

# Journey Through The Plagues

*An exploration of the makkot in eleven voice recordings.*

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(Disclaimer: these are essentially the scripts I prepared to record from for the Whatsapp group Journey Through the Makkot, and are only very slightly edited, and are generally not sourced.)

## Intro

Chodesh Tov and welcome to this journey through the plagues! I'm so excited to have this opportunity to share and explore these ideas with you.

First, I want to explain why the plagues have been plaguing me for a long time. At the center of our seder table growing up was a beautiful, elegant, white and gold plate, with absolutely gruesome fine art depictions of the plagues all around the border. Beautiful pictures of dead fish in a bloody river, dying cows and dead Egyptians. It was not my favorite item at our seder table, but apparently, this was a very popular seder plate, because when I got married, we were gifted with our very own copy of the same thing! The plagues are really popular. I know of at least three different children's books on the subject, and I think I own at least four different sets of manipulatives for kids to play with at the seder. All of which got me wondering, what on earth are we trying to teach our children with all of this, and what are we teaching ourselves?

Hopefully, we will be able to answer that question better at the end of this series. Today I wanted to share with you a quick introduction, three main ideas that will guide us in our exploration:

Number One:

1. There is a dual nature to the plagues.

Yeshayahu 19:22 “וְיִגְדֹף יְהוָה אֶת־מִצְרַיִם בְּגֹף יִרְפְּאוֹ” —the Zohar (2:36a) explains that the plagues were plagues to Egypt and healing for Am Yisrael.

This is because the plagues were a revelation of truth. And if you're ready to accept the truth, that's a wonderful thing. And if you're not, that can be painful.

Number two:

2. The *makkot* are not an isolated event, they are part of the process of history.

So, to begin at the beginning: Hashem spoke the world into being through the 10 *maamarot*. The natural world is a communication from Hashem. They are an expression of the way the world is meant to be. But it is a communication that requires no answer from us. We can choose to open ourselves up to hear what the *ma'amarot* are saying, as Avraham did. Or we could ignore them.

The 10 *dibbrot* were also a communication from Hashem, but they are a communication that require a response from us. They are a conversation.

The *makkot* stand in the middle. They are the point that moves us from the world of the *maamarot* to the world of the *dibbrot*.

“The Ten utterances were completed by the Ten Commandments. .. but the ability for this to be revealed in the world was by means of the 10 plagues.”

In the more than 2000 years between the creation of the world to when we were slaves in Egypt, the messages that Hashem was communicating to the world through the 10 *ma'amarot* were not reaching us. The plagues, one by one, revealed the inner meaning of the *maamarot* and prepared us to accept the *dibbrot*. This was a systematic process. The first plague begins with the last of the *ma'amarot*, and the last of the *dibbrot*, revealing the inner meaning of the *ma'amar* and preparing us to accept the corresponding *dibra*. The plagues peel back the messages of the *ma'amarot* one by one, until the last plague, the plague of the first born, which takes us all the way back to the first *ma'amar*, which is the first word in the Torah, Bereisheit. This is the process we are going to look at in depth.

I want to be very clear, though. This is just my attempt to take some Torah I've learned and put it into a format that is meaningful to me, and I hope to you. *Barur*, obviously, I am only touching the surface of this topic. There is so, so, much more.

Final Idea:

3. The key to the plagues was explained by Hashem before he began the plagues, in the first sign that Moshe did before Pharaoh

So, let's take a look at this section of Chumash, Shemot 7: 8-13. (I'm sharing with you the *peirush* of Rav Moshe Shapiro, from his volume on Shemot, essays 85 and 86)

First Hashem says to Moshe and Aaron, listen, you're going to go to Pharaoh, and he's going to ask you for a sign, to prove yourselves. And this is what you're going to do. You're going to take your staff, and Aaron will throw it down before Pharaoh, and it's gonna become a snake. Okay, sounds impressive. So far so good. So Moshe comes with this staff to Pharaoh. And does exactly as Hashem commanded. He takes the staff, throws it on the floor, and -pow- it's a snake. And what's the result?

Pharaoh is, to put it mildly, unimpressed. The pasuk says, Pharaoh summoned his wise men and his sorcerers, and they did the same thing. The Midrash, however, describes Pharaoh laughing and cackling like a hen. This is your sign?? You're like the fool that brings fish to Acco (a port city). You bring chaff to a city full of chaff. He brought school children to do the same. His wife came out and did it. Nursery school children did it. It's a huge party. Everyone is throwing their sticks on the floor, and the floor is teeming with snakes. It's a disaster. Seems like the biggest flop ever.

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However, Rav Moshe Shapiro tells us, this was exactly the point. To really understand, let's take a closer look at exactly what was going on here.

Moshe comes to Pharaoh with his *mateh*, his staff. Let's look at this Hebrew word for staff, *mateh*. Rav Moshe Shapiro tells us, "In Hebrew, the root *mateh* means inclining—transferring from one side to the other. It also relates to *matah*, below. Likewise, the task of the staff, the *mateh*, the incliner, was to transfer things from their root on high to below, *matah*, and bring them to their actualization."

The *mateh* takes potential, and brings it down into actuality. But as it does so, it inclines it to whatever side it wants that potential to go.

Another aspect of this Hebrew word *mateh* is that it can be broken up into

a) 49 + Hashem = מט ה = מט'ה

Now 49 is an interesting number. The Yalkut Shemoni tells us that "Everything that Hashem said to Moshe, He said with 49 facets of purity and 49 facets of defilement."

49 are the 49 facets of creation. We know that the world was created in 7 days, 7 facets. But there is also a unity to creation, so on every day, the facets of all the other days are also revealed, through the lens of that day. So there are really 7 times 7 facets to creation. 49. (If you ever counted *sefirah* with the middot, the 49 days, *chesed she'ba'gevurah*, etc. It is the same idea).

So there are 49 facets to the beautiful, pure, expression of our world.

But as we know, there has to be a balance between good and evil in this world, because this is the place where we have free choice. So there are also 49 facets of impurity in this world.

The *mateh*, which is 49 plus *hey*, for Hashem, is our power. We hold it in our hand. And we can use it to take the *shefa* from above and bring it into the world in whichever way we want to.

When we bring that revelation, the *shefa*, down into the world in the way that Hashem intended, it looks like a *matteh*, like a staff, a straight line leading directly back to source.

And if we instead choose to veer from that path, if we twist and turn Hashem's message to meet our own needs, the staff looks like—a snake.

Aaron threw the staff on the floor. It appeared to disconnect it from its source. And it turned into a snake. If you think the staff can exist on its own, it will turn into a snake. The snake is just the power Hashem gave us to act in this world, but used for its own purposes, disconnected from Hashem.

And immediately, everyone in Egypt could do the same. They could do it because Aaron was able to do it. The power to do evil is power that Hashem gives us.

And that is why, that moment above, in Pharaoh's palace, where Pharaoh and his cadre are gleefully mocking Moshe and the floor is teeming with twisting snakes is not the end of the story.

Because at that moment, Aaron picks up the snake, which is revealed to have remained a staff the entire time, and as a staff, it swallows up every snake in that room.

How does a staff swallow a snake? No problem, because the thing is, the snake was always part of the staff. All the 49 levels of purity and all the 49 levels of impurity in this world, are all, ultimately, revelations of Hashem. The 49 facets of tumah are also part of Hashem's creation. They only exist because Hashem gives them the power to exist.

The pasuk says, the heart of Pharaoh was strong, and he did not heed them, just as Hashem had spoken.

Pharaoh's heart remained with the snake. Hashem told him to release the Jews, and he wanted to twist those words, and follow his own heart. But even that, that was also just as Hashem had spoken.

Review:

So, just to quickly review.

1. Every plague has a dual nature, it punishes the Egyptians but it heals the Jews
2. The way it does this is by revealing the truth, which is healing for those who want to accept it. The truth that the *makkot* are revealing are the messages of the 10 *ma'amarot* with which the world was created. Each plague reveals the truth of one *ma'amar*, and also prepares us to accept the *aseret hadibbrot*.
3. Finally, with the staff turning into a snake, Hashem was sending a strong message to Pharaoh about the nature of these plagues—He can imagine himself to be his own power, but the reality is, everything, even Pharaoh, and even and especially Pharaoh when he is defying Hashem, exists only because Hashem gives him the ability to exist.

That's all for today, folks. Wishing everyone a beautiful, meaningful, inspiring day, and looking forward to exploring the first Makkah, the plague of blood, tomorrow, iyH.

### **Blood**

(Sound of water) Water. We use it for everything. Water is life. Our cells run on water, plant cells run on water, the whole ecosystem runs on water. And this first plague begins with water.

And then, interestingly, water is replaced with another liquid life force. Blood. Blood is also life. As it says in Vayikra 17:11, כִּי־נַפְשׁ הַבָּשָׂר בַּדָּם הוּא. “The *nefesh* is in the blood”

So this first plague takes one life force, water, and replaces it with another, blood. But wow, are these two life forces different. Let’s take a moment to explore these two amazing liquids.

Rav Moshe Shapiro explains that “Water is the element in the world that corresponds to the attribute of kindness. It brings all cultivation, all growth, and it facilitates all construction. Water cultivates and connects and causes things to grow.

Water, chemically, is cohesive and adhesive, it sticks to itself and it sticks to others. It seems almost like a physical representation of the importance of *keshet*, connection. We look at water, and we can almost see it singing out the message, “life is about connection.”

On the other hand, blood, Rav Moshe explains, corresponds to the attribute of justice, of setting boundaries and defining borders. Blood is life—but life that is limited to the one in whom the blood circulates. Blood is life force that is specific, contained. It exists only within specific boundaries. He writes, “There is no expansion of life from blood. To the contrary—the expansion of blood is death itself.” (Shemos p.97-98)

That is why the sound of overflowing water is the relaxing sound of a waterfall. And the image of overflowing blood, gushing blood, is death.

We can look at the world from the perspective of water, or we can look at the world from the perspective of blood. From the perspective of water, of expansiveness, we understand that Hashem is big. He made a big world. And we are one part of a very, very big picture, connected to all the parts around me.

There is another way of looking at the world where I am everything. Where the only life force that matters is the life force inside me. This is actually the way we are born. A baby is all self. Everything that exists is part of self. For a baby, there is no object permanence because anything that is not part of me doesn’t really exist.

Pharaoh was not that different. What Pharaoh said was, “The river is mine. I made myself.” The only life force that matters is the life force I feel within myself. The ideology is, what I am, what I want, that is what matters most. That is what really exists.

On the surface this is an appealing way to exist. It means I get to express myself, actualize myself, I don’t need to limit myself to being confined to what anyone else may want or feel. It seems amazing.

Pharaoh certainly thought he had it all figured out.

He was wrong, of course. And what Hashem did to prove it was simply to cause physical creation to reflect his illusion. Pharaoh said, “I am the Nile. I made myself.” Hashem said, let me show you graphically what you are doing to the world when you mistake your life force for the life force of

the entire world. Hashem replaced the flowing, life-giving water of the Nile with blood, in the process killing everything in the river. It was a stark depiction that a world of only myself is a world of death. When the life sustaining, expansive fluid provided by G-d is replaced by the limited liquid of man, the result is destruction. A river filled to the brim with stinking dead fish.

Okay, that was part one: the plague. Hold that thought for a moment, I want to go a bit deeper, so that we can explore the *ma'amar* and the *dibra* that relate to the plague.

Let's begin with the famous midrash in Shemot Rabbah.

It describes how, as all the water in the land of Egypt is turned to blood, the Egyptians were trying desperately to find a good water source, digging wells etc. Nothing was working. And then, they turn around and what do they see? Hey, those Jews are drinking water! From barrels filled with water. You can imagine the scene. Hey, you, you dirty Jew, give me that! He grabs it away, takes a big gulp, ugh, and spits out the blood that's in his mouth. Furious, bewildered, the Egyptian says, get over here. You have water? That's it we'll drink together from one plate! אוֹמֵר לוֹ נִשְׁתֶּה אִתִּי And the Jew drank water and the Egyptian blood.

So what's going on here? Is it water, is it blood? Does it switch back and forth by the second, the Jew grabs it, water, the Egyptian takes it, blood, the Jew takes it back again, water again. Is it just switching back and forth by the second?

Rav Moshe Shapiro says no. It wasn't like that at all. That's completely missing the point. The point is that it was blood for the Egyptian and water for the Jew at exactly the same moment. Both, at the same time.

Two people can be in the same place at the same time and experience two completely different things. It was a tremendous miracle when this happened on a physical level. But it happens on a mental level all the time. To get a glimpse of this, imagine the joy of a grandfather, sharing his favorite music, opera, with his grandson. And imagine how not-thrilled the grandson is to be sitting through the opera. Two people. One place. Two different worlds.

Rav Dessler tells us that this is a great truth of our existence in this world. He says that worlds are "neither places for universes; they are states of consciousness . . . What one sees as absolute constitutes one's "world." In a very real way, it is not our geographic location but our beliefs, our desires, and our perceptions that create our world.

The last *ma'amar* that Hashem used to speak the world into existence, the *ma'amar* that relates to this Makkah is Bereisheit 1:29

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים הִנֵּה נֹתְתִי לָכֶם אֶת־כָּל־עֵשֶׂב | זֶרַע זָרַע אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ וְאֶת־כָּל־הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר־בּוֹ פְּרִי־עֵץ זָרַע  
זָרַע לָכֶם יְהִי־הִיא לְאֹכְלָהּ

And God said, "Behold, I have given you every seed bearing herb, which is upon the surface of the entire earth, and every tree that has seed bearing fruit; it will be yours for food.

This is malchut. With this ma'amar, the last ma'amar Hashem placed the completed world into our hands and gave us rulership over the world. He gave us this ability to create our world.

If we choose to live in a world disconnected from Hashem, where there is no guarantee we will have what we need, in what Mrs. Esther Wein calls survival mode, we will be constantly worried about what we have and what everyone else has. We will create a world of jealousy, and this is exactly what the last dibra, the one that relates to this plague, warns us about.

לֹא תַחְמַד בֵּית רֵעֶךָ לֹא־תַחְמַד אִשְׁתּוֹ

רֵעֶךָ וְעַבְדּוֹ וְאִמָּתוֹ וְשׂוֹרְוֹ וְחֲמֹרוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֶךָ

You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, his manservant, his maidservant, his ox, his donkey, or whatever belongs to your neighbor.

This dibra is warning us not to create that limited, disconnected world for ourselves.

Instead, we can choose to live in a world of connection, of expansion, then there is enough of everything. In the world of expansiveness, when we are connected to Hashem, we know that Hashem is big, there is enough for all of us. We are happy, joyful with what we have. We don't need what our neighbor has.

So, to sum up, let's put this all together: The last of the ma'amarim was the moment when Hashem gave the completed world into our hands. He gave us the ability to create and nourish our own world. We were meant to do this from a place of connection. We were meant to nourish our world with connection, the way that water nourishes the physical world. In the plague of blood, Hashem graphically depicted what happens when we fail to do this. When we try to create our world from a place of ego, a place that is disconnected from Hashem, from others and focused only on ourself, we bring destruction. Our bodies may run on blood, but the world cannot be nourished that way. In this midst of this plague Hashem also graphically illustrated for us the reality that the world that we live in is not defined by our geographical, physical space. It is the reality that we create with our minds. No matter where we are in the world, even if we are drinking from the same plate as the Egyptians, we can choose to nourish our internal worlds however we want. We can live in a world of expansiveness. We can step out of ourselves, and into Hashem's world, where there is room not just for ourselves, but for everyone else. In that world, I do not care what my neighbor has. In that world, we can all flourish.

### Frogs

(Sound of frogs croaking) The melodious sound of croaking frogs. Okay, not so melodious. Shemot Rabbah tells us that the worst part of the plague of frogs was the sound the frogs made. And I get this, I really get this. For one week, we had one cricket stuck in the air conditioning vent by our kitchen. That one cricket was enough to drive me out of my house and almost out of my mind. In Egypt, the frog noise, from thousands of frogs, was everywhere. and just when the

Egyptians couldn't take it anymore, the Midrash describes the frogs jumping into their bodies, so that when they tried to speak, only the sound of croaking came out.

So, what was the message behind sending a plague that filled the entire land with a loud cacophony of meaningless noise? To make a long story short, the loud croaking was highlighting the noise that should have been there instead: the noise was meaningful speech.

But, to really understand what that means, Let's take a moment to explore this idea a bit more deeply, and let's start this time with the 9<sup>th</sup> ma'amar, associated with the plague of frogs, Bereisheit 1:26, "וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים בְּעֲשֵׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ"

And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness"

One of the most famous questions on this pasuk is, who is G-d speaking to when he says, Let us make man? Why is this plural. G-d doesn't really need any help with the process. There are a lot of explanations for this, but one of my favorites I learned from Rav Twersky, I think quoting the Ba'al Shem Tov, that says that the plural here is man and G-d together. We are partners in our own creation. Our avodah in this world is to be a partner in the process of creating ourselves.

Rav Moshe Shapiro explores this idea at length in his classes on Bereisheit, and he explains that one reason why the creation process is described in so much detail in the beginning of the Torah, is that it is from the description of how Hashem created the world, that we can learn how to create our own personal world and how to create ourselves.

So, what was the process of creation? All of creation was brought into being in the first moment of creation. "In the beginning G-d created heaven and earth." Everything was there, but nothing was formed. It all existed in potential. "The earth was tohu." It was astonishing in its lack of form. And then it was "bohu," an unformed mass where the potential for form can be seen. Still, "there was darkness on the depths of unformed matter" until Hashem said, "Let there be light." And with light came the ability to perceive meaning and form.

Rav Shapiro sums up the process of creation: desolateness, followed by emptiness, and then light. Does this seem unrelatable? Far from your everyday existence? The truth is, we experience this all the time.

We exist in a world of process. Each time we step into a new moment in time, we step into tohu. The meaning of the moment is unclear. Sometimes the meaning is astonishingly unclear. Sometimes it is just hidden behind the veil of habit. We are in tohu and bohu. And then, using our thoughts and our speech we create light, we illuminate our world. For six days Hashem formed the world into an astonishing variety of meaningful forms with His speech. We are created in G-d's image, with the power of speech. We can choose to form the world around us in a meaningful way with our thoughts and our words, moment by moment.

"This is the literal definition of the words (Bereisheit 1:27) "In the image of the L-rd, He created him."



Na'aseh Adam. Hashem blew our soul into us, and gave us the ability to speak, and the ability to speak is what gives us the ability to continue to form ourselves.

That's what speech is supposed to be. But that's not what speech was in Mitzrayim. The Zohar tells us that speech itself was exiled in Mitzrayim. The speech in Mitzrayim was not speech that created true meaning. And Hashem graphically illustrated this by filling the entire land with the sound of the croaking frogs, and even had that sound come out the Egyptian's throats.

As Rabbi Jeremy Kagen so eloquently puts it, "This was not a mere displacement by frogs, this was a replacement by frogs." The message was, you are supposed to be humans, but your speech, instead of sounding like an elegant Ted talk, sounds like this: (Ribbit)

Okay, so far so good. We have this connection between the ma'amar, na'aseh adam, let us make man, and the cacophonous plague of frogs that filled the land. It was a graphic representation of how in Egypt our speech, which is our ability to create ourselves, was being corrupted.

However, we still need to explore a bit deeper, because we haven't really explained why the sound of the frog, specifically, is what Hashem chose to use for this message. So, let's think about a frog. Frogs are amphibians. They live in two worlds, in the water and on the land. In that sense, they are very much like us, because we also live in two worlds. And this is true on many different levels. We live in the physical world, and we live in the spiritual world. We live in an internal world and an external world.

We also, as Rav Gerzi teaches, live internally in a world of consciousness, a world of daat, which sits in between our nefesh and our neshama. We are aware of our body, our physical sensations, our emotions, our thoughts, but none of these define who we are. We are more than all of that. We have a neshama. We have a connection to Hashem, a connection to reality on a higher level and any real expression of self has to include this aspect of who we are.

In Shemot Rabbah the midrash stresses that the frogs came up from below. The Egyptians believed that the earth was floating on an enormous sea. The frogs came out of that sea, which was their home. They should have stayed by the edge of the Nile, but they didn't stay in their place. They invaded every part of the land. The Midrash describes how the frogs invaded so many spaces that were human spaces: houses, bedrooms, slave quarters, ovens, mixing troughs. It is a vivid depiction of the animalistic side invading and taking over the human side. The Egyptians were not interested in connecting to a higher aspect of self. In their own consciousness, they had allowed their lower drives and desires to take over their entire self. The frogs running roughshod over the entire land, invading every aspect of human technology, represented what happens when our connection to our lower self overtakes us completely. Speech is supposed to integrate physical with spiritual. The frog's croaking was the sound of words that actualize only body and not neshama.

Viscerally understanding how wrong this was preparing us to accept the ninth dibra, לֹא־תַעֲנֶה לְאִתְּךָ עֵד שָׁקֶר בְּרַעֲיֹן עֵד שָׁקֶר You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. On the pshat level, it's a

pretty clear connection. This Makkah teaches us about the meaning of real speech, and the *dibra* warns us about using speech to express truth, and not falsehood in our world.

However, I would like to end by adding one small additional dimension. Rav Gerzi teaches in the name of Rabbi Singer that *re'echa* can also mean your soul. *V'ahavta l'reicha kamocha* means to love your soul as yourself. Take a moment to smile at that. Love your soul, and love yourself because you have a soul. And if we put this definition of *re'echa* into the *dibra*, what we read is, (Hebrew) do not bear false witness against your soul. Do not use your speech to express your body to the exclusion of your soul, because that is using your speech to bear false witness about who you are.

So, to sum up. In the last plague, the plague of blood, we spoke about how we can animate and create our world from a place of expansiveness. In this plague, we explored how we create and give meaning to ourselves. With the ninth *ma'amar*, *na'aseh* Adam, Hashem created us, humans, with the ability to speak, which was the ability to continue our creation process by using our speech to give meaning to each moment of our lives. We do this by staying connected to the fact that we live in two worlds, the world of our body and the world of our soul. The frogs, which came up from the water and took over every part of human life were a very loud and very annoying, depiction of what happens when we allow our physical selves to take over and define all the moments in our life without giving a voice to our soul. The ninth *dibra*, not to bear false witness, teaches us to use our speech to express the truth in this world, and even deeper, to use our speech as a true witness to the beauty of who we really are, a combination of body and soul.

### Lice

Welcome to the *makkah* of the itty bitty teeny-tiny things. The plague begins with the dust of the earth. Dust of the earth is pretty small and insignificant. In fact, dust that is so insignificant we use it as the example when we do *bittul* chametz—let it be “nullified and ownerless like the dust of the earth.” Aaron strikes the dust, and that dust, which certainly the Egyptians never thought about for a moment, turns into creepy crawly itty bitty lice. And at that moment, all the itty bitty teeny-tiny things become very significant. So significant, in fact, that for the first time since the makkot began, the Egyptian sorcerers were unable to replicate the miracle. For the first time the sorcerers admitted, “This is the finger of G-d.”

If we listen carefully we can hear in the description of all the land turning itself into lice the echo of the 8<sup>th</sup> *ma'amar* which relates to this plague: תּוֹצֵא הָאָרֶץ נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה לְמִינָהּ -- And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kind, cattle and creeping things and the beasts of the earth according to their kind.

Let's take a moment to explore this *ma'amar*, this moment of creation. There are now living beings populating the water, the air and the earth. The entire planet is teeming with an immense diversity of life, that is almost beyond comprehension. You know what can get lost in that moment when you are staring at an almost incomprehensible diversity of life? The Source of it

all. As the creation grows bigger and bigger, Hashem's presence grows a bit smaller. And that, actually, is the plan. This Makkah is all about the importance of being small to accomplish something big.

Bear with me for another moment, and I will explain. We haven't gone into it this that much in these voice notes, but each of the *makkot* and *maamarot* and *dibbrot* relate to the ten sefirot as well. The *sefirah* that relates here is the *sefirah* of *Hod*. *Hod* is usually translated as splendor, but it actually has three meanings. There is splendor, as in "הוֹד וְהַדָּר לְבִשְׁתֶּךָ", there is to thank, as in להודות, and there is to concede, הודאה, אני מודה שאתה צודק. All of these are part of the concept. The splendor of *Hod* is the splendor that is created by recognizing and conceding to the importance of the other.

This is what Hashem brought into the world with *Hod*. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan explains that *Hod* is the ability to restrain ourselves in order to create something bigger. Hashem's primary purpose in creation, writes Rabbi Kaplan, "was that He should be able to reveal Himself to His handiwork." This is the greatest good possible. However, in order for it to be possible for us to exist, and for us to experience some of Hashem's light, Hashem had to restrict Himself. That was the essence of this *ma'amar*. With this *ma'amar* restricted Himself so much, that along with all the other animals that were created and spread out over the earth . . . was the snake. Yes, the evil snake. The same snake that would tempt Adam and Chava in Gan Eden. The snake's existence is the expression of Hashem hiding himself enough for us to have free choice in this world. He made himself small in the world, in order to give us space to exist and to be in relationship with Him. He made Himself small in order to accomplish something big.

We are created in Hashem's image. We were created to reflect the Sefirot, the ways in which Hashem relates to the world. We can also accomplish amazing things when we make ourselves small. When we make ourselves small, we become big, and we create something big.

Do you know which day of the Omer is *Hod she'b'Hod*, the greatest expression of this *middah* of *Hod*? Lag Baomer. The day of Rebbe Shimon Bar Yochai. Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai lived at a time of incredible darkness in the world, his was the time of the destruction of the Second Temple, and the failure of the Bar Kochba revolution. Rebbe Akiva's students died during the days of the Omer, and after that Rabbi Akiva himself, R' Shimon's teacher, was brutally tortured and killed by the Romans al kiddush Hashem. He was forced to flee with his son into a cave for 13 years. It was from this place of darkness and smallness that the incredible light of the Zohar was born.

It is our ability to make ourselves small that allows us to become big. How much can you learn if you think you already know everything? How much can you grow if you believe that you are always right? How many meaningful conversations can you have if there is no room in your world for another point of view?

The eighth *dibbra* warns us, Do not kidnap. Hashem restrained Himself, hid Himself in this world so that He could form us in His image, with the ability to exercise free will and guide our own lives. Each and every one of us is an expression of G-dliness in this world. We each belong to

Hashem. A kidnapping is an assault on the Divine nature of man, an assumption that one man can just take and own another is a denial of our Divine nature as humans.

Hashem made a big world full of diversity, and made space for each creature to express his unique expression of G-dliness in the world. When we make ourselves small enough to recognize that our greatness comes not from ourselves, but from the revelation of our intrinsic divine light, we can become very, very big.

That is what we were supposed to do, as we spread out and populated the world. We were supposed to make our ego a bit smaller, so that there would be room for our divine light to shine through, and then we could fill the world with our unique, spiritual diversity. This is not what happened in Egypt. Instead, the Egyptians made themselves, in their own eyes, very, very big. Pharaoh said, I made myself. The Egyptian ego was so big, that it crowded out entirely their divine aspect. And in reality, they became very, very small.

In this *makkah*, Hashem actualized this graphically for them. Instead of filling their land with the beautiful light of spirituality and diversity, they filled it with the boring sameness and constriction of ego. They existed on their land just like a billion crawling indistinguishable lice on the face of the earth.

Okay, so that's part one, the importance of being small in order to accomplish something big. But, I feel like I can't quite end this voice note yet. I want to balance it out, with one last but not least point we can learn from this *Makkah*: the importance of knowing that even though we are small, we are actually very, very big.

And for that I want to discuss one more aspect of this Makkah. It is in this Makkah that for the first time the sorcerers of Egypt are not able to replicate the miracle of the plague, and they are forced to admit (using their *middah of hod*) that this is the finger of Hashem. Rashi explains that the magicians had no power over anything that was smaller than a grain of barley. Rabbi Kagen further explains that the power of their magic derived from the Magician's ability to relate to objects as individual entities cut off from larger reality. They had to isolate it, and then they could work their magic on it. But a particle of dust is the epitome of insignificance. Humans cannot relate to a speck of dust as an individual item, we only see it as a small part of a bigger whole.

But here's the thing, that's not true of Hashem. Hashem is big enough to control the entire world, and also big enough to control each grain of dust. He is big enough to create the solar system, but also big enough to animate atomic force fields.

And the point that I want to draw from this is that sometimes we feel ourselves to be small and unimportant. We think that what we do, what we think, who we are, is not that important and really doesn't matter. And then we think, I'm not important enough to have a relationship with Hashem.

But that is our limitation that we are putting on Hashem. Hashem is not limited in that way. We are limited in time and energy. We are limited in what we can care about and focus on. Hashem is not. Hashem can create individual lice out of individual grains of sand. He created every aspect of this world, and if we're in it, we are important and we have our place. We are big.

So, to review:

The plague of blood illustrated the importance of shaping the world at large and our own personal worlds from a place of expansion and kindness. The plague of frogs illustrated the importance of speech, the tool we use to create ourselves and our personal worlds. And today we spoke about how the plague of lice teaches us about the importance of being small in order to become something big, but also that even when we feel small, we are really always big because of our connection to Hashem.

**Arov—Wild Animals:**

(sound of roaring animals) This is the plague of wild animals. Although actually, did you know that according to one opinion in the midrash, this Arov, which means mixture, was really a mixture of hornets and mosquitos, and would have sounded like this: (sound of swarms of bees). Most commentators explain this plague as a swarm of wild animals, and this vision of beasts running wild is, really, just the perfect depiction of unrestrained desire. The Egyptians, as we mentioned before, were connected to their physical side, not to the higher aspects of themselves or to Hashem. They gave free reign to their physical desires. And what that looks like, when Hashem depicts that graphically throughout the land, is wild beasts running rampant, destroying everything. Or, if we take the opinion that this is a swarm of insects, it's a real Lord of the Flies moment.

And when we take a moment to look at these strong forces of desire, what we might think is, ugh. What happens if we have the honesty and courage to see within ourselves those same forces or very similar forces? What if we see wild animals within ourselves? We might want nothing more than to lock them up and wish them away.

But before we go that route, I'd like to remind you of something earlier in this story, where we also have a mention of people who are like wild animals. After Pharoah instructed the midwives to kill all the Jewish babies, and after the holy midwives refused to follow orders, and were called back to Pharoah to give an explanation for what they did, the answer of the midwives was, we couldn't, we're sorry, "the Jewish women are not like the Egyptian women. *Ki Chayot Heina*. Which Rashi explains to mean, "they are like the *chayot* of the field." And he reminds us, based on Shemot Rabbah, that the Jewish people are compared to animals in the *brachot* that were given to us: Judah is like a lion, Binyamin like a wolf, etc. The Shach says, based on this, that the wild animals didn't hurt us because we were one of them. We were wild animals.

Okay to try to understand this, let's take a moment to step back and explore the ma'amar that is associated with this *makah*, the 7<sup>th</sup> ma'amar, which is a description of the powerful bursting forth of life into the world. (Bereisheit 1:20): וַיֵּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים יִשְׂרָאֵל הַמַּיִם שְׂרָצוּ שְׂרָצוּ חַיִּים עַל-הָאָרֶץ And God said, "Let the waters swarm a swarming of living creatures, and let fowl fly over the earth, across the expanse of the heavens.

When the sea and the sky burst forth into teeming life, we are told that there was one very special creation that was created at the same time, the Leviatan. The Gemara tells us that the Leviatan was created as a couple, but was not allowed to live and reproduce in the world, because that would have destroyed the world. The Maharal tells us that the leviatan was an embodiment of Hashem's desire to connect to the world, but it was too strong of a desire to remain in the world. So strong, uncontrolled desire is dangerous. And strong desire is also what brought life into our world.

Desire is an intrinsic aspect of our world and ourselves. It's not just a part of the creation process. It's the first, most intrinsic part of the creation process. Mrs. Esther Wein explained this brilliantly in her shiur on Parshat Vayakel. She asks us to take a moment to consider what we mean when we say, as you may have heard in many a shiur, that the world was created Yesh Me-ayin, something from nothing. Our world was created by Hashem. Why don't we say the world was created something from Hashem, not something from nothing? It's because the first thing Hashem created was nothing, or more precisely, the perception that there's an emptiness that needs to be filled. That was the space into which Hashem brought existence. The background of our existence is yearning and desire, need and want.

Hashem infused all the *briyah* with the sense of want, desire, seeking to be filled so that we would use that feeling to reach out and find *shleimus*. The whole world is like this to it's tiniest particles. Every atom is seeking to complete its 8 electrons.

The feeling that we are incomplete, our desire for more is not a flaw. It's the way we were created, part of our toolbox for accomplishing what we need to accomplish in this world. We can not live without desire. And the stronger our desire, the more alive we feel. We have powerful feelings and desires, and that is an amazing thing. We need them. The animalistic desires within us can be our downfall and lead us to ruin, but those same forces of desire can be the key to our greatest spiritual fulfillment. It is no accident that the 7<sup>th</sup> *dibbra*, which is associated with this Makkah, is לֹא תִנָּאֵף, do not commit adultery. This is discussing the very powerful desire we have inside for the deepest, most holy form of physical connection. And it is a warning not to channel that desire in the wrong direction.

So, in this Makkah we have on one side the *ma'amar* of creation, which is the first, forceful bursting forth of life on our planet, which comes with tremendous forces of desire, and then we have the Makkah, which vividly shows what happens when we take our desires and allow them free reign to run freely over ourselves and our world. And we have the *dibbrah*, which warns us to use and channel our desires in the right way.

But there is still one thing left to understand. How do we do this? How do we face down the wild animals within and harness them in the right way? And I would like to suggest that the nature of the Makkah itself points us in the right direction.

Specifically, let's listen in for a moment on a bit of the warning Moshe gives Pharaoh. He says, "I am going to do something wonderful on that day, that in the land of Goshen where my people stand, there will be no Arov, so that you will know that I am Hashem in the midst of the land." This is the first time, for any plague, that Moshe mentions the fact that the Jews will not be affected. This is also the first time that we see this lesson for Pharaoh. Moshe tells us this plague teaches us that Hashem is in the midst of the land.

I would like to suggest that if we can imagine the land of Egypt, with all the wild animals running roughshod over it, as an externalization of what was really happening internally inside the Egyptians, then perhaps we could imagine Goshen, tranquil and unaffected by the wild animals, as an externalization of what should be happening, ideally, inside of us Jews.

The way that we face down the wild animals within us is actually not to face them down at all. All we really have to do is stand in Goshen.

Ibn Ezra tells us that this message of Hashem being in the midst of the land is like a king that puts his palace in the midst of his country, and like the way the heart is situated in the midst of the body. Hashem, as we know from the Mishkan, dwells within us. There is a place of connection to Hashem that always exists within us. And that place is a place of calm, a place of connection to our higher selves. In Egypt, that place was symbolized by Goshen.

The Maharil Diskin explains, that it was not that there were no wild animals in Goshen. In fact, as Hashem was bringing all the animals from all around the world to come and wreak havoc in Mitzrayim, many passed through the land of Goshen, but they didn't harm anyone in Goshen at all.

I think of the animals walking through Goshen, passing through but causing no harm, and it makes me think of my mindfulness classes, where we step back and watch our thoughts and emotions as they pass through our minds.

One of the most powerful tools for dealing with strong emotions is to simply observe them. One of the most powerful tools for dealing with strong desires we don't want to act on is to find something we want even more. If we can find the place within us that is Goshen, the place that is connected to a higher self, the place where Hashem is there in the midst of the land, then we have space to feel our thoughts and emotions, and allow them to walk through us without harming us, as the wild animals walked through Goshen, because our deepest desire, to be in a state of connection, is already taken care of.

We are powerful. We were created with big emotions, and big desires. And that is one of the most wonderful things about us. Jewish women were compared to the *chayot* of the field, and the tribes are collectively praised as different animals. We cannot win if we fight our own nature,

our feelings and desires, or beat ourselves up for the feelings and desires we have. But if we can connect to our higher selves then we can embrace every ounce of that power and drive and use it to connect to others, to ourselves and to Hashem.

So to review:

The plague of blood illustrated the importance of shaping the world at large and our own personal worlds from a place of expansion and kindness. The plague of frogs illustrated the importance of speech, the tool we use to create ourselves and our personal worlds. The plague of lice teaches us about the importance of being small in order to become something big, but also that even when we feel small, we are really always big because of our connection to Hashem. And finally, in this plague, we explored the powerful force of desire within us, which when we connect to what we really want and who we really are, is one of our greatest tools.

### **Dever/Pestilence:**

The plague of pestilence. According to Malbim, this plague begins with a kindness from Hashem to Pharaoh. Not what you were expecting to hear, right? But before I explain that, I should probably backtrack and explain the plague itself, because while frogs and blood are pretty self-explanatory, pestilence isn't one of those words I find myself using very often. Which is interesting, because according to my online dictionary, pestilence is a contagious or infectious epidemic disease that is virulent and devastating. Which, oh wait, does, actually sound kind of familiar. Yup, this plague was kinda like corona, but for animals. Also different, because this disease caused sudden death, so that according to some *mefarshim* although the plagues as a general rule lasted for a week each, this one lasted for only a moment.

There is a debate among the *mefarshim* but many believe the plague happened as follows. First, Moshe comes and gives a warning to Pharaoh. And it's a pretty long warning, possibly longer than the plague itself. Moshe tells Pharaoh that the Hand of Hashem will affect his livestock. And then, as if in illustration of the Hand of Hashem stretching out and each finger touching another breed, Moshe lists the five types of animals the plague will affect: horses, donkeys, camels, cattle and sheep. Moshe tells Pharaoh that once again He will make a separation, this time between the livestock of the Jews and the livestock of the Egyptians. And, according to Malbim, Hashem warns Pharaoh that the plague will happen the next day. The Malbim explains that this was specifically to give Pharaoh time to change his mind and to do teshuva because there would be no time later. Once the plague began, it was over, and most of the Egyptian livestock was dead, there was no time to ask Hashem to reconsider.

To understand the message behind this plague we have to understand the way the ancient Egyptians understood pestilence in general. According to Rabbi Kagen, the ancient Egyptians believed that pestilence was caused by Sekhmet, the daughter of the sun god Ra. The Egyptians, and actually the ancient world in general, associated pestilence as coming from the sun gods.



Which is so interesting. Because guess which *ma'amar* relates to this plague?

Bereishit 1:14: ויאמר אלוקים יהי מארת ברקיע השמים להבדיל בין היום ובין הלילה והיו לאתת ולמועדים ולימים וישגים

And God said, "Let there be luminaries in the expanse of the heavens, to separate between the day and between the night, and they shall be for you signs for appointed seasons and for days and years.

That's right. The *ma'amar* associated with this plague is the creation of the sun and the moon.

Now, we know that the Egyptians associated themselves with the sun. Pharaoh looked at the Sun and says, "I'm part of that, I made myself, that's me." He views himself as the sun, as the source of life for himself and for the world. "I am in charge of reality. And my flocks, my world is dependent on me."

So Hashem said, really? You think you're the sun, you think you can sustain your world? What happens when the life force from above is cut off? Can you still keep anything alive? In my mind, I picture it almost like the hand of Hashem letting go, and then whatever it was sustaining just dropping into the abyss.

On the other hand, the connected hand, we identify as the moon. In fact, the first mitzvah we were given as a nation, right in the midst of the ten plagues, was the mitzvah of the moon, Rosh Chodesh. The moon gives light, and life force to the world, but only because it is connected to the sun.

The Egyptian animals died, because they were relying on the Egyptian's ability to sustain them without Hashem. The Jewish animals never died, because we never separated from our source of life.

So, this was a plague that challenged the sense of control that people have over the world around us. If you remember from Corona days, pandemics tend to do that quite well. That is why the emphasis, in the warning for this plague, is on the difference between the possessions of the Jews and the possessions of the Egyptians.

Both we and the Egyptians believe that we bring life into the world. In the description of the creation of man, we learn the Hashem blew into us the force of life, and we became, a *nefesh chaya*, the animating force of the world. Hashem created us to be creators in our world. In face, this language of *nefesh chaya* might remind us of our discussion yesterday. We are *chayot*. We are alive. We have a powerful drive to connect to our source, and that is what gives us the ability to bring life to our world.

It is our connection to our source that allows us to keep our world vibrant. We know that we are the moon, and that the moon is just a reflection of the sun. It was the disconnection from source that caused the Egyptian's cattle to die. They thought they were the sun, and they thought the

sun was the source of life. What they didn't get is that just as the moon is only an echo of the sun, the sun is only an echo of Hashem.

Interestingly, for most of Egypt's existence the Egyptian animals didn't die either. We mentioned, in fact, that even in the midst of the plagues, according to Malbim, Hashem was giving Pharaoh time to perhaps do *teshuvah*. This is one of the themes of Tomer Devorah. Hashem is constantly giving us life, even if we may choose to use that life to deny the very One who is giving it to us.

Of course, that's not what we are supposed to do with that life. The *Dibra* that relates to this plague is לֹא תִרְצַח, Do not murder. Of course, if we understand that we are not the ultimate purveyors of life in this world we would not murder. But I would also suggest that this *dibra* is reflecting the understanding that Hashem created us and sustains us in order for us to be able to create and sustain our world. We are meant to add life and vitality, not death, to everything around us. When we act as the conduits of Hashem, then we sustain and enhance everything around us.

So, this plague speaks to our relationship with the world around us. Just as the sun and the moon animate our physical world, we were created to bring light and vitality into all the aspects of our personal world.

And even though I could stop there, I just want to end by going a bit deeper into this balance between the sun and the moon, and the famous midrash that is brought by Rashi on these *pesukim*. The *pasuk* says, Hashem made two big luminaries, the big luminary to dominate the day, and the smaller luminary to dominate the night. So is it two big luminaries, or a big and a small one? The *midrash* tells the story that the Sun and the moon were originally created equal. Both shining big. But the moon complained. How can two kings share one crown? And so, Hashem responded to the moon, make yourself small. And it seems like that's exactly what happened. The moon appears to have been punished for speaking up.

But I'd like to share an interesting thought. Even when the sun and the moon were both shining together, they were still the same sun and moon. The sun still shone, and the moon was still reflecting the light of the sun. So, although they were both big, really, the moon didn't feel like it was accomplishing anything. And then the moon became small, and the partnership changed. The moon did not become the sun. But the moon was now able to affect real change in the world. The moon determines the rhythm of our lives, our months, and our holidays. The partnership now is that the sun determines how much light is available and the moon determines how that light appears on earth. It's another example of how when we make ourselves small, we really become very big.

We are all the moon. We cannot control everything, and we can't always make our light bigger, but we all have our own unique light. Our power is our ability to determine how we apply the light we are given. And at every moment we have a real choice. We get to choose how much of our light we want to let shine into the world.

So, to review:

The plague of blood illustrated the importance of shaping the world at large and our own personal worlds from a place of expansion and kindness. The plague of frogs illustrated the importance of speech, the tool we use to create ourselves and our personal worlds. The plague of lice teaches us about the importance of being small in order to become something big, but also that even when we feel small, we are really always big because of our connection to Hashem. The plague of wild animals explored the powerful force of desire within us, which when we connect to what we really want and who we really are, is one of our greatest tools. Finally, in this plague, we explored our ability to animate the world around us, which we are able to do in wondrous ways, as long as we remember to stay connected to our source.

### Boils

So, we begin this plague with a dramatic, I would say, cinematic moment. Instead of a warning with this plague, Moshe and Aaron just set this plague off in front of Pharaoh. The scene takes place somewhere on the grounds of Pharaoh's palace, but not his throne room. Perhaps a garden. There is a large furnace. The cast is Moshe and Aaron, Pharaoh and all of Pharaoh's magician advisors. On Hashem's command, and without speaking, Moshe and Aaron reach into the furnace and fill both their hands with soot. And then, according to the midrash, miracles start to happen. Aaron puts his two handfuls of soot into Moshe's already full hands. And it fits. And then Moshe transfers all the soot from his two hands into only one. And he throws the soot forcefully into the sky. And as the soot comes back down, it somehow spreads over the entire land of Egypt, acting like a kind of burning ember that raised horrific blisters and boils on all the people and animals it fell on. Specifically, it fell on all of Pharaoh's magicians, reducing them to a quivering mess. I guess they exit the scene, since the pasuk tells us they were unable to stand before Moshe. Since they were unable to do their job of strengthening Pharaoh's heart with their evil advice, Hashem takes over, and it is here for the first time that we hear that Hashem strengthens Pharaoh's heart, which according to the Ramban, means giving Pharaoh the strength to follow his own convictions in the face of a reality that is overwhelmingly pointing him in the opposite direction.

It's an amazing scene, filled with drama. And it's interesting, because the ma'amar that goes with this Makkah also involves a scene filled with drama, at least according to the Midrash. Our ma'amar is Gen. 1:11--**וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאָדָם אֲנִי יְהוָה וְאַתָּה אֲדָמָה וְעַתָּה אֲנִי מְצַוְיָךְ וְעָשִׂיתָ כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתִּי לְךָ**: And God said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation, seed yielding herbs and fruit trees producing fruit according to its kind in which its seed is found, on the earth," and it was so.

This is the first time we see Hashem turning to creation and asking creation to join Him in becoming a creator. And a funny thing happens when he does this. In the *ma'amar* itself, Hashem commands the earth to produce fruit trees producing fruit. Which would mean fruit trees that have fruit, but also where the trunk itself is edible fruit. But as we know from the next pasuk and also from life, this is not what the earth produced. The earth produced trees that you cannot eat,

with fruit that you can. Which is pretty astonishing. This is only the third day of creation, and already it seems like creation is falling apart.

So, how can we connect these two stories? What underlying message do they share? In order to figure it out, we need one more piece of the puzzle. As we mentioned in a previous class, along with the 10 *ma'amarot*, *makkot* and *dibbrot*, there are also the 10 sefirot, the ten modalities that Hashem uses to relate to our world. And the *sefira* that aligns with this plague is *gevurah*. Now, we often translate *gevurah* as brute strength, and think of it as harsh and demanding. Justice. Din. But the chachamim look at it a bit differently. The Gemara (Chagiga 12a) describes how when Hashem created the world it began to expand and go forward, like two balls of warp unravelling. R' Gedalia Gurfein gives an image to this, like the two strands of DNA, intertwining. And the world just continued to expand, until Hashem said "enough." That enough is the essence of *gevurah*. That enough is what changed the world from an endless expanse into a useable world. That *gevurah* is what enables our world to be a world we can exist in.

Rabbi Kagen explains that one of the names we use to describe the force of *gevurah* in our world is nature. The natural world is an expression of Hashem's *gevurah* in the world. Nature is an amazing thing. It is filled with rules, and you really can't break them. You can't jump off a mountain expecting to fly. You can't build a bridge if you think  $2+2 = 5$ . There are rules to nature, and those rules, like the law of gravity and the rules of physics, and the fact that we can expect to see the sun rise every morning, is what gives us the structure to be able to make sense of our world and create meaning in our lives. If we wanted to, we could express this another way. We could say that *gevurah* is the strength to create boundaries. And this is the thing that we know, or we should know, about boundaries. Boundaries exist for the purpose of something bigger. We create boundaries so that we can have healthy relationships. Boundaries are, in fact, the key to creating good relationships.

*Gevurah*, and the expression of *gevurah* that is nature, is similar. Hashem uses nature in a similar way to the way we use boundaries. It is part of Hashem's process of creating the space for us to be able to be in relationship with Him. *Gevurah* is a tool that Hashem uses in the service of *Chesed*, in the service of His desire for us to have a relationship with Him in this world.

So let's use this idea of boundaries to explore the messages of this plague. Nature is a boundary, put in place by Hashem, which delineates the most physical aspect of our world. For the ancient Egyptians, who called nature *maat*, it was an end to itself, something they could rely on, and not a means to anything else. What Moshe and Aaron were in the process of revealing, through the *makkot*, was that nature is not an end to itself, it is just the border Hashem put up, a physical world that is the external aspect of a vast world that consists of so much more. Nature is the outer layer of a vast world. And we are meant to use it to see something deeper beneath. Hashem created nature so that we can turn around and see Hashem shining through the natural world.

So let's see how Moshe and Aaron teach this. They take soot from the furnace, which will turn into burning embers in the air. Fire, which breaks things down to their composite, individual pieces, is always associated with Din. Moshe and Aaron are figuratively grabbing *Gevurah*, or Din.

But what they actually grab is soot—or more precisely, as Rav Hirsch says, charcoal. The soot that was found in their ovens was actually charcoal, which happened to be the recognized remedy at the time for boils. Fun fact, the first recorded use of charcoal for medicinal purposes comes from Egyptian papyri around 1500 B.C.E. The irony is intentional. The purpose of *din*, of boundaries, of nature, in our world is ultimately to give us the space we need to be able to come close to Hashem. It's whole purpose is to heal. But in Egypt, the charcoal didn't fulfill its purpose, just as nature was not used as it was intended, to bring healing to the world. The charcoal also burned blisters and boils into their skin.

Interestingly, skin is also a boundary and a border. It is the outer layer of our body, the separation between our outer, physical world, and our internal world. As nature both hides and reveals Hashem in the world, our skin also hides and reveals our neshama in our body. Our skin is not just supposed to express our physicality, the skin holds our body together so that it can express our soul. Just as physical reality does not define creation, our skin and our bodies do not define us. But the Egyptians used their bodies and the natural world only for their own selfish, physical needs. And they identified with them completely. They were using nature not to reveal Hashem, but to hide Him. In response, the soot, which should have been healing burned them. The result was that their skin, their boundary, became riddled with bumps, pushing against the natural line it was supposed to create. The midrashim describe it as an expression of *ga'avah*, the external representation of how their ego was puffing them up, pushing them outside their natural boundaries. The midrash also tells us the boils included a form of *tzara'at*, which is a stark reminder that we've pushed the boundary in how we are using our creative power of speech. For some reason, I also imagine it as if the internal self, denied expression, was trying to push its way out in whatever way it could.

Of course, none of the soot burned Moshe or Aaron, either before or after the plague. Instead, nature became a miraculous tool to express Hashem's Will even in the darkest places of Pharaoh's palace. Nature was created to serve Hashem's will. Since Moshe and Aaron were using nature to serve Hashem, nature became their partner and their tool to achieve their goals, even to the extent that it changed to allow miracles to happen.

Okay, so far we have tied together the plague and the *ma'amar* with the idea of nature being an expression of *gevurah*/or *din*/or boundaries. We explored how the plague was an expression of what happens when we view nature and *din* as a means in and of themselves, and not as a means to reach a higher goal. But we still have to connect this all to the *dibra* that connects to this Makkah, which is כְּבֹד אֲבוֹתֵינוּ וְאִמֵּנוּ. Honor your father and mother. And for that we have to tease out one more idea.

We mentioned in the beginning that there was a lot of drama in this plague, and a lot of drama in this *ma'amar*. And that drama, those missed moments, people and creation acting, for good or for bad, that is all an important part of the story. Our *ma'amar* was the first time that creation was asked to be a creator. Hashem requested something from the earth. And the earth did not

succeed. The earth did not live up to the ideal. And I would like to say, that this seems like a pretty accurate omen for the way things often turn out to be. We often don't live up to the ideal.

But here's the thing. Hashem asking the earth to create a tree, was a representation of Hashem giving space to creation to be its own creator. Hashem was making space for the process, the choice, the possibility for us to fail. We could suggest that the discrepancy between the tree that Hashem asked for and the tree that appeared was just the discrepancy between the way things look in the physical world, and the way those same things appear from a different perspective. Because in our world, the natural process of free choice and creation is not always sweet. We may produce the "fruit of our labor" in the end, but the process to get there, the growing of the tree, can be rough. But from a higher perspective, the process is all part of the plan. And therefore, it is all sweet. Even when it's rough, even when we fail. This whole process is valuable.

We are commanded to honor our parents, because being parents is the greatest expression we have in this world of our creative faculties. Honoring our parents means honoring the human aspect of creation. It means giving honor and recognizing the meaning in the human process of creation. Honoring our father and mother is a way of honoring this process in the world, and by extension giving honor to the one who gave us the ability to create.

Rav Hirsch gives us an additional interesting insight into the way this Makkah was carried out. Moshe and Aaron took two handfuls of soot, and threw it up in the air, expecting it to cover all of Egypt. Rav Hirsch points out, this is a negligible quantity of soot to spread over the entire land. But he says, "This may have been to teach, that, however insufficient it may seem to be to accomplish the desired result, men must always do, fully and completely, the utmost that they can within human capability." It's a strong message to just embrace the process. Do the best you can. *Lo alecha hamelecha ligmor*. We won't be able to do it all. We definitely will stumble. It's okay. We just have to embrace the process. Hashem is in charge of the results. Hashem will take care of the rest.

So to review:

The plague of blood illustrated the importance of shaping the world at large and our own personal worlds from a place of expansion and kindness. The plague of frogs illustrated the importance of speech, the tool we use to create ourselves and our personal worlds. The plague of lice teaches us about the importance of being small in order to become something big, but also that even when we feel small, we are really always big because of our connection to Hashem. The plague of wild animals explored the powerful force of desire within us, which when we connect to what we really want and who we really are, is one of our greatest tools. The plague of pestilence explored our ability to animate the inanimate world around us, which we are able to do in wonderful ways, as long as we remember to stay connected to our source. And this plague, boils, explored the way in which the din, and the boundaries of our world, are all part of the process, all exist in service of Hashem's desire for us to be able to create relationship with Him.

## Hail:

(sound effect of thunder) Thunderstorms. Lighting. I remember loving them when I was young, watching them with my parents from our porch. But then again, I didn't grow up in Egypt. To really understand this plague, you have to take a moment to consider the climate of Egypt. The Torah compares Gan Eden and Egypt. Crops were watered from the Nile, and even today it almost never rains in Egypt. So rain, even regular rain, was not something the Egyptians knew how to deal with.

And this, of course, was not regular rain. Hashem warns that He is sending a plague that will put fear in their hearts, hail the likes of which was never seen in Egypt since the day it was founded. At our seder, we usually focus on one supernatural aspect of this plague, that there was fire in the midst of hail. Mostly this is because it's the best excuse ever for throwing pink and white marshmallows at the kids. However, if we look at the *pesukim*, we will see that was not what Pharaoh was focused on. Did you know that Hail only forms in a thunderstorm? And it was the thunder that bothered Pharaoh the most. He says, please, Moshe, can you beg Hashem, to take away the hail? Too many are these voices of G-d and this hail.

Which is, truly, amazing. We are now getting towards the end of the plagues, and these words must have been so gratifying for Moshe. Because, as the Kli Yakar reminds us, they are the exact inverse of the first words we ever hear Pharaoh speak to Moshe. מי ה' אשר אשמא בקולו? Who is Hashem that I should listen to his voice? Now, with Hashem's voice thundering all around him, Pharaoh has no choice but to listen.

So what is Hashem trying to say? As always, we can gain so much insight by going back to our *ma'amar*, which this time is יְקוֹוֹ הַמַּיִם מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם אֶל־מְקוֹם אֶחָד וְתִרְאֶה הַיַּבְשָׁה וְיִהְיֶיבֶן. And God said, "Let the water that is beneath the heavens gather into one place, and let the dry land appear," and it was so. This is the moment when the water moves over and for the first time there is a place for man in the world. And that is the theme of this *makkah*. What does it mean to have a sense of place, a sense of *makom*, in this world?

We know that it's definitely not whatever the Egyptians believe, because so many aspects of this plague are a direct assault on the Egyptian's sense of place. The waters that moved over to make space for man at the beginning of creation now come down in a different form to drive the Egyptians out of their space. From the very beginning of the plague, Hashem warns that this is something that has never been since the foundation of the city. The focus of the plague is to hit the land and the vegetation of Egypt, and for that reason, the Egyptians are given a chance to save their animals. Which was an enormous blessing. But also, think for a minute what their homes must have been like even before the plague began. Many of our homes may be a bit turned around at the moment, but at least we aren't sharing them with a bunch of livestock! And then, from that place of discomfort inside their homes, there was the actual experience of the plague. As R' Kagen points out, to be directly under thunder is extremely unnerving. It shook them to the core. R. Kagen (p.244) "when you are under a thunderclap the noise comes from

everywhere—there is nowhere to run. It is the experience of losing makom (place).” This is why Pharaoh was begging to take away the noise.

And that wasn't even the end of it. But wait, there's more! This plague was the first plague that was targeting their crop. The Egyptians believed that their crops had been blessed by Yaacov, when he came down to Egypt. Remember, they buried his body in the Nile, and believed that he served as a blessing for them, which had lasted all these years. They had been living in his bracha. That was now reversed. And at the same time the Egyptian crops were being destroyed, crops in Goshen were still growing strong. The original premise for enslaving the Jews was that they owed service to Pharaoh for him having kept them alive during the famine. If they now have to buy their food from the Jews, what happens to that foundational argument? The place they created for themselves in their identity was definitely taking a hit.

They believed in their ability to control nature. They believed their place was created by nature. And this wasn't working out for them all that well. If your place is predicated only on the natural, you may find out you have no place.

When Pharaoh begs Moshe to stop the plague, Moshe goes out of the city to pray. According to some opinions, the hail at that point in the plague was not falling in the city, only in the fields beyond the city. So Moshe walks out of the safety of physical civilization and straight into the center of the storm in order to pray. And it is there that he finds his place, his *makom*. It is a *makom tefillah*, a place of prayer .

Interestingly, according to the Sefer Hachmat HaTorah Moshe was not the only one who was safe in the fields. Any animal or slave which had been brought into the house in the beginning of the plague according to Hashem's warning, and then had wandered out, was not hurt by the hail. It was a stark expression, which even the *mitzrim* could see that *makom* is not a physical place. Makom is a spiritual state.

And the spiritual state that is our Makom is expressed in the *dibra* that aligns with this plague. זָכוֹר אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקֹדֶשׁ Remember the Shabbat to keep it holy. I cannot tell you how happy I am to be sending out this voice note on Erev Shabbat. Because the message of this plague is that our place in this world is not a physical place. We know this so well. We are wandering Jews. Even now that we are back in our land, many of us are still wandering. We have existed against all odds for so many years because our place in this world is supernatural.

Our place is Shabbat. Because Shabbat is a place of completion. And we teach this to ourselves every week when we say kiddush, and quote the psukim from Bereisheit, וַיְבַלְּו הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ וְכָל-צְבָאָם וַיְבַלְּו אֱלֹהִים בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מְלַאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה. We usually translate, The Heavens and the Earth and all their hosts were completed on the sixth day. And Hashem completed on the seventh day his work. Which actually is a bit confusing. Did Hashem finish on the sixth day? Or The Seventh? Mrs. Esther Wein points the beautiful clarity of Rav Hirsch. *Vayichal* is actually one of those words in Hebrew, like *ikkar* and *l'aker*, that mean two opposite things at once. On the one hand, *vayichal*



is connected to the *shoresh "kol"*, which is everything, in gematria 50, it is *shlemus*, and it means complete. But *vayichal* is also connected to the *shoresh "kli"*, which is a vessel, something that is waiting to be filled, which is how it is used in Tehillim, in the term, *kalta nafshi*, my soul is yearning, wanting. *Vayichal* is both yearning and completion.

So let's look at these *pesukim* again. וַיְבַלְּוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ וְכָל-צְבָאָם. At the end of the creation process, the entire world was infused with desire, yearning, wanting to come into something more than just physical, to move into relationship with Hashem. וַיְבַלְּוּ אֱלֹהִים בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מְלֵאכֶתָּו. And so Hashem brought completion to His word on the seventh day by putting into the world the Shabbat, the ability for us to bring ourselves into a more expanded, spiritual place.

And that really brings all the pieces of our puzzle together, the *ma'amar*, of the water that first moved over to make space for man, the plague, which tore apart the Egyptian conception of *makom* as a physical entity, and Shabbat, which brought into the world our ability to move into the spiritual place that is our foundation.

But, as usual, I still want to share with you one more beautiful thought which you might want to think about at your seder if you are like us and like to throw pink and white marshmallows. According to Rav Tzaddok HaCohen (Pri Tzaddik, Bo) only the Jews were able to perceive the fire and water together, which is why Pharaoh mentioned nothing about the fire when asking for the plague to be removed. It was a message of transcendence which was given over completely to the Jews.

To understand, let's look at this fascinating Riva on the Torah. When Pharaoh calls Moshe, and begs him to stop the hail, he starts with the words Hashem is a *tzaddik*. The Riva says that what Pharaoh was referring to was the rain that came down with the plague. To him, it was a sign that Hashem, even in His anger, still had mercy on His creations, and brought them rain. So he asks Moshe to remove the voices and the hail, but not the *matar*, the rain. But when Moshe raises his hands and stops the *kolot*, the *barad*, and the rain—then Pharaoh is no longer so impressed with Hashem's mercy. In the very next pasuk, Pharaoh sees (in reverse order from the previous verse) that the rain, the hail and these *kolot* have stopped, and he hardens his heart. You can almost hear him thinking, never mind, Hashem is not really a Tzaddik after all. He didn't leave me the rain.

What Pharaoh didn't see, couldn't see, was the fire and water together in the hail. As we mentioned in the last plague, *din* always exists in Hashem's world in service to *chesed*. Fire is *din* and water is *chesed*, and the hail was a *nes betoch nes*, it was fire and water together in a supernatural way. In our world, *din* and *chesed* are mixed and we experience them together. And that is part of our ability to live in *makom*.

We learn in Bereisheit Rabbah:

מפני מה מכנין שמו של הקב"ה וקוראין אותו מקום שהוא מקומו של עולם ואין עולמו מקומו

Hashem is the place of this world, we are all within Hashem's place, Hashem's reality, and it is so much bigger, so much more expansive than just what exists in the physical world we can observe through our senses. It includes the physical world, and all the spiritual worlds, and all of time,

beyond anything we can even begin to comprehend. I can not even begin to do justice to this topic, which I learned from Rav Gerzi, but just for today, the idea I want to give over here is that because the world is so big, we can live in and with a lot of paradoxes. We can live as both a body and a soul. We can live in a world of chesed and joy, even as we are experiencing pain. We can be in connection and conversation with Hashem, even when we are screaming at him. We can live in a world of physicality, and also, at the same time a world of spirituality. We can feel Hashem's love even when we are still slaves in Mizrayim. We can step into Shabbat, which is a day of delicious food and beautiful clothes and also be in *me'ein olam haba*, a bit of olam haba that exists right here.

The plague of hail stopped suddenly. Which meant there was overwhelming noise, all the rain, the hail, the thunder, the cries... and then sudden, peaceful quiet. In moments like that, the silence is palpable. What does Pharaoh do with the quiet? He goes back to where his heart really wanted to be. Hard. Intractable. We also get a moment of silence each week, when we accept Shabbat. And we can also take the opportunity to fill the yearning we have deep inside us. We can also go back to the place where our heart really wants to be.

So to review:

The plague of blood illustrated the importance of shaping the world at large and our own personal worlds from a place of expansion and kindness. The plague of frogs illustrated the importance of speech, the tool we use to create ourselves and our personal worlds. The plague of lice teaches us about the importance of being small in order to become something big, but also that even when we feel small, we are really always big because of our connection to Hashem. The plague of wild animals explored the powerful force of desire within us, which when we connect to what we really want and who we really are, is one of our greatest tools. The plague of pestilence explored our ability to animate the inanimate world around us, which we are able to do in wondrous ways, as long as we remember to stay connected to our source. Boils explored the way in which the din, and the boundaries of our world, are all part of the process, all exist in service of Hashem's desire for us to be able to create relationship with Him. And today, with the hail, we explored where our true place, our true *makom*. Our place is not the location of our physical body, but the much bigger place of our soul, which exists in the enormous *makom* of the expansive world that Hashem created.

### Locusts

(locusts) That is the sound of locusts. It was a sound Pharaoh's servants were not at all interested in hearing, or experiencing. Swarms of desert locusts are devastating, even today. They are huge and can include 40 to 80 million locust and cover 460 square miles. The average swarm can destroy around 192 million kilograms of vegetation a day, which means they eat the same amount of food in one day as half the population of France. Which is why in this plague we see for the first time the amazing sight of Pharaoh's servants speaking up against Pharaoh.

There's actually a lot going on in the lead-up to this plague, so let's take a look. The plague begins with a warning. Hashem tells Moshe to go to Pharaoh so that I can put (*ototai eleh*), these signs of mine in his midst. So Moshe and Aaron come to Pharaoh, and warn him that they are about to bring a plague of locusts the likes of which the country has never seen. They will come and cover the face of the earth, and eat everything that was left over from the hail. As soon as Moshe and Aaron leave, we hear Pharaoh's servants. They're like, wait, why did you just let them go? This is gonna be the end of us. Are you crazy? Send out the men to worship their G-d! They succeed in getting Pharaoh to call Moshe and Aaron back in, and Pharaoh says, okay, you can go serve your G-d, but then he follows quickly with a qualifier—but—*mi v'mi haholchim*. Who exactly is going. And in these words R' Shapiro asks us to hear the echo of that first question Pharaoh asked Moshe— *Mi Hashem asher eshma b'kolo?* Who is G-d that I should listen to his voice?

This question, this “*mi*” was the heart of the *galus*. The first expression of Pharaoh. We are nearing the end of the plagues, beginning the transition into *geulah*, and R' Moshe Shapiro tells us that if you really want to understand what is going on here, the place to look is the haftorah for Shabbat Nachamu, Yeshayau Perek Mem (40), which is also addressing this shift from Tisha B'av and *galut* into a time of *geulah*, a time of healing. The last pasuk of the haftorah is,

שְׂאוּ-מְרוֹם עֵינֵיכֶם וְרֹאוּ מִי־בָרָא אֱלֹהִים (הַמוֹצֵיָא בְּמִסְפָּר צְבָאָם לְכֹלֵם בְּשֵׁם יְקֹרָא מְרַב אוֹנִים וְאִמְיץ בָּח אִישׁ לֹא נִעְדָּר)

Lift up your eyes, see *mi bara eileh*—who created these? The Zohar tells us, if you put the words “*mi*” and “*aleh*” together they are the letters of Elokim, the name of Hashem as it expresses His rulership over nature. The pasuk is a warning, telling us, do not separate the *mi*, the who, the cause, from the *eileh*, these things, this multiplicity that you see in the world around you. The idea is that when we look around at the world and see all these seemingly acting independently, don't stop there. Lift your eyes higher. See and connect to the who that created these.

Of course that is exactly what Pharaoh was not doing. For him, “*mi*” is a big question with no answer. Who is this G-d? Who will go? G-d is not connected to *eileh*, these things around me.

Hashem's response to Pharaoh's question, and Pharaoh's worldview was the plague. And Hashem hints to it in His words to Moshe, when He tells him that he is sending the plague, : לְמַעַן : In order to put these, *eileh*, signs in your midst. Hashem is bringing back the *eileh*. The purpose of the plague is to learn how to reconnect the *mi* and the *eileh*.

So what is this *eileh*? It means these, a lot of things, multiplicity. The multiplicity of the world is the beginning of the possibility for falsehood in the world. And the roots of it, of course, begin with the *ma'amar* that is connected to this plague. : יְהִי רָקִיעַ בְּתוֹךְ הַמַּיִם וְיִהְיֶה מַבְדִּיל גֵּיּוֹן מַיִם לְמַיִם : 3rd Ma'amar is 1:6—“Let there be a sky, a *rakia* between the waters, and it will divide between the lower waters and the waters.” The *rakia* is what created the concept of separation, the concept of many. It was the ability to have many different points of view in the world, some of which are not true. It gave the illusion that the abundance of our world is unconnected to Hashem. It is only after the *rakia* that we can have a world where we can separate *mi* and *elokim*.

There is a response to our world that was created by the *rakia*. And that response is in the *dibra* connected to this plague. לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת־שֵׁם־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוּן

You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain.

This *dibra* requests of us to be careful with Hashem's name. And what is this entire world if not an expression of Hashem, an expression of His name. Hashem created a world where each of us has individuality, a unique expression. There is so much beautiful diversity in our world. Hashem asks us not to use that diversity, that expression of Hashem, to create falsehood and nothingness. Do not take Hashem's name in vain.

Let's go back to *perek nachamu* one more time. Listen to how perfectly aligned these pesukim are with our plague. Hashem is described as He Who sits above the circle of the earth, and **whose inhabitants are like grasshoppers, who stretches out the heaven like a curtain**, and He spread them out like a tent to dwell.

Hashem stretches out the heaven like a curtain, like a *rakia*, and the inhabitants are like grasshoppers. What's so special about grasshoppers? The grasshoppers are a very destructive manifestation of Pharaoh's view of the world as "eleh" these, lots of disconnected parts, with no attachment to "mi" the who who created them, a higher source.

The very name Arbeh, is connected to *harbei*, a lot. Locusts come in swarms, a lot of them at a time, so many of them that they cover the eye of the earth, which Malbim tells us means the sun. They physically make a *rakia* in the sky. And they have an interesting nature. Mishlei 30:28: there is no king of the locusts, and yet they all go out in a single swarm. When there is a king, the people are unified around the king, around something outside themselves. The locusts are different. They move as one, in a swarm, but they are still *arbeh*, many, because they are each still focused on themselves. They are united, but it's only because they all want the same thing. The togetherness of the locusts is a togetherness of the lowest common denominator. It's still each man for himself. And that type of unity is a unity that always brings destruction in its wake. Even Pharaoh considers them as death.

There's another interesting thing about locusts. Locusts actually exist in two different phases. They have a solitary phase, where they are not particularly scary. And then they have the gregarious phase, where they swarm. And the entire physical nature of a locust changes when it switches between these two phases.

R' Shapiro tells us that this comes to teach that "To exist as an *arbeh*, as part of the masses, is one form of existence. To exist as an individual is an entirely different form of existence." The locusts can move back and forth between stages. We can also choose where we want to be holding. We can exist in a herd mentality, or we can change.

As klal Yisrael, we are united as individuals, connected together by a higher source, Hashem. We are the opposite of Pharaoh, and listen to how this is brought out in his discussion with Moshe. Remember, Pharaoh asks Moshe, *mi v'mi*, who will be going to worship your G-d. He wants only the men to go.

But Moshe responds, Sorry, we need everyone. We have a *chag*.

What's a *chag*?

Listen again to that pasuk in Yeshayahu, in nachamu. Hashem is described as He Who sits *al chug haarets*, above the circle of the earth, and whose inhabitants are like grasshoppers.

A *chag* is a circle. We worship hashem in a circle. What this means is vividly depicted in Taanit 31a—"In the future, HKBH will make a circle for the righteous and sit in their midst in Gan Eden." Everyone. Everything, Everyone. We are all connected in Hashem's world. There is no one closer, no one farther away. We are separate, but we are united. In pharaoh's world, perhaps, only the men could go, only some people are important, and others can be made into slaves. We live differently. In our world, multiplicity is an excuse to lift our eyes up to *shamayim* and see *mi bara eileh*, who created these. When we do that, we use Hashem's name, the expression of Hashem in the world, to reveal truth, and not to create vain falsehood. In the world of truth, all the multiplicity of the world is an expression of Hashem, and we are all part of the circle. Every small part of the world is an expression of Hashem, and we are all important. There is no one that can be left behind.

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The plague of blood illustrated the importance of shaping the world at large and our own personal worlds from a place of expansion and kindness. The plague of frogs illustrated the importance of speech, the tool we use to create ourselves and our personal worlds. The plague of lice teaches us about the importance of being small in order to become something big, but also that even when we feel small, we are really always big because of our connection to Hashem. The plague of wild animals explored the powerful force of desire within us, which when we connect to what we really want and who we really are, is one of our greatest tools. The plague of pestilence explored our ability to animate the inanimate world around us, which we are able to do in wondrous ways, as long as we remember to stay connected to our source. Boils explored the way in which the *din*, and the boundaries of our world, are all part of the process, all exist in service of Hashem's desire for us to be able to create relationship with Him. The hail explored how our true *makom*, our place is not the location of our physical body, but the much bigger place of our soul, which exists in the enormous *makom* of the expansive world that Hashem created. And the locusts are an expression of how the multiplicity of this world is an expression of Hashem, and is meant to bring us closer to Hashem and unify even as we retain our individuality.

### Choshech

It's so perfectly matched. The plague of darkness has such a beautiful, clear, relationship to its *ma'amar*: יהי־אור! "Let there be light,". But of course, it is not exactly as simple as it looks. The darkness of this plague is not regular darkness, and the light of the *ma'amar* is not regular light. So let's explore a bit deeper.

First, the darkness. Shemot Rabbah, quoted by Rashi, tells us that the plague of darkness lasted for six days. For the first three days the darkness was basically the whole world going pitch black,

but the Egyptians could still move. In the second three days, the darkness intensified, until “no person could rise from his place”. It paralyzed all movement.

Rav Moshe Shapiro tells us that this intense darkness was connected to the plague before. As we mentioned, the locusts were a physical expression of the disjointed, non-unified unity of the Egyptians. Locusts are the animals that Shlomo Hamelech describes as swarming without a king. They swarm together, but only because they are all hungry. In their group, it is always each man for himself. They are not rallied around a higher point, but around the lowest common denominator. We may have observed certain similarities with aspects of our modern world. As Rav Moshe Shapiro points out, there is a type of togetherness, based on herd mentality and personal ego, that leaves us alone and lonely even in a group. Darkness is separation. It separates us from the things around us, and from each other. This means that even when a person is surrounded by others, as the pasuk says, “no man could see his brother.” And then the darkness gets more tangible. It thickens. When we can’t connect to others, then the second part of the pasuk takes over, the inability to really move or grow. As the pasuk says, “no man could move from his place.” A world without the light of moving toward a purpose and connection to Hashem, is a world that is stopped in its tracks, and is a world of darkness.

So, this is not just a physical darkness, but a spiritual darkness. And what about the light? What kind of light is this? Well, it’s interesting because this is the light of the first day of creation. It is the light that existed before the sun and the moon, which were only created several days later. Rashi says this was the spiritual light that shone on the first day and then was hidden for the righteous in the future.

In order to understand something about the nature of spiritual light, I would like to share with you a teaching from Ohel Rachel. Ohel Rachel points out the truth that not all light is the same. The type of light we use determines what we can see, and how we experience our reality. This is true in the spiritual world, but also in the physical world. Different physical lights allow us to see our world differently. For example, a white t-shirt appears different under a blacklight than it does in daylight. And just as Hashem made different physical lights, He provided us with different spiritual lights that allow us different opportunities to see our world.

One of the lights Hashem provided us with is the light of the sun. It is a light that gives us a broad vision, the ability to view the world as a whole, integrated system. Sunlight is the light of the natural world. In the sunshine world, we exist in one system together with all mankind, and the entire expanse of animals and plants. We can experience the bounty of creation and see the big picture. We can exhibit our creativity in a multitude of ways. But in the sunshine world, it is our external accomplishments that come into focus quickly. Our profession, wealth, beauty, and intelligence are all things that make us important. And we are often in constant competition with the world at large, which will see and recognize our accomplishments only if they are important enough. Our measure of success always comes in comparison to what those around us have. Things like our home, our bank account, and our intelligence, appear big or small based on what our neighbors have. Competition and comparison are the name of the game.

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And then there is candlelight. Candlelight is uniquely human light. And it was a gift from Hashem at the end of the very first Shabbat, and what it gifts us with is a different way of seeing our world. It allows us to search for that which is beyond the surface, beyond the natural. It reveals what is hidden, the inner essence of things. As it says in Mishlei, (20:27), “The soul of man is the candle of G-d, which searches out all the innermost parts.”

And the thing that is hidden, the inner essence, is the part that connects and unifies all the disjointed pieces of our world. And so, in our homes, we light candles every week, and when we do, the woman of the house often prays for the members of her family. The Shabbat candles are an expression of the candlelit world we create in our homes. The difference between the sunlit world and the candlelit world is that in the sunlit world things and people are important because of their usefulness and their accomplishments. In the candlelit world, people and things are important because of their connection to each other. In a family, a person’s importance is based on who he is to the other members of the family. We are father, mother, daughter, son, brother, or sister. We are all important because of the connection that we have to each other: “this is my spouse” or “this is my parent” or “this is my child.” We need to do nothing else. Our status is guaranteed. The position we hold in the outside world has no bearing on our position in the candlelight world. Inside a *bayit*, in the candlelit world of connectedness, external accomplishments are not the point. We are important because we are connected. Spiritual light is the light of connection.

So let’s take a moment for an aside, because it is almost time for *bedikat chametz*. And, as I’m sure you remember, we do a very odd thing when we do *bedikat chametz*. Instead of looking for our chametz in the light of the bright sun, we wait until it is dark out, and then search using the flickering, not too bright, light of a candle. It doesn’t seem like the most effective or efficient way to find all the crumbs in the house. And it isn’t. I don’t know a single person who relies on the candlelight search to remove all the chametz from their home.

The *bedikat chametz* candlelight search is the reminder that this entire process of getting rid of chametz is not just physical, it is spiritual as well. There is so much Torah on this, I’m sure you’ve heard some of it. In the context of what we’re exploring here, I would just suggest, that as we move around our homes in the dark with the candle, we can be aware that we are gaining the opportunity to explore our world, our home, the *makom* we have built around us, though a different light. We can look at it through the light of connection. And as we travel around our home, we can ask ourselves, what does this connect me to? What does this connect me to?

And now, if we want to move from the *ma’amar* to the *dibra*, we can see the progression clearly. The *ma’amar* expresses the light that Hashem put into this world that gave us the ability to see the world on a higher level, a deeper level. It is the ability to see inside things, to see that they are connected to a higher source, more than just what they appear to be. In Mitzrayim, the Egyptians were stuck in darkness, the result of their focus on self, and their separation from each other and even their true selves. The *dibra* that relates, the second *dibra*, is **לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עִלְפָּנַי**, you shall not have the gods of others in My presence.

Avodah Zarah happens when we take the forces of this world and think that they are acting on their own, looking at them only with the sunlight, as part of the natural world, without the light of connection. To serve Hashem is to live with those same forces, but within each of them, to see constant connection to Hashem.

One final insight, before we end, given by the Malbim. According to the Malbim, it was not just that the plague and the *ma'amar* were connected. It was that makat choshesh was actually a revelation of the Ohr Haganuz, the light of the first day of creation that was hidden. As we know, the plagues are, at one and the same time, suffering for the Egyptians and healing for the Jews. The Ohr Haganuz was spiritually to the Egyptians what the unveiled sunlight is physically to us. It was too much. It blinded them. But for us, it was a revelation of the real nature of our world. Not only did it not blind us. It gave us superpowers. Spiritual light works everywhere and it gives us the ability to see into the depths of things even in the darkest places.

The midrash tells us that during the plague, at the end of the plague, when the Egyptians were unable to move, the Jews went into the Egyptian houses and were able to see all the treasure that was inside. It was in that way that they knew where all the wealth of the Egyptians was stored, and they were able to ask for it and take it with them when they left.

The Chassidic explanation for why we took the wealth of Egypt with us when we left is that what we removed were all the sparks of holiness, all goodness that could be found. We looked into the Egyptian homes, and we found all the spiritual treasure we could. Lazer Gurkow writes on Chabad.org, “the Jews peered into dark hidden places and discovered 'gold' and 'silver' treasures. In the language of Kabbalah, gold and silver represent love for G-d. The Jews peered into the darkness and discovered their love for its hidden divine roots.”

I want to take you back, for a moment, to that first moment when Hashem created light. Listen to the pasukim. וַיִּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אֹרֶךְ וַיְהִי אֹרֶךְ. Hashem says, let there be light, and there was light in the world. And what does he do? He uses the light. וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאֹר כִּי-טוֹב. He uses the light to “see the light” so to speak, and what He sees is that it is good. His creation is good. Remember, Rav Moshe Shapiro taught that the creation story is given over to us in the Torah, because learning how Hashem created the world teaches us how we can each create our own personal world.

In creation, Hashem used the spiritual light to see goodness. In Egypt, the Jews used the spiritual light to find treasure in the darkest of places, the personal homes of their tormentors. And now, on Erev Pesach, we again pick up a candle, and we search. We search our homes, we search ourselves. But we are not searching with a torch, that burns. We are not searching with the sun, that gives us a picture of how things appear on the outside. We are searching with a candle. During Bedikat Chametz we are invited to take the opportunity to search out and to see what is good. We are invited, amidst all the busyness, amidst the stringencies and sometimes even the harshness, to take a moment to appreciate the abundant good we can find in our homes, and the abundant good we can find in ourselves. Even when you are searching for chametz to burn and



destroy, you can still look around your home, your soul, your life, and see that it is good, and that you are good.

And now, for the last review, before we get to the final plague:

The plague of blood illustrated the importance of shaping the world at large and our own personal worlds from a place of expansion and kindness. The plague of frogs illustrated the importance of speech, the tool we use to create ourselves and our personal worlds. The plague of lice teaches us about the importance of being small in order to become something big, but also that even when we feel small, we are really always big because of our connection to Hashem. The plague of wild animals explored the powerful force of desire within us, which when we connect to what we really want and who we really are, is one of our greatest tools. The plague of pestilence explored our ability to animate the inanimate world around us, which we are able to do in wondrous ways, as long as we remember to stay connected to our source. Boils explored the way in which the din, and the boundaries of our world, are all part of the process, all exist in service of Hashem's desire for us to be able to create relationship with Him. The hail explored how our true makom, our place is not the location of our physical body, but the much bigger place of our soul, which exists in the enormous makom of the expansive world that Hashem created. Locusts are an expression of how the multiplicity of this world is an expression of Hashem, and is meant to bring us closer to Hashem and unify even as we retain our individuality. And now, the plague of darkness, teaches us that when we look at the world in the right light, we can find the unity and the good in everything, most especially in ourselves.

### **Makkat Bechorot**

It all began with a cry. "In those days the king of Egypt died, and the children of Israel sighed from the labor, and they cried out, and their cry ascended to God." And Hashem heard. That cry was the beginning of the redemption, the beginning of the *makkot*.

And it ends with a cry. Listen to how Hashem describes what will happen during *makkat bechorot*, the last *makkah*: "And there will be a great cry throughout the entire land of Egypt, such as there never has been and such as there shall never be again."

So, as we explore this last *makkah*, the moment everything has been leading up to, we start with exploring what a cry is. A cry is sound with no words. It doesn't express something specific, that can be quantified, and it doesn't come from the mind. A cry comes from the heart. It expresses something deep inside us. For example, it could express beginning or potential. Newborns begin life with a cry. Shofar blowing is also a form of crying. Crying always expresses something about essence. The Zohar (2:20a) tells us that crying is the greatest form of prayer and it is immediately answered.

The cry from our essence, that wordless prayer, was what began the redemption process. In response, R' Wolbe describes how Hashem sent the *makkot* as a process. For the Egyptians it was a punishment, a process of stripping away all the layers of self that were getting in the way of them doing the right thing. For the Jews it was a series of *nissim*, miracles, which were progressively leading up the moment of *chatzot* on Pesach night. At that moment we cried again, but this time it was our national moment of freedom, our national birth cry.

But, the night of Pesach was not then and is not now only a national phenomenon. It is very personal. The Ramchal tells us that the same illumination that illuminated at the time of the redemption from Egypt illuminates every year at the same time. In Nissan we were redeemed and in Nissan we will be redeemed. It's not that we are just remembering the night of the seder, it's that the night of the seder implanted that spiritual experience in our yearly calendar, and every single year we spiritually relive that experience. We ourselves go out of Egypt. There is the famous saying of the Kotzker, "Where can you find Hashem? Wherever you let Him in." So here too, if we are open to it, if we let it in, we will find *makkat bechorot* on seder night.

Let's take a step back for a moment to see how we can connect our Makkah, the death of the firstborn, with the corresponding *maamar*, Bereisheit Bara Elokim, In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth, and the corresponding *dibra*, *Anochi Hashem Elokecha*. I am Hashem your G-d that took you out of Egypt. Then we'll see if we can make this something accessible, that we can relate to, on Seder night.

The first thing we notice is that this *ma'amar*, this *dibra*, and this plague are all substantively different than the other things in their sets. Let's start with the *ma'amar*. The nine *ma'amarim* we have spoken about so far are all specific utterances. They start, as you would expect them to, with the words "And G-d said". But the first one, Bereisheit, is different. There is no specific thing that is spoken into existence. Instead, the entire concept of time was brought into existence. All of creation was brought into existence--in potential. This is the *ma'amar* that created our reality and enabled every other *ma'amar* to be spoken.

The *dibra* is very similar. Nine of the *dibrot* are, as you would expect, actual commands, asking us to do or not do something. This first *dibra*, "I am Hashem your G-d who took you out of Egypt" is an expression of fact. It expresses that we have a relationship with Hashem. It doesn't specifically command us to do anything, but it puts us in relationship with Hashem, and so it enables all the other commands to be given.

And what about the Makkah? This Makkah took place only for a moment. Instead of being a punishment, it was a revelation that killed the Egyptian first born. At the same time, this Makkah revealed the true greatness of Bnei Yisrael. We were lifted up to a level of "*maaleh min hateva*" beyond, above nature. This was the level where we could just walk out of Egypt into the desert without asking any questions. Just as the first *ma'amar* enabled all the rest of the *ma'amarot*, and the first *dibra* is the basis of all the rest of the *dibrot*, this moment of *chatzot* on Pesach was

what enabled all the spiritual heights that we achieved afterward, and that is why we say, at all our holidays, “*Zecher l’yetziat metzrayim*.” We call all our holidays a remembrance of our going out of Egypt. This was the source of everything.

Ok, now we can go deeper. The Alei Shur says this is not just a national thing, this is also a personal thing. When the Maharal tells us that the *makkot* are a process, which one after the other, reach further and further into the self, he is speaking about each of us. The experience of *makkat bechorot* is an experience of the essence of our self.

So, let’s ask the question: Who am I?

One of the many profound things I learned from Rav Gerzi is that before we can answer the question “Who am I?” we first have to take the time to examine who am I not. And the *klal*, the general principle, is, if I can observe it, I am not it. So, for example, I can observe the desk I’m sitting at as I record this. I am not that desk. I can observe my hands, so I am not my hands. I can observe my body, so I am not my body. I can observe my feelings, so I am not my feelings. I can observe my thoughts, so I am not my thoughts.

We get almost all of our information and knowledge from the way that we interact with the outside world through our senses, our thoughts and our emotions. There is one part of ourselves that is separate from all that. There is a part of us, deep within ourselves, that just knows, “I exist.” You do not know you exist because you saw the sun shine, or because you stubbed your toe. You just know, “I exist.” And in that place, where we know that we exist, we have desire. Rav Dessler says, *Ritzono hu mehuto shel adam*, the *Ratzon*, the will, our desire, is the essence of the person.

What did the *makkot* teach us about who we are? Let’s see what happens when we take what we’ve learned so far about the plagues and look at it through the lens of the question, “Who am I?” Beginning with, “Who am I not?” Remember what happened when Pharaoh tried to equate the entire world with himself? The bloody Nile illustrated that the world cannot be sustained as a personal part of myself, it’s much more expansive. I am not the world around me. The frogs illustrated how humans create the world we live in with our speech. I am not my speech. I am not what people say about me. The lice were small and everywhere, constantly moving, constantly taking up space, pushing boundaries. They are the busyness of our lives, and the thousand small thoughts that run through our brains. I am not the busyness of my everyday life. I am not the random thoughts that run through my mind. The wild animals illustrated the powerful emotions that course through us. I am not my emotions. The pestilence expressed the way we sustain things in this world. I am not the things I buy or the profession that I create in this world. The boils expressed the boundaries we set with intelligence that separate us from others. I am not how smart I am, my thoughts or my intelligence. The hail illustrated that we live in *makom*. I am not limited to the physicality of this world. Those are the first seven plagues, and they are all grouped together in Parshat Va’era.

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The last three plagues are grouped together in Parshat Bo. In them we can begin to move away from who am I not, and start to answer the question, Who am I? The locusts, through their disunified unity, swarming without a king, showed us that we need to be unified around something higher than ourselves. And we each are connected to something higher. I am a unique spark of G-dliness. Through the plague of darkness that was really light, Hashem showed us that we can use our connection to Hashem to view the world as unified and good. I am a unique expression of that G-dly spark in the world.

And now we can begin to get a sense of what happened at the moment of Makkat Bechorot. By this I don't mean we can really understand what happened, of course, in that moment of complete revelation of Hashem. But I would like to suggest that we can learn enough to taste a bit of that moment on our own level. Rav Wolbe writes that what was revealed in this moment was the "*Kudsha Brichu V'Yisrael Chad Hu*—Hakadosh Baruch Hu and Yisrael are one." At the moment when we traveled into that deepest part of self, the part that knows, "I exist" what we found is, "I exist because Hashem made me." And even deeper, "I exist because Hashem is continuously, lovingly, willing me into existence." At the core of my existence, I find myself, but I also find Hashem.

At the moment of makkat Bechorot, the real inner meaning of the ma'amar Bereisheit was revealed. At the core of every existence there is desire. At the core of the existence of the world is Hashem's desire for relationship with us. We learn, "*Bereisheit, Bishveil Yisrael Shenikrau Reisheit.*" Hashem created this world for us. Because He desired a relationship with us. In the ma'amar of Bereisheit, and also through the entire natural world that expresses it, Hashem is reaching out to us, asking us to be in relationship with Him.

And at makkat Bechorot, as a nation, we heard, within the deepest parts of ourselves, the desire to reach back to Hashem, to respond to Hashem, to live in connection to our Source, our Creator. That was what made us free to be who we were created to be.

And that was what created, eternally, the first *dibra*, even though it had not yet been spoken into the world. When we are free to be who we really are, then we are free to live in the world of the *dibbrot*, in the world of relationship with Hashem, where we respond to Hashem's communication with the world.

This was the cry that was heard at *Chatzot* on Pesach night. It was a double cry. For the Egyptians, it was an existential wail of despair. They were faced with the reality that when they looked into the essence of who they were, there was nothing there.

But for us, that cry was the cry of being born. It was a cry of expressing our essence. It was a cry of expressing our deepest desire, and because of that, it was a cry of prayer. When we express the essence of who we are, we return Hashem's invitation to reach out to Him by reaching back in prayer.

This is the structure of our seder night. The first half of the seder is all about waking ourselves up with questions. It is the night of *makkat bechorot*, the night of the sefira of *Chochma*, which is *koach ma*, the force of asking, "What is this?" or in this case, "What am I?" The question itself is important. Getting to the core of who we are is important. Everything about the evening focuses on bringing the self to the experience. We tell our sons, "Hashem did this for me." We are required to see ourselves as personally coming out of Egypt. We chastise the *Rasha* for excluding himself from the avodah of the evening. Polite curiosity doesn't cut it at the seder. This has to be an experience of self.

At the beginning of the meal we hide a piece of the matzah, the afikoman. It is the bigger piece of the matzah, and it symbolizes the part of ourselves that we hide from ourselves. At the end of the seder we find it. What is hidden within us becomes revealed. We recognize who we are at our core. At that moment we become free, and in our freedom, we transition from questions, to song.

The end of the seder is hallel and song. At our core we are beings who were created to reach out to our Creator. We were created to delight in our relationship with Hashem. To be joyful in that relationship. To have fun in that relationship. When we come face to face with who we are at our essence, we pray, we praise Hashem, and we sing silly, meaningful songs.

I'd like to suggest one thing, to end this shiur and this series. For a moment, at the seder, perhaps while eating the afikomen, I invite you to take the opportunity to be very quiet. It can just be for one moment, and you can totally do this while you're chewing. Take that moment to focus inside yourself. Relax. Bonus points if you remember to take a deep breath. Let yourself be free from all the things that are not really you. And just feel this truth: I exist. I exist because You, Hashem, made me. Thank you Hashem.