

Parashat Vaera 5778, 2018:

*Of Thunder and Hail*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The Passover Haggadah lists the Ten Plagues (*makkot*) in order of their appearance in *Sefer Shemot*: “These are the Ten Plagues that the Holy One, blessed be He, brought upon the Egyptians in Egypt: blood, frogs, lice, wild beasts, pestilence, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, slaying of the first born.” (Translation, [http://www.aish.com/h/pes/h/Ten\\_Plagues.html](http://www.aish.com/h/pes/h/Ten_Plagues.html)) The first seven appear in our *parasha*, whereas, the final three are found in Parashat Bo. The Torah teaches us that the overarching purpose of the *makkot* was in order that “... the Egyptians shall know that I am the L-rd when I stretch forth My hand over Egypt, and I will take the children of Israel out of their midst...” (*Sefer Shemot* 7:5, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Fascinatingly, while each plague profoundly affected every aspect of Egyptian society, only *barad* (hail) elicited the following statement from Pharaoh: “I have sinned this time (*chatati hapa'am*). The L-rd is the righteous One (*Hashem hatzadik*), and I and my people are the guilty ones.” (9:27) Pharaoh’s words contain three separate ideas: The recognition of his personal sin, the acknowledgment of Hashem’s righteousness, and the assertion of his and the Egyptian people’s guilt for having acted cruelly toward us.

Why did Pharaoh make this proclamation exclusively in regards to this plague? *Midrash Tanchuma Buber* provides us with the following insight:

[Let us learn the reason for Pharaoh's behavior based upon the manner in which most people would act:] If someone desires to go to war against his fellow man, and be victorious against him, he attacks him in an unexpected [and stealthy manner]. He then kills him and takes every possession that his enemy has. Yet, the Holy One blessed be He acted in an entirely different fashion toward Pharaoh and proclaimed to him: "And now, send, gather in your livestock and all that you have in the field, any man or beast that is found in the field and not brought into the house the hail shall fall on them, and they will die." (9:19) [It was precisely as a result of Hashem's warning that Pharaoh,] following his experience of the [forewarned] *barad*, exclaimed, "The L-rd is the righteous One." (Parashat Vaera 20, translation and brackets my own)

According to this midrashic passage, Pharaoh was completely overwhelmed by Hashem's merciful warning regarding the mortal danger that *barad* would entail. Nonetheless, because of his nearly unlimited arrogance, Pharaoh ignored G-d's adjuration, and his people suffered untold death and destruction. When he finally recognized the dire consequences of his behavior, Pharaoh had little choice but to proclaim, "The L-rd is the righteous One."

The *Kli Yakar* (Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz, 1550-1619) takes a different approach regarding the underlying reason for the Plague of Hail, focusing upon the question, "Why was this plague so pivotal to G-d's plan?" He stresses that the hail was accompanied by thunder, "... the L-rd gave forth thunder and hail ..." (9:23), which played a crucial role in Pharaoh's recognition of the Master of the Universe:

The Plague of Hail and the thunder came upon Pharaoh as a result of his refusal to listen to Hashem's voice with the proper majesty ("*b'hadar*") to which it was due. Therefore, Hashem forced him to hear thunder that was both awe-inspiring and frightening in nature. As a result, here, and here alone, he confessed to his sin and declared, "the L-rd is the righteous One, and I and my people are the guilty ones," since [until this point,] he had denied Hashem's existence and verbally proclaimed His non-existence. As such, Pharaoh sinned through his voice, and spoke *lashon hara* [i.e. pejoratively] about his Creator. Therefore, he was punished through the sound of thunder... [Once, however, Pharaoh confessed his sin, Moshe declared,] "The thunder will cease, and there will be no more hail, in order that you know that the land is the L-rd's." (9:29, *Kli Yakar* translation, brackets and underlining my own)

The Kli Yakar depicts a scenario in which Pharaoh needed to be reminded of G-d's existence and His ultimate majesty and power. This stands in stark contrast to one of the most stirring episodes in the early history of our people, namely *Birkat Ya'akov* (Jacob's Blessings to His Sons). The first two *pasukim* (verses) of *Birkat Ya'akov* are written in the plural, and serve as a call for attention and introduction to everything that follows: "Jacob called for his sons and said, 'Gather and I will tell you what will happen to you at the end of days. Gather and listen, sons of Jacob, and listen to Israel, your father.'" (*Sefer Bereishit* 49:1-2) The great third-century Palestinian Talmudic scholar, Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, suggests this verse is teaching us that Jacob was about to foretell the future of the 12 Tribes, the Jewish people, and, by extension, the time of the *Mashiach* (Messiah):

R. Simeon b. Lakish said: 'And Jacob called unto his sons, and said: Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you.' Jacob wished to reveal to his sons the 'end of the days,' whereupon the *Schechinah* [the Divine Presence] departed from him." (*Talmud Bavli, Pesachim* 56a, translation, with my emendations, *The Soncino Talmud*)

Jacob immediately assumed that the *Schechinah* had abandoned him due to some critical flaw in one of his children. As Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish so beautifully explains:

Said he, "Perhaps, Heaven forefend! there is one unfit among my children, like Abraham, from whom there issued Ishmael, or like my father Isaac, from whom there issued Esau." [But] his sons answered him, "Hear O Israel, the L-rd our G-d the L-rd is One." Just as there is only One [G-d] in your heart, so is there only One in our hearts. (Ibid.)

Jacob was so reassured by his sons' outpouring of faith and loyalty to Hashem that he joyously declared: "*Baruch shame kavode malchuto l'olam vo'ed*" ("Blessed be the name of His glorious Kingdom for ever and ever"), a practice we emulate until our own historical moment when we recite the *Shema*.

May we ever choose the path of Jacob and his sons, and raise our united voices in recognition of the Oneness of Hashem and the eternity of His Kingdom. Moreover, may our fervent prayer help

bring us closer to the Almighty and herald the coming of the *Mashiach* soon and in our days.  
*V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at:  
<http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.