

Parshat Bo
By Rebecca Feder



Upon review of this week's Parshat Bo and last week's Parshat Va'eira, several questions become very apparent regarding the facilitation and the cessation of the plagues. Some plagues are facilitated by Moshe, some by Aharon, some jointly by Moshe and Aharon, and some by G-d himself. Sometimes G-d speaks to Moshe, sometimes G-d speaks to Moshe to speak to Aharon, and sometimes G-d speaks to Moshe and Aharon together. Some plagues cease on their own, some require Moshe petitioning G-d through prayer, and some require Moshe spreading his hands out. All the above require in-depth analysis but given time and space constraints are mostly outside the scope of this Dvar Torah.

I will try to answer some of these questions and concentrate on one inconsistency in the *pesukim* (verses) for the plagues of Barad and Arbeh. G-d commands Moshe to use his hands to carry out these plagues, yet the scripture explicitly tells us that Moshe uses his staff in 10:12 and 10:13. God commands Moshe to stretch his hands over the land of Egypt to bring about the plague of locusts. The next *pasuk* (verse) states that Moshe stretches his staff over the land to commence the plague. Why does Moshe disobey God's command and use his staff instead of his hands?

The most obvious answer is that the hands and the staff are interchangeable. In 8:1, God commands Moshe to tell Aharon to stretch forth his hand with his staff to introduce the plague of frogs. The next *pasuk* states that Aharon stretches his hand over the waters of Egypt to start the plague. There is no mention of the staff. Although this answer is sensible, it left me feeling unsatisfied.

I believe the true answer lies in the Moshe's character. Throughout the Bible, Moshe is depicted as very insecure. He is not a natural leader, which is evident in his first encounter with God at the burning bush. God instructs Moshe five times to go to Pharaoh on behalf of Bnei Yisrael, and each time Moshe resists and makes excuses. Moshe's insecurities are also evident in his dealings with the various crises he faces during his tenure as the leader of the Jews. At times, he complains to G-d that his burden is too much to carry, and at times he literally faints and falls to the ground in a state of helplessness. At times, he grows frustrated such as the incident of Mei Meriva, which I will soon explain.

These *makot* (plagues) follow a trajectory of Moshe's insecurities. God instructs Aharon to complete the first three plagues because he knows that at this point Moshe is not ready. Rashi even gives reasons why Moshe felt he was unable to complete the first three plagues. After Aharon, God takes over and delivers the next two because he knows Moshe is still not mentally ready. God is trying to completely prepare Moshe by showing him the two elements needed to complete the *makot* successfully; the human, exemplified by Aharon, and the divine.

Finally, he commands Moshe to initiate the plague of boils. Skip this plague for a moment and instead focus on the next two plagues of hail and locusts. Why does Moshe disobey God twice and use the staff when God specifically commands him to use his hands?

In 4:20, Moshe's staff is referred to as "*mateh haelokim* (the staff of God)." This *pasuk* informs the reader of the miraculous and divine nature of Moshe's staff. It is not a wooden rod, rather it is a holy object that Moshe carries with him. This explains why Moshe uses the staff instead of his hands in the plagues of hail and locusts. Moshe's development is only partially complete. He has finally gained enough courage to perform the plagues himself, but feels he needs some part of God with him. For Moshe, using his hands grants him too much individual power. The staff comforts him by allowing him to feel and rely on God's presence.

There seems to be an exception with boils. Doesn't Moshe use his hands to bring about this plague? There is, however, a big difference. In the plagues of hail and locusts, Moshe's hands are the focus. There are no other distractions or props to take the attention away from what he is doing with his hands. With boils, Moshe's hands are simply the medium to reach the soot so he can cast it upwards.

In the plague of darkness Moshe is finally confident enough to follow God's command to exclusively use his hands. What changes from the plague of the locusts to the plague of darkness that Moshe suddenly has the confidence needed to use his hands instead of the staff?

I would like to suggest that beginning with the plague of Barad, Moshe recognizes that Pharaoh is beginning to crack. Pharaoh acknowledges after Barad that he is a sinner and after the plague of locusts, Pharaoh's servants begin to sow the seeds of discontent by asking, "Do you not yet know that Egypt is lost? (10:7)"

When the plague of darkness comes, Moshe no longer needs the staff because he feels God's presence with him now. Moshe knows that God is facilitating Pharaoh's punishment by hardening Pharaoh's heart, and has gained the confidence to perform the miracles on his own. The miraculous staff is not needed.

Unfortunately, Moshe's confidence is not permanent. Moshe lives in a constant state of insecurity, self-doubt and self-reflection. In other words, Moshe is very human. These insights explain why Moshe hits the rock at Mei Meriva instead of talking to it (Bamidbar 20:12), and why God gets so angry. Bnei Yisrael are exhausted from living as nomads in the desert. Now more than ever they need a strong leader who can successfully take initiative. Up to this point God has held Moshe's hand, building his confidence and proving to him that he is capable of success. He appoints Moshe the leader of an entire nation at a very difficult time, trusting him to lead them out of Egypt and through the desert. He uniquely talks with Moshe face-to-face, something he has never done with anybody else and will never do again. Moshe is clearly God's chosen servant and at this point should have the confidence and faith needed to complete this task. God tells Moshe to talk to the rock to prove to Bnei Yisrael that he can be the leader they so desperately need and to sanctify His name through Moshe. But Moshe makes a catastrophic mistake. Not only does he fall back on the crutch of using the staff to perform the miracle, he doubles down on his error by defiling the holy staff of G-d and violently using it to strike the rock twice. Not only does Moshe fail to live up to his potential as a leader but he desecrates G-d's name at the same time. For this reason, G-d says to Moshe "since you did not have faith in me (Bamidbar 20:12)" you are stripped of the privilege of leading the people into Eretz Yisrael.

Moshe is a reluctant hero and is not a natural-born leader. He is shy and has a speech impediment. He is plagued by his own self-doubt and most importantly is uncomfortable with his G-d-given task as the leader of this nascent nation. But this is what makes Moshe so great. He was not a super-human, extremely charismatic and confident leader. The scripture describes him as the most humble man ever. A wonderful character trait but not something often associated with a leader. And yet this is what makes Moshe who he is. He was relatable to everyone. Although difficult at times, the people ultimately always trusted in him and accepted him as their leader. His character resonated with Bnei Yisrael and resonates with me today. We all have faults. We are imperfect and flawed just like Moshe, and we too have weaknesses we must grapple with throughout our lives, but it is crucial to reach for success despite our flaws. If we continue to do this, like Moshe, we can achieve greatness. Shabbat shalom.