

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist

Three Texts – One Twist

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(Insights into Tur, Orach Chaim 271)

(Brought by Rabbi Posner in www.chabad.org)

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Jewish Philosophy with a Twist



1

Why Were the Waters Not Stricken Through Moses? (Insights into Exodus Rabbah 9:10 & Exodus Rabbah 10:7)

Background to Our Story



Exodus Chapter 4

¹³ But he said, "Please, O Lord, make someone else Your agent." The Lord became angry with Moses, and He said, "There is your brother Aaron the Levite. He, I know, speaks readily. Even now he is setting out to meet you, and he will be happy to see you. ¹⁵ You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth — I will be with you and with him as you speak, and tell both of you what to do —¹⁶ and he shall speak for you to the people. Thus he shall serve as your spokesman, with you playing the role of God to him, ¹⁷ And take with you this rod, with which you shall perform the signs."



From the verses above, what is expected to be Aaron's assignment? What is expected to be Moses' assignment?



Exodus Chapter 7

¹⁹ And the Lord said to Moses, "Say to Aaron: Take your rod and hold out your arm over the waters of Egypt — its rivers, its canals, its ponds, all its bodies of water — that they may turn to blood; there shall be blood throughout the land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and stone."



Exodus Chapter 8

¹ And the Lord said to Moses, "Say to Aaron: Hold out your arm with the rod over the rivers, the canals, and the ponds, and bring up the frogs on the land of Egypt." ² Aaron held out his arm over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt.



Exodus Chapter 8

¹² Then the Lord said to Moses, "Say to Aaron: Hold out your rod and strike the dust of the earth, and it shall turn to lice throughout the land of Egypt." ¹³ And they did so. Aaron held out his arm with the rod and struck the dust of the earth, and vermin came upon man and beast; all the dust of the earth turned to lice throughout the land of Egypt.

? After understanding Aaron's and Moses' assignments from Exodus Chapter 4:13-17, what is puzzling about the first three plagues (see verses above)?

The Text: Exodus Rabbah 9:10 & Exodus Rabbah 10:7

Exodus Rabbah 9:10

ויאמר ה' אל משה אמר אל אהרן, אמר רבי תנחום למה לא לקו המים על ידי משה, אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא המים ששמרוך כשהשלקת ליאור אינו דין שילקו על ידך, חייב לא ילקו אלא על ידי אהרן.

And the Lord said to Moses: Say to Aaron. Rabbi Tanchum said: why were the waters not stricken through Moses? The Holy One -Blessed Be He- said to Moses: the waters that protected you when you were thrown into the Nile, it is not fair for them to be stricken through you. I (God) swear by your life! They will only be stricken through Aaron!

Exodus Rabbah 10:7

ויאמר ה' אל משה אמר אל אהרן נטה את מטבך והך את עפר הארץ, אמר רבי תנחום אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה עפר שהגן עליך כשהרגת את המצרי אינו דין שילקה על ידך, לפיכך לקו שלש מכות אלו על ידי אהרן.

And the Lord said to Moses: Say to Aaron: Hold out your rod and strike the dust of the earth. Rabbi Tanchum said: The Holy One -Blessed Be He- said to Moses: the dust (of the earth) that protected you when you killed the Egyptian, it is not fair for them to be stricken through you. Therefore, the Egyptians were stricken with these three plagues through Aaron!

? Why was Moses instructed not to strike the waters and the dust of the earth?

Bonus ? Why was Aaron instructed to strike the waters and the dust of the earth?

? Do you think it is possible for Moses to feel gratitude and still strike the waters and the dust of the earth?

2

Why Do We Cover the Challah Bread on the Shabbat Table?

(Insights into Tur, Orach Chaim 271)

(Brought by Rabbi Posner in www.chabad.org)

A Jewish Law with a Twist



There are a number of reasons for this tradition.

1. When our ancestors traveled in the desert for forty years, they subsisted on the manna that miraculously fell from heaven every day. The *challah* we eat on Shabbat is actually in place of that manna. Since the manna was encased between layers of dew that preserved its freshness,¹ we envelop the *challahs* between the tablecloth (or cutting board) and the *challah* cover, reliving the manna miracle at our Shabbat meal.²

(Actually, on Shabbat the manna did not fall. Rather, a double portion fell on Friday—one portion for that day, and another for the day of rest that followed.³ That is why we place two *challahs* on the Shabbat table, to commemorate this double portion that fell on Friday in honor of the Shabbat.⁴)

2. In Talmudic times, before tables and chairs, banquet participants were served their meal on three-legged trays, which were brought to them by the waiters. On Shabbat, these table-trays would be brought out only after *kiddush*, in order to demonstrate that the meal is being served in honor of the Shabbat, which had just been sanctified during the recitation of *kiddush*.⁵ Today, we don't carry small tables in and out. Instead, we set the table with the *challah*, but cover it until the time when it would have been carried in. This delivers the message that the meal only begins after, and because of, *kiddush*.⁶

3. Not only do different types of food require different blessings, but there is actually a hierarchy that regulates the order in which we recite blessings and eat various foods.

Generally, the seven foods with which the land of Israel is praised—wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates⁷—take priority over other foods. In the event that one is eating two or more of these foods, they are eaten in the order that they are mentioned in the Torah.⁸ Since grain is mentioned before grapes, it would follow that the bread should be eaten before the wine.

We therefore cover the bread (“wheat”) in order that it not be “shamed” by the fact that we drink the *Kiddush* wine (“grapes”) before we partake of the *challah*.⁹

Please let me know if this helps.

Rabbi Menachem Posner

FOOTNOTES

1. Rashi to [Exodus 16:14](#).
2. Tosafot to Pesachim 100b.
3. [Exodus 16:5](#) passim.
4. Talmud, Shabbat 117b.
5. Talmud, Pesachim 100b.
6. Tosafot, ad loc.
7. [Deuteronomy 8:8](#).
8. Seder Birchot Hanehenin 10:13.
9. Tur, Orach Chaim 271, quoting the Jerusalem Talmud.

? Were you familiar with reason #3? What do you think of the idea of covering the bread (challah) in order that it not be “shamed”? Why do you think the word “shamed” is in quotation marks?

3

For After One's Acts is the Heart Drawn (Insights into Sefer Hachinuch, Mitzvah 16) Jewish Philosophy with a Twist

Sefer Hachinuch Mitzvah 16: The Prohibition to Break a Bone of the Pesach Offering

Exodus Chapter 12

⁴³ The Lord said to Moses and Aaron: This is the law of the passover offering: No foreigner shall eat of it.⁴⁴ But any slave a man has bought may eat of it once he has been circumcised.⁴⁵ No bound or hired laborer shall eat of it. ⁴⁶It shall be eaten in one house: you shall not take any of the flesh outside the house; nor shall you break a bone of it.



We are commanded not to break any of the bones of the Passover offering: as it is stated, you shall not break a bone of it (Exodus 12: 46).

At the root of the precept lies the purpose to have us remember the miracles of Egypt, as we have written of the others... For it is not a way of honor for royal princes and counsellors of the land to scrape the bones and break them like dogs. This is fit only for the hungry poor of the people to do. Therefore, at the beginning of our emergence to become the treasured choice of all the nations, a kingdom of kohanim and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6), and again every year at the same time, it is fitting for us to perform deeds which reflect the great degree of excellence to which we rose at that hour. Through the action and the symbol that we perform, we set this matter in our souls permanently.

And now, my son, if you have understanding, hear this; incline your ear and hearken. I will teach you of the Torah and the precepts, for your benefit.

Know that a man is influenced in accordance with his actions. His heart and all his thoughts are always [drawn] after his deeds in which he is occupied, whether [they are] good or bad. Thus even a person who is thoroughly wicked in his heart, and every imagination of the thoughts of his heart is only evil the entire day-if he will arouse his spirit and set his striving and his occupation, with constancy, in the Torah and the *mitzvot*, even if not for the sake of Heaven, he will veer at once toward the good, and with the power of his good deeds he will deaden his evil impulse. For after one's acts is the heart drawn. And even if a man should be thoroughly righteous, his heart

upright and honest, desiring the Torah and the *mitzvot*, should he but engage constantly in impure matters-as we might say by way of example, if the king forcefully appointed him to an evil vocation-then in truth, if his entire occupation, constantly, all the day, will be in that vocation, at some point in time he will turn from the righteousness of his heart to become completely wicked. For it is a known and true matter that every man is influenced in accordance with his actions, as we have stated.

For this reason, the Sages of blessed memory said: The omnipresent God wished to make the Israelites meritorious; therefore, He gave them an ample, abundant Torah and a multitude of *mitzvot*. [It was] in order to fasten all our thoughts onto them, that all our preoccupation should be with them-and thus to do us good in our afterlife. For by the good actions we are acted upon to become good (virtuous), meriting eternal life. Our Sages of blessed memory hinted at this when they said: Whoever has a *m'zuzah* at his entrance, *tzitzith* in his garment, and *t'fillin* on his head, he is assured that he will not sin. For these are uninterrupted *mitzvot* [to be observed constantly] and one is constantly affected by them.

? How do we “create” good people according to the author of Sefer Hachinuch?

“The Twist” – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from These Texts

! Building Character and Becoming a Mensch: One “Good” Step at a Time!

EPILOGUE

These three very different sources - the two short texts in Exodus Rabbah, the explanation of the Tur to why we cover the Challah on Shabbat, and the philosophical approach of the anonymous author of Sefer Hachinuch to the obscure prohibition to break a bone of the Passover offering- share a common message: the way to building character and becoming a mensch is by doing actions, over and over again, that reflect the values we wish to incorporate. In other words: actions create feelings and right behavior creates right values, and not the other way around. In other words, showing appreciation will make us appreciative human beings, doing acts of kindness will make us kind and compassionate, and giving generously will transform us into generous human beings.



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The Plague of Frogs

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And Aaron stretched out his hand over the Waters of Egypt and the Frogs came up and covered the Land of Egypt. And the Magicians did so with their enchantments and brought up Frogs upon the Land of Egypt. Exodus Ch. 8. Ver. 6, 7.