

The Parenthetical Wizards

Vaera 5779

I.

I'M VERY CONFUSED. Or, more accurately I was very confused earlier this week. When reading the story of *Sefer Shemot* I am always fascinated by the *chartumei mitzrayim*, Egypt's magicians. Who are these mysterious people? From where do they derive their power – a power that the Torah underscores is inferior, yet still comparable to that of God Himself?

But what confused me in particular this past week was an issue I've highlighted before with how the Torah describes the actions of other figures: they don't make sense. Though we tend to focus on the most popular story concerning the *chartumei mitzrayim*, when they turn their staffs into snakes that are nonetheless swallowed by Aharon's (Ex. 7:10–12), there are other episodes in our *parashah* this morning that are just confusing.

To see what I mean, turn to page 326 in the *Stone Chumash* where we see the description of the first plague, blood (Ex. 7:20–22).

וַיַּעֲשׂוּ-כֵן מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה, וַיָּרֶם בְּמִטָּה וַיִּף אֶת-הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר בַּיָּאֵר לְעֵינֵי
פְּרַעֲזָה וּלְעֵינֵי עֲבָדָיו, וַיַּהֲפֹכוּ כָּל-הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר-בַּיָּאֵר לְדָם: וְהַדְּגָה אֲשֶׁר-בַּיָּאֵר מָתָה
וַיָּבֵאֵשׁ הַיָּאֵר וְלֹא-יָכְלוּ מִצְרַיִם לִשְׁתּוֹת מַיִם מִן-הַיָּאֵר וַיְהִי הַדָּם בְּכָל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:
וַיַּעֲשׂוּ-כֵן חֲרָטְמֵי מִצְרַיִם בְּלִטְיָהֶם וַיַּחֲזֹק לִב-פְּרַעֲזָה וְלֹא-שָׁמַע אֶל־הֵם כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר
יְהוָה:

And Moses and Aaron did so, as Hashem 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 to them; as Hashem had spoken.

At this point you may be wondering where my confusion lies. What about this piece of narrative makes no sense? It's subtle, but it's significant. Picture the scene. We're told that Moshe and Aharon turn the entire Nile into blood. Then it tells us that the magicians did the same thing – וַיַּעֲשׂוּ-כֵן חֲרָטְמֵי – but what exactly are they doing? The whole of the Nile is already blood, what is there to do? The scene in your head breaks down.

II.

There's another issue. This time with the second plague, *tzefardea*, frogs. Here the Torah tells us that Aharon brings a plague of frogs upon the land. Then, the Torah once again tells us וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כֵן הַקֹּהֲנִים (Ex. 8:3), that the magicians do the same thing. This time it makes more sense – there are more frogs to bring (though you wonder why Egypt's State magicians are willing to bring destruction to their own country, a question amplified by their attempts to also bring devastating lice in the third plague) – but what makes no sense is Pharaoh's reaction. Straight after we are told that the magicians can replicate this plague, the Torah tells us:

וַיִּקְרָא פַרְעֹה לְמֹשֶׁה וּלְאַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמֶר הֲעֵתִירוּ אֵלֵי־יְהוָה וַיִּסַּר הַצְּפַרְדִּיעִים מִמּוֹנֵי וּמֵעַמִּי
וַאֲשַׁלְּחָה אֶת־הָעַם וַיִּזְבְּחוּ לַיהוָה:

Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, “Plead with the LORD to remove the frogs from me and my people, and I will let the people go to sacrifice to the LORD.” (v.4)

If the magicians can do the same thing, as the Torah just told us, why not ask them to remove the frogs? It is almost as though Pharaoh is unaware of their presence in the story. Indeed, you can make a similar case from the ambiguous wording in the first plague.

Here's my confusion: there are these super-powerful magicians who prove their power in the first plague by doing something that makes no sense and are ignored for their power in the second plague. Why?

III.

I came across an answer that I find fascinating by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom, a teacher and Rosh Beit Midrash at YULA High School in Los Angeles and author of *Between the Lines in the Bible*. He notes that our reading of the Torah suffers from its lack of parentheses. Sometimes the Torah is not revealing a narrative as it is happening but is, instead, including a parenthetical comment. But Biblical Hebrew has neither brackets nor en-dashes, and so it's hard to notice when the Torah isn't describing the narrative as it happened.

And this leads R. Etshalom to make a really interesting suggestion: the magicians' actions in the first two plagues should be read as parenthetical comments referencing something that took place in the past. It's not that Moshe and Aharon turn the Nile to blood and then the magicians do the same. It's that Moshe and Aharon turned the Nile to blood just as the magicians had once done (which R. Etshalom argues might have been done to punish the people). That's why Pharaoh ignores them on the second plague: they aren't there. Moshe and Aharon bring frogs just as the magicians had once done.

I really like this idea for two reasons. The first is that, as R. Etshalom notes, *Chazal* in *Menachot* 85a state that Moshe and Aharon's “magic” at the Hands of God is nothing special to Egyptians; and second, there is a wonderful insight by R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, the 20th-century author of

Meshekh Chokhmah, that Moshe and Aharon's job was not simply to convince Pharaoh of God's greatness, but also the enslaved Jewish people, too.

In other words, the very first things Moshe and Aharon need to do – the very first thing God needs to do to prove His power to both Egypt and His people – is to ape the power of Egypt. Just as Egypt's magicians once turned the Nile to blood, so does God. Just as the *chartumim* once brought a plague of frogs, so does God. It's only after this that the rest of the plagues start to emphasize the gap between God's power and Egypt's.

IV.

I really wanted to share this idea because I think it's a really cool way to read the story, but as I was struggling to apply it to challenges in our own lives, I fortuitously stumbled across an article in *The Atlantic* entitled "Civil Discourse Exists in This Small Corner of the Internet."

It was profiling a subreddit – that is, a subsection of the website Reddit, which, if you've never heard of it all you need to do is think of it as is a forum for people to exchange opinions. Now, when you hear the words "internet" followed closely by "forum for people to exchange opinions" this is where you usually think the darkest part of humanity dwells. But what *The Atlantic* article showed was that, thanks to a clear set of rules and intense moderation, a forum has flourished called "Change My View" founded in 2013 by a Scottish teenager. Anyone can go to this subreddit and post a challenge – examples the article mentioned concerned some of the most controversial topics our society faces: gun-control, abortion, and whether a hot dog is considered a sandwich – in which the person states the view they hold and why, and challenge others to change it.

This would usually be a recipe for disaster. The internet brings out the worst in people, particularly over important conversations that are societal flashpoints. But, not only does the forum remain civil, but it very often leads to people reconsidering their viewpoint. As the author of the article, Kiley Bense, pointed out, this is because these conversations contain what Stanford psychologist Robb Willer calls "moral reframing" – "appealing to the morality of the person you are trying to convince rather than your own."

This is the key to civil discourse: having to frame your arguments not the way you see them but as the other person sees them – and that process will not only be more likely to convince someone else, but it will also make you reconsider the strength of your own position.

How does God have Moshe and Aharon set out to convince Egypt and the Jewish people of His power? By showing them power they expect to see, by appealing to the religiosity of the people He was trying to convince rather than His own. Did God need to bring all the plagues? No! But that's the point – they are for the people, not Him.

God's religious reframing teaches us the importance of moral reframing – that we always consider the viewpoints of those with whom we disagree rather than angrily proclaiming the falsehood of anything uttered from those not on our team. Just as we need to put parentheses around the magicians in Shemot, do we need to minimize our own way of thinking when talking with those with whom we disagree.