

## Parshat Va'era 5780

In this week's parasha, 7 of the 10 plagues appear; while the final 3 appear next week, as is well known from the gematria of next week's parasha בזב. However, this split doesn't fit in with the well-known acronym of R Yehuda in the Haggada of ג"צַדְקָה שְׁבָתָן, which would suggest that a more appropriate split would be after plague 3 or 6 (if indeed a split were needed at all). So why did the Rabbis split the plagues across these two parashiot in this way?

Before answering this, it is important to consider another question – why did we need 10 plagues at all? Last week, Hashem told Moshe to say to Paro “*Thus says Hashem – my son, my firstborn, Israel...and I say to you – send my son and let him serve Me, and if you refuse to send him, I will kill your son, your firstborn.*” (Shemot 4:22-23) This is a clear indication that only one plague was actually needed, the tenth plague (as it turned out).

But when Moshe presented his plan to Paro, Paro's immediate reaction was: “*I do not know Hashem, and I will not let Israel leave*” (Shemot 5:2). Effectively, Paro has increased the stakes from denying a national liberation of the Jewish people, to also denying the existence of Hashem. This meant that to counteract Paro, the punishments had to operate on two levels – the theological and the national, and this is exactly the split we see between the plagues in Vaera, and those in Bo.

- (1) In Vaera, we repeatedly hear the refrain “*And Egypt will know that I am Hashem*”, “*By this you will know that I am Hashem*”, “*that you will know that there is none like Hashem our God*”, “*that you will know that I am Hashem in the midst of the land*”. From this it is clear that Moshe is waging a theological war against Paro. But we don't hear any of these expressions in Bo.
- (2) In Vaera, the repeated demand is for the Jewish nation to go three days into the midbar in order to serve Hashem. Again, this is a religious/theological request, with the potential implication that they will return afterwards. Once we move to Bo, there is no mention of three days, but rather a negotiation about how much of the nation will be allowed to go, i.e. it has moved to the nationalistic/political level.
- (3) In Vaera, Moshe's combatants are the *chartumim*, or magicians, and they engage in a battle over who rules over nature; a battle that Hashem clearly wins when the *chartumim* can no longer stand in front of Moshe because of the

boils. But in Bo, the combatants are Paro's advisers, who try to negotiate a compromise solution because they see that the nation of Egypt is being destroyed. So again, we move from a theological dispute to a national dispute.

- (4) We also see that the plagues in Vaera are debilitating but not life-threatening – demonstrated by Paro's lack of haste by requesting that the plague should be removed the next morning. This additionally shows Hashem's control over nature by being able to specify the time that the plague should stop. However, the plagues in Bo are potentially fatal – the locusts eat all the food (and Paro calls it “this death”), in the darkness all human functioning stops, and the last plague speaks for itself. (Admittedly the last plague in Vaera, hail, does kill some people, but these are the slaves of those Egyptians that do not believe in the word of Hashem.)

Our parasha ends with Paro saying “I have sinned – Hashem is the righteous one, and I and my people are wicked”. At this point, the theological battle has been won, but the national battle for freedom has not yet been won, and he still refuses to let the people go. This is the battle in next week's parasha.

We also see this distinct difference in the haftarat of the two parashiot. The centrepiece of the haftarah of Vaera is Yechezkel's description of Paro as “the great crocodile (*tanim*) wallowing in his Nile, who says ‘I am the Nile and I made it for myself’”. Hashem warns him that He will show His power “I will put hooks into your jaws, and make all the fish in the Nile stick to your scales, and lift you up out of your Nile...and cast you into the wilderness”. Thus Hashem destroys the myth of the Egyptians that their Paro controls the Nile, the source of all sustenance (Egypt was dependent on the annual Nile floods for agriculture and hence food). This is the continuation of the religious/theological character of our parasha, and indeed ends up with “and [the Egyptians] will know that I am Hashem”.

This is in contrast to the haftarah of Bo, which depicts a national battle where Nebuchrezzar king of Bavel comes to destroy the nation of Egypt, just like the parasha of Bo talks about the nationalist oriented plagues, and indeed the departure of the Jewish nation from Egypt. Furthermore, Yirmeyahu depicts Egypt as “a beautiful calf”, a symbol of food and basic needs of the nation, rather than the crocodile which represents the power of their gods.

Based on shiurim by Rav Moshe Lichtenstein.