

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XV: Bo (Ex. 10:1–13:16)

Essay 3. The timing of the tenth plague

"**כֹּה** אָמַר ה' כְּחֹצֵת הַלַּיְלָה" וְכֹי' וְאָמְרוּ ז"ל דְּמִשְׁה אָמַר "כְּחֹצֵת" וְלֹא אָמַר "בְּחֹצוֹת" כְּדִי שְׁלֹא יִטְעוּ אִיצְטְגְנִינִי פְרָעָה וְיֵאמְרוּ מִשְׁה בְּדַאי הוּא. וּמִקְשִׁים הָעוֹלָם שְׁמַכְל מְקוֹם מִשְׁה הִיָּה לוֹ לֹמַר בְּלִשׁוֹן שְׁאָמַר לוֹ הַקַּב"ה, אוֹ לֹא הִיָּה לוֹ לֹמַר "כֹּה אָמַר ה' ", אֲלֵא "וְיֵאמַר מִשְׁה כְּחֹצֵת הַלַּיְלָה". וְעוֹד דְּלֹא חָסַר שְׁרָאוּ שְׁנֵבוֹאֵת מִשְׁה וּתְפִלוֹתָיו בְּכָל הַמְּכּוֹת הַקּוֹדְמוֹת הִיָּתָה אֲמַת לְמָה עָתָה יֵאמְרוּ בְּדַאי הוּא. וְעוֹד מֵאֵי נִפְקָא מִיָּנָה לֹאִיצְטְגְנִינִים בֵּין רְגַע לְרְגַע שְׁכָל כֹּד יִהְיוּ מְקַפִּידִים אִם תִּהְיֶה בְּאוֹתוֹ הַרְגַע מִמֶּשׁ אוֹ לֹא, דְּהָא כִּינֵן שְׁבָא בְּאוֹתָהּ הַלַּיְלָה מֵה בְּדַאי שְׁיִיד כָּאן. וְעוֹד שְׁהוֹאִיל שְׁהַמְכָּה הִיָּתָה בְּחֹצֵי הַלַּיְלָה מִמֶּשׁ וּמִשְׁה אָמַר "כְּחֹצוֹת" יִשְׁרָאֵל עֲצָמָם יֵאמְרוּ כֹּד כְּמוֹ שְׁהִקְשׁוּ בְּסִפְרָה הַזּוֹהַר.

“Moses said, ‘**Thus said the L-rd: As [i.e., like] midnight** I will go forth among the Egyptians, and every firstborn in the land of Egypt will die.’ ”¹ [The rabbis] of blessed memory said that Moses said “as midnight” [כְּחֹצוֹת] [*ca'chatzot*] and he did not say “at midnight” [בְּחֹצוֹת] [*ba'chatzot*], so that Pharaoh’s astrologers would not err as to when midnight was, and thus say, “Moses is a liar.”²

Question 1: **Everyone asks that in any case, Moses should have spoken in the language that the Holy One, Blessed be He, spoke to him, or else he shouldn’t have said, “Thus said the L-rd,” but rather, Scripture would have recorded: “Moses said, ‘As midnight, [the L-rd] will go forth . . .”** I.e., by adding, “Thus said the L-rd,” he obviously intended to have people believe that he was quoting G-d.

Question 2: **Also, after [the astrologers] saw that the prophecy of Moses and his prayers for every preceding plague had been true, why would they now say, “Moses is a liar”?**

Question 3: **Also, what is the practical difference to the astrologers between moment to moment, that they would be so precise if it would be at the exact moment or not, since it came in the same night, how is lying relevant here?**

Question 4: **Also, since the plague was exactly at midnight³ and Moses had only said “as midnight,” Israel themselves would say this, that Moses was a liar, as was asked in the Zohar.⁴** I.e., wasn’t Moses worried that Israel would interpret “as midnight” as “approximately midnight, but not exactly midnight,” and consider him a liar when it happened exactly at midnight?

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¹ Ex. 11:4–5.

² Berachot 4a.

³ Ex. 12:29.

⁴ Zohar, II:37a.

וגיש לומר שידוע שלפי סדר המעלות שצ"ם חנפ"ל בתצוי הלילה של מפת בכורות הנה משמש פוכב צדק בשעה ששית דהיינו שעה האחרונה של תצוי לילה הראשון, וכוכב מאדים בשעה שביעית דהיינו בשעה ראשונה של תצוי הלילה האחרון, שהרי ישראל יצאו ממצרים ביום חמישי כדאמרין בשבת פרק רבי עקיבא וכמו שכתבו המפרשים.

It can be said that it is known that according to the order of the orbits of the seven Heavenly bodies⁵—Saturn [שבתאי], Jupiter [צדק], Mars [מאדים], Mercury [חמה], Venus [נה], Star [כוכב], and the Moon [לבנה]—which Heavenly bodies were serving at midnight of the day of the plague of the firstborn.⁶ The planet Jupiter was serving at the sixth hour, which was the final hour of the first half of the night, and the planet Mars was serving at the seventh hour, which was the first hour of the second half of the night. That is known, for Israel left Egypt on Thursday, as it is said in tractate Shabbat, the ninth chapter, entitled “Rabbi Akiva,”⁷ and as the commentators wrote.⁸

ואם הייתה מפת בכורות רגע קודם תצוי הלילה שהיה סוף השימוש של פוכב צדק לא הנה כל כך גם אם ניצולו ישראל, רק עיקר הנס היה שהופו המצריים אף על פי שהפוכב היה טוב, ואין הכי נמי שישראל לא הנה להם זכות ליגאל, אלא שבהיות אותו הרגע הפוכב טוב לכך ניצולו. ואם המפה הייתה ברגע אחר תצוי הלילה שפכר התחיל פוכב מאדים הנה להפך, שמפת המצריים אינה כל כך גם לפי שהפוכב היה רע אבל הצלת ישראל הייתה גם גדול ועקר בנס הזה לפי ממשלת הפוכב, ועל כן לומר שישראל יש להם זכות ומשום הכי ניצולו.

If the plague of firstborns had been a moment prior to midnight, being at the end of the service of Jupiter [צדק] [tzedeq], which means “righteousness,” it would not have been such a miracle in the eyes of the astrologers if Israel had been saved from the plague and redeemed from Egypt, because Jupiter’s service is to increase good in the world, and stop wars and strife.⁹ Rather, the main miracle would have been that the Egyptians were stricken at that time, even though the planet was serving for good. It’s indeed so that Israel did not have the merit to be redeemed, rather, the astrologers would have said that at that moment they were saved through the goodness of the planet.

But if the plague had been a moment after midnight, then the service of the planet Mars would have begun, to the opposite, for Mars is associated with war and plague. Thus, the astrologers would reason that the plague of the Egyptians would not have been such a miracle, for the service of the planet was bad, but the rescue of Israel under such a planet was a great miracle. The principle of this miracle was because of the rule of the planet, the astrologers would argue in such a scenario, and you must say that Israel had merit, and because of this they were saved.

⁵ שבתאי, צדק, מאדים, חמה, נה, פוכב, לבנה = שצ"ם חנפ"ל.

⁶ On the fourth day of creation, when the seven Heavenly bodies were set in the sky, they began to serve as servants. They each serve for a separate hour, one after the other, and at the end of seven hours a new cycle begins.

⁷ The chapter begins on Shabbat 82a, and the day of the plague of the firstborn is given on Shabbat 87b.

⁸ Rabbeinu Bahya on Ex. 11:4.

⁹ The ancient view of astrology was known to the Babylonians, and was adopted by the Greeks and then the Romans. It is unclear whether it had been adopted by the Egyptians at the time of the Exodus, or not until afterward, during the Late Period. See Joachim Friedrich Quack, *The Planets in Ancient Egypt*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190647926.013.61> (published online 23 May 2019).

אָבֵל פּוֹנֵת הַקֵּב"ה הַיְהוָה לְהַכּוֹת הַמִּצְרַיִם בְּאוֹתוֹ הַרְגַע מִמֶּשׁ שֶׁל חֲצֵי הַלַּיְלָה שֶׁהַכּוֹכָבִים זֶה יוֹצֵא וְזֶה בָּא וְאִין לָהֶם יְכוּלֵת לְהִטִּיב אוֹ לְהַרְע, וְיִהְיֶה הַגֵּס כְּפוֹל בֵּין בְּמַכַּת הַמִּצְרַיִם בֵּין בְּהַצֵּלַת יִשְׂרָאֵל. וְאִם הָיָה אוֹמֵר בְּחֲצֵי הַלַּיְלָה וְהַיִּצְטַגְנִינִים יִטְעוּ יֵאמְרוּ מִשָּׁה בְדַאי הוּא לֹאמֵר שְׂיִהְיֶה הַגֵּס כְּפוֹל, שְׂהָרִי מִצַּד אֶחָד לֹא הָיָה צָרִיךְ גַּם שְׂהָרִי הָיָה סִיוֵעַ הַכּוֹכָב, וּמִשׁוּם הַכִּי אָמַר "בְּחֲצוֹת" כְּלוֹמֵר בֵּין יְהִיָּה קוֹדֵם חֲצוֹת אוֹ אַחַר כֵּךְ אוֹ בְּרַגַע מִמֶּשׁ שֶׁל חֲצוֹת יִלְקוּ הַמִּצְרַיִם וְיִשְׂרָאֵל יִהְיוּ נִיִּצְוּלִים.

But the intention of the Holy One, Blessed be He, was to strike the Egyptians at the very moment of midnight, when the planet of Jupiter goes and the planet of Mars comes, and they have no ability to do either good or bad. Then the miracle would be doubled both for the plague of the Egyptians and for the saving of Israel. If [Moses] had said “at midnight,” with the implication being that both the plague of the Egyptians and the saving of Israel were miracles, and the astrologers had erred in calculating midnight, they would have said “Moses is a liar, to say that there would be a double miracle.” That is, from one side, there would have been no need for a miracle, as the planet was helping. I.e., if the astrologers had thought the plague had occurred before midnight, then they would say that Jupiter had served to save of Israel, so it would not have been a miracle from that side. Or if the astrologers had thought the plague had occurred after midnight, then Mars would have served to kill the firstborn, so it would not have been a miracle from that side.

This is the answer to Questions 2 and 3, why the astrologers would have been concerned whether the plague occurred exactly at midnight, or before, or after, and why depending on their possible miscalculations they may have determined that Moses was a liar. **Because of this, [Moses] said “as midnight,” as if to say, either before midnight, or after midnight, or at the exact moment of midnight, the Egyptians will be defeated and Israel will be saved.**

וְאִם עַל פִּי כֵן לֹא שִׁינָה דְבָרוֹ שֶׁל הַקֵּב"ה שְׂהָרִי בְּמִדְרָשׁ עַל פְּסוּק "וְיִהְיֶה בְּחֲצֵי הַלַּיְלָה" כְּתִיב "מִקִּים דְּבַר עֲבָדוֹ וְנִעֲצַת מִלְּאֲכָוֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל" שְׂהַבְטִים לְאַבְרָהָם לִיגָאֵל אֶת בְּנָיו בְּחֲצֵי הַלַּיְלָה כְּמוֹ שְׂרַדְף אַחַר הַמְּלָכִים לְקַדֵּשׁ שְׁמוֹ שֶׁל מְקוֹם. וְכֵן הַפְּיִט אָמַר "גְּלִיתָ לְאַזְרַחֵי חֲצוֹת לַיִל פֶּסַח", וּמִשָּׁה כְּשֶׁאָמַר "כֹּה אָמַר ה' פְּחֲצַת" פּוֹנֵתוֹ הַיְהוָה לְרַגַע חֲצוֹת לַיְלָה מִמֶּשׁ, כְּמוֹ שְׂהָיָה חֲצוֹת לַיְלָה שְׂהַבְטִים לְאַבְרָהָם, וְכֵן פִּירַשׁ דְּבָרָיו לְיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּדִי שְׁגֵם הֵם לֹא יִטְעוּ בְּדְבָרָיו.

Even so, [Moses] did not change the words of the Holy One, Blessed be He. As it is written in the Midrash on the verse, “At midnight, the L-rd struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt:”¹⁰ “But confirm the word of His servant and fulfill the prediction of His messengers,” that He promised to Abraham to redeem his sons at midnight, just as at midnight [Abraham] fled after the kings who had kidnapped his nephew Lot in order to sanctify the Name of the Omnipresent.¹¹ Similarly, the poet of the Haggadah said, “You revealed to the Ezrachite [i.e., Avraham], midnight of the night of Pesach,”¹² and Moses, when he said, “Thus said the L-rd: As the middle of the night,” his intent was at the exact moment of

¹⁰ Ex. 12:29.

¹¹ Gen. 14:15, which is typically translated as, “And he divided himself, he and his servants, against them, at night,” could instead be read as, “And he divided the night, he and his servants, against them,” which could mean that Abraham acted at midnight to pursue the kings and rescue Lot.

¹² Pesach Haggadah, Nirtzah, Zevach Pesach 2.

midnight, as the midnight that He promised to Abraham. This is the explanation of [Moses'] words to Israel, in order that [the Israelites] also would not err by his words. That is, G-d told Moses, “at midnight,” [בַּחצוֹת] [*ba'chatzot*], but He also told Moses to notify the Israelites that He would liberate them at midnight, as He had promised Abraham. Thus, Moses was allowed to change the wording to “as midnight,” [כַּחצוֹת] [*ca'chatzot*].

והקב"ה רצה שתהיה המכה דוקא בחצות לילה להורות שנשלם הקץ, שאף כשנגזר הגלות בין הבתרים היה חצות לילה ממש, ובאותו הרגע שהתחיל השעבוד הדין נותן שתתחיל הגאולה. ודבר זה היה קשה למצרים לומר שנשלם הקץ, שכל טענתם היתה שעדיין לא נשלם, ואם היה אומר "בחצות" והיו טועים איצטגניני פרעה, היו אומרים שמשה בדאי הוא שעדיין לא נשלם הקץ. והראיה שלא באה המכה בחצות ממש, ומשום הכי אמר להם "בחצות" שלא לגלות להם הסוד ד"בחצות" משמע קרוב לחצות מלפניו או מלאחריו, וזהו לעין האיצטגנינים אבל לפי האמת דעת משה היתה לומר שתהיה בחצות ממש, ומשמעות "בחצות" פאותו חצות של אברהם.

The Holy One, Blessed be He, wanted the plague to be exactly at midnight to show that the end of the Exile was fulfilled. The Exile foretold in the Covenant Between the Parts was decreed exactly at midnight. The Covenant Between the Parts was G-d's promise that Abraham would have a great number of descendants,¹³ and that the Nation of Israel would face exile, but would ultimately be redeemed,¹⁴ and would inherit the Land of Israel.¹⁵ **At the same moment that the servitude began, the law was given that the Exile would begin.**

It was difficult for the Egyptians to say that the end of the Exile had been fulfilled, for their entire claim was that it had not yet been fulfilled. If [Moses] had said “at midnight,” and Pharaoh's astrologers had erred, they would have said that Moses was a liar, for the end of the Exile had not yet been fulfilled. The proof, they would claim, is that the plague did not come precisely at midnight. That is why [Moses] said to them “as midnight,” so as not to reveal to them the secret that the plague would arrive at the time that the Exile ended, that “as midnight” means close to midnight, either before or after.

That was the case in the eyes of the astrologers, but the truth is that Moses' intention was to tell them that it would be exactly midnight, he just didn't want the astrologers to err in their calculation of the time and accuse him of lying. **And the meaning of what he actually said, “as midnight,” was to be understood by the Israelites “as the same midnight of Abraham.”**

This is the answer to questions 1 and 4, that Moses had two reasons for changing the language. First, so that if the astrologers had erred as to the moment of midnight, they wouldn't have doubted his truthfulness. Second, because it would have been understood by the Israelites as a reference to the Covenant Between the Parts made between Abraham and G-d, that the Exile would occur at midnight, as had the action that Abraham took to exalt G-d's Name.

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¹³ Gen. 15:5.

¹⁴ Gen. 15:13–14.

¹⁵ Gen. 15:7–8.