

God's Staff
By Rav Tamir Granot

Introduction

A full description of the Exodus from Egypt, as reflected in the Torah, requires an extensive review of a very complex array of events and means related to the process - motivating it, acting within it, or resulting from it. Among all of these, a central place must be awarded to Moshe's staff.

On one hand, it seems that if we were to come to know the story of the Exodus without the frequent use of the staff, we would not feel its absence in any way; from this perspective its role appears to be a relatively minor one. However, the literary facts indicate otherwise. The Torah devotes lengthy verses, over and over again, with prominent emphasis, to its descriptions of the role of the staff as part of Moshe's direction of the Exodus, and thereafter in the desert, as well. It is difficult to conjure up, in our traditional imagination, any picture of Moshe acting without his staff. The tension between the hypothetical perspective and the actual situation turns the question of the role of the staff into a most central one in understanding the processes at work in the Exodus, and especially in the direction of those events.

Before embarking on a discussion of the subject, the following are some methodological comments on the manner in which we shall address the question of the staff:

1. The role of the staff must be understood through an examination and comparison of the instances in which Moshe uses it. No less importantly, though, attention must be paid to the instances in which it is absent – especially where we would expect, based on the context, for it to be used.
2. The nuances – sometimes very fine – distinguishing between the different uses of the staff, in the plagues and in other events, is of great importance, to my mind. Attention should be paid to the relationship between the command and its execution, to the use of the staff being mentioned explicitly or only hinted at, to the exact manner in which it is used, etc. We shall therefore address the subject by means of a comparative study, with careful scrutiny of each source. Obviously, not every linguistic variation is of fundamental importance to the subject.
3. Theoretically, it is important that we preface our discussion with an *a priori* distinction between two possible uses of the staff: real vs. symbolic. A real function of the staff means that the action undertaken by it is tangible, and brings about, in some way, a change in reality. Symbolic functioning, on the other hand, means use of the staff as a metaphorical instrument

expressing the ideal that it represents. Here, the actual change in reality is not at all dependent on the staff being used; the connection in such cases generally consists of no more than chronological succession.

For the sake of convenience, let us divide the discussion into four parts, in chronological order. (Further on it will become clear that this division does not coincide with another integral division, which we have yet to discuss.)

- Prior to the plagues
- The plagues
- The Exodus itself
- The episodes of the rock and the water

In the present *shiur* we shall address only the first three sections. The fundamental role of the staff in the stories of the rock will hopefully be tackled on some other occasion.

This *shiur* contains a certain measure of repetition of the story of the plagues and its structure, which we covered in last week's *shiur*. We repeat here only the essential core that is needed for an understanding of the role of the staff in the plagues.

Part 1: Sanctification and Standing Before Pharaoh

The first encounter that we – and Moshe – experience with the staff as an object of more than trivial value takes place at the burning bush. Moshe argues, "They will not believe me and will not listen to me, for they will say: God did not appear to you." God's response begins with a focusing on the staff: "God said to him: What is that in your hand? And he said: A staff."

God's question sounds, as Rashi points out in several places, like a merely rhetorical introduction; a way of starting a conversation. But this is not the case. Moshe, obviously, knows what he holds in his hand, but he is about to discover that every reality is open to manipulation. If God so wills it, no substance is stable and defined. Even the most concrete and certain of objects – the very staff in your hand – can change its form in an instant. Moshe recoils in shock both from the snake and from the sudden change in reality.

But the crux of the lesson is actually to be found in the return to the previous state: "Put forth your hand and take hold of its tail." The staff returning to itself by being grasped proves that this is no mere witchcraft or magical episode, but rather the absolute mastery of nature. Moreover, the sign of the staff is directed principally at Moshe, and – less importantly – also at the nation, which requires proof of the authenticity of his mission. This sign does not stand alone, but rather is joined by the sign of leprosy, and possibly also the sign of blood. It is of great significance that at this stage the staff – even when it comes to its own special sign – is not the means for the performance of the signs, but rather their mere "object." It is acted upon by Moshe, who casts it down and then grasps it. It appears to me that beyond the symbolic significance of the sign of the staff on the communicative level – i.e., towards the nation – it also has importance in molding the role of the staff itself as a tool of leadership for the future. It is only later, in the concluding accord of the revelation at the burning bush, that Moshe is commanded to take up the staff with which the signs are to be performed: "And you shall take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs." The distinction between this command, with its general significance, and the first time the staff is used as a sign, endows the first sign the status of an introduction, a sort of exposition, to the "story of the staff," and defines its status in the context of Moshe's actions. Moshe's hand acts upon, or by means of the staff. The staff is both cast down and grasped – signifying its subordination to Moshe's hand. In other words, **Moshe's staff has no power of its own to act.**

Further on in the story, in the description of Moshe's return to Egypt, the staff is referred to as the "staff of God." In light of what we have said thus far, we may propose two ways of understanding this designation, which represents the full and official title of the staff from this point onwards:

- The staff with which Moshe operates acts in God's Name and as His agent.

or

- It is the staff of leadership, with the word "*elohim*" used in the sense of "leader." As we find in the adjacent verses, "He shall be for you as a mouthpiece, and you shall be his leader (*elohim*)" [1].

In the performance of the signs before the people, there is no mention of the staff – for it has no importance.

The next time we find mention made of a staff being used is in the competition with the magicians, before Pharaoh. Here the staff becomes a reptile and swallows the staffs of the magicians, which have also turned into reptiles. However, surprisingly, Moshe is instructed that Aharon should use his own staff, and not that of Moshe. Since the role of Aharon's staff has not been defined in advance, its role here must be deduced from the context. The context is its use here forth in the first set of plagues, and therefore we shall now address that stage.

Part 2 – The Plagues

In the exegesis surrounding the story of the plagues, the prevailing view has long been that the Torah presents the plagues in three sets of three, with the final plague – the death of the firstborn – not included in this system, since only this final plague is a "punishment" in the precise, biblical sense – measure for measure:

"So says the Lord: Israel is **My firstborn son**. I say to you, Let My son go, that he may serve Me. If you refuse to let him go, behold, I shall kill **your firstborn son**."

Thus – the firstborn son corresponding to the firstborn son.

This division of the plagues is not essential from an historical point of view, as we may easily deduce from the chapters in *Tehillim* that describe the plagues in a different order and with a different division (also totaling a different number). Its significance rests, rather, on the literary and ideal levels. We shall note here only the primary literary reason for the division, and that is that the first plague of each set (the first, the fourth, and the seventh) are preceded by a warning delivered by Moshe to Pharaoh at the river, with a ceremonious declaration of what is about to happen and an ideological speech. The second plague of each set comes with an abbreviated warning, delivered apparently in Pharaoh's palace, but clearly not at the river. The third plague in each set comes without warning. Since, according to their primary objective, the plagues are not meant to punish Egypt, as mentioned above, but rather – as Chapter 7 teaches us – to bring the Egyptians to an awareness and awe of God, and ultimately also to serve as a primary, formative story in the Israelite memory (see the introduction to the plague of locusts), the warning is no less important than the plague itself. In fact, the warning should not be separated from the plague, for the natural disaster carries with it a message only because it is known in advance, such that its Source is completely clear, and likewise its purpose.

Hence, we must regard the third plague of each set – arriving, as we have noted, with no warning – as a mere complement to the two previous ones; a sort of "final blow" following what has already taken place. They may even be the product of natural causality, arising from the second plague. In any event, the ignorance of Pharaoh and the Egyptians as to the author of this message annuls its communicative nature.

The second parameter for the distinction between the sets of plagues is the question of who actually brings them about. The first plagues are effected by Aharon, the second set directly by God, and the third set by Moshe. The purpose as defined in the introductory speech is likewise different for each set. All of this leads us to conclude that the literary division apparently has religious and pedagogic significance. The

Egyptians, who learn to recognize God's hand acting in reality, arrive at this understanding gradually, in accordance with their ability to accept it; we learn along with them.

This description of the structure of the plagues brings me to my principal point. Careful examination reveals that the distinction between the sets of plagues is also connected to the technique of their execution, and I refer here principally to the manner in which the staff is used. The following is a description of the execution of the plagues belonging to the first set:

Blood - (7:19) "God said to Moshe: Say to Aharon, TAKE UP YOUR STAFF and stretch out your hand over the water of Egypt, upon their streams, upon their rivers and upon their ponds, and upon every pool of their water, and they shall be blood, and there shall be blood throughout the land of Egypt, as well as in the vessels of wood and in the vessels of stone.

(20) So Moshe and Aharon did so, as God had commanded; HE LIFTED THE STAFF AND STRUCK THE WATER that was in the river before the eyes of Pharaoh and before the eyes of his servants, and all the water that was in the river turned to blood."

Frogs – (8:1) "God said to Moshe: Say to Aharon, STRETCH OUT YOUR HAND WITH YOUR STAFF OVER THE STREAMS, over the rivers and over the ponds, and bring up frogs over the land of Egypt.

(2) SO AHARON STRETCHED HIS HAND OVER THE WATER OF EGYPT, AND the frogs CAME UP."

Lice – (12) "God said to Moshe: Say to AHARON: STRETCH OUT YOUR STAFF AND STRIKE THE DUST OF THE LAND, and it shall turn into lice throughout the land of Egypt.

(13) And they did so; AHARON STRETCHED OUT HIS HAND WITH HIS STAFF AND STRUCK THE DUST OF THE LAND AND IT BECAME LICE upon man and beast; all the dust of the land became lice throughout the land of Egypt."

These descriptions must be compared with the manner in which the plagues of the third set are brought about:

Hail - (22) "God said to Moshe: STRETCH OUT YOUR HAND HEAVENWARD and there shall be hail throughout the land of Egypt, upon man and beast and upon all the vegetation of the field in the land of Egypt.

(23) SO MOSHE STRETCHED OUT HIS STAFF HEAVENWARD, AND GOD PRODUCED THUNDER AND HAIL, and fire proceeded to the ground, and God rained down hail upon the land of Egypt."

Locusts - (12) "God said to Moshe: STRETCH OUT YOUR HAND OVER THE LAND OF EGYPT with locusts, that they may ascent over the land of Egypt and consume all the vegetation of the land, all that was left by the hail.

(13) SO MOSHE STRETCHED OUT HIS STAFF OVER THE LAND OF EGYPT, AND GOD DROVE AN EAST WIND over the land."

Darkness - (21) "GOD SAID TO MOSHE: STRETCH OUT YOUR HAND HEAVENWARD and there shall be darkness over the land of Egypt, and the darkness will be felt.

(22) SO MOSHE STRETCHED OUT HIS HAND HEAVENWARD, AND THERE WAS THICK DARKNESS throughout the land of Egypt for three days."

The second set of plagues is brought by God Himself, and therefore there is no room for discussion as to the role of the staff, which has no mention there.

Let us now point out the differences and analyze them:

· Type of staff: Obviously, in the first set of plagues it is Aharon's staff that is active, while the third set features Moshe's staff – in accordance with the actors themselves, Aharon and Moshe.

· The command: In the first set, God's command specifies explicitly that the staff be used, in all the plagues, while in the third set Moshe is instructed to use his hand, with no mention of the staff – here again, in all the plagues of this set.

· Manner of execution: In the first set of plagues, the staff is always held downwards, and in two of the plagues (blood and lice) it actually strikes. In the third series the hand, or the hand holding the staff (in the plagues of darkness it is not mentioned at all), is directed either towards the heavens or towards the land of Egypt generally, rather than pointing towards any concrete object (we recall that the first plagues are effected upon the water or the dust – lice).

· The connection between the action of the staff and the plague: In the first series of plagues, the plague arises directly from the action of the staff. For example, "He stretched out... his staff and struck the dust of the earth and [immediately] it turned to lice...." In the second set there is a noticeable break between the action of the staff and the occurrence of the plague. The plague is an act of God, not of the staff (especially in the plagues of hail and locusts; darkness, as the third plague in this series, has a shortened description and it should be regarded, as we have said, as a "final blow"). It is described thus: "Moshe stretched out his staff over the land of Egypt and GOD DROVE an east wind..."; or, in the plague of hail: "Moshe stretched out his staff heavenward AND GOD PROVIDED thunder and hail...." It is God Who brings the plague; not the staff.

In truth, this parallel raises a question as to Moshe's functioning in the third set of plagues. Why does he use the staff even though he is not commanded to do so? It would seem that the answer to this question lies in an understanding of the other striking differences between the roles of the staff in the first and third sets of plagues.

Clearly, the staff in the hand of Aharon during the plagues of blood, frogs and lice plays a dominant role. Aharon is commanded to use it, the use is of a precise and concrete nature, and the plague arises from the action of the staff. The role of the staff in the third series is secondary; it appears almost redundant. This being the case, why, in fact, does Moshe use it?

The explanation for all of this requires an understanding of the reason for the transfer of the first three plagues to Aharon, while the others are carried out by Moshe, and also – ultimately – the message that each set of plagues is meant to convey. The motto of each set of plagues is formulated in its introductory speech which Moshe is commanded to deliver to Pharaoh in advance of each triad. It is formulated in brief, and is repeated as a motif in the descriptions of the plagues;

- series A: "By this you shall know that I am God"
- series B: "In order that you may know that I am God in the midst of the land"
- series C: "In order that you may know that there is none like Me in all the land" – or, as we shall explain further on – in order that you may be shown My strength, and in order that you will tell of My Name throughout the land.

Let us attempt to explain the principle that is concentrated in this brief formulation of objectives:

The first series of plagues aims at showing the Egyptians the very existence of God and His supernatural abilities and powers. There is a God amongst Israel. To a great extent this is a response to Pharaoh's arrogant statement, quite unusual in the context of a pagan society: "I do not recognize God, nor will I let Israel go." The power of the God of Israel is to be revealed in the manifestations that are familiar to the Egyptians. Therefore the first plagues are those that may qualitatively be imitated by the magicians – and it is specifically this fact that causes them to begin to appreciate their supernatural character. Therefore the first series of plagues looks like a sort of magicians' contest, with Aharon and the Egyptian magicians as the contestants. This is substantively the direct continuation of the competition of the reptiles, which preceded and introduced them. Therefore, as in the first competition, it is Aharon who is active – for, as a first stage in the learning process, the priests must be confronted with the person who is destined to be a priest in the Israelite religion, and showing that his magical power is greater than theirs. The success of the plagues means nothing more than winning the contest. The final victory is expressed in the

declaration of submission by the magicians, after their failure in their attempt to repeat the lice, "They were not able," and they admit, "It is the finger of God." The motif that connects the first three plagues – and only these – is the consistent attention towards the reaction of the magicians; this indicates the purpose of these plagues, as we have explained.

Hence we can also explain the use of Aharon's staff. This staff is an instrument for action that parallels the staffs of the magicians. In other words, it is a magical instrument. As such, its power to act does indeed lie within itself. Of the first set of plagues we may say that they are indeed brought about by the staff, whose power we – the readers - know is not inherent to it, but rather the result of God's blessing upon it, contained in the command to make use of it. Therefore the staff is activated by hitting within or by holding it over a tangible place, and this tangible contact is what creates the occurrence. The transfer of execution to Aharon and his staff has one single purpose, according to what we have said above (without connection to the important educational message of gratitude which Rashi notes here): Aharon, the priest of the Israelite religion, rather than Moshe, the prophet and God's emissary, is the active party here, using an instrument that – to the eyes of its beholders – seems to have a sort of magical power.

The second set of plagues teaches that the Israelite Divinity has no need for magic in order to operate; rather, it acts in the world independently and with no mediation. Since there is no natural mediator, Divine justice is revealed in its perfection when nature changes in accordance with God's will. In other words, the plague affects only those who deserve it (the principle of Divine Providence). Magic makes no distinction between the righteous and the wicked. Even if some supernatural power is effected, the nature of the action is mechanical rather than intentional. Therefore the Torah does not tell us that *Bnei Yisrael* were saved from the suffering of the first plagues, since blind magic strikes with no distinction. The beginnings of discrimination appear only from the fourth plague onwards, where God acts directly. (As we have seen, in the third series, too, it is God Who actually carries out the plagues.) I certainly accept the teaching of *Chazal* in the Midrash, that *Bnei Yisrael* were able to drink water, or that the frogs did not affect them, but this is an historical fact that the text actually takes pains to hide – specifically in order to highlight the innovation represented by direct Divine action in the second set of plagues, directed by and acting with justice as against the magic of the first set. Therefore "God distinguished between the cattle of Israel and that of Egypt," and "only in the land of Goshen, where *Bnei Yisrael* were, there were no wild swarms," etc.

The third series adds the principle of absolute Divine rule over nature, and the universal nature of Israelite Divinity: "There is none like Me in all the land." Or – as Yitro put it, later on: "Now I know that God is greater than all the gods, because in the matter in which they were proud, He was greater than they." But in this series the Egyptians – and, more importantly, *Bnei Yisrael* – also discover another principle: that Divine leadership is given over to God's emissaries, His prophets – with Moshe at their head.

In these plagues, Moshe announces the appearance of the Divine action and also points to it, but he does not act in its stead. Let us explain. It is Moshe who is active in the third set of plagues, and his actions here would, superficially, appear comparable to those of Aharon in the first set. Yet, we would be mistaken to assume this. Aharon acts on his own strength, using supernatural powers which, as far as we know, were granted to him by God. Moshe is a prophet who merits Divine revelation, and therefore he is able to predict an imminent Divine action. His role is to explain its purpose, but it is not he who causes it. Hence the differences in the action of the staff between the first and third sets of plagues. God does not command Moshe to take up the staff because there is no need for it. The command to stretch out his hand is an instruction to indicate the onset of an event – just as the wave of a flag may signify the beginning of a race, but is not what causes it. Moshe indicates only the direction from which the plague will emanate, but it is God Who brings the plague, as we have noted in the precise wording of the verses. Moshe uses the staff in his hand in the first two plagues of the third set like a teacher pointing with his stick in a certain direction; there is no more to it than that. Therefore, there is no contradiction between the command and the action, for the staff here is simply an extension of his hand, as it were. In the terms that we used at the beginning of this analysis, we may assert that the action of Aharon's staff is a real, tangible one – even though it is a supernatural reality. Moshe's action, on the other hand, is technical and symbolical; it is meant only to indicate the Divine nature of the event. In the process, Moshe acquires the role of one who directs reality in God's Name and by His power, and thus we return to our definition from the first part. Moshe's staff has no independent power; it is merely the symbol of his leadership. The use of the staff is a symbolical expression (theoretically he could have used his hand) of the fact that the management of reality is given over to the emissaries of the Holy One – His prophets.

It would seem that the complete abandonment of the staff in the plague of darkness arises from the fact that it is not performed in public, and therefore the staff – which is the symbolic expression of prophetic leadership – is redundant.

Thus far we have examined the role of the staff in God's revelation to Moshe, and thereafter, before all the Egyptians and in the plagues. We are already able to note a duality in our view of the staff. We shall now proceed to encounter it in its different manifestations in the story of the Exodus and in the desert.

Part 3 - The Exodus

Let us examine the verses in which the staff, or the hand, plays a role:

"As for you – lift up your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea, and split it, and *Bnei Yisrael* shall go through in the midst of the sea on dry land" (14:16).

The command includes an instruction that the staff be raised and then to stretch out the hand, meaning – apparently – to point in the direction of the sea. We may explain that the staff must be raised, with the other hand stretched out. But it seems more likely that the command refers to the same hand that lifted the staff. Once again the question arises: why does the verse not continue to speak of stretching out the staff, but rather switches to the hand?

In the description of the execution, the staff is altogether removed:

"Moshe stretched out his hand over the sea, and God drove the sea with a strong eastern wind all night long, and He made the sea dry land, and the water was divided" (14:21).

Clearly, as in the last set of plagues, Moshe does lift or stretch out his hand, but the appearance of dry land is not a direct result of his action. It is preceded by a description of Divine intervention: "Moshe stretched... God drove..." and then "the water was divided!"

There is admittedly no contradiction of the command here, for the text describes a stretching out of the hand corresponding to the command to stretch out a hand. Still, we must ask: why is there no mention, in the execution, of the lifting of the staff?

It seems that all that we have said here is a continuation of the joint leadership of God and Moshe that we encountered in the plagues of hail and locusts. As mentioned above, the literary expression of this leadership is a deliberate blurring of the definition of execution – whether it is performed through the staff or by Moshe's hand. The command mentions the staff, in the sense of an extension of Moshe's hand, as an instrument to point with, indicating Moshe's leadership in accordance with God's instructions and with His help. Therefore, the uplifted staff and the hand that is stretched out are in fact the same thing.

As we continue reading about the command for the water to return to its place, and its execution, the staff is entirely absent:

"God said to Moshe: Stretch out your hand over the water, that the water may come back over the Egyptians, over their chariots and their riders.

And Moshe stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its strength towards morning, and the Egyptians fled towards it, and God overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea" (14:26-27) [2].

Clearly, action that is performed by means of the hand emphasizes the miraculous and Divine nature of the act, and it is indeed fitting that as the miracles of Egypt come to their end and the final destruction of the Egyptians is over, the staff disappears altogether. This expresses the recognition that Moshe's leadership and his actions are all driven by God, and there is no semi-magic or witchcraft that is taking place by means of any object.

Moshe's hand becomes, in the next verses, the hand of God: "And on that day God saved... and Israel saw the great hand with which God had acted in Egypt." The "great hand" is both an image in its own right and the hand of Moshe, which appeared to Israel as God's hand acting within reality. The essence of this process is therefore summed up with the words, "They believed in God and in Moshe, His servant." They have faith in both the Sender and His emissary, as has become clear to them during the course of the final plagues and in the crossing of the sea, when they saw Moshe conducting the Divine miracle by means of his hand/staff.

Notes:

[1] My thanks to Miriam Ben-David for proposing this beautiful interpretation in class.

[2] Here the description of the execution contains no detailing of God's action; rather, we are told only that "the sea returned" – in the wake of Moshe's action. The reason for this is simple. While the splitting of the sea required an extraordinary ecological phenomenon – a strong eastern wind to create a dry path within the water, the return to its normal state requires nothing special at all. The wind ceased, and the sea returned, on its own, to its strength. The raising of Moshe's hand is the conducting of the natural event which Moshe knows about from God, but in fact no miracle occurs here.

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