

# CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

## THE WONDER OF WONDERS AND MIRACLE OF MIRACLES Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

If G-d split the Red Sea today, a flood of hydrologists would be sweeping toward the Middle East before anyone could make it across on dry land. If frogs overnight populated every oven in Egypt, or a plague *chas veshalom* killed firstborns exclusively, an ocean of virtual ink would drown anyone seeking to leave the event inexplicable. At least, I suspect, this would be the case within Modern Orthodoxy. Does this reflect a lack of faith, or religious maturity?

Maimonides notes brilliantly that the first thing Avraham does after arguing with G-d about Sodom is to wake up and smell the sulfur. Any time angels appear in a narrative, he insists, everything that happens is a dream. The destruction of Sodom as we read it in Torah is Avraham's dream. But when Avraham wakes up, there really is sulfur in the air.

The Torah describes the destruction of Sodom from the perspective of a religious sensibility, but what happened could also be told in the driest objective materialist language. Perhaps it was a volcanic eruption, or a sandstorm, or a massive invasion of carnivorous fireflies, or whatever.

My question is whether Avraham could distinguish the dream from the reality; did Avraham know that he was imposing meaning on a naturally explicable order, or did he believe that Sodom had literally been destroyed by an eruption of Divine justice into an ordinarily self-contained universe?

Here's why this matters. Many of us actively resist seeing tsunamis as different in theological kind from gentle beachside breakers. If miracles can be recognized only when physical explanations are impossible, then it would be miraculous for us ever to recognize a miracle. (This argument

was made by Isaac Breuer.) We cannot relate to an Avraham who thought G-d's anger meant that physical effects could proceed from exclusively metaphysical causes. But we should have no difficulty relating to an Avraham with experience of volcanoes but who had never before seen them as ignited by angels.

Every age develops its own naturalistic explanation of the plagues, and at least for Maimonideans, such explanations hold no religious terrors. But regarding another element of the Exodus narrative, there is an enormous *nafka mina* depending on whether one sees an event as natural or not. I refer to G-d's hardening of Pharaoh's heart.

Here is a naturalistic explanation, from Steven Spielberg (Prince of Egypt): Pharaoh's late father had often called his adolescent son weak, and contrasted his mental toughness invidiously with that of Mosheh, the adopted son whose personality was far more suited to the throne. So the confrontation with Mosheh was really about proving his father wrong, and the more disastrously things went, the more determined he was to persevere.

Spielberg's approach to this issue is anticipated by Shadal, who writes (7:3):

"ואני אקשה את לב פרעה"

אפשר לפרש כדברי הראשונים (רמב"ם ורמב"ן ואחרים) שהענין כמשמעו, כי לעוצם פשעי פרעה היה מן הדין למנוע ממנו דרכי התשובה. (עיין רמב"ם הל' תשובה פרק ו')

רש"י ז"ל כבר קדם וכתב הפירוש הזה, אך הוא בקוצר לשונו הוסיף בו דבר נאה ונכבד, והוא כי מניעת דרכי התשובה מפרעה לא היתה לעצם פשעיו בלבד, אך נוספה לה סבה אחרת, והוא כי גלוי היה לפניו יתברך שאף אם ישוב לא תהיה תשובתו שלימה; עיין דבריו הקצרים כי נעמו

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ואפשר ג'כ לפרש כדעת רמב"ן שלא היה בזה ענש א-להי ונס ממש, אלא  
כי פרעה עצמו הקשה את לבו, אלא שכל המעשים ייחסו אל הא-ל מצד מה,  
כי הוא הסיבה הראשנה

ואני מוסיף כי המעשים המיוחסים בספרי הקדש אל הא-ל הם המעשים  
הזרים שסיבתם בלתי מובנת לנו, וכן כאן קשי ערפו של פרעה אחרי ראותו  
כמה אותות ומופתים הוא דבר זר ומתמיה, ע"כ ייחס אל הא-ל

*"I will harden Pharaoh's heart" –*

*It is possible to explain as do the medieval (Rambam, Ramban, and others) that the matter is in accordance with its literal meaning, that because of the vastness of Pharaoh's crimes it was reasonable to deny him the paths of repentance (See Rambam Laws of Repentance Chapter 6).*

*Rashi of blessed memory already wrote this, but in his succinct language he added something attractive and worthy, namely that the denial of the paths of repentance to Pharaoh, was not solely owing to the vastness of his sins, rather there was an additional reason, namely that it was revealed before Him may He be blessed that even if he would repent, his repentance would be incomplete*

*– see Rashi's succinct words for they are pleasing.*

*It is also possible to explain in accordance with Ramban's opinion that there was not here any Divine punishment or actual miracle, rather Pharaoh himself hardened his heart, but all actions can be ascribed to G-d in some fashion, because He is the Prime Cause.*

*I add that the actions which are ascribed to G-d in the Holy Books are those strange actions whose causes are not explicable to us, and similarly here the stiffneckedness of Pharaoh after he has seen a number of signs and wonders is something strange and astounding, so therefore it is ascribed to G-d . . .*

Shadal and Spielberg (and perhaps Nachmanides) solve the theological problem of how G-d can interfere with free will: He does not. Exodus is a story of human choice. I believe it was Hume who said that we all believe in free will before we act, and determinism after. That we can explain compellingly why Pharaoh made a particular choice does not mean that he could not have chosen otherwise, or would not have chosen otherwise at least once if given infinite do-overs.

But can the religious sensibility to the Exodus survive this solution? Shadal's Divinity is truly a "god of the gaps," invoked only when science fails. Many before me have pointed out that the gaps are narrowing in modernity, so this is not a good survival tactic for religious belief. Moreover,

many things are trivial but inexplicable, and I have no interest in ascribing to G-d the fact that my new ATM card matched the numbers in the weekly Powerball drawing (especially as I had not bought a ticket).

The medieval philosopher and exegete Yosef Ibn Caspi raises a different theological difficulty with the Exodus narrative. How can Moshe repeatedly decline the Divine mission, and why does it seem that G-d changes His plans in response to Moshe's advice and lack of consent?

Ibn Caspi's answer is that prophets are certain they have heard G-d's word, but often unsure they have understood it right. What the Torah presents as dialogues between G-d and Mosheh are actually Moshe's deliberations as to the actual intent of what he's been told.

Like Maimonides on miracles, and Spielberg on Pharaoh (lehavdil), Ibn Caspi takes a story that is apparently about Divine intervention and psychologizes it, so the drama takes place fully within a human consciousness. But Ibn Caspi does not fully naturalize the story; there is still the moment of prophetic encounter which precedes deliberation, the mere sight of the unburning bush.

But unlike Avraham at Sodom, it is clear that Moshe is aware that every physical phenomenon is subject to scientific explanation. He turns aside to see "this great sight." Why is the flame not consuming the bush? What makes him a prophet is his capacity to see it as a *מראה גדול*, a great sight, even while and after he seeks to explain it.

It is not a lack of faith to believe that everything physical can be explained physically, and everything psychological can be explained psychologically (nor is it a lack of maturity to believe otherwise, so long as one is willing to see the data). Maintaining a religious sensibility requires only that we be able to wonder when something wondrous happens, and be able to hang on to that wonder even after we have explained it.

*Shabbat Shalom!*

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