

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XV: Bo (Ex. 10:1–13:16)

Essay 12. The scope of the tenth plague

פסוק "ועברתי בארץ מצרים בלילה הנה והפיתי כל-בכור" וכו'. פרש רש"י אף בכורות אחרים והם במצרים. ומנין אף בכורי מצרים במקומות אחרים? תלמוד לומר "למכה מצרים בבכוריהם" עכ"ל. צריך עיון למה הוצרך רש"י להביא בכאן מה שאנו לומדים מפסוק "למכה מצרים", הלא אין דרכו אלא לפרש פשט הפסוק המדבר עליו ולא לפרש פסוקים אחרים מן החוץ. ולא היה לו לומר ומנין אף בכורי מצרים וכו', רק אף בכורות אחרים והם במצרים ותו לא.

There is a verse: **“I will go through the land of Egypt that night and strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human and beast”** (Ex. 12:12). **Rashi explained: “Also other nations’ firstborn who were in Egypt. And whence may we deduce that even the firstborn of the Egyptians who were in other places [would be struck down]? Scripture in Psalms states: ‘Who struck Egypt through their firstborn’** (Ps. 136:10) [which implies even those who were not in Egypt].”¹

We need to study why it was necessary for Rashi to bring here what we learn from the verse in Psalms, **“Who struck Egypt”**? Wasn’t there any other way but to simply interpret the verse that speaks of it, i.e., Ex. 12:12, and not to interpret other verses such as Ps. 136:10 from outside? Also, he did not have to say, **“And whence may we deduce that even the firstborn of the Egyptians who were in other places [would be struck down].”** He had to say only, **“Also other nations’ firstborn who were in Egypt,”** and nothing else. I.e., Rashi’s usual approach is to comment on only one verse at a time. Thus, we would have expected him to have explained that the firstborn of other nations would also be afflicted in Egypt. Why did he also state his teaching regarding Egyptians abroad, instead of saving it for his commentary on Ps. 136:10?

ואם פנונתו היתה למרץ הפסוקים, שמ"והפיתי כל-בכור בארץ מצרים" משמע דנקה בארץ מצרים היתה המכה ולא חוצה לה, ומפסוק "למכה מצרים" משמע שלא מתו אלא בכורי מצרים בכל מקום שהיו, הלא עדיין הקושיא במקומה עומדת על הפסוקים, שאם האמת הוא שמתו אף בכורי מצרים שהיו במקומות אחרים למה אמר הכתוב "והפיתי כל-בכור בארץ מצרים" דמשמע איפכא.

Perhaps his intention was to explain the verses, for otherwise there may appear to be a contradiction. We might think that, **“I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt,”**

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¹ Rashi on Ex. 12:12, based on Mechilta d’Rabbi Yishmael 12:12

has the specific meaning that the plague was only within the land of Egypt and not outside of it. And perhaps the verse, “Who struck Egypt through their firstborn,” has the meaning that only the firstborn of Egypt died, in every place they were.

If so, doesn't the question on the verses still stand even after his analysis? If the truth is that even the firstborn Egyptians who were in different places died, based on Ps. 136:10, why does Scripture say in Ex. 12:12, “I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt,” which has the opposite meaning?

ונראה לומר שפוננת רש"י היתה לתרץ סתירת פשט הכתובים הנ"ל, לפי שבמירוץ אלו הכתובים תורץ קושא אחרת על פסוק זה "והפיתי כל בכור" וכו', והיגו שמפשט הפסוק "למכה מצרים בכוריהם" נראה שיש הוכחה שהקב"ה הנה המכה במצרים, לפי שהמכה היתה בכוריהם בכל מקום שהם.

It seems that Rashi's intention was to explain the contradiction of the simple explanation of the above verses, but not the contradiction raised above. Instead, according to the explanation of these verses, we will solve a different difficulty about this verse, “I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt.”

That is, from the plain meaning of the verse, “Who struck Egypt through their firstborn,” it appears that there is a proof that the Holy One, Blessed be He, was the source of that plague in Egypt, as the plague affected their firstborn in every place where they were. I.e., if firstborn Egyptians were dying at the same time in Egypt, in Africa, in India, etc., and others weren't affected in Africa, India, etc., everyone would understand it to be miraculous.

והכי דייק הב"ת של בכוריהם, דאי לאו הכי שיהיו בכורי מצרים שבמקומות אחרים ניצולים אז לא היו אומרים שהקב"ה הנה המכה במצרים, רק שטבע האויר או הזמן הוליד חולי זה במצרים, ומפל שכן שמתו גם בכורות אחרים שהיו במצרים. אלא ודאי צריך לומר שכל בכורי מצרים שהיו במקומות אחרים מתו אף הם, ואינם יכולים לתלות עוד בטבע האויר של מצרים.

Thus, the initial letter *beit* [ב] [“in”] in the word *bivchoreihem* [“in their firstborn”] [בכוריהם] is precise, for if it were not present, it would have been that the firstborn of Egypt in other places would have been saved. Then they would not have said that the Holy One, Blessed be He, was the source of that plague in Egypt, only that the nature of the air or the time led to this sickness in Egypt, especially as other nations' firstborn died in Egypt. Rather, it's certainly necessary to say that all of the firstborn of Egypt who were in other places also died, and [the Egyptians] cannot depend upon the nature of the air of Egypt as being the cause. Rashi wanted to bring Ps. 136:10 here to emphasize that the death of firstborn Egyptians around the world proved that it was by the Hand of G-d.

ומפֿשֿט הכֿתוב שֿל "וְהַפִּיתִי כָל־בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם" מִשְׁמַע כְּמוֹ שִׁפִּירֵשׁ רִשׁ"י וְאִם בְּכוֹרוֹת אֲחֵרִים שֶׁהָיוּ בְּמִצְרַיִם. וְעַל זֶה קָשָׁה וְלָמָּה מָתוּ בְּכוֹרוֹת אֲחֵרִים דְּמִשְׁמַע אֲפִילוֹ שֶׁרִיָּה אוֹ אוֹרְחִים שֶׁהָיוּ עוֹבְרִים בְּמִצְרַיִם דְּרָדָּ עֲרָא, דְּבִשְׁלָמָא בְּבִכּוֹר הַשְּׂבִי וּבְכוֹר הַשְּׁפָקָה יֵשׁ הַטַּעַם שֶׁלֹּא יֵאמְרוּ יִרְאֲתֶם תְּבַעֲהָ עֲלֵבוֹנָם. אִי נָמִי שֶׁהָא גַם הֵם מִצְרַיִם לִישְׂרָאֵל, אֲמָנָם בְּאוֹרְחִים הַעוֹבְרִים שָׁם דְּרָדָּ מִקְרָה אֵין שׁוּם טַעַם בְּמִיתָתָם. וְאֲדַרְבָּא מַה יִּהְיֶה מְקוֹם לְטַעוֹת וְלוֹמַר שֶׁמִּפְּנֵי זֶה אֵינָה מִן הַקַּב"ה אֵלָּא מִטַּבְּעֵי הָאָוִיר.

From the simple understanding of “I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt,” the meaning is as Rashi explained, viz, “Also other nations’ firstborn who were in Egypt.” That is difficult, for why did other nations’ firstborn die, for this means even if they were encamped or were guests who were only passing through Egypt temporarily.

Granted, it makes sense that the firstborn of the captive² and the firstborn of the maidservant³ in Egypt should die, for the reason that they shouldn’t say that it was their god who had acted on their behalf because of the humiliation imposed upon them by the Egyptians.⁴ Alternatively, it could be that [the captives and maidservants] were also oppressing Israel.

But indeed, regarding guests passing there by chance, there is no reason for their deaths. To the contrary, that would be a reason to err and to say that this plague is not from the Holy One, Blessed be He, but from the nature of the air.

וְכַדִּי לְתַרְצֵי קוּשְׁיָא זֶה הֵבִיא הַפְּסוּק שֶׁל "לְמַפְּהָ מִצְרַיִם" וְכוּ' וּמִנֵּינֵי וְכוּ', לְהוֹדִיעַנו שֶׁהוֹכְחָה שֶׁהִיָּתָה זֹאת הַמַּפְּה מִן הַקַּב"ה הִיָּתָה מִחַמַּת בְּכוֹרֵי מִצְרַיִם שֶׁבְּמִקְוֵמוֹת אֲחֵרִים, דְּאִילוֹ הָאוֹרְחִים שֶׁהָיוּ בְּמִצְרַיִם הָיוּ מוֹכְרֵחִים לְמוֹת כְּדִי לְפָרְסָם הַגֵּס שִׁישְׂרָאֵל לְבָדָם יִהְיוּ נִיצוּלִים, וּמִזְלִיָּהוּ גַרְם לְהִיּוֹת נִמְצָאִים שָׁם.

In order to solve this question, [Rashi] brings the verse of, “Who struck Egypt through their firstborn.” He asks “and whence may we deduce that even the firstborn of the Egyptians who were in other places [would be struck down],” to inform us that the proof that this plague was from the Holy One, Blessed be He, was because of the firstborn of Egypt who were in other places. The guests who were in Egypt had to die in order to publicize the miracle that Israel alone would be saved, and their bad luck caused them to be found there.

וְהַטַּעַם שֶׁנִּתְּנָה רִשׁ"י עַל בְּכוֹר הַשְּׁפָקָה וּבְכוֹר הַשְּׂבִי אֵינּוּ עַל עֶקֶר מִיתָתָם, דְּכִפְשִׁיטָא שֶׁהִיָּה לְהֵם לְמוֹת דְּלֹא גְרָעֵי מִשְׂאָר אוֹרְחִים, אֵלָּא הוֹצְרָדָּ לְמַת טַעַם לָמָּה פִּרְט הַכֿתוּב אֵת אֵלוֹ. וְלִכְּוֹ הַמִּתִּין רִשׁ"י לְפָרֵשׁ זֶה בְּדוּקָא עַל פְּסוּק שֶׁל "וְהַפִּיתִי כָל־בְּכוֹר" וְלֹא פִּירְשׁוֹ לְמַעְלָה עַל "וּמַת כָּל־בְּכוֹר", אִם עַל פִּי שִׁפִּירֵשׁ שֶׁם הַטַּעַם שֶׁלְקוֹ בְּנֵי הַשְּׁפָחוֹת, לְפִי שֶׁבְּפְסוּק זֶה יֵשׁ רִמְזָא וַיִּתְּנוּ לְשׁוֹן, שֶׁכִּינֵן שִׂאמַר "וְעַבְדֵי בְּאֶרֶץ־מִצְרַיִם" לֹא הִיָּה לוֹ לֹמַר אֵלָּא "וְהַפִּיתִי כָל־בְּכוֹר . . . מֵאֲדָם וְעַד־בְּהֵמָה" וְכוּ'.

The reason that Rashi gave for the firstborn of the maidservant and the firstborn of the captive was not for the fact of their death, for it’s obvious that they had to die, as they were not worse off than the other guests. Rather, it was necessary to give a reason for why

² Ex. 12:29.

³ Ex. 11:5.

⁴ Rashi on Ex. 11:5, based on Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 12:29.

the Scripture singled out these people. Therefore, Rashi waited to interpret this specifically for the verse of Ex. 12:12, “I will strike down every firstborn,” noting that the other nations’ firstborn would die to show the miracle that only the Israelites were saved. **He did not explain it above for the verse of Ex. 11:5, “and every firstborn shall die in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the maidservant who is behind the millstones,” though he did explain there the reason that the sons of the maidservants were struck down, i.e., to prevent them from saying that their god had protected them and punished the Egyptians.**

He waited for this verse, Ex. 12:12, to explain the miraculous nature that the firstborn of all nations would die in Egypt, except for the Israelites, **because for this verse there is a hint of superfluous language. That is, at the beginning of the verse, it says, “I will go through the land of Egypt that night,” He didn’t need to add “and strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human and beast,” but rather He had to say only, “and I will strike down every firstborn, both human and beast.”**

ומהו שְׁחַזַר לומר "בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם", דְּמִשְׁמַע מִיעוּט "בְּאֶרֶץ־מִצְרַיִם" דְּנִקָּא וְלֹא בְּשָׂאֵר אֶרְצוֹת, אֲלֵא וְדַאי דְּאִין מִיעוּט אַסְר מִיעוּט אֲלֵא לְרַבּוֹת אִף בְּכוֹרֵי מִצְרַיִם שְׁבַמְקוֹמוֹת אַסְרִים, וְנִהוּ שְׂצִינִין "וְהַכִּיתִי כָּל־בְּכוֹר" וְכוּ', דְּמַלְתִּי נְגוּ' שְׂצִינִין מוֹדִיעַ לְנוּ הַאֲמַתִּי הֵב"ל.

Why did he repeat “in the land of Egypt”? The meaning of the restriction of the first “land of Egypt” specifically meant not in other lands. But certainly we learned from the Gemara the hermeneutical principle of understanding the Torah that there is no restriction following a restriction except for amplifying.⁵ In this case, even firstborn of Egypt that are in other places, and this is why [Rashi] pointed out “I will strike down every firstborn,” for the words [“in the land of Egypt”] that he pointed out informs us of the truth, as above.

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⁵ Menachot 9b, 67a; Bava Batra 14a; Shevuot 7b; Megillah 23b; Sanhedrin 15a, 46a, 86a; Makkot 9b; Chullin 132a; Yerushalmi Rosh Hashana 1:1; Yerushalmi Horayot 1:1; Yerushalmi Sheviit 8:1; Yerushalmi Yevamot 12:1; Yerushalmi Sotah 9:2; Yerushalmi Peah 6:7.