

APPENDIX 3

The Finger of God³⁹

Refusal to Recognize Hashem

WHEN HASHEM DISPATCHED His two emissaries, Moshe and Aharon, to demand that Pharaoh set Bnei Yisrael free from their Egyptian servitude, He told them to say to Pharaoh, “Thus says Hashem, the God of Yisrael, ‘Send forth My nation, and they shall celebrate a feast unto Me in the wilderness.’” Pharaoh responded, “Who is Hashem that I should obey His words and send forth Yisrael? I do not know Hashem! And I shall not send forth Yisrael!”⁴⁰ Moshe and Aharon told him, “The God of the Hebrews revealed Himself to us; let us now travel three days into the wilderness...lest He slay us with the plague or with the sword.” Rashi explains that when they said, “lest He slay us,” they really meant, “lest He slay you,” but out of respect for the king they did not threaten him directly. On the surface, their conversation resembles that of an ambassador from a foreign country calling upon the king of another land with a list of demands, the king’s refusal to concede to those demands, and the ambassador’s threat of war if those demands are not met. In truth, however, within this challenge and response, Moshe and Pharaoh were also debating three fundamental principles of religious belief.⁴¹

39. This essay elaborates on the Alshich’s commentary discussed on p. 157.

40. *Shemos* 5:1–2.

41. This section was adapted from the Alshich’s commentary to *Shemos* 5:1–3 and 8:15.

Moshe began with the first principle by using the words, “Thus says Hashem,” thereby informing Pharaoh that there exists a Supreme Being who created the entire world and whom we refer to as Hashem.

Moshe continued with the second principle, “Hashem [is] the God of Yisrael.” He has chosen Yisrael as His personal nation and placed it under His direct supervision. Moreover, He is always ready to intervene on their behalf and to protect them from their oppressors.

Moshe then alluded to the third principle by citing Hashem’s demand, “Send forth My nation.” Unlike human kings whose dominion is limited to their particular country and its citizens, Hashem is not merely the God of Yisrael in particular; He is the God and Master of the entire universe that He alone has created. Therefore, every human being, whether king or commoner, must heed Hashem’s word and submit to His will.

Pharaoh understood all the hidden meanings of Moshe’s words. His measured reply, “Who is Hashem?” was a calculated contradiction of the first principle, a denial of the very existence of Hashem. Pharaoh then continued, “...that I should obey His words and send forth Yisrael?” Even if I were to agree with both your first and second principles, that He exists and that He is the God of Yisrael, that would still not obligate me to obey His commands, for He is not the God of my nation, “and I shall not send forth Yisrael!”

When Hashem sent Moshe and Aharon to Pharaoh’s court the first time, He told them that the king would not listen to them and, of course, this is what happened. Pharaoh dismissed their words and made the Jews work harder.

Hashem sent Moshe and Aharon to Pharaoh again. This time He told them that Pharaoh would ask them to prove themselves the legitimate emissaries of Hashem by performing some miraculous feat. When Pharaoh indeed challenged them,

Aharon threw his staff down, as Hashem had instructed him to do, and it became a serpent. But Pharaoh simply responded by summoning his wise men and sorcerers to duplicate this feat, which they did. Then Aharon's staff swallowed all the other staffs, "But Pharaoh's heart was stubborn and he did not listen to them, as Hashem had spoken."⁴²

On their third mission to Pharaoh, Moshe and Aharon were to warn him that Hashem was planning to turn the waters of Egypt into blood if Pharaoh continued to refuse to release Bnei Yisrael from slavery. But Pharaoh still did not learn his lesson. In fact, as in their second encounter, Pharaoh's initial reaction to each of the first two plagues — Blood and Frogs — was to command his sorcerers to duplicate Moshe and Aharon's feat, and "the Egyptian sorcerers did the like through their legerdemain."⁴³

The Gemara (*Menachos* 85a) even records a conversation between Moshe Rabbeinu and Pharaoh's two chief wizards just after Moshe and Aharon turned the Nile's waters into blood:

The sorcerers Yochana and Mamrei cynically chided Moshe, "Why are you bringing straw to Afarayim, where straw is plentiful and cheap?" [They meant, "Egypt is the 'world capital' of the black arts and you seek to impress us with your magic?!"] Moshe retorted in kind, "People say that it is to the vegetable market that you bring your vegetables to sell." [He meant, "Indeed, the inhabitants of a city teeming with sorcery will recognize Hashem's miracles as far superior to the deception of your illusions and legerdemain."]

42. *Shemos* 7:8–13.

43. *Shemos* 7:22 and 8:3.

The Statements of Creation

THE HAUGHTY SORCERERS had a completely different reaction to the third plague, however, when an onslaught of lice struck Egypt. “The sorcerers said to Pharaoh, ‘This is the finger of *Elokim!*’”⁴⁴ By that they meant, “We do not possess the skill to turn dust into lice.”

The sorcerers’ use of the term “the finger” of God presumably alludes to the ten imperatives with which Hashem created the world,⁴⁵ for those ten statements of Creation may be anthropomorphically compared to the ten fingers of Hashem. That is, a person builds things with the ten fingers of his human hands, and Hashem created the world with the “ten fingers” of His words.⁴⁶ Indeed, a similar allusion is found in the Midrash (*Bereishis Rabbah* 4:4):

A Cuthite once asked R’ Meir, “Is it possible that the supernal waters are suspended by the breath of a spoken word?”

R’ Meir responded in the affirmative and, to prove his point, requested that the Cuthite bring him an *afarkas* (funnel).⁴⁷ R’ Meir then filled it with water, which he tried to keep inside by pressing a golden plate against its outlet. But the hard, flat golden plate did not stop the funnel from losing water through the rough lip of its outlet. He then pressed a silver plate against the outlet, with the same result. Finally, he placed his finger on the narrow opening and his soft flesh molded itself to the uneven tip, effectively stemming the flow of water.

“But,” protested the Cuthite, “you are restraining the water

44. *Shemos* 8:15.

45. See *Avos* 5:1.

46. *Eitz Yosef* to *Bereishis Rabbah* 4:4.

47. The Alshich’s understanding of *afarkas* as a funnel follows the alternative interpretation in Rashi’s commentary on the Midrash.

with your finger! [How does that demonstrate that the supernal waters are suspended on the breath of a spoken word?]

R' Meir replied, "If a mere mortal like me can hold back the water with his flesh and blood finger, is it not logical that the Holy One, Blessed is He, can certainly suspend the waters with His word? Thus, the supernal waters are suspended by the breath of a spoken word."⁴⁸

With this, the connection made in the Midrash between Hashem's command to the waters and a physical finger is clear. An analysis of the sorcerers' attribution of the plague of Lice to God's finger will shed new light on the analogy of the Ten Imperatives of Creation to ten fingers.

"Let Us Make Man!"

ANOTHER OF THE Ten Imperatives of Creation is Hashem's statement, "Let Us make man!"⁴⁹ We will now demonstrate how that imperative is related to the plague of Lice,⁵⁰ which will also answer why the sorcerers called it "the finger of *Elokim*" even though Moshe had used the Name "י-ה-ו-ה" when he spoke to Pharaoh and his court.

48. The "spoken word" mentioned in the Midrash refers to the second day of Creation. "And God said, 'Let there be a firmament between the waters; and it shall separate between [the supernal] water and [the terrestrial] water'" (*Bereishis* 1:16).

49. *Bereishis* 1:26.

50. In the Alshich's published *Chumash* commentary, *Toras Moshe*, he mentions that he wrote another *Chumash* commentary, which he calls *She'arim*. In *Toras Moshe*, the Alshich states that he wrote a dissertation in *She'arim* on the correspondence between the Ten Imperatives with which the world was created and the Ten Plagues that Hashem visited upon Egypt. Unfortunately, to the best of our knowledge, *She'arim* has never been published and is no longer extant. However, in *Toras Moshe* he does present one example of those correspondences, the creation of man with the plague of Lice.

The Gemara's story in *Sanhedrin* 90b–91a of a discussion between the Jewish *Nasi* (leader) and the Roman emperor will shed light on this matter:

Caesar posed a question to Rabban Gamliel: “You Jews speak of the resurrection of the dead, but the dead turn to dust. How can dust become a living human being?”

Caesar's wise daughter requested the *Nasi's* permission to respond to her father's question. She told her father, “There are two potters in our city. One of them produces his pottery from water; the other uses potter's clay. Which of the two is more expert in his craft?”

Her father replied, “The one who makes solid pots out of water is certainly more adept.”

She continued, “If God is continually creating living people from a drop of fetid watery fluid, is it not obvious to you that He can create living people out of dust or clay?”

What a profound parable! Caesar's daughter was able to condense the deepest mysteries of life and death into a few short sentences. But just as Caesar did not understand his daughter's parable until she explained it in full, neither Pharaoh nor his sorcerers grasped the message of the first two plagues until Hashem made it clear for them in the third one. Hashem first caused the waters of the Nile, the life source of the Egyptians, to putrefy and turn into blood. Then, using that very same putrefied water of the Nile, He created life anew — for the plague of Frogs. But it wasn't until Hashem showed that He could breathe life into dust and clay by turning the dust of Egypt into living lice that the Egyptian sorcerers — but not Pharaoh — finally understood that there exists a Supreme Being Who created the entire world.

They looked with fresh eyes at the fish-filled waters of the Nile and understood that God is able to create life from water.

They saw water turn to blood and understood that Hashem is able to afflict that water. They saw the frogs emerge from the Nile and understood that God is able to create life from afflicted water. Then they witnessed the dust turn into lice and understood from this occurrence that God can therefore also turn dust and clay into living human beings. They had made the connection between the imperative statement, “Let Us make man” and the plague of Lice. Moreover, they knew that the Torah begins each of the Ten Imperatives of Creation with the specific phrase “*Elokim* said” (the Tetragrammaton not appearing until later in the *parashah*). That is why they referred to the plague of Lice as “the finger of *Elokim*” instead of “the finger of יהוה-וה.”