



## מכות מצרים – סידרה חינוכית

### Education by Plague

#### ■ The Educational Goal

The ten plagues that G-d visited upon ancient Egypt, and which nearly destroyed it to its very foundations, place in bold relief the force and extent of King Pharaoh's stubbornness. The plagues served an important educational function. They taught Pharaoh a harsh, painful, and very thorough lesson, taking him from total heresy and disbelief in G-d, all the way to a recognition and acknowledgement of G-d's might and wisdom.

Pharaoh's first reaction to the notion that he must defer to an all-powerful G-d and release the Jews from their enslavement was one of total disdain and disbelief:

מי ה' אשר אשמע בקלו?

*Who is G-d that I should hearken to His voice?* (Sh'mot 5,2)

But by the end of the series of plagues, he was already singing the opposite tune. The last words of Pharaoh's army expressed total surrender:

אנוסה מפני ישראל כי ה' נלחם להם במצרים...

*Let us flee from Israel, for G-d is fighting  
for them against Egypt.* (14,25)

Already on the first day of the process, Moshe and Aharon appear before King Pharaoh and present him with a historic prophecy - one that sounds like a royal command:

...כֹּה אָמַר ה' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: שְׁלַח אֶת עַמִּי וַיְחַגּוּ לִי בַמִּדְבָּר.

*So says Hashem, the G-d of Israel: Send out My nation,  
so that they can celebrate for Me in the desert.* (5,1)

Afterwards, they softened their approach a bit: *We will take, please, a three-day journey in the desert and we will sacrifice to Hashem our G-d, lest He strike us down with pestilence or by sword* (verse 3). That is, “It is liable to be us ourselves who will have to pay the price and face a stiff punishment if we do not fulfill our obligations to worship our G-d.”

Let us now learn how G-d achieved the goals He set for the re-education of Pharaoh. To this end, we will separate the original prophecy (5,1) into four parts, or four goals, and divide the Ten Plagues into three groups. We will then see how each educational goal was met by either a set of plagues, or the final plague on its own. The prophecy is divided as follows:

1. 'בַּה אָמַר ה', *So says Hashem*

First of all, Pharaoh must be informed Who is the Creator of the world, and Who it is that sets the laws of nature by His own will. Pharaoh must come to know the Power that is above all the other powers. As G-d later tells Moshe to tell Pharaoh: 'בְּזֹאת תִּדְעַ בִּי אֲנִי ה', *Through this you will know that I am G-d.* (7,17)

2. אֲ-לֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, *the G-d of Israel*

The emphasis here is on G-d's supervision of the world. He oversees all that is done on earth, and takes “affirmative action” towards the nation He loves most. As G-d later says, 'בִּי אֲנִי ה' בְּקִרְבֵּי הָאָרֶץ, *For I am G-d, here on earth.* (8,18)

3. שְׁלַח אֶת עַמִּי, *Send out My nation*

Just as the Nation of Israel belongs to Hashem, the same is true of the entire world and all of Creation. Israel is not the private property of any element or person on the face of the earth – certainly not Pharaoh. As Moshe tells him during the plague of hail, לְמַעַן תִּדְעַ בִּי לֵה' הָאָרֶץ, *so that you will know that the world is G-d's.* (9,29)

4. וַיְחַגְּגוּ לִי בַּמִּדְבָּר, *and they will celebrate for Me in the desert*

This phrase is replaced later by וַיַּעֲבֹדֵנִי, *they will worship Me.* Pharaoh must know that Israel is G-d's first-born and is holy unto Him. He is thus to be G-d's servant and serve Him in His holy land. Pharaoh will thus understand in the end why his attempt to destroy Israel led to the smiting of the Egyptian first-borns.

This introduction contains an answer to the following question: Why did G-d need all ten plagues? After all, the tenth plague – the smiting of

the first-borns – was awesomely lethal. Why did Hashem not begin with this plague, thus saving the arduous months of suffering and negotiations between Moshe and Pharaoh?

Moshe himself provides an answer to this question after the sixth plague. He explains to Pharaoh why G-d did not simply destroy the Egyptian nation in previous plagues:

כִּי עָתָה שְׁלַחְתִּי אֶת יָדִי וְאֶדְוָה אוֹתָהּ וְאֶת עַמָּהּ בַּדָּבָר וּתִכָּחַד מִן הָאָרֶץ.

*For I could have unleashed My power,  
smiting you and your people in the pestilence,  
and you would have been obliterated.*

וְאוֹלָם בְּעִבּוֹר זֹאת הָעִמְדָתִי,

בְּעִבּוֹר הָרְאִתָּה אֶת כְּחִי וְלִמְעַן סַפֵּר שְׁמִי בְּכָל הָאָרֶץ.

*But the reason I let you survive is  
to show you My power, and that My Name  
be known around the world. (9,15-16)*

Moshe Rabbeinu tries to reason with Pharaoh: “You, Pharaoh, saw the tremendous plague of the *dever*, pestilence, that killed all your livestock. You know it would not have been hard for G-d to use the same method and kill all the people as well, enabling us to simply get up and leave! But He did not do so - because the purpose of these plagues is not just to intimidate you, but is rather to establish the foundation for the entire world’s recognition of Divine Providence. The Jewish Exodus from Egypt will be the foundation stone for all future Divine service.”

As we study the plagues, we see that all ten of them were necessary, as was the entire process. Each of them has a specific “task” that contributes to the overall goal of breaking down the wall of heresy and cruelty behind which Pharaoh closed himself.

### ■ The First Lesson: I am G-d

The kings of Egypt were enamored with themselves and their total supremacy over their subjects. During Joseph’s time, the Pharaoh said, “*I am Pharaoh...*” (B’reshit 41,44), and in Moshe’s days, the king declared, “*So says Pharaoh, I will not give you straw...*” (Sh’mot 5,10)

To counter this, Moshe and Aharon historically announce: “*So says G-d: Thus you will know that I am G-d*” (Sh’mot 7,17). The test now begins: Who will

prevail? This is, as we said above, the first step of Pharaoh's re-education, in which he will learn Who the Al-mighty truly is.

The first plague – turning all water into blood – struck at the source of life in Egypt, the Nile River. True, the wizards of Egypt also turned water to blood; but not only could they not turn the blood back into water, as Moshe did, they also never dared to actually touch the Nile, the godly symbol of Egypt. Only Moshe turned the powerful waterway into a river of blood, thus proving G-d's superiority over Egypt, its kings, and its gods. This was a message written in the blood of the Jewish children who had been drowned in the Nile by the cruel Pharaoh.

The educational series continues with the next plague, that of Frogs, which teaches that **there is no god other than Hashem**. Knowledge of G-d's existence is, of course, the basis of all religious faith, and the Ten Commandments begin with it: 'אנוכי ה', *I am G-d* (Sh'mot 20,2). But in actuality, this is not enough. The second of the Ten Commandments must also be recognized:

לא יהיה לה אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל פָּנָי.

*You shall have no other gods before Me.* (20,3)

Pharaoh learned this via the plague of Frogs, which filled all of Egypt. True, the wizards added some of their own (8,3) - but they were unable to get rid of them. When Pharaoh finally conceded and asked Moshe to remove the frogs, Moshe responded: "*Just as you say - so that you will then know that there is none like Hashem our G-d*" (8,6) - No one else can end the plague other than G-d.

But still one more plague is needed to teach of G-d's absolute superiority, for the Egyptian wizards, too, were able to produce both blood and frogs. This third plague will be one that the wizards will be unable to mimic or remove: Lice.

וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כֹן הַחֲרָטְמִים בְּלִטְיָהֶם לְהוֹצִיא אֶת הַכְּנָנִים וְלֹא יָכְלוּ...

וַיֹּאמְרוּ הַחֲרָטְמִים אֶל פְּרַעֲה אֶצְבַּע אֱ-לֹהִים הוּא...

*The wizards did the same with their magic, [trying] to produce the lice, but they could not... and they said to*

*Pharaoh: This is the finger of G-d.* (8,14-15)

They thus admitted outright that there is no god like Hashem, in terms of both bringing the plague and ending it.

The plague of Lice ends the first set of three plagues, known as *DeTZaKh*: *Dam* (Blood), *Tzfarde'a* (Frogs), and *Kinim* (Lice). It teaches the fundamental lesson of faith that “I am G-d, and there is no one like Him.”

### ■ Here on Earth

The time has now come to teach Pharaoh the second lesson: that Hashem is the G-d of Israel, the Divine overseer of all that takes place in the world. He is not detached from the world, as the philosophers would have it.

Pharaoh is of the opinion that the plagues thus far are an expression of general anger by the gods, and have nothing to do with Hashem's demand to free the Jews. He needs proof that the plagues are a Divine message telling him specifically to release Israel from his bondage. Such proof will be in the form of a clear differentiation between Egypt and Israel. This is the function of the fourth plague, *Arov*, Wild Beasts:

והפֿלִיתִי בַיּוֹם הַהוּא אֶת אֶרֶץ גֹּשֶׁן אֲשֶׁר עָמַד עָלֶיהָ  
לְבִלְתִּי הִיֹּת שָׁם עֶרֶב לְמַעַן יִדְעַ כִּי אֲנִי ה' בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ.

*On that day I will set apart the Goshen area on which My nation lives, so that there shall not be beasts there, so that you shall know that I am G-d here on earth.* (8,18)

Not only will the plague not affect the Israelites, He announces, but they are “*My nation*: Israel is Mine, and I am Israel's; I watch out for them so that no harm shall befall them.” This is the supreme expression of “*For I am G-d here on earth.*”

The phrase “*send out My nation*” appears only twice in the entire story of the plagues – here (verse 17) and in the plague of Locust. This is also testimony to G-d's preferential treatment and absolute connection with Israel – G-d's nation and His inheritance.

The next plague is that of *Dever*, Pestilence, which struck specifically Egypt's animals while passing over those of Israel. It was designed to teach Pharaoh that G-d's special Divine providence extends even to the livestock of the Chosen Nation, as written: *And Hashem shall differentiate between the cattle from Israel and that of Egypt.* (9,4)

The next plague completes the second set of three, and shows the full extent of G-d's Providence. Hashem instructs Moshe to throw a handful of dirty ashes into the air, where they will turn into a dust that will bring

painful blisters and sores upon the Egyptians. This plague is different than all the others, which were all carried out via the special staff that Moshe carried; this one was effected by the lowly soot of a furnace – showing that G-d's supervision over the world reaches even the most lowly places. Everything in the world, even the most measly and scanty object, can serve G-d's purposes when He wills it.

This set of three plagues, then – known as *ADaSh*: *Arov* (Beasts), *Dever* (Pestilence), and *Sh'chin* (Boils) – teaches the second set of lessons: **I am G-d here on earth**, all over, in control of all.

### ■ No One Like G-d

This brings Pharaoh to the next stage, in which he must recognize that G-d's providence and control of the world has no equal in any force in the world. The first lesson in this regard comes from the seventh plague: Hail. In the warning preceding this plague, Moshe conducts, for the first time, a test of the Egyptians' fear of G-d:

וְעַתָּה שְׁלַח הָעִזִּי אֶת מִקְנֶךָ וְאֵת כָּל אֲשֶׁר לְךָ בַּשָּׂדֶה,  
כָּל הָאָדָם וְהַבְּהֵמָה אֲשֶׁר יִמְצָא בַּשָּׂדֶה  
וְלֹא יֵאָסֵף הַבַּיִתָּה וְיֵרֵד עֲלֵהֶם הַבָּרָד וּמָתוּ.

*Now gather your livestock and all you have in the fields.  
Any person or animal that will be found in the fields and will  
not be gathered indoors, will be smitten by the hail.* (9,19)

The warning came true. He who feared G-d's word and brought his slaves and livestock indoors - saved them and himself; those who did not heed Hashem's warning paid a heavy price. This is the reason for Pharaoh's rare confession here - *"I have sinned this time, G-d is the righteous One, and I and my people are the evil ones"* (9,27) – because he realized that he could have saved them had he heeded Moshe's warning, and that it was therefore his fault.

The hail that plagued Pharaoh's Egypt was truly like no other hail that ever fell before:

וַיְהִי בָרָד וְאֵשׁ מִתְלַקַּחַת בְּתוֹךְ הַבָּרָד כְּבֵד מְאֹד  
אֲשֶׁר לֹא הָיָה כָמוֹהוּ בְּכָל אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מֵאִזְ הָיְתָה לְגוֹי.

*There was hail, with fire amidst the hailstones, very heavy,  
there had never been anything like it in all of Egypt from the  
time it became a nation.* (9,24)



True, the following plague, Locust, was also a one-of-its-kind scourge, as we read in Sh'mot 10,6. Still, the Hail – fire burning inside frozen water pellets – was the first plague to prove unambiguously that the force of the G-d of Israel is like no other in the entire world:

...בַּעֲבוּר תִּדְעַ כִּי אֵין כָּמוֹנִי בְּכָל הָאָרֶץ.

*...so that you will know that there is none like Me  
in all the world.* (9,14)

### ■ The Earth is the Lord's

We must now analyze the third passage in the original historic declaration that Moshe and Aharon brought to Pharaoh: *Send out My nation.* (Sh'mot 5,1)

The plague of Hailstones began the final set of four plagues known as *B'ACHaV: Barad* (Hail), *Arbeh* (Locust), *Choshech* (Darkness), and *Bekhorot* (Smiting of the First-Borns.) The common lesson to be learned from each of them is that **the entire world and everything in it belongs to the G-d of Israel.**

This was foreign to Pharaoh's understanding of the world. He was convinced that he was the master of all slaves, including Israel, and that the demand to release them was nothing more than the theft of his personal property. It was therefore vital to have him realize that the world belongs to G-d, and that Israel is not his private property.

Little by little, it became clear to him that nothing was his: Neither the water nor the food he eats; neither his animals nor the light; not his land, his sons or his slaves – and certainly not the Nation of Israel. Everything belongs to the Master of the World. When G-d instructed Moshe to put an end to the plague of Hail, Moshe pointed out to Pharaoh Who it is who really owns the earth's crops:

הַקִּלּוֹת יִחְדָּלוּ וְהַבָּרָד לֹא יִהְיֶה עוֹד לְמַעַן תִּדְעַ כִּי לֵה' הָאָרֶץ...  
וְהַחֲטָה וְהַכֶּסֶּמֶת לֹא נִכְּוּ כִּי אֶפִּילַת הַנֶּה.

*The thunder and hail will stop, so that you will know  
that the world is G-d's... The wheat and spelt were not destroyed,  
as they are late in sprouting.* (9,29-32)

Moshe is essentially telling him: "If the hail continues, there will be nothing left. Thus it is obvious that Whoever can stop the hail and enable further growth, is the true master of whatever grain grows from now on." But Pharaoh's refusal to acknowledge this truth brought about the next plague,

Locusts, which finished off whatever had been left by the Hailstones: *Nothing green remained on the trees or the fields throughout Egypt* (10,15). In other words: “This, too, is not yours, and I, G-d, am taking back what is mine.”

### ■ The Darkness of Egypt

The ninth plague, Darkness, comes to fill in, educationally, that which the Locust left out. The message for Pharaoh is that when G-d says the whole earth is His, He means that a king's ability to see his land and think it is his – even that is taken from him.

The previous plague, Locust, was also a form of darkness. The black clouds of swarming insects blocked the entire expanse, including the light of the sun. But it was still possible to differentiate between day and night. Then came the Plague of Darkness. Day turned into a very thick night, so heavily murky that it was impossible to even get off of one's chair. When one's sight is taken from him, it is as if he has lost all. And all this was in order to make clear: *“The earth is the Lord's”* (Sh'mot 9,29). We need permission even just to be able to look at the world around us.

The plague of Darkness lasted exactly three days – a reminder to Pharaoh that Israel's request to leave for three days of Divine worship was still pending, waiting for his approval.

### ■ The Smiting of the First-Borns

The time has now arrived for the actualization of the fourth passage in the original historic declaration: *Israel will celebrate for Me in the desert.* (Sh'mot 5,1)

The time has come for Hashem's first-born, Israel, to serve Him. Regarding the upcoming plague of the Smiting of the First-Borns, Moshe prophesized back at the start of his mission, when he was still in Midian:

בְּלִכְתּוֹתָ לְשׁוּב מִצְרַיִם... וְאָמַרְתָּ אֶל פַּרְעֹה, כֹּה אָמַר ה' בְּנִי בְכֹרִי יִשְׂרָאֵל.  
וְאָמַר אֵלָיִךְ שְׁלַח אֶת בְּנִי וְיַעֲבֹדֵנִי וְתִמְאֹן לְשַׁלְּחוֹ,  
הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי הִרְגָּת אֶת בְּנִי בְּכֹרִי.

*“When you return to Egypt... tell Pharaoh that Hashem said,  
‘Israel is My first-born, and I say to you, release My son  
and He will serve Me’ - but you have refused to release him. Behold,  
I will kill your own first-born son...”* (4,21-23)



First-born sons had always been dedicated for the service of Hashem – but the difference now is that there is an entire nation that is called “Hashem’s first-born.” An entire nation has been chosen to serve G-d.

For his refusal to allow this to happen, Pharaoh paid with his own first-born’s life, as well as the lives of all the first-borns in Egypt. This proved without a doubt that Israel was the nation chosen for Divine service as Hashem’s eldest son.

We have thus seen how the Ten Plagues, including Moshe Rabbeinu’s warnings and declarations interspersed among them, comprise not only indirect lessons for the entire world, but a comprehensive educational curriculum for a despotic and tyrannical king, and his arrogant kingdom as well.

