

***DEREKH HOKHMA***  
**PART II: THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**  
**OF THE EXODUS NARRATIVE**

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In Part I, we determined that, at God's instructions, Moses applies *derekh hokhma* – a stratagem devised to get the children of Israel out from under the harsh servitude imposed by Pharaoh. Clearly, Moses leads Pharaoh to believe that the Israelites were interested only in taking a three-day journey into the desert to worship God. However, through a study of the verses relating this narrative, we can perceive a deeper purpose to the method of the Exodus. From his very first appearance to the Hebrews, Moses uses Divinely-ordained *derekh hokhma* to teach both the children of Israel and Pharaoh the Omnipotence and Unity of the One God of Abraham.

When Moses first meets the elders of the oppressed Hebrews, he reveals the ultimate purpose of God's plan for the future of the Israelite nation: '*. . . I will bring you out of the wretchedness of Egypt, to the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, . . . to a land flowing with milk and honey*' (Ex. 3:17).<sup>1</sup> And, exalted, *The people believed. They accepted the message that God had granted special providence to the Israelites, and that He had seen their misery* (4:29-31). Yet just a short few verses later the hopes and promise of freedom and independence fizzle out. The people encounter Moses and accuse him of hurting them: '*Let God look at you and be your judge they said to him. You have destroyed our reputation with Pharaoh and his advisors. You have placed a sword to kill us in their hands*' (5:20).

What is it that caused this sudden about-face? I would say the reality of human logistics. Consider the following: According to the census taken in Numbers 1:46, the Israelites number some 600,000 men over the age of 20. If we factor in an equal number of women and a high birthrate, the population is in excess of two million. What is the reality of providing food and water in the desert for a population of that size? Egypt survived as an oasis and reached a high level of civilization because it was nurtured by the Nile River.

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But the survival of a people numbering about two million in the desert for even a few days would seem impossible. Even if this group of ex-slaves were to muster the ingenuity to make it to Canaan, it is very doubtful that it would have the ability and resources to conquer the land and settle it. Canaan, as the spies will inform us (Num. 13-14), is protected by city walls and formidable armies. I suggest here that unless the Israelites -- who after all have now been in pagan Egypt for some 200 years<sup>2</sup> and become part of Egyptian culture and society -- have a profound belief in God they have no option other than staying in Egypt. When Israel initially cried out to God, . . . *the Israelites groaned because of their subjugation* [min ha'avodah] (Ex. 2:23; see also 14:12). Their prayer is for a lighter work load, not for religious or national independence.

Perhaps this is why Pharaoh never suspects that the people would want to leave Egypt -- it is simply not a realistic option. His primary fear is that they might develop a sense of independence and rebel against his leadership. This calculation may reflect the remark his predecessor on the throne makes to his advisers: '*. . . in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us, and rise from the ground*' (1:10) -- in the sense of the note to this verse in the NJPS 1986 translation, *gain ascendancy over the country*.

The possibility of freedom from Egyptian rule and dominion, however, is simply unfathomable in the minds of the Hebrew slaves. Short of a dramatic miracle, the idea of leaving Egypt could not possibly enter into the Israelite consciousness. While this analysis is feasible, it does not unveil the entire picture. When we read the Book of Exodus, the initial impression we are given is that the only obstacle preventing the children of Israel from leaving Egypt and immigrating to the Land of Israel is their physical bondage to Pharaoh. The Prophet Ezekiel, however, offers a more complicated and theologically significant picture in Chapter 20 of his book:

*. . . The Lord God says: 'On the day I chose Israel, I took an oath to the seed of Jacob's house and revealed Myself to them in the land of Egypt. I swore to them saying: I am God your Lord. On that day I swore to take them out of the land of Egypt, to a land which I had searched out for them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most beautiful of all lands. I said to them: Let each man throw away the detestable things which you see. Do not defile*

*yourselves with the idols of Egypt. I am God your Lord. But they rebelled against Me and did not want to obey Me. None of them threw away the detestable things they saw, and they did not abandon the idols of Egypt. I decided to pour out My anger upon them and drain My wrath against them in the land of Egypt. But I acted for the sake of My name, so it would not be profaned in the eyes of the nations among whom they dwelled for I revealed Myself to the Israelites by taking them out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations.*

Ezekiel affords us a context that suggests the Israelites face a theological hurdle that must be overcome. This is a people that lacks faith and spiritual resolve. Indeed, there is clearly a secondary objective to the Exodus; namely, a didactic purpose. In the way of *Derekh Hokhma*, while laying the groundwork for a physical and political Exodus, God will subtly re-teach to the descendants of Abraham that his One God is not only present but Omnipotent. God will actually provide at least 10 miracles – the Plagues – to teach them.

*In the sight of the nations*, Ezekiel said, God will perform His miracles. Not only a physical redemption but a spiritual awareness, not only for the down-trodden Hebrews, but for Pharaoh and all Egypt, and for the nations that will hear of the Exodus – the ones we read about later in the Torah, like Midian and Balak's Moab. This Divine intention lies at the heart of the Plagues. It is *Derekh Hokhma* on a much grander scale. According to Ramban on Exodus 13:16,<sup>3</sup> this is the central theme of the entire narrative:

When idolatry first appeared in the world, in the days of Enosh, opinions became confused. Some denied the existence of God, saying the world predated everything while some denied His knowledge of details of this world, saying, *How could He know? Is there knowledge with the Most High?* (Ps. 73:11) Some acknowledged His knowledge but denied His providence, saying *He has made mankind like the fish of the sea* (Hab. 1:14) for which He has no care, and no punishment or reward – *They say God does not see us; God has abandoned the country* (Ezek. 8:12).

But when God singles out a group or an individual and does marvels for them, changing the normal course of nature, then the

repudiation of all these opinions becomes clear to all. For it shows that there is a God in the world, Who constantly renews the world, and knows and responds and is omnipotent. And this marvel is announced by a prophet beforehand, the truth of prophecy, too, becomes evident. . . . All these essential beliefs were denied, or doubted by the Egyptians, so that the great signs and wonders testified powerfully to the belief in the Creator and in the whole Torah.<sup>4</sup>

Abravanel, while echoing Ramban's commentary, includes in particular Pharaoh in the educational process. Abravanel argues that Pharaoh's rejection of God ('*Who is God that I should heed His voice to send Israel out? I do not know God*') [5:2]<sup>5</sup> is a submission to the gods of Egypt for protection and direction. This is precisely why, Abravanel suggests, the Plagues were specifically directed against Egyptian gods whom the Egyptians believed were personified in nature.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Pharaoh, the King of Egypt, rules the land as a god. He is considered the reincarnation and son of Amon-Re, or as Horus, or as a combination of the gods of Upper and Lower Egypt. A stela from the Middle Kingdom describes the divinity of a deceased pharaoh named Ni-Maat-Re, also known as Amenemhet III, and exhorts the reader: "Worship Pharaoh Ni-Maat-Re, living forever, within our bodies. And associate with his majesty many hearts . . . He is Re, by whose beams one sees, He is the one who illumines the Two Lands more than the sun disc."<sup>7</sup>

This interpretation of the underlying purpose of the Plagues is confirmed in Numbers 33:4, where we are told that the Egyptians buried those who had died by the Tenth Plague, by which God *executed judgments against their gods*. Based on this, one realizes that the Plague of Blood [*dam*] is directed against the god Khnum, creator of water and life, or against Hapi, the Nile god, or against Osiris, whose bloodstream was the Nile. The Plague of Frogs is directed against Heket, the goddess of childbirth who was represented as a frog, and so on.<sup>8</sup> It was therefore essential to perform the miracles in Egypt, the land of magicians and sorcerers, whose expertise, according to Ran (De-rashot HaRan No. 4), was "one of the branches of science," for only there would they recognize that the signs performed by Moses and Aaron did not follow the laws of science or nature.

Regarding the Plague of Darkness, the Torah states: *People could not see one another and for three days no one could get up from where he was, but all the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings* (10:21-23). The alternation of light and darkness, day and night, ceases. Yet darkness and light exist side by side in geographically distinct places. The children of Israel have light, while the Egyptian have darkness. In short, God reverts conditions to a state prior to the Creation [*ma'aseh bereshit*], when light and darkness exist side by side (Gen. 1:4-5).

The text itself provides considerable support for the idea that the Plagues are to convey knowledge of God to all who witness them and hear about them. The *derekh hokhma* is seen in ostensibly veneering the didactic purpose by the more dramatic confrontations of Moses and Pharaoh regarding the trek of the Israelites into the desert. In the text, however, the didactic purpose progresses through the narrative.

First, the realization that there is a God:

*'And Egypt shall know that I am God, when I stretch out My hand over Egypt. . . '* (Ex. 7:5).

*'You shall say to Pharaoh, God, the God of the Hebrews, has sent me to you saying: Send out My people that they may serve Me in the wilderness – but behold, you have not heeded up to now. So says God, through this shall you know that I am God'* (7:16-17).

Second, while these references allude to an awareness that there is God, the next four references in chronological order suggest a deepening understanding of God's nature, specifically God's uniqueness, immanence and dominion:

*'For Tomorrow . . . as you say – so that you will know that there is none like God our God . . . '* (8:6).

*'And on that day I shall set apart the land of Goshen upon which My people stands, and there shall be no swarm there; so that you will know that I am God in the midst of the land'* (8:18).

*'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 none like Me in all the world. For now I*

*could have sent My hand and stricken you and your people with pestilence and you would have been obliterated from the earth. However, for this have I let you endure, **in order to show you My strength and so that My Name may be declared throughout the world'** (9:14).*

*Moses said to [Pharaoh]: 'When I leave the city I shall spread out my hands to the Lord; the thunder will cease and the hail will no longer be, **so that you shall know that the earth is God's'** (9:29).*

The final two didactic references function to emphasize a third kind of knowledge of God. This knowledge is even more specific. They present this omnipotent universal God as having a special relationship with the Israelite people and thus having a dual purpose to the course of events. In the first statement, the information is directed towards the children of Israel, while in the second, it is directed at Pharaoh.

*Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Come to Pharaoh, for I have made his heart and the heart of his servants stubborn so that I can put these signs of Mine in his midst; **and so that you may relate in the ears of your son and your son's son that I made a mockery of Egypt and My signs that I placed among them – that you may know that I am God'** (10:1-2).*

[At the onset of the Plague on the firstborn of Egypt, God declares:] *'Against the children of Israel, no dog shall wet its tongue, against man nor beast, **so that you shall know that God will have differentiated between Egypt and Israel'** (11:7).*

Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh, as per Rashbam's reading, has concomitant purposes; namely, to educate Pharaoh, Egypt and, in addition, the children of Israel. The fact that the Plagues also served to enlighten the Israelite people should not be underestimated. It is in this light that we can understand the letter conjugation "vav" in the word *v'yedatem ki ani . . .* [And you shall know that I . . .] (6:7) as being causative. The passage then means: Through these miracles you will finally come to know God. Indeed, in Deuteronomy Moses begins with precisely this message. He warns the children of Israel:

*'Only beware for yourself and beware for your soul lest you forget the things your eyes have seen and lest you remove them*

*from your heart all the days of your life and make them known to your children and children's children' (Deut. 4:9).<sup>9</sup>*

According to Rambam: "the signs done by Moses in the wilderness -- were done out of necessity" (Yesodei Hatorah 8:1). Not so the miracles performed in Egypt, whose purpose, in the words of Yehuda Halevi, was to transform each individual in Israel into "a servant loving the object of his servitude and willing to sacrifice his life for the one whom he loves." Nissim ben Reuven Gerondi, in *Derashot HaRan*, third sermon, explains that one of the main objectives of the miracles associated with the Exodus was to show the entire world, especially the children of Israel, that God is the omnipotent Lord of the universe, providentially overseeing all that happens.

One other aspect of the *derekh hokhma* in the drama of the Plagues begs further elucidation: the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Here too the narrative speaks on multiple levels. The hardening of Pharaoh's heart can of course be simply a poetic way of describing Pharaoh's stubbornness. But it actually takes on a much deeper significance if seen against the background of ancient Egyptian culture and its mythology. In ancient Egypt the heart [*ib*] represents the essence of a person. Egyptologist E.A. Wallis Budge defines *ib* as the "heart, middle, interior, sense, wisdom, understanding, intelligence, attention, intention, disposition, manner, will, wish, desire, mind, courage, lust, self, and thoughts" of a person.<sup>10</sup>

In Egyptian belief, after a person died, the heart was weighed in the balance of truth to determine the kind of afterlife the deceased would receive. On one side of the balance was placed the heart of the deceased and on the other side was placed a feather. If the heart outweighed the feather the deceased was in trouble.<sup>11</sup> When the Torah tells us that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, this is a polemic against Pharaoh's pure and untainted character. This gives a new, unique insight into verses like: *Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he did not send out the people (9:7)*, which we now understand as going beyond the historical/ cultural context in which the Book of Exodus is written, to glorify God and to demonstrate His control over the entire universe. And, *'I will harden Pharaoh's heart . . . so that I gain glory for Myself over Pharaoh and all his army; and the Egyptians shall know that I am Lord' (14:4, 17)*.

There is an interesting pun in the latter two verses, in itself an instance of a stratagem, a *derekh hokhma*, for a higher goal. The root "כבד" [*kbd*] is found in the word "וַיִּכְבַּדְתָּ [v'ikhabda – so that I gain honor, glory]," as in verse 14:7. This same root is also found in the word "וַיִּכְבַּדְתִּי [hikhbadeti – Because I have made his heart heavy]" in verse 10:1. Indeed, the words are related. Honor lends a certain weightiness to a person. When the root is applied to the heart, it is made heavy, and in Egyptian culture, that means sinful. And that, of course, is central to the didactic message of the *derekh hokhma* related in the story of the Exodus that we read on Passover eve.

## NOTES

1. All translations are the author's unless otherwise noted.
2. See Rashi and Ibn Ezra on 12:34.
3. See also Rashi at Ex.7:17 who quotes the Midrash Tanchuma; Midrash Rabba 9:8.
4. See also Yerushalmi Pesachim 5:5.
5. See Abravanel on this verse.
6. The literature on this issue is quite extensive. See *Da'at Miqra Humash Sefer Exodus*; also Benno Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus*, trans. with introduction by Walter Jacob and Yaakov Elman (Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav, 1992), Chapter 7 Introduction; Nahum Sarna *Understanding Exodus* (New York: Schocken, 1986); Ziony Zevit, "Three Ways to Look at the Ten Plagues," *Bible Review* (June 1990); George A.F. Knight, *Theology as Narration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976) Jack Finegan, *Let My People Go* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987) and others.
7. James Pritchard. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1955) p. 431.
8. M. Gilula "The Smiting of the First Born – An Egyptian Myth," *Tel Aviv* 4 (1977) p. 94. For similar midrashic interpretations, see B.T., *Menachot* 85a; *Exodus Rabbah* 9.4.
9. Yerushalmi *Berakhot* 5:1 interprets the verse "One who internalizes his learning does not quickly forget."
10. E.A. Wallis Budge, *An Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary* (London: John Murray 1920).
11. See John D. Currid, "Why Did God Harden Pharaoh's Heart?" *Bible Review* 9, 6 (1993) pp. 45-51.