

Bo - Rabbi Lerner - January 13, 2013

The Tenth Plague: The Death of the Firstborn

12:12: *And I will pass through the land of Egypt on this night and I will strike every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from man to animal; and among the gods of Egypt I shall execute judgments - I am Hashem.* **Rashi:** He will pass like a king who has a procession passing before Him from place to place; and it will be in just one passing that all them will be slain. There is redundancy here in this pasuk, saying in the land of Egypt twice. The Torah does this to tell us that the firstborn of other nations who are residing here in Egypt will also be killed. **Rashi:** There is yet another pasuk in Tehillim (136:10) that says *Lemakeh Mitzrayim Bivchoreyhem* which tells us that the Egyptian firstborn who were out of the country were also killed at the same moment as those in Egypt. **Rashi:** This pasuk also says *from man to animal* - this tells us humans are listed and killed first because they were the sinners who causes all of the punishment. **Rashi:** What does it mean *all the gods of Egypt*? If it was a wooden image, it would decay and rot; if made of metal, it will melt into a liquid into the ground; the idols of Egypt will be completely undone. **Rashi:** *I am Hashem* means that Hashem will do it by Himself - Ani Be'Atzmi - He is God and no ministering angels will perform this plague; as we say in the Hagaddah - only God by Himself executed this plague, without any assistants.

Ramban: Rashi details how each of the Egyptian gods will be destroyed, depending upon what they were made of; Rashi focuses on the gods of Egypt. But later in 12:29 where the Torah details how Hashem actually carries out the destruction, it doesn't say anything about the gods of Egypt being destroyed. Did Hashem not carry out this prophecy? He did, but we do not know this until much later in Bamidbar 33:3-4, where the Torah says *They journeyed from Ramses in the first month, on the fifteenth day of the first month, on the day after the korban pesach; Bnai Yisrael went out Beyad Ramah - with an upraised hand - before the eyes of all Egypt. And the Egyptians were burying those whom Hashem had struck, every firstborn; and on their gods Hashem had inflicted punishments.* Why does our parsha ignore the destruction of their gods? The killing of the firstborn is what really got to the Egyptians; in every house there was a dead child - that was the biggest blow, that is what caused the Egyptians to panic, even though there was justice against the gods as well; it was the death of the firstborn that caused the Egyptians to tremble in fear. If Rashi is correct about the destruction of all of the Egyptian gods, they wouldn't have known about that until they went to their houses of worship the next morning - they didn't know that right away. However, while Rashi says that the Egyptian gods were physical idols that they worshipped, that is not correct. This pasuk that talks of their gods refer to the powerful forces in heavens - each nation has ministering angels in the heavens that protect them. God attacked these heavenly Egyptian forces and the Egyptians constellation. Why does Hashem have to attack them? Because those forces from above control the destiny of all the nations below. Hashem wanted to completely destroy the Egyptian civilization - He had to first destroy their powerful, controlling forces in the heavens. The physical idols were connected to the heavenly forces - those had to be dealt with first. We are the only nation without an intermediary - God is our direct provider and protector.

Chizkuni: *Bechal Elohai Mitzrayim* here in this pasuk refers to the officers of Egypt; *elohim* in the Torah often means powerful people, judges, or the elite of the nation. **Abarbanel:** the Chizkuni is incorrect; Hashem went after the gods of Egypt, in heaven and earth.

Ramban: Rashi had said that when it says *her I am Hashem*, that Hashem did this Himself without any assistants. Where does Rashi get this from? Rashi says that it means *Ani Be'Atzmi* - Hashem Himself will wreak havoc - this is learned from the words *Ani Hashem*. But the Midrash Chazal where Rashi got this from says something different - it does not come from the words *Ani Hashem*. It comes from the fact that everything here in this pasuk is in the singular - I will pass, I will strike them, I will punish their gods. As it says in the Hagaddah - "***And I shall go through the land of Egypt - I and not an angel; and I shall strike every firstborn - I and not a seraph; and against all of the Egyptian gods I will mete out punishment - I and not an emissary; I am Hashem and no other.***" The fact that Hashem will do everything Himself is not derived from the two words, *Ani Hashem*, at the end of the pasuk. When we look at the beginning of this section in 12:3, it was to be said over to the Jews - *Dabru El Kal Adas Yisrael Laymor*; if Moshe is now saying this over to the Jews, he should have changed all of the verbs in this pasuk to the third person - that God will pass over and He will kill them, etc. The fact that it is written this way is signaling to the nation that Hashem will do all of this Himself. Hashem usually uses His intermediaries to do this; but in this instance He will do it all Himself. This plague comes from God, not like a king who brings revenge against enemies with executioners and henchmen; God, in this case, is doing it Himself. **Rashi** normally says that *Ani Hashem* usually means that Hashem can be depended on to reward and punish because He is always around - He was, is and will be; here he deviates from that meaning. **Ramban:** *Ani Hashem* here means "I and no other" - that Hashem is One and there is no heavenly power on a level with Him to prevent Him from doing as he wishes.

Rabbeinu Bachya: quotes the Ramban and says that *Ani Hashem* tells us something else. Had Hashem brought about this plague with His usual agents, the angels who are based only on the attribute of Din, this would have been bad news for the Jews, as they also were sinners and idolaters deserving of death. It would have been a disaster for the Jews had the angels been the ones to carry out the plague; the Jews also would have died in large numbers. So Hashem's decision to execute this plague Himself wasn't just to bring revenge on the Egyptians - it was to save the Jews. This is why Hashem could not let his usual agents to perform this plague.

12:13: *The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; when I see the blood I will skip over you; there shall not be a plague of destruction - Negef Lemashchis - upon you when I strike in the land of Egypt.* **Rashi:** I will pass over you means I will have mercy on you. **Abarbanel:** why did we have to place the blood on the door posts? They actually did not deserve to be saved; most of the Jews did not want to go out of Egypt; none were really deserving of liberation because of their sins. The blood created the merit in which they would be saved. The bringing of the korban pesach was a denial of the idolatry of Egypt - by killing the animals, they slew their gods; they did it in broad daylight and showed how they had separated from idolatry; and in that zechus they would be saved. The blood on the door post was necessary to show that the Jews had now denied the validity of idolatry, and through this they deserved to be saved. The Jewish homes were right next to the houses of the Egyptians; they were intermixed with the Egyptians throughout the land, even in Goshen. **Ibn Ezra:** One of the reasons that the Jews were told that none of them should venture out at night was that they should be concentrated in their homes, and that it will be easier to gather them in the morning when it was time to leave. Another interpretation says that the blood was to remind Hashem of how they had suffered with the spilling of Jewish blood, and that Hashem should take revenge on all of the Jews who had been killed by the Egyptians - no Jewish family had been spared and all should be avenged.

What is the meaning of *negef lemashchis*? Later in 12:23 it says that Hashem will see the blood on the door posts and will not allow the mashchis to enter their houses. Who is the mashchis if it is only Hashem carrying out this plague? Some of the meforshim, such as **Rabbeinu Bachya**, say that it means the angels who are not killing the firstborn - that was Hashem's exclusive job - but the revenging angels were killing the evil Jews who were to die that night; the blood on the door posts will protect the Jews from these punishing angels. **Abarbanel**: it means the Egyptian hordes; when the Egyptians see their children dying, who will protect the Jews from the angry mob? That was this mashchis who was out that night. **Beis Halevi**: the mashchis means something additional that was a consequence of the killing of the firstborn. After the deaths of all of these firstborn, a huge plague broke out - a pollution, a poison entering into and pervading the atmosphere - there was a horrible mist or fog that was going through the atmosphere, killing Egyptians. That is why the Jews were instructed not to go out at night, and Hashem also guaranteed that this poison won't seep into their homes. The proof is that it says in Hallel Hagadol, in the above pasuk from Tehillim - *Lemake Mitzrayim Bivchoreyhem* - He will smite Egypt through the instrument of their firstborn; a plague will arise from the bodies of all of these people, a horrific plague. The Jews will be saved by showing the blood of the korban pesach, and Hashem will then protect the Jews from all other aspects of this plague.