will strike them with a huge plague and that all the afflictions which they afflicted the Jews will be forgotten. Similar to the interpretation of Pharaoh’s dreams, the reason you could not tell the skinny cows consumed the fat cows was due to the fact that the years of hunger will be so terrible that they would forget the years of plenty.

Hashem sent 10 plagues and split the sea so that the oppression the Egyptians inflicted on the Jews was forgotten.

There is a lot of symbolism in the sign of the staff transforming into a snake. It was to remind the Egyptians how they should have acted like a staff in G-d’s hand; however because they added to the degree of affliction decreed on the Jews, like a snake, they would have to be punished. Additionally, it was to point out the Egyptians’ cruelty for oppressing the Jews without gain. Lastly it was to demonstrate how in the future G-d’s staff will “swallow” the Egyptians’ “staffs”; G-d will send a consequence that will be so much worse than the Egyptians, that the Egyptian’s cruelty will be forgotten.

May we merit G-d’s redemption from this exile shortly and may all our personal and communal sufferings in exile be forgotten due to the miraculous and incredible redemption He will bring.

Shabbat Shalom

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