

Parashat Va'era 5783, 2023:

Of Makkot and Miracles

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohane, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, Alexander Leib ben Benyamin Yosef, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Pesach, the most widely observed *chag* of the *Shalosh Regalim*, is preeminently the time when families and friends join together at the *Seder* and recite the *Haggadah*. One of the many highlights of this experience is the presentation of the *Eser Makkot* (Ten Plagues), which have become one of the most celebrated aspects of the Pesach story. Precisely because they are so well-known, however, there is a danger that some among us may lose sight of their miraculous nature. As we find in *Pirkei Avot*: “Ten *nissim* (miracles) were performed for our forefathers in Egypt... Ten *makkot* were wrought by G-d upon the Egyptians in Egypt.” (5:4, translation, Rabbi Yosef Marcus with my emendations)

The first seven *makkot* are found in our *parasha*, and the final three in Parashat Bo. As such, the time of these Torah readings is an ideal opportunity to ask ourselves, “Since the Master of the Universe could have visited any kind of plague upon the Egyptians, why did He choose precisely these ten?” A revealing answer is found in the midrashic work, *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah*:

The Holy One blessed be He brought ten plagues upon the Egyptians; and all were brought upon them solely as a result of what they planned to do, [and did against,] the Jewish people. This is the case, since the words [and deeds] of the Holy One blessed be He are absolute truth and operate with the principle of *middah k'neged middah* (measure for measure). Therefore, no evil action goes forth from Him, only good (that is, fitting) actions. Moreover, [seemingly] negative behaviors are actualized against people, [as in the case of the *Eser Makkot*,] as a result of their twisted and perverse actions ... (7:8, this and the following translation and brackets my own)

In sum, each of the *Eser Makkot* is a *middah k'neged middah* response by the Almighty to the evil behaviors of the Egyptians against our people. A particularly telling proof of this concept is offered by this midrash (7:15) in its analysis of *Makkat Barad* (the Plague of Hail):

Why was *barad* brought upon them? This is because the Egyptians forced the Jewish people to plant gardens, orchards, [vineyards] and all manner of trees. [They forced them to undertake this activity] to prevent them from returning to their homes so they would be unable [to engage in marital intimacy and bring forth] more children. Therefore, the Holy One blessed be He brought the Plague of Hail upon them that destroyed all the plantings in which the Jewish people had been engaged. As the texts state: “He destroyed their grapevines with hail...” (*Sefer Tehillim* 78:47) ... “the hail struck all the vegetation of the field, and it broke all the trees of the field.” (*Sefer Shemot* 9:25)

The *barad* sent by the Almighty was completely beyond the Laws of Nature: “And there was hail, and fire flaming within the hail, very heavy, the likes of which had never been throughout the entire land of Egypt since it had become a nation.” (*Sefer Shemot* 9:24, this and the following Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*). Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself on *Midrash Tanchuma* 14:10, develops this theme by noting the *nase b'toch nase* (miracle within a miracle) composition of the *barad*: “[This was] a miracle within a miracle. The fire and hail intermingled. Although hail is water, to perform the will of their Maker they made peace between themselves [so that the hail did not extinguish the fire nor did the fire melt the hail].” In addition, *Midrash Tanchuma* brings a *mashal* (parable) to help us grasp the meaning of this unique double *nase*:

To what may this be compared? To two powerful legionaries who have despised each other for a long time. When their king became involved in a war, he made peace between them so that they would go forth together to fulfill the king's command. Similarly, though fire and hail are hostile to each other, when the time for war with Egypt came, the Holy One, blessed be He, made peace between them and they smote Egypt. Hence it is said: “The fire flashing up amidst the hail.” When an Egyptian was seated, he would be pummeled by hail; when he arose, he would be scorched by fire in conformity to the punishments meted out to wicked men in the netherworld... (Translation, Samuel A. Berman, with my emendations)

The miraculous nature of the *Eser Makkot* represented the perfect vehicle for teaching the greatness of Hashem. The Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270) gives powerful voice to this idea in his *Commentary on the Torah, Sefer Shemot 13:16*:

Now when G-d is pleased to bring about a change in the customary and natural order of the world for the sake of a people or an individual [that is, a miracle], then the voidance of all these [false beliefs] becomes clear to all people, since a wondrous miracle shows that the world has a G-d Who created it, and Who knows and supervises it, and Who has the power to change it... This is why Scripture says in connection with the wonders [in Egypt]: “in order that you know that I am Hashem in the midst of the earth” (*Sefer Shemot 8:18*), which teaches us the principle of providence (*hashgacha*), that is, that G-d has not abandoned the world to chance, as they [the heretics] would have it; “in order that you know that the earth is Hashem’s” (9:29), which informs us of the principle of creation, for everything is His since He created all out of nothing; “in order that you know that there is none like Me in the entire earth” (9:14), which indicates His might, that is, that He rules over everything and that there is nothing to withhold Him. The Egyptians either denied or doubted all of these principles, [and the miracles confirmed their truth]. Accordingly, it follows that the great signs and wonders constitute “trustworthy witnesses” (*Sefer Yeshayahu 8:2*) to the truth of the belief in the existence of the Creator and the truth of the whole Torah. (Translation, Rabbi Dr. Charles B. Chavel, with my emendations)

For the Ramban, the *Eser Makkot* emerge as one of history’s greatest heuristic devices, as they are exemplars of *nissim* that teach us Hashem created (*bara et HaOlam*) and runs the world (*hashgacha*), that “He rules over everything,” and that there is nothing beyond His control. With Hashem’s help and our fervent desire, may these essential principles of *emunah* (belief) guide our thoughts and actions each and every day. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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*** 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: [The Rav](#)