Five Hidden Components of Yetziat Mitzrayim

By Rav Moshe Taragin

The section of the Haggada of tzei u-lemad unveils the nuanced stages and components of both the bondage to Pharaoh and the deliverance from Egypt. More than any other section, the four pesukim and the associated interpretations of Chazal cited by the Haggada, amplify the themes of redemption which flavor the seder experience. The final of the four pesukim cited from Parashat Ki Tavo lists five dimensions of the exodus and Chazal discerned 5 “unseen” redemptive elements within these phrases.

The final pasuk reads "Va-yotzienu Hashem Elokeinu misham be-yad chazaka u-be-zeroa netuya u-be-mora gadol u-be-otot u-be-moftim” – “God liberated you with a strong hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with impressive revelation, and with signs and miracles.” Although the pasuk speaks in general and even generic terms of the exodus, Chazal elicited multiple ideas from this list.

I. Be-Yad Chazaka - The Pivotal Role of the Plague of "Dever"

The Hagadda cites a pasuk from Shemot perek 9 which quotes the Egyptian sorcerers as attributing the plague to the “hand of God.” This phraseology affirms the association between the plague of dever and the phrase "yad chazaka" (strong hand). What is less obvious is the spotlighting of dever as opposed to the other nine makkot. Why does the pasuk in Ki Tavo specifically underscore the plague of dever? Interestingly, the midrash in Shemot Rabba parasha 10 cites R. Yehoshua ben Levi, who asserts that every plague was accompanied by dever, further affirming an influential role for the plague of dever. What makes this plague "stand out" from the others and why is this special motif captured by the phrase "yad Hashem?"

In truth, attacking the animal herds of Egypt was not merely an assault on a chief economic asset. Since the Egyptians worshipped their animals, it was an offensive against the Egyptian deity as part of Hashem’s continuing demonstration of the futility of Egyptian theology. Hashem had promised Moshe (Shemot 12) “I will indict the Egyptian gods” and ultimately Egyptian animals would be slaughtered as pascal offerings on the night of deliverance. In this respect, dever is an early forerunner of the korban pesach and deserves special notice.

Beyond the direct comment upon the specific Egyptian form of animal worship, dever may provide an overall statement about monotheism and an unknowable God. In addition to discrediting animal worship, Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu wanted to debunk paganism in general and display monotheism as a truer alternative. A tenet of monotheism is the belief in an invisible God which cannot be seen and whose essence is in no way physical or human-like. The plague of dever was the only plague which was completely “invisible.” During each plague, the catalyst was visible and palpable (frogs, blood, wild animals, boils, etc.), but the microbe that infected and ravaged the Egyptian herds was not discernable to the human eye. In this respect, dever was a perfect lesson to the Egyptians regarding an invisible world. The plague is referred to as the "hand of God" because it educated the Egyptians that God has no discernable elements; his hand is UNSEEN and UNKNOWABLE. Associating dever with the "hand of God" illustrates a unique message encapsulated in the
heart of this plague.

In truth, this message was already initiated during the plague of *kinim/*lice. Although the lice were visible, they were too small to truly discern naturally; they heralded the evolution of a completely invisible plague of death. Already at this early stage, the Egyptian magicians struggled to reproduce this event and referred to it as "the finger of God." As Rashi reminds us, their magic was ineffective regarding items smaller than barley seeds. Their magical pagan rites were anchored in a visible and material world; as the plagues diminished in size, their magic failed. Ultimately, the hand of God as experienced through *dever* reminded the Egyptians that God has no hand, nor even any fingers.

If *kinim* presaged *dever*, the plague of *Bechorot* succeeded it. Each produced absolute death and not mere suffering, and in each instance the cause of death was invisible. The final *pasuk* in the Torah alludes to "u-le-chol ha-yad ha-chazakah u-le-chol ha-morah ha-gadol..." Chazal (in the *Sifrei*) interpret this second iteration of "yad chazaka" as a reference to *makat bechorot*. Both *dever* and *bechorot* deal death to the Egyptians in an unseen fashion and each reinforces the notion of a non-physical God. The same phrase - *yad chazaka* – which encapsulates *dever* in *parashat Ki Tavo* describes *bechorot* in the final *pasuk* of the Torah.

II. **U-be-zeroah Netuyah – The Military Sword**

The Haggada cites a verse in *Divrei Hayamim* which associates an outstretched sword with a city under siege. As Dovid and his colleagues viewed the angelic sword extended in the direction of Yerushalayim, they realized that the dire siege was about to begin and they began to pray for its removal. Based upon this verse, the phrase "outstretched arm" in Ki Tavo is taken by Chazal as a reference to a sword which punished the Egyptians in Egypt. Chazal do not indicate the exact nature of this sword. Nothing in the description of the ten plagues indicates a sword as a tool of punishment!

One solution may stem from an interesting Midrash Tanchuma in Parashat Bo, which likens the series of ten plagues to a military assault upon a besieged city. First the water sources are cut off; subsequently loud and frightening noise is generated; afterwards arrows are fired to kill as many as possible; then individual insurgents enter the city, followed by vicious groups of soldiers who infiltrate sow fear. This ultimately yields to a general assault of the entire army. Without first softening the enemy defense heavy casualties will be suffered. The progression of the *makkot* may be likened to this process. The plague of *dam* polluted the source of water, and subsequently croaking and shrieking sowed fear and terror. The *arov* insurgency stirred general panic, and was followed by an general attack of an entire army (*arbeh* – see Yoel perek 1 which likens locust to an army of God). The *midrash* proceeds to associate each plague with an element of military strategy, discerning within the overall series a carefully planned military victory. The sword alluded to by the phrase *zeroah netuya* reminded Egyptian and Jew alike that the plagues were not only penal; they symbolized Hashem waging war with His Egyptian enemy.

This image was crucial to the newly liberated nation. Very shortly, they would be forced to fight against hostile and barbaric kings of Cana'an. The challenge of military struggle for newly emancipated slaves is evidenced by God’s reluctance to travel past the Phlishtim; although the Phlistim can be ignored for now, the kings of Cana’an will necessarily be engaged. By viewing their God as a WARRIOR and not merely a Creator and Punisher, the people may possess the conviction and faith to wage these pending wars. The process of deliverance was structured as war to aid the growing identification of God as military leader. Ultimately, this identification matured at the *Yam Suf*, when the people fully realized “Hashem Ish Milchama Hashem Shemo.”
fully assimilating the role of God as warrior and generating the confidence to pursue future battles.

The sword alluded to in the phrase of "zeroa netuya" reminds us that the plagues were in fact a battle. Sadly, the egel and miraglim disasters delayed entry into Eretz Canaan and set the pending wars of conquest back 40 years, yielding a new generation whose confidence wasn’t cramped by 200 plus years of slavery.

Yet another aspect of this war is alluded to in the Ritva’s interpretation of the sword and is based upon an account cited by several midrashim (see for instance Pesikta De-Rav Kahane, pesikta 7). Hearing of Moshe’s threat to annihilate the firstborns, the intended victims mobbed Pharaoh’s palace, demanding the release of the Jewish slaves to avert this catastrophe. Unmoved by the threat to his very own child, Pharaoh refused their pleas. Frustrated by this rejection, the firstborns rebelled, launching an insurrection which caused over 60,000 Egyptian casualties before the plague of the firstborn even began. Having slain their countrymen, the firstborns could not escape their inevitable fate.

Although this episode would appear incidental to the actual plague, it was anything but. As part of His general intervention in nature, science, and human psychology, Hashem intervened in internal Egyptian politics as well, fomenting a mutiny that exacted a heavy toll on the Egyptians (one may conjecture that more were killed in this civil war than in the central plague of bechorot). Internal Egyptian political developments must be seen as divinely ordained elements of redemption. We recite in Tehillim 136: “Le-makeh Mitzrayim bi-vchoreihem" - Hashem punished the Egyptians through their firstborns, suggesting that the firstborns were not only the victims of the plague of bechorot but the instruments of destruction as well. Makat bechorot was a dual layered plague, first God incited a civil war spearheaded by the first born and then he murdered those very agents.

The sword alluded to in the phrase "zeroa netuya" reminds us of the war which was launched; although it seemed political in nature and independent of the Jewish drama, it was a function of the outstretched arm and sword of God.

III. U-ve-mora Gadol – The First Recorded Divine Revelation

The Haggada interprets this as a reference to the divine revelation which accompanied the exodus from Egypt. Citing a parallel pasuk in Devarim 4, the Haggada accentuates the first national revelation of Hashem's Shekhina. God had first appeared to Avraham in his tent subsequent to his circumcision, but He had never revealed Himself to an entire nation. Ironically, the cesspool of Egypt, saturated with corpses, served as the first site of national revelation.

Of course, the irony is noteworthy and important. As the midrash comments, God lovingly descended into Egypt on this night to retrieve his beloved nation despite the un-holiness of the environment. The midrash likens this decision to the loyal choice of a kohen to follow his teruma into a cemetery regardless of the consequences to his personal status. This divine descent signals the launch of the rapture between God and His people - a passion which Shir Ha-Shirim immortalizes.

This encounter foreshadows and grooms the people for the more comprehensive encounters of the Yam Suf and subsequently the delivery of the Torah at Har Sinai. While the term morah gadol in Ki Tavo is taken by Chazal as a reference to this original rendezvous, the identical term, mentioned again in the final pasuk of the Torah, is interpreted as a reference to the more extensive encounter at the Yam Suf. At that stage, the pasuk boldly announces that the nation witnessed God’s great "hand," employing a verb (va-yar) that leaves no question regarding the revelatory nature of this event.

Of course, this national epiphany requires unique elements along with it – korbanot and mitzvot – as any
encounter with the Shekhina demands. Casting the ceremonies of the original night of Exodus in the context of a divine encounter greatly impacts their function and symbolism. A more complete analysis of this dynamic lies beyond the context of this shiur.

IV. U­ve­otot – The Symbolic Staff

At this stage, the Haggada displays the staff of Moshe, the source of the 10 plagues, as a crucial component of the Exodus saga. The word otot is associated with the mateh primarily because they are twinned in Shemot 4 – the pasuk in which God delivers the staff to Moshe. In addition, the term otot insinuates the staff since, according to Chazal, actual letters were written upon it - the acronym of "dezach adash be-achav," referring to the plagues and miracles. It would appear that key thematic elements are contained within this instrument of miracles.

According to the Rambam’s position, the mateh of Moshe certainly symbolizes an important theological detail. The Rambam believes that divine interventions in nature are not upheavals of the natural order but predestined and preprogrammed. When God created the world, he already planted the seeds for these future miracles. By way of example, when Hashem created the oceans, he pre-established that 2448 years after the creation, on the 22nd day of Nissan, the waters should split. Their molecular structure was established in a manner that they would split at this stage.

Although the Rambam does not indicate the reason for this cosmological reality, an intriguing gemara in Shabbat (53a) may articulate his philosophical position. The gemara recounts the story of a man whose wife died, leaving a nursing child. As he was unable to afford a wet nurse, a miracle was necessary; indeed, he miraculously began to lactate. Upon hearing of this episode, R. Yosef remarked, "How great is this man, that the natural order has been altered on his behalf!" Abaye dissented, claiming, "How INFERIOR is he that he required a rending of nature and could not be assisted within the natural scheme." Perhaps the Rambam agrees with Abaye’s position; a true need should already be programmed into God’s system.

In this light, the mateh is iconic. The mishna in Avot lists the staff as one of ten elements created by Hashem during twilight immediately succeeding the six days of creation. According to the Rambam, this signifies that the miracles themselves which the staff would catalyze were already inserted within the natural order. As they are deviant from the normal system, they had to be "created" during the final twilight of Creation and not during the six days proper. However, as they were still "natural," they must be rooted in those original six days.

By explaining "u­ve­otot" as a reference to the staff, we maintain that the miracles of Egypt were historically predestined and that our redemption was valuable enough to be an incorporated element of nature. The inscription of the ultimate ten makkot upon the staff reinforces the predetermined nature of these interventions. Jewish history and redemption were important enough to be considered during creation. Jewish destiny is cosmological.

Even without the Rambam’s theory, the staff contains important symbolic significance. The midrash comments on the reason for delivering the staff to Moshe. After persuading a reluctant Moshe to accept his mission, God delivers the mateh and informs Moshe that it will be the apparatus for performing the miracles. The midrash comments that Hashem informed Moshe, "even if you are unwilling to fulfill my mission, this staff – inanimate as it is - is capable of executing My will." This sobering message should ideally assure Moshe’s continued commitment despite his lingering ambivalence. It also depersonalizes Moshe (which may contribute to his conviction). If the staff is fully capable of miracles, there is little reason to impute these powers to Moshe. In this light, referencing the staff on the night of Pesach is strategic. Moshe’s name is
conspicuously absent from the *seder* – and for good reason. This is the night of God; as the well known *derasha* confirms, *ani ve-lo shaliach* - "I alone, without any intermediary agent." Just as the association of angelic agents is suppressed, so is Moshe’s mortal agency. To emphasize the absence of a human intermediary, the staff and its message is mentioned.

Implicit yet a third imagery of the *mateh* is provided by the continuation of that same *midrash*. Having delivered the staff to Moshe, Hashem informs him of a post-Egypt role for the staff in producing heavenly manna, water, clouds of glory and various other GIFTS. A staff which had been so clearly aligned with plagues and human suffering would also be pivotal in ensuring human welfare. It is an icon of "*otot," - many different forms of miracles and not merely of plagues; Moshe must be aware of these potentials even as he wreaks havoc upon Egypt though the *mateh*’s curses. After the Exodus, religion may have been miscast by some as centered around death and suffering. In announcing himself to the ancient world, Hashem destroyed the cradle of civilization and riddled them with months of misery. It is crucial that religion be viewed as a contribution to the human condition and that this Divine staff be responsible for wellbeing and human benefit as well. This broader role is already announced prior to the Exodus, well before any of those benefits will be necessary, to ensure a holistic view of the staff. It is a staff of life not a rod of death.

Nowhere in the Torah is the symbolism of the staff as an instrument of prosperity more accentuated than in the episode immediately following the mutiny of Korach. The nation had suffered a litany of rebellions and riots, each ending in the savage death of large numbers of the Jewish populace. As the sinners were abolished, religion began to be depicted as a culture of death and misery. At this point, the Jews complain to Moshe, "*atem hamitem et am Hashem*" – religion is literally killing us. In response, a final "caucus" is conducted by placing the staffs of each tribal head in the *Mikdash*. The selected staff would announce the chosen tribe. Aharon’s staff flowered and yielded fruit. Aharon’s selection for religious service is captured by a flowering tree, reminding the people that religion is meant to encourage and embrace life and not to terminate it. There are moments in which sinners are punished, but the texture of religion must not be distorted. By alluding to the general *otot* of the *mateh*, we are reclaiming the staff as an instrument of welfare, and not merely plagues and curses.

**V. ** *U-ve-moftim* - The Apocalyptic Blueprint

This reference is perhaps the most arresting. Firstly, the association between *dam* and the term *moftim* seems flimsy at best. Nowhere in the Torah’s account of the plagues are the terms paired. The Haggada cites a *pasuk* in Yoel which terms the apocalyptic signs as *moftim*. The signs are listed as blood, fire, and smoke in both heaven and earth!; blood alone is not referred to as a *mofet*. In addition, there is no record of smoke or fire during the Egyptian plagues. Finally, even if we could identify blood as the allusion of *moftim*, why is it spotlighted and why is this spotlight the concluding image of the Exodus description? If anything, the reference to blood should be provided earlier.

In fact, the Ritva cites a *mekhilta* of R. Shimon bar Yochai, who claims that the plague of blood was accompanied by smoke and fire. Even if we accept this description, however, we are left with multiple questions regarding the centrality of the plague of blood. Why does it deserve special treatment and mention?

Perhaps the description of *dam* in Yechezkel 29 may lend blood greater symbolic importance. In *Parashat Bo*, the plagues of blood and frogs are depicted in thoroughly functional terms. By bloodying the Nile and launching an amphibious attack, life was both inconvenienced and even threatened; the primary source of Egyptian agriculture was in turmoil. *Yechezkel 29* presents the plague as existential and even theological.
Pharaoh had deified himself and imagined himself as the great Reptile of the Nile River. His confidence in the agricultural potential of the Nile filled him with delusions of grandeur. Hashem announces that He will assault the great Reptile and hook his cheeks as he is drawn out of the Nile. As he is lifted, drying and dead fish will cling to his scales. These verses describe the first two plagues (primarily the first) in metaphoric terminology. Highlighting blood at this stage may remind us that the plague entailed more than just a practical offensive.

However, even if we broaden the connotations of the plague of blood, it is still strange that it is mentioned at this late stage. It seems as if the Haggada – by citing the apocalyptic blood accompanied by smoke and fire - intends a different message.

It appears as if this very message is embedded in an interesting midrash - in fact the conclusion of the aforementioned pesikta of Rav Kahane. Having described the series of makkot as structured similar to a military campaign, the midrash subsequently declares that just as God punished the Egyptians, he will indict the kingdom of Edom in the final apocalypse. Essentially, the ten plagues serve as a blueprint for the apocalyptic retribution and accounting. The midrash proceeds to associate each plague with a parallel element of the apocalypse, citing various sources indicating the occurrence of plague-like events during that apocalypse. The first pasuk cited portrays the presence of blood, fire, and smoke during the apocalypse, based upon our very pasuk in Yoel perek 3 – “Ve-natati moftim ba-shamayim u-va-aretz, dam va-eish ve-timrot ashan.” Although smoke and fire are new additions to the process of divine retribution, blood is, of course, familiar from the Egyptian plagues. This pasuk is cited by the midrash to indicate the common presence of blood during the exodus and during the apocalypse. Subsequently cited pesukim verify the presence of the remainder of the plagues during that process.

It seems likely that the Haggada cites the pasuk in Yoel to associate the Exodus and the apocalypse in the same fashion as the midrash links them. Limited in space, the Haggada did not cite each and every pasuk verifying each and every “Egyptian” plague during the apocalypse. Instead, it merely quoted the first one. According to the Haggada, the final phrase of the four pasuk synopsis of Ki Tavo envisions an ultimate redemption modeled after our first redemption. The concluding word of “moftim” links to the pasuk in Yoel, which serves as the first indication that the plagues will reemerge during the apocalypse. The Haggada cites this one pasuk assuming that we can draw the allusion to the message and the linkage between the Exodus and the apocalypse.