

Dear Community,

The story of the Exodus traditionally stars two main players: Moshe and Pharaoh. Moshe represents the Jews, while Pharaoh represents the Egyptians. Exodus accordingly contains two narratives. One revolves around the liberation of the Jewish people and their evolution into a nation under G-d. The second details the fury of divine justice as exacted from the Egyptians. However, if we look closely at the text of the Torah, these two narratives are not as neatly bifurcated as we might have liked.

As G-d assigns Moshe the burden of leadership, Moshe is told, “And take your staff, for with it you shall do the signs.” What ‘signs’? Only one of the proofs that Moshe demonstrates to convince the Jewish elders of his authenticity involved his staff. The commentaries answer (Ibn Ezra, Seforno, etc.) that ‘signs’ refers to the plagues that Moshe will bring unto Egypt. This begs a question. If we are to look at the plagues as simply punitive measures meted out against an oppressive regime, while they might be considered educational, ‘signs’ would hardly be their primary characterization.

The second problematic passage comes at the beginning of this week’s Torah portion. G-d promises Moshe that the Jews will be redeemed with four formulations of redemption. Amongst them the Torah writes “וְגִאֲלֹתִי אֶתְכֶם בְּזְרוּעַ נְטִיָּה וּבְשִׁפְטִים גְּדֹלִים, *I will redeem you with an outstretched hand and great judgments.* ‘Great judgments’ clearly reference the plagues, but why are the plagues mentioned in connection with the promise of redemption? Why mix these two seemingly separate themes? What does the devastation wrought on Egypt have to do with the redemption of the Jews in any sense other than the instrumental?

The resolution of both problems can be found in a careful reading of the first verse in this week’s Torah portion. “And G-d [*Elokim*] spoke to Moshe and told him ‘I am the Lord [*Hashem*]’.” The verse uses two names of G-d: Elokim and Hashem. We know that the names of G-d each reflect a distinct aspect of G-d as perceived by humanity. The only way humanity can know G-d is through His names, and each time the Torah names G-d, there is a clear reason why that particular aspect/name of G-d is most clearly manifest. If so, why does G-d appear to Moshe in one manifestation but inform him of another? If this is meant to be the time that the aspect of G-d encapsulated in *Hashem* will be demonstrated to the world, why appear to Moshe as *Elokim*?

The Shulach Aruch (A’H 5) describes the intention one should have when reciting the various names of G-d. When reciting the name Hashem, one should concentrate on G-d’s dominion and eternity. When pronouncing Elokim, the main focus is on G-d as all-powerful. The point of the Exodus, as stated explicitly in numerous places in the text, was to inform the Jews as well as the world at large of G-d’s role in the world.

The Jews, the Egyptians, and the larger civilization of 3,300 years ago were not at a point where they were able to accept and recognize G-d in the persona of Hashem.

[MOU2] G-d first had to use His mastery over nature to reveal Himself to the world, in the

guise of Elokim. The plagues, while intentionally punitive (in a “measure for measure” directed against the Egyptians’ actions), were primarily meant to reveal Who actually pulls the strings. As such, the core characterization of the plagues were as “signs:” evidence of who runs the world. And these signs were an essential component of the redemption of the Jews. The plagues were not solely for the Egyptian audience. G-d was preaching to the choir, presenting a visceral display of His power to reach the Jewish nation and motivate them to recognize and accept G-d’s dominion.

In each of our lives, we experience moments where we see signs. They may not be as explicit as the plagues, but G-d loves us and wants us to recognize Him, and He will send signs that are clear enough for us to get it. This past week was one of my moments. I was driving home in the dark, after a long day, and a longer night. While doing 60 mph on the Northern State, my eyes closed for a moment and I flew off the road and into a stand of trees. As soon as my car drifted I went into an adrenaline panic, but I experienced the sheer helplessness of vainly trying to regain control of the car while it plowed through the forest, knocking down trees. My Sonata was utterly totaled, with the whole front crumpled in like an accordion around the tree trunk that finally stopped it. I was able to scramble out through a back window, call for help, and then walk around and stare dumbly at the smoking pile of wreckage that was the car I bought a month or so ago. After a quick checkup at the hospital, I was sent home, completely uninjured. The state trooper at the scene was unequivocal: I was lucky I hadn’t died. The next morning, with my kids badgering me what it was like to ride in an ambulance (their papa was finally someone worth knowing), the realization of what had happened hit me. G-d saved me, not only for me, but for them, for Him, for any good I can still -- and should still -- be doing. G-d sent me a sign that life is fragile, life is meaningful, and life is valuable. I hope that I can be galvanized by this event, and live the life He wants for me.

חסדי ה' כי לא תלמו, כי לא כלו רחמו

Good Shabbos,

Rabbi Shlomo Agishtein