

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XIV: Va'era (Ex. 6:2–9:35)

Essay 8. The death of the fish during the plague of blood

מדרש רבה "והדגה אשר-ביאר מתה". אָמַר ר' חַנִּינָא, מִמַּכַּת דָּם הֶעֱשִׂירוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל, שֶׁהָיוּ מוֹכְרִים מַיִם לַמִּצְרִיִּים וְכוּ'. מִקְשִׁים הָעוֹלָם מָה עֲנִן דְּרִשָּׁה זֶה עַל פְּסוּק זֶה דְּנִקָּא וְהִיכִי רְמִיזָא.

Midrash Ex. Rabbah 9:10: “‘The fish that were in the river died’ (Ex. 7:21). [In explanation,] Rabbi Chanina¹ said, ‘Israel became enriched from the plague of turning water to blood, for they sold water to Egypt.’ ” Everyone asks how this explanation is particularly relevant to this verse, and how this is hinted by the verse.

וְנִשְׁ לֹאמַר שֶׁהַדָּבָר יְדוּעַ שֶׁבַמִּדָּה שֶׁאָדָם מוֹדֵד בָּהּ מוֹדְדִים לוֹ. וְהִנֵּה הַמִּצְרַיִים הָיוּ מִנִּיחִים אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל לְצוּד דְּגָיִם וְהָיוּ אוֹכְלִים אוֹתָם בְּלֵי פֶסֶף וּבְלֵי מַחִיר. לְכֵן אָמַר הַכָּתוּב "וְכִרְנוּ אֶת-הַדָּגָה אֲשֶׁר-נֹאכַל בְּמִצְרַיִם חֲנָם", וְלִכֵּן מִטַּעַם זֶה לֹא הָיָה לָהֶם לְדָגִים לְמוֹת. וְעוֹד שֶׁזָּהוּ נִזְק גְּדוֹל לְיִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁלֹּא יִמָּצְאוּ עוֹד דְּגָיִם לְאָכּוֹל חֲנָם, וְאִם יִרְצוּ מְזוֹנוֹת אֲחֵרִים צְרִיכִים לְפָרוֹעַ מִכִּיסָם. וְקִשָּׁה עַל הַכָּתוּב שֶׁאֹמַר "וְהַדָּגָה אֲשֶׁר-בִּיְאֹר מֵתָה" שֶׁלֹּא הָיָה לָהּ לְמוֹת. לְכֵן בָּא ר' חַנִּינָא וְדָרַשׁ עַל פְּסוּק זֶה דְּנִקָּא שֶׁמִּמַּכַּת דָּם הֶעֱשִׂירוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאִם כֵּן לֹא הָיוּ צְרִיכִים עוֹד לְאָכּוֹל הַדְּגָיִם בְּחֲנָם, שֶׁהָיָה יֵשׁ לָהֶם מְעוֹת הַרְבֵּה לְקִנּוֹת מֵהַ שִׁצְרִיכִים.

It can be said that the matter is known that, “With the measure by which a person measures, he is measured with it,” i.e., “the punishment fits the crime,” or “the reward fits the positive action.”² Surely, the Egyptians would allow Israel to fish and to eat the fish without paying money and without wages. Thus, Scripture said, “We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt” (Num. 11:5), and therefore for this reason, as the fish were beneficial to Israel, the fish should not have died when the water turned to blood. Moreover, this death of the fish caused great harm to Israel, for they did not find any more fish to eat for free, and if they wanted other foods they would have had to pay from their pockets. It is difficult that Scripture says, “The fish that were in the river died,” for they should not have died. That is why Rabbi Chanina came and expounded precisely on this verse, that Israel became enriched

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¹ Our edition of Midrash Rabbah reads “Rabbi Avin haLevi in the name of Rabbi.”

² Mishnah Sota 1:7; Sota 8b; Megillah 12b; Sanhedrin 100a. The Talmud’s wording, לוֹ מוֹדְדִים לוֹ, בַּמִּדָּה שֶׁאָדָם מוֹדֵד בָּהּ מוֹדְדִים לוֹ, is equivalent to the well-known saying of מִדָּה כְּנֶגֶד מִדָּה (*middah k'neged middah*) (*measure against measure*),” that G-d punishes a person measure-for-measure.

from the plague of blood, and if so, they no longer had to eat the fish for free, since they then had a lot of funds to buy what they needed.

ועוד יש לפרש שמה שאמר הכתוב "את־הדגה אשר־נאכל במצרים חנם", אינו רצוה לומר חנם ממש כדאמרינן בפרק ח' דיומא, אלא חנם בלא מצוות. ומשום הכי מתו הדגים, שהמצרעיים לא היה להם בזה שום זכות שלא נותנים אותם לישראל בחנם.

It also can be interpreted that what the Scripture says, “the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt,” doesn’t mean to say literally free, as it is said in the eighth chapter of tractate Yoma (75a),³ but “free” meaning without observing the commandments.⁴ That is, G-d was willing to support Israel if they obeyed the commandments they’d been given, such as the covenant of circumcision. But when they violated those commandments, He became angry. Because of this sinful behavior on the part of Israel, the fish died, for G-d no longer wanted the Jews to have the fish for free, and the Egyptians certainly did not have any right to [the fish], as they did not give them to Israel for free.

ואין להקשות על פשט הכתוב מה צריך להשמיענו שמתו הדגים. והלא מילתא דפשיטא היא, שהרי הדגים כל מחיתם אינה אלא במים ועכשיו שנהפכו המים לדם בנדאי שישי להם למוות? שאפשר לומר שאף שנהפכו המים לדם לא היה דם ממש, אלא שמה שהיו שואבים המצרעיים בלבד היה נראה להם דם, אבל מה שהיו שואבים ישראל היה מים ממש. ואם כן אף הדגים היו יכולים לחיות הואיל שהיו מזונם של ישראל, והמים לגבי הדגים לא היה להם להיות דם. אלא שממפת דם העשירו ישראל וכו'.

There is no need to question the plain meaning of the Scripture as to what reason there was to inform us that the fish died. For isn’t that obvious, as all of the fish’s lives are in water, and now that the water has turned to blood, isn’t it certain that they have to die? No; it would be possible to say that even though the water became blood, it was not real blood, but that what the Egyptians drew only seemed to them to be blood, but what Israel drew was real water. If so, even the fish would be able to live, because they were the food for Israel, and the water as far as the fish were concerned would not have been blood to them. Rather than allow us to think that, Scripture informs us that the fish died, and the Midrash tells us that the plague of blood enriched Israel, etc., so that we would understand why the fish died, even though their existence had been helpful to Israel.

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³ Yoma 75a says that the Jews certainly did not receive fish for free, and that Scripture may be referring euphemistically to illicit sexual relations.

⁴ Sifrei Bamidbar 87:1, “Is it possible that the Egyptians gave them fish free? Is it not written, ‘And now, go and work, and straw will not be given you’ (Ex. 5:18)? If they did not give them free straw, would they give them free fish? How, then, are we to understand ‘free’? ‘Free’ of mitzvot.”