

The Ten Plagues

Ten Parallel Ten

It is a positive mitzva from the Torah to speak about the miracles and wonders that were done to our ancestors in Mitzrayim on the night of the fifteenth of Nissan.
(Rambam, Hilchot Chametz U'matzah 7:1)

It is incumbent on the leader of the *seder* to discuss the miracles that G-d performed for us in Mitzrayim. Since the retelling of the ten plagues is perhaps an appropriate way to fulfill this *mitzvah*, it would be suitable to study the deeper ideas behind their essence. While there are many questions behind the nature of the ten plagues, there are two fundamental questions that need clarification. Firstly why did G-d bring exactly *ten* plagues? After all, once Pharaoh refused to let the Jewish people go, G-d could have flattened Mitzrayim with one mighty blow. What then is the rationale behind ten different plagues?¹ Furthermore, even if we comprehend the motive behind the number of plagues, we still need to understand the reason behind G-d's choice of bringing these specific plagues. After all G-d had many forces at his disposal to destroy Mitzrayim; what then made these specific ten plagues more fitting for destroying Mitzrayim?

The Mishna in Avot says that G-d created the natural world through ten sayings.² The Ohr Gedalyahu explains that with each saying of creation G-d, so to speak, created a mask for Himself. Each saying gave another layer to the natural laws of the world that hide G-d. However, each of the ten plagues, by altering that part of nature, removed one of these masks and showed that G-d is behind each and every one. Through the ten plagues Hashem wanted to show the world once and for all that He is the driving force behind everything. This is the reason why the ten sayings of creation parallel the ten plagues exactly.³ The following is the break down according to the Maharal:⁴

Sayings of Creation (Bereishit)	The Ten Plagues (Shemot)	Connection
1:1 In the beginning... ⁵	12:29 Death of firstborn	There is a parallel theme of beginning. ⁶
1:3 G-d said, 'Let there be light'	10:22 Darkness	The opposite of light is darkness.
1:6 G-d said, 'Let there be a firmament'	9:23 Hail	G-d made the firmament and now commanded unnatural hail (mix of fire and ice) to rain down from it.
1:9 G-d said, 'Let the waters gather and let the Earth appear'	8:13 Lice	G-d revealed the earth and now the dust of earth transformed into lice as it says: <i>G-d said to Moshe: tell Aharon, stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the land and it shall become lice throughout the land of Egypt.</i> (Shemot 8:12)
1:11 G-d said, 'Let the earth bring forth vegetation'	10:13 Locust	The Locusts ate the vegetation. (Even though the plague of hail also destroyed vegetation, locusts <i>only</i> destroyed vegetation while hail also killed animals.)
1:14 G-d said, 'Let there be luminaries'	9:6 Epidemic	The luminaries affect the state of the air that we breathe which can cause an epidemic. (See Maharal)
1:20 G-d said, 'Let the water sprout forth living creatures'	8:2 Frogs	G-d created creatures that came from water; now frogs came in excess out of water.

¹ See Shem M'Shmuel, Vacira 5678

² Avot 5:1

³ Ohr Gedalyahu, Parshat Bo

⁴ Maharal, Gevurot Hashem, 57, the reason why they don't match up in order is because the Plagues had to be in order of intensity going from lowest to highest. See O'hr Gadalyahu to Parshat Bo for a different reason for the difference in order. See also the Hagadah, Ma'aseh Nissim that similarly points out the parallel between the plagues and "the sayings of creation".

⁵ See Gamara in Rosh Hashana 32a that says that "*bereishit*" is one of the sayings of creation.

⁶ The Alshich (Torat Moshe to Shemot 34:17-18) points out further that the plague of the firstborn was done directly through G-d as opposed to intermediaries. As it says in the Haggadah: *I (G-d) will pass through the land of Egypt, I and not an angel; I will smite all the firstborn, I and not a seraph; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments I and not a messenger; I am G-d, it is I and no other.* This parallels the first saying of creation when there was nothing besides G-d; as angels were only created on the second day. (Rashi to Bereishit 1:5 quoting Bereishit Rabbah 3:8)

1:24 G-d said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures'	8:20 Wild animals	G-d created living creatures on earth and now those animals came in excess and attacked in an unnatural manner.
1:26 G-d said, 'Let us make man'	9:10 Boils	The plague of boils was the only one that affected man's body so directly. Also man was made in the image of G-d and the boils tainted that spiritual idea.
1:29 G-d said, 'Behold I have given vegetation... for food to eat'	7:20 Transformation of water to blood	Food of Egypt depended on the Nile and nutrients of food are transported through blood.

Based on the above we can answer the questions with which we began. The purpose of the ten plagues was to show that G-d is the One Who is behind every force of nature. For this reason the plagues paralleled the ten sayings of creation that created the mask of nature. This is precisely why ten plagues were necessary. Additionally, this is why these specific plagues were chosen. Each plague was another glimpse behind the mask of nature ultimately demonstrating G-d's providence behind every part of creation.

This is also why *Moshe Rabbeinu's* name is mentioned only once in the *Hagaddah*.⁷ On *Pesach Hashem* wanted to show once and for all that He Himself is behind everything and no intermediary, not nature and not *Moshe*. Therefore *Moshe Rabbeinu's* name is mentioned only once in the *Hagaddah*. The *Hagaddah* itself stresses this point: *I (Hashem) will pass through the land of Egypt, I and not an angel; I will smite all the firstborn, I and not a seraph; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments I and not a messenger; I am Hashem, it is I and no other.* In Hebrew the first letters of the words "Mal'ach" (angel), "seraph" (form of angel) and "hashaliach" (messenger) spell *Moshe*, thus hinting at the above idea.⁸ The one time that *Moshe's* name was mentioned is quoting the *pasuk*:⁹ *vayaminu b'Hashem u'vMoshe avdo* (and they believed in Hashem and Moshe His (Hashem's) servant. *Moshe's* name *is* mentioned here because the *pasuk* itself refers to *Moshe* as *Hashem's* servant therefore still maintaining the idea above.¹⁰

It is interesting to note the difference between the Haggadah and Megilat Ester. Whereas the *megillah* leaves out Hashem's name and is instead full of the names of the characters that brought about the salvation, the haggadah stresses the name of Hashem while leaving out the names of any messengers of Hashem. This idea highlights the fundamental difference between *Pesach*, when there were revealed miracles versus *Purim*, where the miracles were hidden.

Five Parallel Five

Chazal tell us based on the verses of the *Torah* that *Hashem* only hardened *Pharaoh's* heart after the fifth plague. Before that it was *Pharaoh* who hardened his own heart and refused to let the Jewish people go. Why is it that *Hashem* chose to harden *Pharaoh's* heart only after the fifth plague?

The *Maharal* says¹¹ that if we look at the plagues as two separate sets of five we see that they correspond to each other exactly. The first five affected things in the lower world while the last five did so in the higher world.

1) Water turned to blood	6) Boils	Both related to disease. Blood affected inanimate waters while boils affected humans.
2) Frogs	7) Hail	Both related to water as the <i>Midrash</i> says ¹² - "the atmosphere is upper water and the seas are lower waters." Frogs came from lower waters while Hail came from upper waters.
3) Lice	8) Locusts	Lice dwell on the low earth while locusts fly in the high heavens.

⁷ In the Haggadah of the Rambam it is not even mentioned once, as the section it is mentioned in is not part of the Haggadah of the Rambam.

⁸ See Haggadah Orach Chaim of the Ben Ish Chai who explains that this idea is also true according to the girsa that has "shaliach" instead of "hashaliach" since the rashei teivot is shemesh, which is a remez to Moshe Rabbeinu.

⁹ Shemot 14:31

¹⁰ Siftei Chaim on Moadim II p.376; One reason why Moshe Rabeinu's name is mentioned this once is because we are not allowed to break up a pasuk and since that pasuk was needed to be brought the Haggadah needed to finish quoting it in its entirety.

¹¹ Maharal, Gevurot Hashem 57

¹² Bereishit Rabbah 12; See also Ta'anit 8b

4) Wild animals	9) Darkness	As it says in <i>Tehillim</i> ¹³ wild animals appear at night “ <i>You create darkness and it is night when all the wild beasts of the forest creep forth.</i> ” Also the Hebrew word for wild animals “ <i>orev</i> ” is linguistically related to the Hebrew word for night “ <i>erev</i> ”.
5) Epidemic	10) Death of firstborn	Epidemic affected lower animals while plague of firstborn affected higher beings namely humans.

The reason why *Pharaoh* was able to withstand the first five plagues without *Hashem*'s hardening of his heart was because they were on a lower level. However for the last five plagues that were on a higher level *Hashem* hardened *Pharaoh*'s heart to enable him to bear the intensity. Since *Pharaoh* constantly chose to disobey *Hashem*, *Hashem* decided to take away his freewill to a certain extent by taking away his emotional reaction to the plagues¹⁴.

Sets of Three

In the *Hagaddah* Rabbi *Yehuda* uses the initials of the names of the plagues to form three words. This means that he split the plagues into three sets. What is the significance of this? Furthermore, why did *Moshe* not warn *Pharaoh* before the plagues of lice, boils and darkness?¹⁵

- One approach in the division of the plagues to sets of threes is as follows. The first three proved that there is a G-d,¹⁶ and that's why it says regarding the first three plagues:¹⁷ *So says Hashem through this you shall know that I am Hashem.* The second set of three showed his providence in the world. By distinguishing between the Jewish people and the Egyptians, *Hashem* showed that He is not only the creator but He is intimately involved in every minute detail of the happenings of the world¹⁸ as it says regarding the second set:¹⁹ *And on that day I shall set apart the land of Goshen upon which My people stands, that there shall be no swarm there; so that you will know that I am Hashem in the midst of the land.* The last set showed that there is no one like Him. *For this time I shall send all my plagues against your heart and upon your servants and your people so that you shall know that there is no one like Me in all the world.*²⁰
- Another reason for the division of the plagues into sets of threes is because the first three plagues were done through *Aharon*, the next three through *Moshe* and the last three by *Hashem* Himself.
- The *Maharal* says²¹ that the first three plagues affected the earth and water, the second set of three plagues affected humans and animals and the third set of three plagues affected the heavens and the celestials. The last remaining plague, which was the killing of the firstborn relates to the human soul. Therefore we see it affected things progressively from the lower earth to animals and humans and finally to the soul; going from lower to higher. Here is the breakdown:

First set of three plagues-Affected earth and water that are the lowest parts of creation.

Blood affected water, frogs came from water onto earth and lice came from the dust of the earth that was transformed into lice.

Second set of three plagues- involved humans and animals that live on the ground.

Wild animals, epidemic that killed animals and boils that affected humans

Third set of three plagues- affected the heavens, sky and the celestial that are even higher

Hail (came from the sky), locusts (fly in the sky) and darkness is lack of light from the luminaries of the sky.

¹³ Tehillim 104:20

¹⁴ See Rambam Hilchot Teshuva; See also Ramban for a different approach.

¹⁵ See Maharal Gevurot Hashem 57 who brings the answer that suggests the reason is because Hashem warns two times and the third time He gives no warning. The Maharal rejects this answer because according to this answer there should have been no warnings following the first two plagues.

¹⁶ See Rashbam to Shemot 7:17; See also Gra to Shir Hashirim 2:3

¹⁷ Shemot 7:17

¹⁸ See Ramban to Shemot 13:16

¹⁹ Shemot 8:18

²⁰ Shemot 9:14

²¹ Maharal, Gevurot Hashem, 57

Finally, the death of the firstborns according to the *Maharal* relates to the soul which transcends the physical world altogether. We see therefore that the plagues went from the lowest parts of creation to the highest in a very specific order.

- The *Maharal* also says²² that the ten plagues can be divided into threes by putting them in groups of positive, negative and neutral (the words positive and negative here are arbitrary it really means one thing, then its opposite followed by a third thing which has both of the opposites within itself). Here is the breakdown:

<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Combination of Positive and Negative</i>
Blood is warm (has characteristic of fire)	Frogs (live in water; opposite of fire)	Lice form in wet places (water) that are warm (fire)
Wild animals (caused abnormal death)	Plague and disease (caused death within natural realms)	Boils (see Maharal there as to how boils includes both)
Hail (falls down)	Locusts (fly up)	Darkness (celestial bodies revolve-essentially going up and down)

According to the last approach we can understand why *Moshe* warned *Pharaoh* for the first two plagues of each set of three. He did not warn *Pharaoh* regarding the last plagues of each set of three namely lice, boils and darkness. The reason is that the last plague of each set of three was not a new thing, rather it was a combination of the first two plagues in that set. Therefore it did not need its own individual warning.

²² Maharal, *Gevurot Hashem*, 57