

## What You **Don't** Do Can Be More Powerful Than What You Do

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R. S.R. Hirsch employs an insight based upon the manner in which the Egyptian plagues are presented in the Tora, to suggest a striking aspect of the Jewish concept of *Shabbat*:

R. Hirsch on *Shemot* 9:29

...Let us note that not only the onset of the plague but also—and primarily—its cessation at God's Will constituted the most striking sign of God's Omnipotence. For even the most sublime revelation of His Creative and Productive Power would be insufficient, even today, to convey to the nations the pure conception of the God of Israel. At most, such a revelation would present Him as the Highest Power of all Powers, the most Forceful of all Forces, whereas in the Jewish conception, God is the free Master over His Work, Whose Creations do not escape His Control. It was primarily through the **cessation** of the plague at God's Command, its cancellation and its differentiation—by God's Order—between Egypt and Goshen that God Revealed Himself. No other power can regain control of elemental forces, once they had been released...<sup>1</sup>

To flesh out R. Hirsch's observation, several components of the account of the Exodus must be scrutinized. Initially, what sort of time frame did the plagues entail? One Midrashic source suggests that the ten plagues extended over the course of an entire year.

*Pesikta Zutrata Shemot 3*

(On the verse *Shemot* 3:18 "And they will listen to your voice, and you and the elders of Israel will come to the king of Egypt and you will say to him, 'God, the Lord of the *Ivriyim* [Hebrews] *Nikra* [happened, revealed Himself] to us and now we will go a journey of three days into the desert and we will offer sacrifices to God, our Lord..")

...What does "*Ivriyim*"<sup>2</sup> connote? Said the Holy One, Blessed Be He, to him (Moshe), "Tell Pharaoh that ten plagues are prepared for him and in the end, into the sea he will be thrown. For this reason it is stated "*Ivriyim*"—the first "*Yud*"<sup>3</sup> represents the 10 plagues;<sup>4</sup> the letters

<sup>1</sup> The Hirsch *Chumash—Sefer Shemos*, trans. Daniel Haberman, Feldheim, Jerusalem, 2005, p. 133.

<sup>2</sup> The word is spelled with an extra "*Yud*"—Ayin, *Vet*, *Reish*, *Yud*, ***Yud***, *Mem*—drawing the attention of the Rabbinic commentators of the Midrash.

<sup>3</sup> See fn. 2.

“Yud” “Mem” (the final two letters of the word) is a reference to the sea (*Yam* is the Hebrew word for “sea”);<sup>5</sup> “*Nikra*”—(the numerical value of the word is) 355, i.e., over the course of an **entire year**<sup>6</sup> the Egyptians suffered plagues.<sup>7</sup>

Another Midrash subdivides the year period among the individual plagues. Two possibilities are offered for the length of all but one<sup>8</sup> of the series of national calamities that ultimately resulted in the release of the Jews from Egyptian bondage.

*Shemot Rabba* 9:12

(On *Shemot* 7:25 “And there were filled **seven days** after *HaShem* smote the river [with the plague of blood]”)

R. Yehuda and R. Nechemya.

One of them says: For twenty four days he (Moshe by way of Aharon) would rebuke them before the plague arrived, and seven days the plague would affect them. (This would appear to be the most straightforward way to understand the verse.) And one of them says: For seven days he would rebuke them, and twenty four days the plague would affect them. (This view understands the verse as stating that the seven days that were filled were the days of rebuke for the next plague following the twenty four days of actual plague.)<sup>9 10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The numerical value of the Hebrew letter “Yud” is 10.

<sup>5</sup> The culmination of the plagues was the drowning of Pharaoh and his chariots at *Yam Suf* (the sea of reeds) in *Shemot* 14:26-8.

<sup>6</sup> Although both lunar and solar years are closer to 365 days, the Midrash takes into account not only the plagues, but also the victory at *Yam Suf*, which took place seven days after the actual Exodus from Egypt finally precipitated by the last of the plagues, the plague of the Firstborn. (It is not uncommon that numerical hints embedded within the Tora text are approximate rather than precise.) Furthermore it is interesting to note that the word representing all of these events is “*Nikra*” suggesting that each plague, and every miracle for that matter, constitute a greater or lesser manifestation of a Divine Revelation.

<sup>7</sup> “*Nun*” = 50; “*Kuf*” = 100; “*Reish*” = 200; “*Heh*” = 5, adding up to 355.

<sup>8</sup> *Makat Bechorot* (the plague of the firstborn) lasted only momentarily and resulted in the deaths of firstborn throughout Egypt—see *Shemot* 12:29.

<sup>9</sup> Once again the numbers involved fall short of the days constituting a lunar or solar year. Only nine of the plagues—see fn. 8 re the plague of the Firstborn—could have each been protracted over the course of either seven or twenty four days, resulting in 279. There could have been a warning period for the last of the plagues, but that would only add either another seven or twenty four days, maximally resulting in 303. Perhaps included in the calculation is the period beginning with the first failed meeting with Pharaoh (*Shemot* 5:1 ff.) including the interregnum between this first and the subsequent encounters (commencing with *Ibid.* 6:10) with the Egyptian ruler. (This would contradict the Midrashic contention in *Shemot Rabba* 5:19,20 that six months elapsed between Moshe and Aharon’s first and second meetings with Pharaoh. The simple understanding of the biblical text does not lead to the conclusion that this much time was involved.)

<sup>10</sup> The assumption that there could have been lengthy warnings and negotiations prior to a plague is exemplified with respect to locusts. Not only is there an extensive warning given to Pharaoh (10:3-6), but as a result of the imploring of his servants, Pharaoh calls Moshe and Aharon back **before** the plague begins (10:8-11) to continue the conversation, although predictably Pharaoh refuses in the end to comply due to God’s Hardening the king’s heart. R. Nachman’s principle, cited below in fn. 12, would allow us to presume a similar series of gives and takes in the other plagues as well.

Once we posit that each plague lasted for a certain period of time, it follows that each plague had a clear beginning and end, as opposed to assuming that the actual plague was only momentary. It is interesting to note that the efforts of Pharaoh's magicians were never directed at **ending** a particular plague, only replicating its beginning.<sup>11</sup> Wouldn't it have been a greater show of power and a refutation of Moshe's claim to represent the ultimate Divine Force, if they could thwart the effects of the attempt to disrupt Egyptian life, rather than merely intensify the problem? Furthermore, while Pharaoh is apparently sometimes warned by Moshe regarding oncoming plagues,<sup>12</sup> the Tora devotes many more verses to the negotiations regarding the cessation of some of the plagues.<sup>13</sup> When Moshe answers Pharaoh's summons concerning removing the frogs (8:4), the king makes what many of the commentators consider a strange request. Upon being asked, when he would like the plague to stop, Pharaoh says, (8:6) "Tomorrow." Generally when someone is troubled or in pain, they would like the problem to be resolved as soon as possible. Some attribute to Pharaoh the attitude of wishing to see if Moshe, as God's representative, could really control the phenomenon, and consequently made an unconventional, and what he perceived to be a completely unexpected request. Of course, not only did this "test" not faze God, it only caused greater discomfort to the Egyptian people.

Another dimension of God's Ability to fine-tune the plagues was the pin-point manner in which they effected only Egypt proper, but not the land of Goshen,<sup>14</sup> the

<sup>11</sup> Blood—*Shemot* 7:22; Frogs—8:3; Lice—8:14 (in the latter instance, the magicians only attempted to replicate the plague, but did not succeed.)

<sup>12</sup> When the first nine plagues are divided into groups of three, the first two are accompanied by predictions, while the last one according to the literal interpretation of the text is unannounced.

Blood 7:15 ff.	Frogs 7:27 ff.	Lice 8:12
Wild animals 8:16 ff.	Death of flocks 9:1 ff.	Boils 9:8
Hail 9:13 ff.	Locusts 10:3 ff.	Darkness 10:21.

The final plague, the plague of the Firstborn, while not predicted immediately prior to its occurrence, was foreshadowed in God's Instructions to Moshe in 4:22. Whether he ever actually articulated this threat to Pharaoh is not explicitly mentioned in the text; yet R. Nachman (*Otzar HaMidrashim*, Eisenstein, 32 Hermeneutic principles of *Aggada*, p. 268) maintains that "the words of Tora are 'impoverished' (sparse) in one place and "rich" (detailed) in another, and therefore even if the threat is not subsequently repeated, that does not mean that it was not conveyed at some point. By extension, were we to apply R. Nachman's principle to all of the plagues, and, one could insist that the concept that one does not punish someone without warning is normative, all of the plagues may have been preceded by warnings, whether mentioned explicitly or not.

<sup>13</sup> As the plagues become increasingly severe, Pharaoh realizes that allowing them to go on indefinitely—he is not privy to the idea that each would only last maximally either seven or twenty four days (see *Shemot Rabba* 9:12)—would cause even more devastation than had already been effected. Consequently he engages Moshe in discussions, not realizing that they were futile because of God's Plan to bring the full array of plagues to bear on Egypt—see *Shemot* 7:5.

Frogs—8:4-7	Wild animals—8:21-25	Hail—9:27-32
Locusts—10:8-11; 24-29		

<sup>14</sup> Wild animals—8:18 ff.      Death of flocks—9:4 ff.      Hail—9:26

With respect to the plague of locusts, while Goshen is not mentioned, there is an emphasis upon the plague affecting "the entire land of Egypt" (10:12-15). That could be understood as either including or excluding Goshen. However, when the text stresses that the locusts consumed whatever the plague of hail had not destroyed (10:14), since hail did not affect Goshen, it could be concluded that locusts also did not.

area set aside for Jewish habitation when they first arrived in Egypt (*Beraishit* 45:10; 46:34; 47:4,6). It is one thing to be able to unleash something dangerous and disturbing, such as a plague, quite another to limit and ultimately end/recall it.<sup>15</sup>

God's Control over miracles in terms of restoring situations to their pre-miracle state, is reflected in the signs that He Provided to Moshe in order to gain the attention of first the Jews, and then Pharaoh. When Moshe's staff transforms itself into a serpent, Moshe is also told what to do to turn it back into a staff (*Shemot* 4:4). The same is true for his hand becoming leprous and then being restored to health (*Ibid.* 7.) As for the third sign, water turning to blood and remaining in this state (*Ibid.* 9,) the Midrash suggests that this might have been an ominous personal message to Moshe:

*Shemot Rabba* 3:13

(On *Shemot* 4:9) "...And you will take from the waters of the river..."

He (*HaShem*) Hinted to him (Moshe) that because of something that he will say to Israel in the future, the water will turn to blood and he

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Darkness did not seem to be a geographical issue, but rather one that was differentiated by ethnicity (10:23), with an emphasis upon wherever the Jews happen to live, they were able to see. This would support the Midrashic contention that during this plague Jews who did not leave died and were buried unbeknownst to the Egyptians, as well as the Jews scouting out the possessions that they would "borrow" from the Egyptians in fulfillment of 11:2 ff. Of course, the plague of the Firstborn was not only universal in terms of geography, but had an additional requirement for Jews to be spared, i.e., the application of blood to the doorposts of the Jewish residences (12:23.) Ibn Ezra on 7:24 takes a more literal tack with regard to the issue of whether the plagues affected only Egypt proper, and opines that if the text does not state explicitly that a differentiation was made between the communities, then it was not. In effect, the plagues where it is stated that Goshen was spared were plagues where rather than mere inconvenience, life and death were involved. On the other hand, you could once again invoke R. Nachman (see fn. 11) and simply extend the differentiation to all of the plagues.

<sup>15</sup> This would appear to be the underlying assumption of "The Sorcerer's Apprentice", for which Walt Disney supplied visuals to accompany Paul Dukas' tone poem, so memorably presented in the animated film *Fantasia*.

...the English name of Goethe's poem *Der Zauberlehrling* (1797). The name also refers to Paul Dukas's *L'apprenti sorcier* symphonic poem of 1897 which was inspired by Goethe's poem. Goethe, in turn, had got the idea from Lucian's story of *Philopseudes*...

The tale begins as an old sorcerer departs his workshop, leaving his apprentice with chores to perform. Tired of fetching water by pail, the apprentice enchants a broomstick to do the work for him - using magic he is not yet fully trained in. The floor is soon awash with water, and the apprentice realizes that he cannot stop the broom because he does not know how. Despairing, he splits the broom in two with an axe, but each of the pieces transforms into a whole broomstick. The broomsticks take up pails and resume their work, now faster than ever. When all seems lost in a massive flood, the sorcerer returns and quickly breaks the spell, saving the day...--[Wikipedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Sorcerer's_Apprentice)

will be punished as a result. For it is written (*BaMidbar* 20: 10) “Listen you rebels”, and he struck the boulder and extracted, as it is said (*Tehillim* 78:20) “They struck the boulder and water ‘*VaYizovu*’--oozed out,” and the term “*VaYizovu*” is associated with blood, as it says, (*VaYikra* 15:25) “And a woman when ‘*Yizov Zov*’—there will surely ooze out her blood”.<sup>16</sup> And for this reason he struck the boulder twice (*BaMidbar* 20:11), that at first, blood came out, and only after water. With respect to the first two signs (the staff turning into a serpent; the hand becoming afflicted with *Tzora’at*), you find that they returned to their original states, but the sign of blood did not return to its previous condition because He (God) did not wish to Forgive Moshe for the sin of the water...

And when Aharon’s throwing down his staff and its becoming a crocodile<sup>17</sup> is replicated by Pharaoh’s magicians, Aharon’s crocodile eating the others is yet another way for God to impose limitations on someone else’s ostensible demonstration of their miraculous abilities.

The theme of imposing limitations and ending miraculous doings is incorporated in a Midrashic explanation for one of the classical names of God:

*Beraishit Rabba* 5:8 (also 46:3 on *Beraishit* 17:1)  
(On the verse *Beraishit* 1:10 “And God Called the dry land ‘Yabasha’...”)

...R. Natan in the name of R. Acha and R. Berechya in the name of R. Yitzchak said: (*Beraishit* 17:1) “I am *Keil Shakai*”<sup>18</sup>—I Who Said to the heavens and the earth “Dai” (enough), for if this had not been so, they would have continued to expand until this moment.

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<sup>16</sup> This is an example of the application of the hermeneutic principle “*Gezeira Shava*”, i.e., two topics that may appear in widely separated places in the bible, by virtue of their sharing a particular word, are linked together with respect to some detail or concept.

<sup>17</sup> The terminology in the two instances where Moshe is first shown the sign, and when it is actually carried out in Pharaoh’s presence, is different. In *Shemot* 4:3, the word “*Nachash*” is used, whereas in 7:10, 12, the staffs transform into “*Taninim*”. One explanation for this inconsistency is that whereas in the former instance, the sign was a rebuke to Moshe (see *Shemot Rabba* 3:13 above) in the sense that just as the primordial serpent had spoken ill of God (*Beraishit* 3:5), so too had Moshe inappropriately cast aspersions upon the Jewish people as a whole (*Shemot* 4:1), the sign had different significance for Pharaoh. Since the crocodile was a royal symbol in Egypt (see below), the symbolism of Aharon’s staff consuming the royal magicians’ crocodiles serves as a statement of power and control.

“King Crocodile” is another of the possible regional kings or chieftains in Egypt who is known only by a few seals and impressions. The motif of the seals that bear his name is water and a crocodile, but it may not be a formal name. It is possible that this king was a ruler of a single province, most likely the 6th nome, which had a crocodile as its symbol.--

<http://www.phouka.com/pharaoh/pharaoh/dynasties/dyn00/04crocodile.html>

<sup>18</sup> In order to avoid pronouncing the Divine Names, slight alterations are made, in this case “*Kuf*” is substituted for “*Alef*” in the first Name, and “*Kuf*” is substituted for “*Dalet*” in the second.

Therefore, even with regard to the natural miracles that are involved in the conduct of the world on a day-to-day basis, we can understand God not only continually Bringing things into existence,<sup>19</sup> but also setting limitations upon that ongoing Creation.

To the extent that man is enjoined to emulate God's Ways, as in *Devarim* 28:9 "...When you observe the Commandments of the Lord, your God, **and you will walk in His Ways**," the idea of placing limitations upon one's creativity at least in certain places at certain times, becomes a religious imperative. R. Soloveitchik, *ZaTzaL*, expresses this aspect of the Jewish spiritual lifestyle in the following manner:

What is heroism in the *Halacha*? What does the *Halacha* recommend to us, that we may attain heroic stature? The answer is: one must perform the dialectical movement. The *Halachic* catharsis expresses itself in paradoxical movement in two opposite directions - in surging forward boldly and in retreating humbly. Man's heroic experience is a polar, antithetic one. Man drives forward only to retreat and to reverse, subsequently, the direction of his movement. The Torah wants man, who is bold and adventurous in quest for opportunities, to act heroically, and at the final moment, when it appears to him that victory is within reach, to stop short, turn around, and retreat. At the most exalted moment of triumph and fulfillment man must forego the ecstasy of victory and take defeat at his own hands. Jacob acted in this manner; he engaged in the dialectical performance. He did not consummate his victory; instead, he set free the antagonist whom he had defeated and whom he could have destroyed. By freeing the defeated enemy Jacob defeated himself. He withdrew from a position he had won through courage and fortitude. He engaged in the movement of recoil...  
*Halacha* teaches that at every level of our total existential experience - the aesthetic-hedonic, the emotional, the intellectual, the moral-religious—one must engage in the dialectical movement by alternately advancing and retreating...<sup>20</sup>

The idea that man must at times cease from his activities in accordance with God's Example, serves as the basis for the continuation of R. Hirsch's commentary on *Shemot* 9:29:

In this spirit the Jew celebrates the last of the days of Creation, the Sabbath. The non-Jewish world, in thoughtless contrast, celebrates the first day, Sunday. The outlook that considers the universe a result of natural forces can perhaps explain the Sunday of Creation, but it

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<sup>19</sup> See *Midrash Tehillim* 96:1 "*HaMechadesh BeChol Yom Tamid Ma'aseh Beraishit*".

<sup>20</sup> R. J.B.Soloveitchik, "Catharsis", in *Tradition*, Vol 17. No. 2, Spring 1978, pp. 43-4.

cannot explain the fact of the Sabbath of Creation. For why has the creation of new creatures ceased? After all the same creative forces of nature still exist. That is why God Established the Sabbath, the Sabbath with which Creation ceased, and not the days of Creation, as a monument to the Creator.

Placing *Shabbat* observance within the context of not only the Creation of the Universe, but also the Exodus of Egypt, with respect to the manner in which God Proved His Omnipotence supplies yet another level of meaning to one of the Jewish people's most characteristic observances.