In the Dark
R. Yaakov Bieler
Parashat Bo, 5774

The arrangement of the plagues as reflected in the early Parashiot of Shemot.

Over the course of the last two Parashiot, VaEra and Bo, the Ten Plagues that HaShem Sent against Egypt unfold. However, the distribution of the plagues in the Parashiot is not an even one—in contrast to the case of the Ten Commandments where, according to popular wisdom, on two facing tablets, there were five on one side and five on the other\(^1\)— with respect to the Ten Plagues, seven are described and recorded in Parashat VaEra, I.e., Blood,\(^2\) Frogs,\(^3\) Lice,\(^4\) Wild Animals,\(^5\) Plague,\(^6\) Boils\(^7\) and Hail,\(^8\) with only three appearing in this week’s Parasha, Parashat Bo, i.e., Locusts,\(^9\) Darkness,\(^10\) Plague of the First-born.\(^11\) This unequal distribution causes Abrabanel to ask at the outset of his commentary on Parashat Bo:

Why did the organizer of the Parashiot\(^12\) decide to begin this Parasha with the plague of locusts, since this is not the beginning of the series of plagues...\(^13\)

---

\(^1\) See “How to Divide the Ten Commandments” by Alex Israel at [http://www.vbm-torah.org/shavuot/shv59ai.htm](http://www.vbm-torah.org/shavuot/shv59ai.htm) for a full-blown discussion of this issue with respect to the Decalogue.

\(^2\) Shemot 7:17-25.

\(^3\) Ibid. 27-8:11.

\(^4\) Ibid. 12-15.

\(^5\) Ibid. 17-28.

\(^6\) Ibid. 9:2-7.

\(^7\) Ibid. 8-12.

\(^8\) Ibid. 14-35.

\(^9\) Ibid. 10:4-20

\(^10\) Ibid. 21-29.

\(^11\) Ibid. 11:4-8; 12:29-31.

\(^12\) While the division of the biblical text into distinct chapters was not the product of Rabbinic thinking—...Archbishop Stephen Langton and Cardinal Hugo de Sancto Caro developed different schemas for systematic division of the Bible in the early 13th century. It is the system of Archbishop Langton on which the modern chapter divisions are based... [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chapters_and_verses_of_the_Bible](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chapters_and_verses_of_the_Bible) the division into Parashiot was Rabbinic in origin, with two systems being developed, a tri-annual cycle and an annual cycle—...There are 54 Parashiot in the annual cycle, and 141, 154, or 167 Parashiot in the triennial cycle as practiced in ancient Israel, as evidenced by scriptural references and fragments of recovered text. By the Middle Ages, the annual reading cycle was predominant, although the triennial cycle was still extant at the time, as noted by Jewish figures of the period, such as Benjamin of Tudela and Maimonides. Dating from Maimonides’ codification of the Parashiot in his work *Mishneh*
Even the “Simanim” associated with the plagues do not follow their presentation in the Parashiot.

Abrabanel then references a well-known acronym that assists in remembering the order of the plagues, and points out that it also does not follow the distribution as found in the Parashiot of the Tora:

...And also according to the mnemonic device that R. Yehuda applied to them (the Plagues) as is memorialized in the Haggada (of Pesach), the third grouping “באח”ב” begins with the plague of hail (Barad), so why would the Parasha begin instead with the plague of locusts (Arbeh)?

The commentator is pointing out that it is as if those responsible for defining where one Parasha ends and the next begins saw something that these last three plagues—locusts, darkness and the destruction of the First Born—had in common, something that they apparently did not share with the plagues that preceded them.

Torah in the 12th Century CE through the 19th Century, the majority of Jewish communities adhered to the annual cycle...

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triennial_cycle

In other words, it would have made more sense to Abrabanel to place all ten plagues within a single Parasha.

A fascinating Midrash is cited by RITVA in his commentary on this passage in the Haggada:

...There are some who explain that in the garden of Yitro the staff (which Moshe would use to initiate some of the plagues) had been thrust and the initials (of each of the plagues) were engraved upon it. All the people would come, but no one was able to interpret the letters until Moshe arrived and read/explained them. Yitro understood that he (Moshe) was a great scholar and gave him his daughter (Tzipora) for a wife...and they said that Adam had inserted the staff there and the letters had been inscribed by God... (Haggada Shel Pesach Im Asara Peirushim, the widow and brothers Ram, Vilna, 5640, p. 20a.) LeHavdil, the Midrash calls to mind the Arthurian legend of Excalibur!
**What are the implications of the internal order of the plagues unto themselves?**

Furthermore, if looking at all of the plagues leads one to the conclusion that they take place in *ascending* order, from the least severe to the harshest and most difficult to withstand,\(^\text{16}\) in other words, the plague of blood was easier to tolerate than the plague of frogs, which in turn was not as devastating as lice, and so on, then the three last ones are far more significant, effective, far-reaching, in line with HaShem’s overall Plan, than those that came before, again leading us to look at the last three plagues with renewed interest in order to try to discern what was so special and profound about these final plagues.

**The length of time that each plague lasted.**

A final variable that draws attention to the last two plagues in particular, is the length of time that each of these phenomena actively terrorized the population. Based upon what the

---

\(^{16}\) One aspect of the increasing severity of the plagues is reflected in the gradual inability of Pharoah’s magicians to replicate even partially (they never seemed to be able to make the plagues cease, something that would have come in much handler for Pharoah and the Egyptians) what was being initiated by Moshe and Aharon:

*Shemot 7:10-12*

And Moshe and Aharon went in unto Pharaoh, and they did so, as the LORD had Commanded; and Aharon cast down his rod before Pharaoh and before his servants, and it became a serpent. Then Pharaoh also called for the wise men and the sorcerers; and they also, the *magicians of Egypt* did in like manner with their secret arts. For they cast down every man his rod, and they became serpents; but Aharon's rod swallowed up their rods.

*Ibid. 20-22*

And Moshe and Aharon did so, as the LORD Commanded; and he lifted up the rod, and smote the waters that were in the river, in the sight of Pharaoh, and in the sight of his servants; and all the waters that were in the river were turned to blood. And the fish that were in the river died; and the river became foul, and the Egyptians could not drink water from the river; and the blood was throughout all the land of Egypt. And the *magicians of Egypt did in like manner* with their secret arts; and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he hearkened not unto them; as the LORD had Spoken.

*Ibid. 8:2-3*

And Aharon stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt; and the frogs came up, and covered the land of Egypt. And the *magicians did in like manner* with their secret arts, and brought up frogs upon the land of Egypt.

*Ibid. 13-15*

And they did so; and Aharon stretched out his hand with his rod, and smote the dust of the earth, and there were gnats upon man, and upon beasts; all the dust of the earth became gnats throughout all the land of Egypt. And the *magicians did so* with their secret arts to bring forth gnats, but they could not; and there were gnats upon man, and upon beast. Then the magicians said unto Pharaoh: 'This is the Finger of God'; and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he hearkened not unto them; as the LORD had spoken.
Tora says regarding the first plague, Blood—Shemot 7:25 “And seven days were fulfilled, after that the LORD had Smitten the river”—it is assumed by the Rabbis that each of the successive plagues also lasted for a week, with the exception, of course, of those where the Tora explicitly states otherwise. With respect to the plague of darkness, the Tora states, (Ibid. 10:21 “And Moshe stretched forth his hand toward heaven; and there was a thick darkness”17 in all the land of Egypt three days”. And with respect to the plague of the First Born, the calamity struck and was over in a moment—(Ibid. 12:29) “And it came to pass at midnight, that the LORD Smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the first-born of Pharaoh that sat on his throne unto the first-born of the captive that was in the dungeon; and all the first-born of cattle.” Should we conclude that the length of time that a plague was in effect, was a direct function of the extent of that plagues intensity, again leading to the conclusion that the last two were that much more severe than all those preceding them?

A theme that connects the last three plagues with one another.

Abrabanel suggests that one of the common denominators that makes the final three plagues a unit unto themselves is that they share the quality of DARKNESS.

In all three of them, the earth was darkened:
With respect to the locusts, it is written (Shemot 10:15) "For they covered the face of the whole earth, so that the land was darkened; and they did eat every herb of the land, and all the fruit of the trees which the hail had left; and there remained not any green thing, either tree or herb of the field, through all the land of Egypt."

(Some commentators understand the phrase כָּל־הָּאָרֶץ־עֵין־אֶת יַוְּנִי כִּי־אִּדֵּק [lit. and he covered the "eye" of the earth] as a reference to the swarm of insects being so dense, that they would function like a great cloud, or a dense fog, cutting light off from the sun, resulting in the earth being plunged into darkness.)18

Abrabanel continues,

And in the plague of darkness, it is written (Ibid. 21) “And the LORD Said unto Moshe: 'Stretch out thy hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, even darkness which may be felt.' And surely the plague of the First Born occurred at midnight.

The commentator concludes with a lugubrious comparison:

---

17 Dante, in his The Divine Comedy describes hell as “solid darkness stained.”
18 This interpretation calls to my mind Tolkien’s image of the eye of Sauron in Lord of the Ring.
And He Made them to dwell in dark places, as those that have been long dead.

In his final comment, Abrabanel is paraphrasing Eicha 3:6—

He hath made me to dwell in dark places, as those that have been long dead.

Abrabanel’s attention was probably drawn to this verse by the Gemora in Nedarim 64b, where someone who is unable to see is categorized as experiencing a form of living death:

And it was taught: Four are accounted as dead: ... a blind person...
The blind, as it is written, “He hath set me in dark places, as they that be dead of old.”

Interpreting the symbolism of the theme.

So why might HaShem have Wished that the final plagues would feature various degrees and forms of darkness? God had Told Moshe at the outset of his mission to Egypt that he should direct at Pharoah a lethal threat were the Egyptian monarch not to release the Jewish slaves:

Shemot 4:22-3
And thou shalt say unto Pharaoh: Thus Saith the LORD: Israel is My Son, My First-born. And I have Said unto thee: Let My son go, that he may serve Me; and thou hast refused to let him go. Behold, I will Slay thy son, thy first-born.'--

Is it possible that the literal human death inherent within Makat Bechorot was gradually anticipated by the two preceding plagues, Arbeh and Choshech, which involved increasing degrees of the figurative death of blindness?

A second unifying theme suggested by Abrabanel for the last three plagues.

The interpretation that the darkness of locusts and the plague of darkness constituted allusions to the massive death manifested in Makat Bechorot might underlie a second commonality between Arbeh, Choshech and Makat Bechorot pointed out by Abrabanel, namely that it is only at this point in the series of plagues, when the Egyptians begin to try to negotiate with Moshe, prior to the plague actually taking affect.

Because from this plague (locusts) and onwards, Pharoah and his servants began to fear Go and His Plagues, before they would arrive, which was not the case with regard to the other plagues that had already taken place, because these plagues were not experienced until after they had occurred. However, with this plague, as soon as Pharoah and his servants heard Moshe’s warning regarding the locusts, they were afraid and terrified before it took place,and
from this point on, Pharoah tried to appease Moshe and to negotiate with him regarding his mission (to free the Jewish slaves). 19

Abrabanel is carefully reading the text regarding the locusts and notices that once Moshe and Aharon finished describing the plague of locusts, in order that the Egyptians should not be able to complain that no one had warned them of their impending doom, the Tora states:

Shemot 10:7-8
And Pharaoh's servants said unto him: 'How long shall this man be a snare unto us? let the men go, that they may serve the LORD their God! Knowest thou not yet that Egypt is destroyed?' And Moshe and Aharon were brought again unto Pharaoh; and he said unto them: 'Go, serve the LORD your God; but who are they that shall go?'

Apparently, simply fearing the potential for imposed darkness was enough to strike terror in the hearts of even the most resolute enemy of the Jews.

**An additional indication that just as blindness is to be feared, sight is to be valued.**

ChaZaL have always looked upon those who are in continual darkness as being terribly afflicted. In addition to the sobering statement in Nedarim that a blind person is in a certain metaphorical way like someone who is not alive, when the Birchot HaShachar, the morning blessings, were originally recited to accompany the stages of our getting up in the morning, upon opening our eyes, we would declare:

Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, Who Allows the blind to see.

The blessing reminds us that we should view God’s Giving us the ability to see as an act of profound Divine Chesed, and that this incomparable Gift is Renewed by HaShem, at the beginning of each day when we awaken from our sleep during which we were unable to use our normal vision.

**Fear of the dark as a recognized phobia.**

While being afraid of the dark is common among children, it is also found to affect some adults. Names that have been attributed to fear of the dark that could be categorized as pathological include: achluophobia (from the Greek “mist”), nyctophobia (“night”), scotophobia

---

19 Although when one considers what the bible says about the plagues of darkness and the First-born, there is no mention of Pharoah discussing them with Moshe before they occur, Abrabanel is apparently agreeing with RaMBaN who states with regard to the plagues that the text does not spell out what takes place in each plague, but expects the reader to fill in any missing information. See RaMBaN on Shemot 10:2.
(“darkness), and lygophobia (twilight). A relatively high-profile case in point is that of Mariella Frostrup, the middle-aged long-standing advice columnist for The Observer in London, who two years ago wrote about her struggles with this deep-seated fear. Many of the adults, including Ms. Frostrup, speculate that a traumatic experience during childhood is being triggered by the dark and causes them to relive their terror over and over. I would imagine that Egyptians who underwent the plague of darkness, and for that matter, the rest of the plagues, no matter how they were at the time of the Exodus, must have suffered a form of PTSD for the rest of their lives, and not least among their phobias would have been a fear of darkness.

**Contemporary examples of sighted individuals experiencing various degrees of literal blindness.**

We have experienced our own mini-plagues of darkness during the power outages that have affected our area more frequently than we would certainly like, particularly on Shabbat, when there is no possibility of lighting additional candles or turning on flashlights, until Shabbat’s conclusion. Finding oneself in the dark is disconcerting, to say the least.

In a more cultural, educational and gastronomic vein, more than 12 years ago, in Zurich, Switzerland, as part of an exhibition entitled, “Dialogue in the Dark”, a restaurant was opened in which diners would be waited on by blind servers, and given the opportunity to eat in the dark. In Israel, a Kosher dairy restaurant named appropriately enough “Blackout”, is part of the NaLaga’at Center in Yafo. The Center is the home of the truly amazing Deaf-blind acting ensemble that in 2013 came to North America for a series of performances, which some of us were truly fortunate to experience. Reviews of restaurants like “Blackout” run the gamut, from those who are powerfully moved by the experience and are determined to encourage others to “see” for themselves, to those who agree that it is a “once-in-a-lifetime” experience, but once is more than enough!

**The literal blindness associated with the last three plagues gives rise to ruminations of figurative blindness as well.**

---

22 Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.
23 It was pointed out to me that even among those who are considered legally blind, there are different degrees to which an individual might or might not be aware of daylight. A blind person who cannot detect alternating light and dark periods will be subject to even greater disorientation because his circadian rhythm is thrown off by not sensing a light-dark cycle in the world around him. A recent radio commercial presents an individual who says that he is blind and has trouble sleeping at night for just such a reason. This is just another indication of how devastating a handicap literal blindness can be.
While blindness understandably causes an individual to turn inwards and become highly concerned with his own safety as well as taking care of himself, another dimension of such a condition is that it is difficult to take notice of the needs of another. In other words, someone in need can hardly expect to be assisted by someone who is unable to see him and his situation. But there are plenty of sighted individuals who also do not “see”, or perhaps choose not to see, those who are in trouble and require help. It seems that the Egyptians because inured to Jewish slavery and suffering and virtually no one lifted a hand to ease the burdens of the slave population. The Divine Impetus to plunge the entire Egyptian nation into states of darkness could then be viewed as a function of punishing the society in a manner that corresponds with their moral shortcomings. In this sense, Moshe provided a stark contrast, when the Tora states explicitly, (Shemot 2:11) “And it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown up, that he went out unto his brethren, and looked on their burdens; and he saw an Egyptian smiting a Hebrew, one of his brethren.” Despite having grown up in the royal palace, where it could be expected that indifference to the plight of the Jews was even official policy, Moshe’s nature did not permit him to fall into step with the Egyptian oppressors. Similar dynamics can be observed throughout human history, where those in power care little about the suffering of those who are not. The Tora and prophets repeatedly remind the Jews to care about the situations of the widow, the orphan and the sojourner, since these are often the classes of individuals who require the most support and are frequent targets of exploitation and oppression. In recent Jewish history, the obliviousness, or at least the claims of never having noticed, of those who lived near the atrocities taking place in concentration camps is difficult to fathom. On a micro level, the Tora’s mandates that one is not to “hide himself”\(^{26}\) from situations of returning a lost object\(^{27}\) and assisting someone in loading or unloading his animal,\(^{28}\) even if he is not your

\(^{26}\) A young child who thinks very concretely, thinks that by closing his eyes, he makes what he is seeing disappear. Those who already can engage in abstract thinking realize that this is certainly not empirically true.

\(^{27}\) Devarim 22:1, 3
Thou shalt not see thy brother’s ox or his sheep driven away, and hide thyself from them; thou shalt surely bring them back unto thy brother...
And so shalt thou do with his ass; and so shalt thou do with his garment; and so shalt thou do with every lost thing of thy brother’s, which he hath lost, and thou hast found; thou mayest not hide thyself.

\(^{28}\) Shemot 23:5
If thou see the ass of him that hateth thee lying under its burden, thou shalt forbear to pass by him (this is to be read as a rhetorical question, i.e., you surely should not pass by him as if he and his animal didn’t exist); thou shalt surely release it with him.

Devarim 22:4
Thou shalt not see thy brother’s ass or his ox fallen down by the way, and hide thyself from them; thou shalt surely help him to lift them up again.
favorite person, succinctly serves as a paradigm of how each of us is expected to extend ourselves to those who are struggling in one form or another to deal with life’s challenges. 29

On a more subtle level, there is a Halachic principle expressed in ideal form in Avot 4:15:

...R. Matya ben Cheresh used to say, “Initiate greetings of Shalom to all people”...

Similarly in Berachot 17a, the following statement appears:

It was related of R. Yochanan b. Zakkai that no man ever gave him greeting first, even a heathen in the street.

Whether or not an individual strives to meet the higher standard expressed and exemplified by R.’s Matya ben Cheresh and R. Yochanan ben Zakkai of always initiating greetings to others, it should go without saying that responding to a greeting offered by another ought to be an obvious expectation of not only etiquette but proper Middot. And yet, it has happened to me on a number of occasions that a proffered greeting has gone unacknowledged, as if I did not exist and the other individual does not see me. This is a form of figurative blindness which may not be as destructive as not helping someone truly in need, but ends up depriving someone of a feeling of worth and concern that every human being deserves.

Makot Arbeh, Choshech and even Makkat Bechorot offer us the opportunity to reflect upon how important our sight is to the quality of our life experience, and deeply encourage us not to take this Divine Gift for granted.

29 See Devora Ushpizai, “The Plague of Darkness—Social Aspects” #1001, Bar Ilan University, Parashat Bo 5774/January 4th, 2014, Parashat HaShavua Study Center, at www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/bo/1001Ushpizai.doc