

Parashat Vaera 5780, 2020:

## *The Purpose of the Plagues*

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 Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains five instances of the term, “*taida* — that you know,” as found in the context of the *eser makkot* (10 Plagues). The Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270) focused his analytical efforts on three of them:

And I [Moses] will separate on that day the land of Goshen, upon which My people stand, that there will be no mixture of noxious creatures there, in order that you [Pharaoh] know that I am the L-rd in the midst of the earth. (*Sefer Shemot* 8:18)

Because this time, I [G-d] am sending all My plagues into your [Pharaoh] heart and into your servants and into your people, in order that you know that there is none like Me in the entire earth. (9:14)

And Moses said to him [Pharaoh], “When I leave the city, I will spread my hands to the L-rd. 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, all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

In his *Commentary on the Torah*, *Sefer Shemot* 13:16, the Ramban suggests that a considered reading of these *pasukim* reveals the *eser makkot* as essentially heuristic devices divinely designed to teach Pharaoh and his people crucial aspects of Hashem’s power and relationship to the world. Following this line of reasoning, he conceptualizes the phrase in 8:18, “that I am the L-rd in the midst of the earth,” as underscoring G-d's *hashgacha* — divine providence over the entire universe. In the Ramban’s view, it was necessary for the Torah to present this notion at precisely this time in order to teach Pharaoh and his nation

that “He never abandoned the world to capricious happenstance as they had thought;” rather, Hashem was, and is, ever in control of the world. (All Ramban translations my own)

For the Ramban, the expression in verse 9:14, “that you know that there is none like Me in the entire earth,” was uttered in order to teach the Egyptians that Hashem, and none other, is omnipotent: “He rules over everything and there is nothing whatsoever that prevents Him from so doing.” The Egyptians needed to learn this fundamental lesson, as we see succinctly formulated by *Dovid HaMelech*: “The L-rd established His throne in the heavens, and His kingdom rules over all.” (*Sefer Tehillim* 103:19)

The Ramban interprets the phrase in 9:29, “that you know that the land is the L-rd’s,” as referring to Hashem’s role as the Creator, and His act of creating the Universe “...*hechidush* — out of absolute nothingness.” The Egyptians needed to understand that “everything that exists is His, since He created all things *m’ayin* — from nothing.” Here, too, we can cite a verse from *Sefer Tehillim* that strongly supports the Ramban’s exegesis: “The land and the fullness thereof are the L-rd’s; the world and those who dwell therein. For He founded it upon seas and established it upon rivers.” (24:1-2)

The Ramban concludes his interpretation of our three *pasukim* by suggesting that:

...the Egyptians either completely denied, or at the very least, doubted, these essential principles of belief regarding the Almighty [*hashgacha*, omnipotence, and *hechidush*]. As such, the great signs and wonders [of the *eser makkot*] serve as true witnesses regarding proper faith in the Creator — and belief in the entire Torah.

We live at a time when much of the world denies the Almighty’s existence, repudiates His *hashgacha* and omnipotence, and rejects the very concept of *hechidush*. Therefore, may we be guided by the stirring words of the prophet Yeshayahu: “You are My witnesses,”

says the L-rd, “and My servant whom I chose,” in order that you know and believe in Me, and understand that I am He...” (43:10) In so doing, may we teach humankind the truth of His presence and omnipotence in the world. Then, with the Almighty’s help, we will truly become His “light unto nations,” and sanctify Him before all. (49:6) May this time come soon and in our days. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>  
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria 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* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

\*\*\* 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.