

Parashat Vaera

January 16, 3 Shevat 5781

Torah: Exodus 6:2-9:35; **Triennial** 7:8-8:15

Haftarah: Ezekiel 28:25-29:21

Demons, Germs, and Magic Dust
Ilana Kurshan

The struggle between Moses and Pharaoh takes place on two fronts. First, there is the political campaign to free the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, bringing an end to hundreds of years of servitude. But then there is also the spiritual battle to convince Pharaoh and the Egyptians of God's preeminence. Were the exodus a story of political liberation alone, there would have been no need for ten plagues or the hardening of Pharaoh's heart – God could have simply struck the Egyptians with a devastating pandemic that would have killed them all off, leaving the Israelites to go free. The purpose of the ten plagues, as God explicitly tells Moses in this week's parsha, is to "multiply My signs and marvels in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 7:3) so that Pharaoh and all the Egyptians will learn to recognize the hand of God in the world. Surprisingly, one of the significant turning points in this spiritual battle is the plague of lice – it is these

tiny critters that first begin to convince the Egyptians of God's supremacy.

The plague of lice is the first divine sign that the Egyptians recognize as a miracle and not magic. Previously, when Aaron converted his rod into a snake, turned the Nile to blood and summoned the frogs, Pharaoh's magicians were quick to replicate these special effects. But when Moses and Aaron make dust into lice, the Egyptians' spells prove ineffectual. They turn to Pharaoh and pronounce, "This is the finger of God" (Exodus 8:15)– a phrase that appears in only one other context in the Torah, to describe the two tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments (Exodus 31:18). For the Egyptians—albeit not for Pharaoh, whose heart God has hardened—the evidence of God's hand in the world seems rock-solid and they are forced to admit defeat, at least on the spiritual front.

Why is it the plague of lice that stumps the Egyptian magicians? The Torah states that the lice were created from dust – God instructs Moses to tell Aaron, "Hold out your rod and strike the dust of the earth, and it shall turn to lice throughout Egypt" (Exodus 8:12). Adam, too, was created from the dust of the earth, suggesting perhaps that this plague was so effective because the ability to create life from dust is the province of God alone. The Talmud offers another answer, which appears amidst a discussion of magic and witchcraft. Rabbi Eliezer, in discussing the plague of lice, explains that "a demon cannot create an entity smaller than a barley grain" (Sanhedrin 67a). According to this understanding, the Egyptian magicians were using demons to perform their magical feats. But demons

cannot create anything as small as lice, and thus the Egyptian magicians were unable to replicate the third plague and could only throw up their arms.

Demons may not be able to create anything tiny, but they themselves are miniscule – at least according to the Talmudic worldview. The rabbis in tractate Berakhot (6a) explain that demons cannot be seen by the naked eye – to see them, one must take the placenta of a black cat, burn it to ashes, and place it on one's eyes. But Abba Binyamin cautions that if the eye were able to see them, no creature would be able to withstand their abundance and ubiquity. And Rav Huna adds that each individual has a thousand demons to his left and a thousand to his right at all times. In a sense, the demons of the Talmud are not unlike the germs of our modern scientific worldview – they are microscopic entities that we cannot see with the naked eye, but whose existence we nonetheless posit.

Just as we maintain that proper hygiene can mitigate the harmful effect of germs, the Talmudic rabbis believed that proper conduct could mitigate the harmful effect of demons and other magical forces. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 67b) relates that a certain woman once tried to gather the dust from under Rabbi Hanina's feet so as to cast a spell upon him. Rabbi Hanina told her to go ahead, insisting that he was not concerned because, as it says in the Torah, "there is no one besides Him" (Deuteronomy 4:35). The rabbis question whether there are indeed no other powers in the world. They resolve that magic is real, but it had no effect on Rabbi Hanina on account of his righteousness.

As the long arc of the history of science reminds us, belief in demons and germs—and belief in anything we cannot see—requires a leap of faith. I recall a cartoon that hung on the wall of my optometrist's office when I was a bespectacled adolescent: "Dear God," it said under a picture of a boy wearing a new pair of glasses, "Now that I have my glasses, I will finally be able to see you." Indeed, perhaps the more pertinent question is not whether we can catch sight of demons, but whether we can recognize the hand of God. For the Egyptian magicians, this recognition followed the plague of lice, which makes sense: Lice are nearly invisible, and yet they cause so much distress that even the greatest skeptic would be convinced of their existence. For the rest of us, hopefully it will not take lice or any plague or pandemic to come to know God.

This past year has been a reminder that while viruses and germs are an inevitable part of our world, the decisions we make on the global, national, and individual levels can help curb their devastating impact. May we learn to act righteously and responsibly so that even when we cannot eradicate the harmful forces that threaten us, we can nonetheless ensure that we are doing our part to make the world a safer and healthier place.

A River with a Heart?

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb

Text: Shmot 7:19-20; 8:12-13

7:19 *And the LORD said to Moshe: 'Say to Aaron: Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, ... that they may become blood; and there shall be blood throughout all the land of Egypt...* **20** *And Moshe and Aaron did so, as the LORD commanded; and he lifted up the staff and smote the waters that were in the river, in the sight of Pharaoh... and all the waters that were in the river were turned to blood.*

8:12 *And the LORD said to Moshe: 'Say to Aaron: Stretch out your staff and smite the dust of the earth, so it may become lice throughout all the land of Egypt.'* **13** *And they did so; and Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff, and smote the dust of the earth...*

- While Moshe is clearly the leading figure dealing with Pharaoh, the physical act of striking the water and the dust is performed by Aaron. Why?
- What is the significance of carrying this out in the sight of Pharaoh?

Commentary: Rashbam 7:20

In the sight of Pharaoh: *This was to Moshe's honor, that Aaron, Moshe's emissary, was the one who always lifted the staff and used it for striking.*

- According to Rashbam, why is Aaron the one performing the physical acts? What is the reason to create such an image of Moshe in Pharaoh's eyes?
- What question might you raise about this comment as you read through this parasha and the next one?

Commentary: Rashi Shmot 7:19

Say to Aaron: *Since the Nile protected Moses when he was cast into it, it therefore was not smitten by him, neither with blood nor with frogs, but was smitten by Aaron. — [from Tanchuma, Va'era 14]*

- As the Nile would be smitten in any case, who is affected by Moshe not smiting the Nile? What is Rashi teaching here?
- Rashi's comment is based Midrash Tanhuma. However, the Midrash suggests that God instructed Moshe not to smite the water. Why do you think that Rashi eliminated that part of the Midrash?

Commentary: Rashi Shmot 8:12

Say to Aaron: *It was inappropriate for the dust to be smitten through Moses since it had protected him when he slew the Egyptian and had hidden him in the sand. [Therefore,] it was smitten through Aaron.*

- Rashi uses a slightly different wording in explaining why Moshe did not smite the dust. What was the difference between the events when each protected Moshe?

Of Dragons, Crocodiles, and Snakes Bex Stern Rosenblatt

This week's parasha and this week's haftarah are bookends to the experiment of Israelite self-rule. In the parasha, Moses steps up as leader of the nascent nation, declaring for the first time its own wants and needs against the ruling Egyptians. That nation will walk out of Egypt and settle in Canaan, land of its birthright, to govern itself according to the Torah it receives from God, for many hundreds of years. The haftarah picks up just as the period of self-rule is ending. Poised at the brink of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, and the exile to Babylon, the prophet Ezekiel marks the end of Israelite independence. The figure who looms largest at both the beginning and the end of Israelite self-determination is the Egyptian Pharaoh. Hundreds of years after one Pharaoh refused to let the Israelites go, we meet the hubris of another Pharaoh. Even as Ezekiel marks the end of Israelite self-rule, the promise in his words is that just as we rose from the exile in Egypt ended by Moses, so too will we rise from the exile to Babylon. And the hubris of the other nations will lead to their destruction.

Pharaoh is the ultimate anti-hero. He sets himself up in competition with God, styling himself as a fellow deity. In our haftarah in Ezekiel 29, God has Ezekiel respond, saying to Pharaoh, "Behold, I am upon, Pharaoh, king of Egypt, great *tannim* who lies in his Nile river, who said, 'My Nile is my own and I made myself.'" The word *tannim* is interesting here. It carries a range of meanings, all leading to an ultimate rejection of Pharaoh's power.

One possible meaning of *tannim* is dragon. Here, Ezekiel would be referring to Pharaoh as 'The Great Dragon.' This is a common epithet for Mesopotamian rulers and gods. Hammurabi described himself as the great dragon of the kings. Marduk, head of Babylonian pantheon, was called the great dragon of the heavens and the earth. By setting Pharaoh up here with a possible Babylonian epithet, Ezekiel is obliquely mocking the powers which will conquer and destroy Jerusalem.

Reading *tannim* as dragon also invokes the great battle between God and the primeval creatures of the sea that happened before creation. Just as we read in Job, Isaiah and some of the Psalms, God

defeated a number of mythical sea creatures such as the leviathan, crushing chaos before God made order with creation. In this light, Pharaoh functions as the potential for a return of chaos, which God is crushing and containing.

Another possible meaning of *tannim* is crocodile. The crocodile was deified and worshipped in Egypt as *Sobek*, the protective deity of the Nile River. Sobek is the son of *Neith*, the primordial waters, connecting back to the idea of God crushing chaos. Sobek was also embraced by Egyptian royalty, with many Pharaohs choosing to include the word Sobek in their names. Here, Ezekiel may be directly referring to how Egyptians understood themselves, and then portraying God's utter defeat of that world view. The next lines of the passage in Ezekiel describe how God will drag this *tannim* out of the Nile and scatter him in the desert to die.

A final possibility for the meaning of *tannim* is snake. The word for snake is usually spelled with a final nun, *tannin* and not *tannim*. However, as noted first by Radak and supported by modern biblical scholarship, final mems and final nuns are sometimes interchangeable. To read Pharaoh as a *tannin*, a snake, here connects this passage explicitly back to our parasha, as noted first by Chizikuni. Moses and Aaron face off with Pharaoh in Exodus 7:10-13. Aaron casts down his staff, which becomes a *tannin*. Pharaoh's magicians follow suit but Aaron's snake swallows the snakes of the Egyptians. This points to the incredible irony of that Pharaoh's demise. Just as Aaron's snake out-snakes the snakes of Pharaoh's magicians, so too will Pharaoh, the snake who dwells in the waters of the Nile, be drowned in the waters of the Red Sea.

No matter how we choose to translate *tannim*, we are left with the same final image, the self-destruction of the one who was assured of his own greatness, while we, even when facing our own destruction, turn humbly back to the creator for redemption.