

APPENDIX 2

The Ten Plagues¹⁷

Less and Different Order

THE MISHNAH (AVOS 5:4) states: “Ten miracles were performed for our ancestors in Egypt and ten more at the Sea [of Reeds]. The Holy One, Blessed is He, brought ten plagues upon the Egyptians in Egypt and ten more at the Sea [of Reeds].”

Although the Torah does not actually number the plagues here, a straightforward reading of the verses discerns ten of them and the order in which Hashem sent them against Pharaoh and his people: דם — Blood, צְפַרְדֵּי — Frogs, כִּנִּים — Lice, עֲרֹב — Wild Beasts, דָּבָר — Murrain,¹⁸ שָׁחִין — Boils, בָּרָד — Hail, אֲרָבָה — Locusts, חֹשֶׁךְ — Darkness, and מַכַּת בְּכוֹרוֹת — Killing of the Firstborn. The cited Mishnah also talks of ten plagues. Yet, in two of the psalms in *Tehillim*, the Psalmist enumerates fewer plagues and lists them in a different order.¹⁹

Psalm 78:44–51 relates that “He turned their water channels into **Blood**... He sent **Wild Beasts** in their midst to prey upon them; and **Frogs** that destroyed them...He gave the produce

17. See “The Ten Plagues” on pp. 127–139.

18. When the term דָּבָר refers to animals, it is translated “murrain,” which includes a number of fatal diseases specific to livestock. When דָּבָר refers to people, it is translated “pestilence,” which can refer to diseases fatal to humans or to animals or to both.

19. This essay is adapted from the Alshich’s commentary to *Shemos* 10:2, and *Tehillim* 75 and 105.

of their toil to the **Locusts**... He killed their grapevines with **Hail** and their fig trees with hailstones.²⁰ He gave over their animals to the **Hail** and their cattle to bolts of flame... He occluded²¹ their livestock with **Murrain**;²² and He smote every **Firstborn** in Egypt.” This account enumerates only seven of the plagues [omitting the third — Lice; the sixth — Boils; and the ninth — Darkness], retains the plagues of Blood and Killing of the Firstborn as the first and last plague respectively, but completely changes the order of the five other plagues that it lists.

Psalm 105 begins, “Give thanks to Hashem, broadcast His Name; inform the nations of His wondrous deeds.” The psalm then presents a thumbnail history of the Jewish people from the time of Avraham until the nation entered Eretz Yisrael. Verses 27–36 continue with the plagues in Egypt: “[Moshe and Aharon] placed the words of His signs among them and wonders in the land of Cham.²³ He sent forth **Darkness**... He turned their

20. The translation of **הַנִּמְל** as “hailstones” in this verse follows Ibn Ezra; Rav Saadiah Gaon renders it “ice.” According to other commentaries, it refers to a species of locusts.

21. Like the Hebrew verb **הִסְגִּיר** used in this verse, the English verb “occlude” can mean “to obstruct” or “to conceal.” The Hebrew verb has an additional meaning, “to deliver.” Although *Targum* and *Metzudos* render the phrase, “He delivered their livestock to murrain,” the Alshich interprets the phrase as a sort of double entendre: “He occluded their livestock with murrain [i.e., the murrain obstructed the animals’ life force, as if it were a blood clot occluding a coronary artery], and He occluded [i.e., concealed] their livestock from the murrain [by warning them to keep the animals indoors during the plague].”

22. See footnote 16 above. The translation of **לְדַבֵּר הַסְגִּיר** as “He occluded their **livestock** with Murrain” is based on Alshich’s comment (that **הִסְגִּיר** refers to the Egyptians’ animals) and is in accord with *Targum*, Radak and *Metzudos*. Others understand **הִסְגִּיר** of this clause as “their **lives**,” that is, the lives of the Egyptian firstborn, and they read it as if it were part of the next verse, “He delivered their lives to pestilence, when He smote every firstborn in Egypt.”

23. Noach’s son Cham was the father of Mitzrayim, who was the progenitor of Egypt (see *Bereishis* 10:6).

waters to **Blood**... Their land swarmed with **Frogs**... hordes of **Wild Beasts** came; **Lice** were within their entire border. He made their rain into **Hail**... the **Locust** swarm came... He smote all the **Firstborn** in their land, the first of their vigor.” This account lists eight plagues [omitting the fifth — Murrain, and sixth — Boils]; retains the Killing of the Firstborn as the last, but changes the order of some of the other plagues.

The answer is that each of these psalms was composed for a different purpose, so each includes only the plagues that are relevant to its theme. When the Psalmist enumerates the plagues in a different order, he does so to underscore certain relationships between pairs of plagues that did not strike the Egyptians in immediate succession.

Psalm 78 — Understanding God’s Ways

Let us consider the following questions:

1. Why did Hashem send ten plagues against the Egyptians, rather than wipe them out with one mega-plague? Wouldn’t that have been seen as a greater miracle?
2. Why does the Psalmist omit the third, sixth, and ninth plagues—Lice, Boils, and Darkness?
3. Why has the Psalmist changed the order of all but the first and last plagues?
4. Hashem’s warning to Pharaoh before the advent of the seventh plague, Hail, includes the difficult verse, “This time I am sending all My plagues.” Why does Hashem refer to the Hail as “all My plagues”? Additionally, Rashi comments on that phrase, “This teaches that the plague of Killing of the Firstborn was as severe as all the other nine plagues combined.” What does this verse that introduces the seventh plague have to do with the tenth plague?

Mocking Egypt

HASHEM TOLD MOSHE why He was sending him to speak with Pharaoh even though He had hardened Pharaoh's heart and he would stubbornly refuse to accept anything Moshe would say: "So that I may set these, My signs, in his midst, and that you may recount in the ears of your son and your son's son how I mocked Egypt and of My signs that I have set in their midst, and you will know that I am Hashem."²⁴ These verses introduce a major principle of the Jewish faith: "Hashem the Master of mercy is also the Master of strict justice." This principle teaches that when Hashem seems to be treating the wicked with compassion, that very mercy may be the preparation and beginning of a severe judgment that lies in store for them. Conversely, when Hashem seems to be treating the righteous harshly, that very severity may be the preparation and beginning of the compassionate mercy that awaits them. In other words, Hashem sometimes disguises severity as mercy and mercy as severity.

Let us consider how Hashem mocked Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Hashem could have caused all the Egyptian livestock to be killed during the plagues of Wild Beasts or Murrain or Hail, yet He left some animals alive. Not only that, but before the plague of Hail, Hashem mercifully told Moshe to warn Pharaoh of the impending devastation and advise the Egyptians to keep themselves, their servants, and their remaining animals indoors, in order to protect them from the rain of fire and ice. Why didn't Hashem just let the hailstones kill them? And, wonder of wonders, the Egyptians' barley and flax crops were completely destroyed by the Hail, while their wheat and

24. *Shemos* 10:1-2.

spelt crops were compassionately spared. Would Hashem's purpose have suffered had He allowed those crops to be destroyed by this plague?

In truth, however, Hashem was mocking them. What appeared to be Divine mercy was really just a way to ensure that the Egyptians would be able to be punished with the full complement of the Ten Plagues that Hashem had ordained for them. Hashem had a good reason for restraining the wild animals from killing all the Egyptian livestock: if none survived, it would be impossible to afflict Egypt with the plague of Murrain. And if Hashem allowed the diseases to kill off all the remaining animals, or if He did not have Moshe advise the Egyptians to bring their horses and cattle indoors during the rain of hailstones, how would Pharaoh's army and charioteers reach the Reed Sea in time to experience the additional plagues they were destined to suffer there?²⁵ Similarly, had Hashem allowed the hailstones to devastate all the crops, in what way would the locusts be able to plague the Egyptians? Moreover, it was the very appearance of Divine mercy that emboldened Pharaoh's defiance of Moshe's warnings. The compassionate recesses between the plagues gave the Egyptians hope for a swift end to their suffering. That is what Hashem meant by "that you may recount...how I mocked Egypt *in order* to set My signs, *the Ten Plagues*, in their midst." [This answers Question 1.]

Conversely, Bnei Yisrael understand the principle "Hashem the Master of mercy is also the Master of strict justice" and realize that Hashem sometimes disguises severity as mercy and

25. See the discussion in the Haggadah regarding how many plagues the Egyptians suffered at the Reed Sea, on pp. 138–141.

mercy as severity. So when they tell their children how Hashem mocked Pharaoh and the Egyptians, “You will know that I am Hashem.” The “I” Who acts with justice is at the same time “Hashem” (here expressed with the Tetragrammaton, which denotes mercy).

The Three Groups of Plagues

THE HAGGADAH TELLS us that R' Yehudah described the Ten Plagues with the three-word acronym *בְּצִדְיָהוּ שֶׁבְּאַחַב*, but does not explain the significance of this abbreviation. We propose that the Ten Plagues were designed to demonstrate to Pharaoh the truth of three fundamental principles: (1) there exists a Supreme Creator Whom we refer to as Hashem; (2) Hashem chose Bnei Yisrael as His nation, under His direct supervision; and (3) even though he is not a member of Bnei Yisrael, Pharaoh must submit to Hashem's will. By grouping the plagues in the way he did, R' Yehudah was teaching that each abbreviation represents a set of plagues that was inflicted upon Egypt for the purpose of teaching a different one of these principles.²⁶

Now, before afflicting Egypt with the first and second plague in each set, Hashem sent Moshe to inform Pharaoh of what was in store for him and his people if he would not accept the relevant principle and permit the Jews to leave his country. There was no such warning, however, before the third plague of each set, because nothing new was being taught. Hashem was simply punishing Pharaoh for his intransigence in refusing to accept the principle being taught through the first two plagues. Hashem was also showing the king in no uncertain

26. Further discussion of this idea can be found in the essay, “The Finger of God,” on p. 271.

terms that He did not accept his denial of that principle. Since there was no additional lesson to be learned from those three plagues — Lice, Boils, and Darkness — Asaph, the composer of this psalm, omitted them as well. [\[This answers Question 2.\]](#)

Mercy as Severity, Severity as Mercy

AS NOTED ABOVE, Psalm 78 was composed with a certain purpose in mind. Simply put, the Psalmist wanted to publicize the lesson that all is not as it appears. When it looks like Hashem is acting harshly, it may very well be that it is a disguised form of mercy, and vice versa. The Psalmist demonstrated this by rearranging the sequence in which several plagues occurred.

Let us first examine the juxtaposition of the plague of Frogs and Wild Beasts. It certainly would have been more of a miracle if swarms of relatively inconsequential amphibians, rather than hordes of fierce, meat-eating animals, were to decimate the population of Egypt. After all, whoever heard of a frog devouring a human being? Moreover, our Sages tell us that Hashem granted abnormal strength to the frogs, enabling them to break through the marble floors of the Egyptian king's sealed chambers.²⁷ Surely, then, those super-frogs should have been able to attack the Egyptians. So why did Hashem not let the frogs complete the job? Because Hashem specifically wanted to leave room for the wild beasts to do their mission. And the Psalmist states this succinctly by juxtaposing the plague whose destruction was restrained with the plague for which it was restrained: “He sent Wild Beasts in their midst to prey upon them; and [i.e., in addition to the] Frogs that [had partially] destroyed them.”

27. *Shemos Rabbah* 10:7.

Similarly, the juxtaposition of Locusts and Hail: “He gave the produce of their toil to the Locusts... He killed their grapevines with Hail and their fig trees with hailstones,” i.e., He fed the insects from the wheat and spelt crops that He had spared from the Hail. For the same reason, Hashem instructed Moshe to advise Pharaoh to keep his people and their remaining livestock indoors during the Hail; He wanted those animals to be alive when Bnei Yisrael left Egypt so that they could bring their owners to the Sea of Reeds, in whose raging waters they were destined to meet their end. Indeed, Hashem disguises severity as mercy and mercy as severity throughout these events. [[This answers Question 3.](#)]

This interpretation of Psalm 78 provides an insight into the intention of the difficult phrase, “This time I am sending all My plagues,” that appears in Hashem’s warning to Pharaoh regarding the impending plague of Hail. It also explains Rashi’s cryptic comment, “This teaches that the plague of the Killing of the Firstborn was as severe as all the other nine plagues combined.” How does Rashi connect the verse that introduces the seventh plague to the tenth plague?

The answer is that although the Torah states the warning about “all My plagues” in the passage that warned about Hail, it is actually referring to the plague of Killing of the Firstborn. However, the Torah refers to the *last* plague in Moshe’s warning about the *seventh* plague to teach us two things: (1) that each of the first nine plagues was incomplete, for Hashem restrained the force of each plague so that there would remain victims for the plagues that followed; and (2) that Hashem’s reason for bringing so many plagues against the Egyptians was not because He was incapable of annihilating them with just one — for in truth, He could have used any one of the plagues to completely destroy Egypt. But Hashem chose Hail to make this point because that plague began the last set of plagues and

introduced the third principle that Hashem was teaching Pharaoh. Although the Torah states “I am sending all My plagues” at the opening plague of this set, Rashi explains that it refers to the *entire* set, which climaxes, of course, with the tenth plague, the Killing of the Firstborn. [This answers Question 4.]

Psalm 105 — Neither Sorcery nor Sleight of Hand

Let us consider the following questions:

1. Why does this psalm begin with the ninth plague, Darkness?
2. After listing the first and second plagues, Blood and Frogs, in their proper sequence, why does the Psalmist reverse the order of the next two plagues, placing Wild Beasts before Lice?
3. Why are the fifth and sixth plagues, Murrain and Boils, omitted?

The noted omissions and changes of sequence can be explained in light of the theme of this psalm, as stated in its opening verse, “Give thanks to Hashem, broadcast His Name; inform the nations of His wondrous deeds.” The Psalmist accomplishes this by recounting the miracles that Hashem wrought for Bnei Yisrael, from the time He promised Avraham Avinu that his offspring would inherit the land of Canaan until Hashem fulfilled that promise, including the miracles of the Ten Plagues. But a simple enumeration of the plagues would not serve its purpose if Pharaoh and his people — all of whom were masters of the black arts — could challenge Moshe by claiming, “All the ‘miracles’ you are performing are really just sleight-of-hand or sorcery, and we can either duplicate or explain all your

marvels.” Therefore, the Psalmist presented the plagues in an order that forestalls the Egyptians’ skepticism.

Even before mentioning the first plague, the Psalmist alludes to the fact that the plagues were neither acts of black magic, nor white magic, nor sleight-of-hand. This is the meaning of the words in verse 105:27, “They placed the words of His signs [*divrei ososav*, literally, ‘the words of His letters’] among them.” This refers to Moshe’s staff, which *Pirkei Avos* 5:8 states was one of the ten things Hashem made at twilight on the first Friday eve of Creation. As a Midrash teaches, the acronym וְצִוְיָה עַד שֶׁבַח בְּ”ב did not originate with R’ Yehudah; rather, those very letters, in that exact order, were engraved on that wondrous staff.²⁸ And this is why Hashem commanded Moshe to use this staff to bring on the plagues.

The verse continues, “They [Moshe and Aharon] placed... wonders in the land of Cham,” a seemingly unnecessary piece of information that is included to stress the fact that Moshe and Aharon were neither sorcerers nor practitioners of the black arts. The land of Cham (i.e., Egypt) was a hotbed of sorcery, the “world capital” of black magic. The Gemara relates how Pharaoh’s sorcerers regarded Moshe and Aharon as foreigners trying to impress the Egyptians with what the sorcerers considered amateurish wizardry. They compared the first two plagues of Blood and Frogs to “bringing straw to sell in Afarayim,” a city in which straw was plentiful and cheap.²⁹ But the haughty sorcerers conceded defeat at the third plague, when myriads of Lice struck Egypt. The sorcerers said to Pharaoh,

28. *Shemos Rabbah* 8:3.

29. *Menachos* 85a. The full passage is adduced in the essay, “The Finger of God,” on p. 271.

“This [plague] is [sent against us by] the finger of God!”³⁰ In truth, as we shall see below, each of the plagues demonstrated that it was not brought about by mere sleight-of-hand, but was a totally unnatural event that could not be explained as anything other than a miracle of God. And that is what is meant by “[Moshe and Aharon] placed wonders in the land of Cham;” they were indeed wonders, not magic.

The plague of Darkness is the one that could best prove this to the nations of the world to whom this psalm is addressed, and that is why it is the first one mentioned. The Psalmist tells the nations, “He sent forth Darkness and made it dark, but they did not rebel against His word.” This parallels the Torah verse, “Hashem said to Moshe, ‘Extend your hand toward the heavens and there will be darkness over the land of Egypt, after the darkness of night has passed.’”³¹ The Midrash explains that Hashem sent away the intangible darkness of the night and replaced it with the palpable darkness of Gehinnom, “but they did not rebel against His word.” That is, the darkness of night did not complain that Hashem did not use it as His agent to punish the Egyptians, and the darkness of Gehinnom did not complain that Hashem took it from its regular post to assume the mission of the regular night darkness that Hashem had sent away.³² [This answers Question 1.]

We will now follow the sequence of the plagues as recorded in the Torah, and explain why the psalm was composed in a non-chronological order and why it omits Murrain and Boils:

First Plague — Blood: “He turned their waters to blood and caused their fish to die.” Since the purpose of this psalm is to

30. *Shemos* 8:15.

31. *Shemos* 10:21, as rendered by *Targum Onkelos*.

32. *Shemos Rabbah* 14:2.

inform the nations of Hashem's wondrous deeds in a way that will convince them that the plagues cannot be attributed to sorcery or trickery, the Psalmist forestalls any such claim by adding the words, "and caused their fish to die." For had Moshe and Aharon merely performed a "magic" trick, the water's color would have appeared to turn red as if it were blood, but the fish would not have died, because fish do not die in colored water.

Second Plague — Frogs: "Their land swarmed with frogs, even in their kings' private chambers." This verse adduces another proof that the plagues were real and actually defied the laws of nature. Certainly the sealed doors of Pharaoh's private chambers must have been secure and almost impenetrable by soft, weak amphibians. Yet, as noted above, the frogs successfully broke through the royal defenses. Of course, frogs which are merely an optical illusion cannot smash through solid doors and floors.

Third Plague — Lice: The psalm does not need to proclaim that the infestation was not mere trickery, because Pharaoh's sorcerers themselves admitted to him that the Lice plague was "the finger of God." However, the Psalmist does mention the Lice in conjunction with the Wild Beasts, doing so in reverse order because that would best emphasize their miraculous nature, as follows:

Fourth Plague — Wild Beasts: "He spoke and hordes of Wild Beast came; Lice were within their entire border." The nations to whom the Psalmist addresses his words may deny that these wild animals were sent by Heaven. After all, history records many occasions when human habitations were overrun by visitations of such creatures. To refute that argument, the Psalmist informs them that these creatures came into Egypt even as the lice were still actively attacking everything in their path: "Hordes of Wild Beasts came; [while] Lice were within their entire border." And the Midrash describes those lice as insects with stingers as large as sewing needles, insects that under

other circumstances would scare away the largest of animals. This demonstration of totally unnatural behavior on the part of the wild animals proves that they acted to fulfill a Divine command. [[This answers Question 2.](#)]

Fifth and Sixth Plagues — Murrain and Boils: The Psalmist omitted these two plagues because his purpose in composing this psalm was to inform the nations of Hashem's wondrous deeds. But in the matter of the cattle dying of Murrain and the people and animals being afflicted with Boils, the nations could question the Divine origin of what seemingly can be viewed as natural outbreaks of disease that rapidly expanded to epidemic proportions. Moreover, they would probably regard the claim that "not one of the animals of Bnei Yisrael died,"³³ as unprovable and therefore irrelevant. [[This answers Question 3.](#)]

Seventh Plague — Hail: "He made their rain into Hail, fire flaming in their land." Lest the nations try to deny the miraculous nature of the hailstones, the Psalmist tells them that under natural conditions the falling raindrops could not have frozen into hail, because Hashem caused uncontrollable fires throughout the land of Egypt. The atmosphere was thus heated to the point where any moisture in the air above Egypt should have evaporated. Yet, despite the fierce temperature, Hashem turned this rainfall into hailstones.

Another proof that the hailstorms and their accompanying fires were not natural phenomena can be seen in the fact that the wheat and spelt were not destroyed. For, even if their stems could bend before the hail and not break,³⁴ why weren't they

33. *Shemos* 9:6–7.

34. *Shemos Rabbah* (12:7) records two views on the meaning of the term אֶפְיִלוֹת in *Shemos* 9:32. One Sage renders the word "late-ripening"; another relates it to the word פְּלֵא, "wonders," and renders the verse, "The wheat and the spelt were not smitten! Wonder of wonders!"

consumed by the raging fires? Obviously, Hashem had a reason for sparing those crops, as seen in the verses describing the next plague.

Eighth Plague — Locusts: “He spoke and the Locust came, an uncountable swarm of *yelek*. It consumed all the grass of their land; it consumed the fruit of their soil.” The Psalmist now explains why the wheat and spelt crops were spared: Hashem wanted to afflict Egypt with swarms of locusts. Therefore, He spared those crops so the insects would have what to eat. The Psalmist thus teaches: “He, Hashem, spoke [to the hail and fire, telling them to leave some crops standing] and [then] the locust swarm came [and]...consumed all the grass of their land [i.e., the wheat]; it consumed the fruit of their soil [i.e., the spelt].”

The verse, “It consumed all the grass of *their land*; it consumed the fruit of *their soil*,” introduces an additional proof that this particular locust swarm was not a natural event. It was not a coincidental recurrence of a plague that would afflict Egypt every number of years.³⁵ Moshe warned Pharaoh that this locust invasion would be limited to “your border,” and the swarm “came to rest within the entire border of Egypt.”³⁶ The Midrash explains tersely, “The locusts recognized the Egyptian borders.”³⁷ They remained within those borders and, even after consuming all the remaining greenery, did not cross the border to continue their feast of destruction in the kingdom of Cush.

Ninth Plague — Darkness: As stated above, the Psalmist purposely chose to discuss this plague first, because he considered it the best example to use to explain his theme.

Tenth Plague — Killing of the Firstborn: “He smote every

35. In the manner of the seventeen-year locust of the northern United States.

36. *Shemos* 10:4, 14.

37. *Shemos Rabbah* 13:4.

bechor in their land, the first of all their vigor.” With this verse the Psalmist preempts the following possible rebuttal from the nations: “How can you say that Hashem smote the *bechor* of every Egyptian household? We have heard that there were many deaths in some of the Egyptian homes. Doesn’t that indicate that more than just the firstborn died? Accordingly, the plague was not a Heavenly affliction of the firstborns; rather, it must have been an epidemic that attacked random males.”

To deflect this argument, the Psalmist uses two different Hebrew terms for “firstborn.” However, in the Torah we find three ways to describe such a child:

- (a) *Bechor*, a catchall word that can either refer to (1) the first child born to its mother, even if its father has older children from a different woman; (2) the first child of its father, even if its mother has older children from a different man; (3) the first child born to both its mother and its father; or, (4) in a family with no one in any of those categories, to the oldest male member.
- (b) *Petter-rechem*, literally, “the one that opened the womb.” This is the first offspring of a woman, if it exited the womb naturally (e.g., not by caesarean section).
- (c) *Reishis ohn*, literally, “the first [of a man’s] vigor,” that is, the first offspring fathered by a particular man.

Regarding the plague of Killing of the Firstborn, the Torah states: “Hashem smote every *bechor* in the land of Egypt, from the *bechor* of Pharaoh sitting on his throne, to the *bechor* of the captive in the dungeon... There was no household in which there was not [at least one] dead man.”³⁸ The Midrash notes that the verses speak neither of *petter-rechem* nor of *reishis ohn*,

38. *Shemos* 12:29–30.

only of *bechor*. From this we deduce that the Egyptians were very promiscuous and some women had as many as ten sons, each a *bechor* to his father. In such a house there would be ten corpses. But the Psalmist includes the expression “the first of their vigor” in order to impress on the nations that every one of the dead was a *bechor* to his father.

Thus we see that there was no discrepancy between the Ten Plagues recorded in the Torah and the fewer numbers that appear in Psalms 78 and 105 — and we understand why those psalms do not mention all the plagues.