



# ALSHICH

## INSIGHTS FOR THE SHABBOS TABLE

ספר שמות

פרשת וארא

SERIES 2: ISSUE 14

## THE UNIQUENESS OF THE PLAGUE OF BOILS

Let us discuss the plague of boils in the context of all the plagues through the eyes of the following Midrash (*Shemos Rabbah* 12:4):

Blood, frogs, and lice, which occurred on the land, were through Aharon. Hail, locusts, and darkness were through Moshe, since they occurred in the air, for Moshe had dominion over the earth and the sky. Wild beasts, sickness of the livestock, and the slaying of the firstborn were through Hashem. And boils through all of them [acting together].

### Consider the following questions:

1. The Midrash seems to suggest that the first three plagues were brought by Aharon because they were on land. But since, as the Midrash says, “Moshe had dominion over the earth and the sky,” why weren’t they brought through Moshe?
2. Since the plague of wild beasts also occurred on land, why weren’t they also brought through Aharon, rather than through Hashem?
3. Why weren’t all the plagues brought directly through Hashem, since He has true dominion over everything, including the earth and the air?
4. Why was it specifically the plague of boils that required that Aharon, Moshe, and Hashem all be involved?

Hashem wanted to grant the Jewish people the privilege of experiencing first-hand that He is the Creator of all. Bringing the plagues upon Egypt made them fully understand that He created and rules over all three levels of existence: (a) the lowly physical world, (b) the supernal forces (*mazalos*) and (c) the angelic realm. By showing how He rules over the four elements which make up the natural world – earth, water, fire, and air – He demonstrated that He created the physical world. By showing His dominion over the *mazalos*, Hashem demonstrated that He created the celestial system that influences the world. And finally, by showing His dominion over the guardian angel of Egypt, He demonstrated that He is also the Creator of the angelic realm.

In executing the first three plagues, Aharon showed that God has dominion over the two lower (i.e., earthly) elements of earth and water. First he struck the waters of the Nile, which were turned into blood. Then he caused the water to teem with frogs, whose habitat is in the water. In the third plague, he struck the element of earth, which was transformed into lice. Moshe could not strike the land or water, because the earth protected Moshe by concealing the body of the Egyptian taskmaster whom he killed (*Shemos Rabbah* 10:7), and the Nile River saved Moshe from Pharaoh’s decree to kill all babies (*Shemos Rabbah* 9:10, 10:4). **[This answers Question 1.]**

God demonstrated His dominion over the two higher (i.e., less corporeal) elements, air and fire, in the plagues He

brought through Moshe. In the plague of hail, God gave the element of air the ability to freeze water in the heavens, to such an extent that even though there was fire within the hailstones, it was not able to melt the frozen exterior. This also further demonstrated God's dominion over the element of water while displaying His dominion over the element of fire, which did not get extinguished by the ice around it. The plague of locusts is similar to hail in that it was especially linked to the element of air, since this element is predominant in all winged creatures. Finally, the element of air is predominant in the plague of darkness, becoming so foul and dense that it did not allow the light of the sun to penetrate it. It was therefore appropriate that Moshe, who "had dominion over the ... sky," would be God's messenger for the three plagues that were predominantly connected to the higher elements of air and fire. Since in the six aforementioned plagues God was demonstrating His dominion over the four elements of the lowly physical world, He specifically brought them about through human beings who lived there (Moshe and Aharon). **[This answers Question 3.]**

But God Himself had to demonstrate His dominion over the *mazalos*, the (higher) realm of the celestial forces. The *mazal* that the Egyptians worshipped as a god was that of the sheep, so all three plagues that God directly brought about involved striking down this idolatry. In the plague of wild beasts, God used these animals to smite the Egyptians' sheep, thus demonstrating the falsity of the Egyptian belief in the superiority of the sheep over other animals. **[This answers Question 2.]** Similarly, He struck down the sheep in the plague of the sickness of the livestock. And through the plague of the slaying of the firstborn [in Nissan], He also subdued and humiliated the *mazal* of the sheep, which is the "firstborn," primary *mazal*, for it holds sway in Nissan, the first month of the year. God crushed its power by striking down the firstborn of the Egyptians, both man and animal, who are most affected by this *mazal*. In this way, Hashem demonstrated His dominion over all the *mazalos* that He created.

Hashem then demonstrated His power over the highest level of creation, the angelic realm, in the plague of boils, which was the only plague brought through Moshe, Aharon, and God together. Moshe and Aharon were involved because two of "their" elements of the physical world were afflicted by the boils. *Bava Kamma* 80b states that the boils which hurt the Egyptians were moist on the outside and dry on the inside, like a burning fire. The external moistness was from the element of water, and therefore came about through Aharon, who had previously struck the waters of the Nile. The dryness inside was from the element of fire and therefore came about through Moshe.

Finally, the guardian angel of Egypt was also afflicted through this plague. Our Sages (*Shemos Rabbah* 15:27) noted that the second mention of the word "sorcerers" in verse 9:11 lacks the letter *yud*, as it says, *The sorcerers (הַחֲרָטְמִים) could not stand before Moshe because of the boils, because the boils were on the sorcerers (בַּחֲרָטְמָם)*. They taught that this second mention of who was afflicted actually refers to Egypt's guardian angel, as we can interpret the word as if it said *חֲרָטְמָם*, *their sorcerer*, alluding to the celestial prince who oversaw all of Egypt. Since only Hashem could strike down the angel, this plague had to involve Him directly as well. **[This answers Question 4.]**

### THE ALSHICH AND HIS COMMENTARY

The Alshich (1508 - 1600), was one of only five famous rabbis in Jewish history universally known by the title "HaKodosh" (the Holy one). He served on the same Beis Din as Rabbi Yosef Caro, author of the Shulchan Aruch. He simultaneously focuses on both the text as well as the context of a series of verses by listing a range of questions and then answering them all using one or two concepts.

These sheets are drawn from the Alshich on the Torah published by Feldheim and are in memory of Yental Bas Yitzchok, Mrs Jean Silkin. They seek to expand the spectrum of readers who can appreciate the Alshich's true greatness.

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