



## Signs and Wonders: The Narrative Structure of the Makkot: Part 2

By Mr. Aryeh Tiefenbrunn

There are two Makkot narratives outlined in Tehillim, in Perakim 78 and 105. Each one lists only some of the Makkot in a different order than they actually occurred. The Malbim interprets these two narratives to understand both the selection and order of the Makkot in each. In Tehillim 78, the Malbim says, the purpose of the discussion of the Makkot is to emphasize their didactic nature, “to tell us that the purpose of the Makkot was to display His might and strength” (Malbim s.v. 78:44). For this reason, the three Makkot that came without warning are omitted from the narrative in that Perek. To address the alternative order of the Makkot there (Dam, Arov, Tzefardei’a, Arbeh, Barad, Dever, Makkat Bechorot), the Malbim invokes the structure of the Pesukim, which mention two Makkot each. He says that, with the exception of Dam, which is mentioned first and alone due to its being outside of the pattern, the Makkot that are mentioned in Tehillim 78 can be viewed as functional pairs. The purpose of having pairs of Makkot that served the same function was to increase the total number of Otot (didactic Makkot) that Mitzrayim would witness. The Makkah of Arov is mentioned before Tzefardei’a because the former Makkah must have included frogs, so Tzefardei’a was the “extra” one added for emphasis. The Makkah of Arbeh precedes Barad because, while the hail had left some produce untouched for the locusts to consume, the locusts would have been capable of destroying all of Mitzrayim’s produce by themselves. The verse (78:50) says “He leveled a path for His anger”,

which the Malbim says refers to Dever. Hashem’s anger could have wiped out all of Mitzrayim, but He calculatingly channeled it into a conduit that destroyed only the animals. This was done so that Makkat Bechorot could be a widening of this same channel to include the Mitzri firstborn in the death toll. Thus, Dever and Makkat Bechorot form a pair in a sense, despite the unique nature of the final Makkah.

The Malbim also sheds some light on the Makkot narrative in Tehillim 105, which functions in the context of a larger narrative describing the origin of the Jewish nation. Tehillim 105 lists Choshech, Dam, Tzefardei’a, Arov, Kinnim, Barad, Arbeh, and Makkat Bechorot. It is immediately apparent that this list contains both Otot and Mofetim and is written mostly in chronological order, with three major differences: Choshech begins the list, Arov and Kinnim are reversed in order, and Dever and Shechin are omitted entirely. Malbim addresses these three anomalies fairly easily. Choshech is mentioned following an introductory Pasuk that states “(Moshe and Aharon) placed His Otot amongst them, and His Mofetim in the land of Cham”, and this informs the reader that the division of the Makkot into Otot and Mofetim ended with Choshech. That was when Hashem ceased to harden Paroh’s heart, and there was no further extension of the Ot/Mofet display through which Hashem made His power known. The reversal of Arov and Kinnim is due to the fact that there is no explicit statement in Shemot that the lice ever departed, which the Malbim uses as proof that the lice were still oppressing the Mitzrim at the time of the arrival of the animals, so that the two Makkot functioned as one. The omission of Dever is due to the fact that the Makkah didn’t fully culminate until Makkat Bechorot, as explained earlier with regard to Tehillim 78. It is also because Paroh never sought Moshe’s help in removing the pestilence because he stubbornly attributed it to happenstance. In explaining the omission of Shechin, the Malbim clarifies that the other two Mofetim also ought not to have been mentioned, and were only listed for specific reasons: Choshech is included because it ended the main sequence of Makkot, and Kinnim because it extended into Arov. Unlike those two, there was no particular reason to mention Shechin, so it doesn’t

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appear in this Perek. Thus, the Malbim explains that the Makkot narrative in Tehillim 105 is essentially a poetically and stylistically altered version of the original narrative in Shemot.

All in all, it is readily apparent from the Malbim's analysis that Hashem saw fit to display His might to Mitzrayim through the Makkot. The narrative in Shemot serves to convey the full importance of the sequence and structure of the Makkot. The hardening of Paroh's heart served to extend the ordeal, providing ample room for Hashem to create an intricately structured display that would convey the messages He intended. His goal, so to speak, was for Mitzrayim to recognize Him and to free His people and for the Jewish people to learn the same lessons of faith. Through the alternative framings of the narrative in Tehillim, a greater appreciation of the original framing from Shemot can be attained, and through that appreciation, an understanding of what we can learn from the events that led to the Ge'ulah from Mizrayim.

## Who Took the First Step?

*By Yakov Abrahams ('22)*

In this week's Parashah, Moshe Rabbeinu warns Paroh multiple times that if he does not let the Jewish people go, Hashem will continue to strike Egypt with plagues that will only increase in severity. Before executing Makkat Bechorot, the plague that killed all the firstborns of Egypt, Hashem instructs Bnei Yisrael to take the blood of the Korban Pesach and put it on their doorposts as a sign. The sign differentiates them from the Egyptians, so that when Hashem passes through Mitzrayim to claim the firstborn of every household, Hashem will "know" which houses to pass over.

It is fairly obvious that Hashem, the Omnipresent, does not need a sign to know which houses belong to His nation and which do not. He is all-knowing. Therefore, the question arises: For what purpose did Hashem instruct the Jews to paint the blood of the Korban Pesach on their doorposts? There must be an underlying message.

Steven Garfinkel cites the Chasidic masters' answer: We must take the first step. All we have to do is start the work, and we can leave the rest to Hashem. As TABC Rebbeim love to say, "do your best and Hashem will do the rest". The Midrash says "פתחו לי פתח כחודה של מחט ואני" – "אפתח לכם כפתחו של אולם" – "if you open up an opening the size of a needle, I (Hashem) will open up an opening the size of a ballroom." (שיר השירים פרק ה אות ב)

The Zohar teaches that when Bnei Yisrael were in Mitzrayim, they sank to the 49th level of Tum'ah (Zohar Chadash, Parashat Yitro 31a). The Chasidic masters

explain that Bnei Yisrael were so low that they did not have the wherewithal to fulfill the obligation to take the first step. At first glance, without this key ingredient, one must ask why Hashem took us out of Egypt.

The answer is, even though we did not do our part, this is an exception. Hashem said "even though you don't have the strength to take the first step, I will not only do the rest, I will even do the beginning". So what does "ויפסחו על הפתח" mean? It means that Hashem passed over the beginning, the "opening". Even though Bnei Yisrael did not "begin", Hashem began on our behalf.

In other words, Hashem instructed us to paint our doorpost to give us the opportunity to fulfill His command. By doing so, He made us a vessel worthy of being redeemed. Hashem took the first step to purify us, and then redeemed us from Egypt.

We must be eternally grateful to Hashem for taking the first step for us in redeeming us as His Chosen People. The best way to show that "Hakarat HaTov" is to imitate Him, by taking the first step with regard to each Mitzvah we perform. When we collectively take those first steps towards getting closer to Hashem, we hope to thereby merit to see the Ge'ulah Shleimah BeMheirah BeYameinu Amen.

## The Deaths During Makkat Choshech

*By Ariel Kryzman ('23)*

The Midrash explains that the Makkah of darkness was also used to eliminate the Jews who weren't righteous enough to leave Mitzrayim. The Midrash adds that this was specifically done during the Makkah of darkness so the Egyptians would not see the Jews' downfall and say that the Hashem is punishing Bnei Yisrael alongside the Mitzrim. The Midrash records two opinions regarding how many Jews survived this Makkah: Either one in five survived, or one in fifty survived.

Rav Shimon Schwab raises two questions on this Midrash. Even if only one in five Jews survived, wouldn't the Egyptians still notice that there was a drastic decrease in the Jewish population and say that Hashem is punishing the Jews alongside the Egyptians? Also, the several million Jews who died in the Makkah of darkness must be a greater figure than the Jews who died from the tribulations of the years of Egyptian enslavement. How could it be that one short plague produced more deaths than the many decades of enslavement?

Rav Schwab answers that a much smaller number of Jews died. Only the Jews that were complete Resha'im died; therefore, when the Makkah was over, the Egyptians didn't notice a difference in the Jewish population. Rav Schwab adds that the one in five vs. one in fifty argument

refers to the offspring of the Jews who died. Each Jew that died could have had either five or fifty descendants.

This is not the first time that the Torah emphasizes the importance of one's descendants. After Kayin kills Hevel, Hashem tells Kayin, "*Meh Asita Kol Demei Achicha Tzo'akim Eilai Min Ha'Adamah*," "What have you done? Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground" (BeReishit 4:10). Rashi cites a Gemara (Sanhedrin 37a), which states that the plural use of the word "*Damim*," "blood," teaches that Hashem was also referring to Hevel's potential descendants.

The message from these two sources is clear: we must understand that our actions affect not only the person whom we are interacting with but also his/her descendants. If we have a positive influence on someone, we may not only tremendously benefit his/her life but also the lives of his/her descendants. We must also appreciate the fact that we come from Jews that survived the Shoah, pogroms, expulsions from many countries, and many antisemitic attacks. Maybe Hashem chose to save our ancestors because of the people who would come from them (us). Hashem chose us to be the future leaders of Am Yisrael, so let us try to show Hashem that He made the right choice. We should all be Zocheh to remember that every member of Klal Yisrael matters, even those who are not yet born.

## The Roots of Yetzi'at Mitzrayim

By Zachary Becker ('22)

This week's Parashah, Parashat Bo, talks about the last of the three Makkot, and also speaks about all of Bnei Yisrael being given many Mitzvot, notably, their first as a nation. Parashat Bo this year falls in the week of Beit Shammai's "Tu BeShvat", Rosh Chodesh Shvat. This cannot be a coincidence, there must be some sort of significance behind this common denominator. What is the reason Parashat Bo falls out at this specific time?

In order to figure out the reason, we need to analyze the essence of Tu BeShvat, why it was instituted, and how it connects to Parashat Bo. Tu BeShvat is not just "the tree's birthday", it means something so much more. The Mishnah in Rosh HaShanah is the first source we have of Tu BeShvat. The first Mishnah in Rosh HaShanah (1:1) states "*Be'Echad BeShvat Rosh HaShanah Le'Ilan KeDivrei Beit Shammai, Beit Hillel Omerim BeChamishah Asar Bo*," "The new year for the trees (when you cannot mix Ma'aser from before that date with Ma'aser after that date) is on the first of Shvat according to Beit Shammai, and according to Beit Hillel it is on the fifteenth. We end up holding like Beit Hillel, which is why it is called "Tu BeShvat." Tu BeShvat is the start of a new beginning, it is the start of a new year of Ma'aser. Moreover, Tu BeShvat

shows appreciation for all of the new trees that grow during the new year, the beginning of new life.

From a logical standpoint, one knows that we cannot live without trees. They provide the world with necessary resources needed to sustain life, with fruit and with money (agriculture was the primary source of income in the pre-modern world). Do trees really represent life and sustain life? The answer to that question can be found in the negative commandment of cutting down fruit trees. The Pasuk (Devarim 20:19-20) states that when there is a siege on a city we are permitted only to cut down trees that do not have fruit. Ibn Ezra explains that we cannot destroy a fruit tree because it sustains human life. Rabbeinu Bachya explains that not only should you not destroy these trees, you should preserve them, and even benefit from their fruit. He quotes the Gemara (Ta'anit 7a) that says the words of this Pasuk hint to the Torah of Talmidei Chachamim (because the Torah of Talmidei Chachamim can be compared to fruit). Why does the Gemara make this comparison? The Gemara earlier (4a) says that a Talmid Chacham is like a seed; once a seed sprouts, it keeps on growing. I think the Gemara makes this comparison because a plant starts from a little seed, is nourished by water, grows roots in the ground, and propels itself towards the surface. After this, the plant sprouts and grows more and more gradually, ultimately, resulting in something beautiful: fruit. Similarly, a Talmid Chacham does not become a Talmid Chacham naturally, it requires hard work, growth, and nourishment. The fruit of his labor is the brilliant Torah that he will end up teaching. One can see from here that trees are a symbol for Torah.

How, though, does this connect to Parashat Bo? The connection between Tu BeShvat and Parashat Bo is evident as Parashat Bo is the start of Bnei Yisrael's new life, and the beginning of their gradual growth towards becoming a nation. Bo is the start of our new life as we are taken out of the hands of the Egyptians and brought towards Har Sinai and Eretz Yisrael. In addition, it is also a path to Torah, the path to Bnei Yisrael receiving the Torah at Har Sinai.

When we are taken out of Mitzrayim we are essentially a new nation, starting from a new beginning, with a new purpose. We are a seed beginning to grow roots. This is the reason that the first Mitzvah we were given as a nation was Kiddush HaChodesh. Kiddush HaChodesh is mainly for the purpose of celebrating holidays at the proper times. However, it can also be about praising Hashem for renewing the moon. The moon begins a new cycle each month that helps us determine the beginnings of each month. This may correspond to the renewal of Bnei Yisrael as a nation after leaving Mitzrayim. That is why in the Bracha we say

when doing Kiddush Levanah we say “to the moon Hashem said that it should renew itself as a crown of splendor for Bnei Yisrael, those who are destined to renew themselves like it.” We say this to connect Bnei Yisrael being renewed as a nation when taken out of Egypt to the moon renewing itself each month, and also to us being renewed in the future when Mashiach comes. This represents the beginning of our long journey of growth.

After this Mitzvah we are given Korban Pesach, and many smaller Mitzvot pertaining to Korban Pesach. Also, we are given the negative commandment of not eating Chametz on Pesach, and the different smaller commandments with regard to Chametz. What is the basis of these commandments? According to the Sefer HaChinuch the root of these Mitzvot is to remember the miracles Hashem did for us leading up to and during Yetzi'at Mitzrayim. In other words, we need to focus on our roots, they are essential to our growth. Without them, we would not be who we are today.

Finally, we begin to grow steadily and arrive closer to the final product of our growth: the fruit, the Torah. As a nation we begin venturing through the desert to Har Sinai in order to receive the Torah. We started small as a nation, like a seed. Hashem began watering us with Mitzvot, creating new roots, and adding on to the foundation of our nation, the final product, the Torah. Once Hashem causes us to grow a little more, we are finally prepared to receive what we have grown so much for, the Torah.

That is how Tu BeShvat is connected to Parashat Bo, they are both about renewal. Tu BeShvat is about the renewal of fruits and trees, while Bo is about the renewal of Klal Yisrael as a nation. Fruit trees start off as a seed, grow roots, sprout, grow into trees, and produce fruit. Bnei Yisrael started off as a new nation, got commandments, which are their roots, then got the final product and foundation of their religion, the Torah. Just as trees are nurtured by getting watered, we were nurtured by being given Mitzvot. That is why the Pasuk in Mishlei (3:18) says “*Eitz Chayim Hi LaMachazikim Bah*,” “Torah is a tree of life for those who grasp it”. Torah can be a tree of life for people because if you work hard on it and grow, it can really cause you to change.

As the *real* Tu BeShvat approaches, perhaps we can take advantage of this time to work on our own self growth in order to renew ourselves. Good Shabbos.

## Why Hashem Does Not Make Miracles in Every Generation

*By Rabbi Chaim Jachter*

### **A Compelling Question: Why Does Hashem Not Perform Open Miracles Today?**

TABC Talmid David Rabbani poses a most compelling question. Hashem, as recorded in Melachim I Perek 13 (not to mention Sefer Shemot) makes a flurry of Nissim Geluyim/miracles involving violations of the laws of physics, in an apparent attempt to redirect Yeravam ben Nevat at a pivotal juncture in our history. Our generation seems to be in sore need of an open revelation from Hashem – so why does Hashem not do this?

#### **Hashem Prefers Maintaining the Natural Order**

Let us try to answer based on a number of foundational Mekorot. The following episode recorded by the Gemara (Shabbat 53b) illustrates that Hashem wants the world to function in a natural manner.

There was a very poor man whose wife had died after having given birth to a child. The widower became frantic, as he had no financial resources to hire a wet-nurse to feed the baby. Hashem made a miracle, and the husband grew breasts from which he nursed the baby. Rav exclaimed, “What a great man this must be that he merited such a great miracle!” Abaye, however, declared that just the opposite is true – if Hashem disrupted the natural order instead of providing him with resources in a natural manner, the man must be on a low spiritual level. Based on Abaye, our challenge in life is to discover Hashem hiding behind the natural processes of life. A miracle performed within the fabric of our daily lives is deeper and more significant than a miracle that disrupts the delicate balance of the world’s natural order.

#### **Hashem Prefers NOT to Have an Ironclad Argument**

In one of the most striking passages in the entire Talmud, the Gemara (Shabbat 88a) states (translation from the William Davidson Talmud):

The Torah says, “And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God; and they stood at the lowermost part of the mount” (Exodus 19:17). Rabbi Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said: the Jewish people actually stood beneath the mountain, and the verse teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain above the Jews like a tub, and said to them: if you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial. Rav Aha bar Ya’akov said: From here there is a substantial caveat to the obligation to fulfill the Torah. The Jewish people can claim that they were coerced into accepting the Torah, and it is therefore not binding. Rava said: Even so, they again accepted it willingly in the time of Ahasuerus, as it is written: “The Jews ordained, and

took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them” (Esther 9:27), and he taught: The Jews ordained what they had already taken upon themselves through coercion at Sinai.

Strikingly, the Gemara expresses strong objection to presenting an ironclad argument on behalf of Hashem and Torah (this is how the Meshech Chochmah to Shemot 19:17 understands this Gemara – he views the image of Hashem holding a mountain over our heads as metaphorical). Rather, finding one’s way to Hashem and Torah through natural means is strongly preferred. Discovering Hashem through events like that recounted in Megillat Esther, where Hashem subtly tilts events in our favor instead of overtly interfering in the natural process, is a far more authentic path to the divine.

Hashem seeks a relationship with us and not mere compliance. A connection flourishes only when both sides make a choice to enter the relationship. Coercion is antithetical to a healthy and proper relationship.

### **Ramban – The Sacred Obligation of the Jewish People to Publicize Hashem’s Presence**

The Ramban (Shemot 13:16) directly addresses our question and offers an eye-opening answer. Ramban answers that Hashem has delegated to us the job of publicizing His existence and involvement in the world. Since Hashem will not split the Red Sea or perform the ten plagues in every generation, it is our job to gather and retell these great stories. Ramban explains that this is the reason for stressing the exodus from Egypt not only at Passover but every day of the year. The commandments commemorating the exodus from Egypt and all the divine spectacles that accompanied it are meant to refute the claim that Hashem is powerless. He has entrusted the Jewish people of each generation, His “witnesses”, (Yeshayahu 43:10) with the sacred task of continuing to publicize and preserve these divine wonders. Indeed, when we recount the details of the exodus from Egypt each year on the Seder night, it is as if we are experiencing the miracles ourselves.

We believe that this huge statement made by Ramban expresses three central ideas: Our partnership with Hashem, our role as the Torah’s “companion volume”, and the incomparable miracle of Jewish survival, all based on the following foundational Mekorot:

#### **Partnership with Hashem**

Midrash Tanchuma, Parashat Tazri’a:

"Once the evil [Roman governor] Turnus Rufus asked Rabbi Akiva, 'Whose deeds are greater - God's or man's?' He replied, 'Man's deeds are greater.' Turnus Rufus asked him, 'Is man then capable of creating heaven and earth, or anything like them?' Rabbi Akiva replied, 'I was not referring to the sphere beyond man's ability, over which

he has no control. I refer to those creations of which man is capable.' He then asked, 'Why do you circumcise yourselves?' Rabbi Akiva replied, 'I knew that that was the point of your question, and therefore I answered in the first place that man's deeds are greater than God's.' Rabbi Akiva brought him grains of wheat and some bread, and said: 'These grains of wheat are God's handiwork, and the bread is the handiwork of man. Is the latter not greater than the former?' Turnus Rufus answered him, 'If God wanted you to perform circumcision, why did He not create the child already circumcised while still in the womb?' Rabbi Akiva answered, 'Why do you not ask the same question concerning the umbilical cord, which remains attached to him and which his mother must cut? In response to your question - the reason why he does not emerge already circumcised is because God gave Israel the commandments in order that they would be purified by performing them. Therefore David HaMelech wrote, 'Every word of God is pure (or, purified).'"

The Mitzvah of Brit Milah reflects a core mission of humanity, the completion of creation. Rav Soloveitchik (Halachic Man page 101) explains that Hashem deliberately refrained from completing creation. Hashem charges Adam with the job of “conquering” the world (Ramban to Bereishit 1:28). Our job is to complete Hashem’s world.

In the spiritual as well as the physical realm, Hashem has left the world incomplete. Hashem deliberately obscures Himself. Our job is to complete it by announcing Hashem’s presence to all. Hashem hides behind the proverbial “latticework”, and leaves it to announce “behold here is Beloved standing behind the wall, overseeing from the windows, peering through the latticework (Shir HaShirim 2:9).

#### **The Jewish People as “The Torah’s Companion Volume”**

Yeshayahu HaNavi (43:10) strikingly quotes Hashem proclaiming that we Jews are no less than His witnesses! We Jews are perfectly suited to serve as Hashem’s witnesses, since approximately three million of our ancestors witnessed first-hand the great miracles of the exodus from Egypt and the revelation at Mount Sinai. These three million people included many skeptical individuals who often fought and challenged Moses, except at Sinai when they received the Torah. These millions of Jews related this precious tradition, which has been sacredly protected by every generation, until it has reached our very hands.

#### **The Incomparable Miracle of Jewish Survival**

Rav Yaakov Emden states in the introduction to his commentary to the Siddur - The ongoing miracle of the survival of the Jewish People is a greater miracle than

Keri'at Yam Suf: Our telling the story of the Ten Makkot is in itself a greater testimony to Hashem's ongoing involvement in the world than were the Ten Makkot themselves!

### **The Torah's Predictions Fulfilled**

We can add to our answers by unpacking another poignant statement of the Ramban. Ramban states that Hashem's presence is publicized when the Torah's predictions are fulfilled. This is especially true when they are contradictory!

There are numerous examples of Torah promises that have been fulfilled. The fulfillment of these promises demonstrates that the Torah is the product of a divine author, because these predictions have been realized against all reasonable odds. A human author could never have anticipated that such unlikely situations would materialize thousands of years after they were initially recorded.

We present a full discussion of the Torah's fulfilled prophecies in our work "Reason to Believe: Rational Explanations of Orthodox Jewish Faith". A few examples are the Torah's prediction that the Jewish People will survive forever, there will always be Jews who observe Torah, the Jewish People will be small in number but bring Bracha to the entire world, and that the Jewish People will be exiled but eventually returned to their land.

### **Conclusion**

David Rabbani's question is the catalyst to unlocking some of the most central messages of Torah Hashkafah. We believe that these many answers satisfy those who pose the same question as David.

We consider, on the other hand, why Hashem chose to perform open miracles in Mitzrayim, to Yeravam ben Nevat, and with Eliyahu HaNavi and his Talmid Elisha. We suggest that Hashem regarded these overt miracles to be necessary in the infancy and younger years of our nation to launch our Emunah on a national level.

However, once such miracles were in place, we transitioned and matured, as stated by the Ramban, from recognition of Hashem through overt miracles to connection through subtle divine actions, Nissim Nistarim. Shabbat 88a presents Nissim Nistarim as the far superior means of forging a deep and meaningful connection with our Creator.

**Editors-In-Chief:** Ezra Lebowitz and Aidan Samet  
**Publication Editors:** Chanan Schreiber, Ariel Kryzman, and Azarya Tiger  
**Layout:** Chanan Schreiber  
**Communications:** Bob Quillman  
**Rabbinic Advisor:** Rabbi Chaim Jachter  
Questions, comments? Contact us at:  
Phone: (201) 837-7696  
[webmasters@koltorah.org](mailto:webmasters@koltorah.org)