

Dimensions in Chumash

Parshas Vaeira

What Happened in the Plague of Blood?

This week's parsha presents seven of the ten plagues that Hashem brought against Egypt, the first of which involved turning all the water in Egypt into blood for seven days.

The Nile and the Other Waters – Two Observations

As we know, the plague of blood affected not only the River Nile, which was the main source of water for Egypt, but also included every body of water in the land – even water that was inside vessels of wood or stone.¹ Having said that, if we look closely at the relevant verses we will discover that the Torah's presentation of the plague as it affected the Nile versus all the other waters differs in two noteworthy respects.

1. The way the plague is described:

- Verse 17 states concerning the water in the Nile: 'וְנִהְפְכוּ לְדָם' – it will *turn into* blood". Likewise, Verse 20 which describes the plague as it happened states "וְנִהְפְכוּ כָּל הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר בַּיָּאֵר לְדָם" – All the water in the Nile *turned into* blood."
- In contrast, the term used in verse 19 with respect to all the other waters in Egypt is "וַיִּהְיוּ דָם" – and they will *become* blood." Likewise, verse 21 states "וַיִּהְיֶה הַדָּם בְּכֹל אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם" – There was blood in all the land of Egypt."

Now, seemingly, these two verbs – “turning into” and “becoming” – represent two ways of describing exactly the same thing; for by definition, any water that

¹ Shemos 7:19.

“turns into” blood “becomes” blood! Why, then, does the Torah use one term for the Nile and a different term for the other water in Egypt?

2. The act which brought about the plague:

- Verses 17 and 20 relate that the water in the Nile was turned into blood by being struck with a staff.
- In contrast, the other water in Egypt became blood by having a staff extended in its direction.

Here too, we ask: Why would the very same plague be brought about through two different acts?

All of this leads us to consider that although the plague of blood affected both the Nile and all the water in Egypt, nevertheless, it did not affect these two in the same way. In other words, the plague of blood actually contained *two different plagues...*

The Bechor Shor's Chiddush

The basis of our suggestion is a fascinating comment made by one of the Rishonim, Rabbeinu Yosef Bechor Shor,² to our parsha. He writes as follows:

It appears to me that Nile only became blood for a short while – during which the water became blood and all the fish died – and then it became water [again]. My proof that this is so is the fact that [the verse] does not give the reason [the Egyptians] could not drink from the Nile as the fact that it was blood; rather, as since the fish had died and putrefied [the water].³

Furthermore, it states⁴ the [Egyptian] magicians did likewise, turning water into blood. Yet how could they do so, seeing as everywhere there was only blood, even in the vessels? Rather, it is clear that there was blood for [only] a short while throughout Egypt, which then turned back to water, at which point the magicians turned some of it back into blood. Indeed, for this reason Pharaoh did not instruct them simply to turn the blood back into water.

² One of the *Baalei HaTosafos*, a student of Rabbeinu Tam.

³ Verses 18 and 21.

⁴ Verse 22.

On the Coat-Tails of the Rishonim

Now, a simple reading of the Bechor Shor's words indicates that his explanation of the plague is as it affected all the water in Egypt. However, if this is so, we should note two things:

1. The Bechor Shor adduces proof for his thesis from the fact that the reason given for the Egyptians' inability to drink the water was not that it was blood, but rather that it had become putrefied from the rotting fish. The verse in question (verse 18) reads: "The fish in the Nile will die and the Nile will putrefy, and Egypt will tire from trying to drink water from the Nile." We note that this verse explicitly mentions the Nile three times. Likewise, verse 21 reads: "The fish in the Nile died and the Nile putrefied, and Egypt could not drink water from the Nile." Why the repeated emphasis on the Nile?
2. Since the plague affected every collection of water, including that which was inside vessels where there were no fish, what would be the result of the water momentarily become blood and then turning back into water? With nothing to kill and putrefy, it would simply revert to being be drinkable water, exactly as it was before the plague happened!

Let us suggest that that it was *in this respect* that the other water differed from the Nile, namely, the water in the Nile was turned into blood only temporarily, whereas the other water remained blood for seven days.⁵

If this is so, we can now answer the two questions we raised at the beginning of this discussion. Firstly, this will explain why there are two different verbs used to describe the plague, for they are essentially describing two different effects:

- With regards the Nile, the term used is "נהפך – *turning into*", which emphasizes the *transition* from water to blood, if only for a moment.
- With regard to the other water, however, the term used is "יהיה – *will be*", which implies that they will not only turn into blood, but will *remain* so.

⁵ As we will appreciate, the second proof of the Bechor Shor, namely, that there was also water available for the magicians to turn into blood, likewise does not necessitate an understanding that all the water which had turned into blood turned back into water after a moment. It would be sufficient for some of the blood to revert to water for some to then be available; specifically, the water of the Nile, around which they were all congregated.

We now also understand why the different waters were affected by different actions, each one appropriate to the way in which that water would be affected:

- The Nile turned into blood after being struck by Aharon's staff, an act which was abrupt in nature, representing a *momentary* transition.
- The other water became blood after Aharon extended his staff towards it, representing the fact that their newly acquired state would also exist for an *extended* period of time.

Loopholes for Delusion – Explaining the Duality within the Plague

Having discovered that the plague of blood actually took on two distinct forms, the question now is: What is behind all of this? Why would the one plague affect different waters in different ways?

To answer this question, we need to remind ourselves that in addition to being the largest source of water for Egypt, the Nile was also an object of worship.⁶ An idea mentioned by numerous commentators is that the concept of “hardening Pharaoh's heart” was essentially the process of manipulating his natural stubbornness and egotism.⁷ This process continued throughout the year of the plagues, with each plague contain a loophole of sorts for Pharaoh to latch onto, insisting that he was right and that Moshe was a charlatan. Here too, by allowing the Nile to revert to being water after just a moment, Hashem gave Pharaoh the option of perceiving his deity as having “defended itself” and recovered expediently. It is true that this thesis is not particularly cogent, for the waters of the Nile hardly emerged fresh from the plague. Nonetheless, the opening was there for Pharaoh to reach the conclusions which suited him. He did not allow the unbearable stench of rotting fish rising from his deity to dissuade him. For Pharaoh, that was nothing other than the smell of victory. This was a pattern that was to repeat itself with each of the ensuing plagues, so that while the people of Israel were progressively becoming free of Pharaoh's rule, Pharaoh himself was becoming ever increasingly enslaved by his obstinacy and egocentricity.

Further Observations: Moshe and the Plague of Blood

⁶ See Rashi to Verse 17.

⁷ See e.g. Maaseh Hashem to our parsha.

This explanation might also help us answer another question regarding the plague of blood. Rashi⁸ famously comments that the reason Moshe was instructed to tell Aharon to initiate this plague is because he was saved by the Nile when he was set afloat upon it as a baby; hence, it would be inappropriate for him to strike it. However, it is most interesting to note that the words on which Rashi comments, “say to Aharon,” were not stated with reference to the Nile, but rather in the verse which refers to him extending his staff toward the *other waters* of Egypt! Clearly, Rashi understands that Aharon’s substitution for Moshe likewise took effect with regards to hitting the Nile, effectively having him initiate both parts of the plague. However, let us ask a simple question: Given that the “default” situation is for Moshe to initiate the plagues, and given also that his gratitude pertained to the Nile specifically, why were the two aspects of the plague not *divided between them* – with Aharon striking the Nile and Moshe extending his staff toward the other waters? If anything, this division would underscore Moshe’s particular gratitude toward the Nile!

Perhaps we may suggest, based on our discussion, that such a division would not be acceptable. Since the temporary nature of the plague as it affected the Nile in contrast to the other water was designed in order for Pharaoh to conclude that he was right, that discrepancy could not be ascribed to any external factor, such as the fact that the Nile was afflicted through Aharon, while the other water was afflicted through Moshe. Hence, once Aharon took over the one aspect of afflicting the Nile, he resultantly also took over the other aspect of afflicting all the water in Egypt.

⁸ Verse 19, s.v. *emor*.