



”בא אל פרעה”

An Incredible Allusion from the Holy Rabbi Shimshon of Ostropoli Related to the Plague of “Arbeh”

This week’s parsha, parshas Bo, begins with the narrative related to the plague of “arbeh”—locusts (Shemos 10, 11): **”ויאמר ה' אל משה בא אל פרעה כי אני הכבדתי את לבו ואת לב עבדיו למען.”** Hashem said to Moshe, **“Come to Pharaoh, because I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, so that I can put these signs of Mine in his midst.”** Why does HKB”H say to Moshe, **“Come to Pharaoh,”** rather than **“Go to Pharaoh”**? We find an answer to this question in the Zohar hakadosh (Bo 34a):

Rabbi Shimon (bar Yochai) said: Now, I intend to reveal secrets . . . Why is it written, “Come to Pharaoh”? It should say “Go to Pharaoh.” What is the significance of “Come”? It is because HKB”H took him (Moshe) through one room after another (through many rooms) to reach the one mighty, supreme sea-serpent (Pharaoh) . . . because Moshe was afraid of him (since his power of tumah was tremendous) . . .

When HKB”H saw that Moshe was afraid (to approach Pharaoh) . . . HKB”H said (Yechezkel 29, 3): “Behold, I am against you, Pharaoh, King of Egypt, the great sea-monster that crouches within its rivers.” Thus, HKB”H had to wage war against him and not anyone else, as it says (Shemos 12, 12): “I am Hashem.”

Rashbi’s words deserve further clarification. After all, prior to the plague of “arbeh,” Moshe Rabeinu had already approached Pharaoh several times and had brought the seven plagues described in parshas Va’eira. So, why did he suddenly become fearful when he came to warn Pharaoh about the plague of “arbeh”? In fact, Moshe was so fearful that HKB”H had to encourage him and bolster his confidence by saying, **“Come to Pharaoh”—i.e., I will come with you, and I will subdue his tremendous power of tumah.**

Additionally, we find another fascinating passage in the Zohar hakadosh related to this passuk (Bo 32b):

“Come to Pharaoh, because I have hardened his heart, etc.” Rabbi Yehudah began by saying (Tehillim 89, 16): “Praised are the people who know the significance of the shofar-blast; Hashem, in the light of Your countenance they walk.” To what degree to people have to abide by the ways of HKB”H and observe the mitzvos of the Torah to merit Olam HaBa and to protect them from all the accusations above and below? For, just as there are prosecutors down below, there are also prosecutors up above who oppose human beings.

The commentaries struggle to make sense of this puzzling passage. What is the connection between HKB”H saying to Moshe Rabeinu, **“Come to Pharaoh”—warning him about the upcoming plague of “arbeh”—and the passuk related to the mitzvah of sounding the shofar on Rosh HaShanah: “Praised are the people who know the significance of the shofar-blast”?**

”בא אל פרעה”: Transform the Permutations of the Letters of פרעה”

We will begin by shedding some light on the enigmatic words of our sages. They point out an extremely odd fact concerning the plague of “arbeh.” Nowhere in the narrative does HKB”H state that He is about to bring this plague as He does with all of the other plagues. Instead, the Torah simply says: **“Come to Pharaoh, because I have hardened his heart, etc.”** In Likutei Shoshanim, the divine kabbalist Rabbi Shimshon of Ostropoli, ztz”l, writes in the name of the Galya Razyta that this is alluded to by words **”בא אל פרעה”**. He writes

that the word **ב"א** is an acronym for **ב'מכת א'רבה**—**with the plague of “arbeh.”**

In fact, the holy Rabbi Shimshon explains the matter himself based on the principle of interchangeable letters. We know that the letters **אח"ה** are articulated from the throat, and they can be interchanged with one another. Similarly, the letters **בומ"ף** are articulated with the lips; they, too, can be substituted for one another. Hence, if we switch the **“pei”** of **פרע"ה** to a **“beis”** and the **“ayin”** to an **“aleph,”** the letters **פרע"ה** are transformed to **ברא"ה**, which is an anagram for **ארב"ה**—**“arbeh.”**

Let us now apply this device to interpret the words **בא אל ב"א** **פרעה**. If we substitute the letters **ב"א**, as just explained, in the name **פרע"ה**, we find that **HKB”H** was alluding to the plague of **“arbeh”** that He was about to visit upon Mitzrayim.

Notwithstanding, this wonderful allusion deserves further explanation. After all, **HKB”H** did not instruct Moshe to interchange the letters of Pharaoh’s name when warning him about any of the other plagues. So, what was different about the plague of “arbeh”?

A Fantastic Clarification from the Chasam Sofer

To clarify the insight of the holy Rabbi Shimshon, we will introduce an explanation from the sacred teachings of the Chasam Sofer, who cites the words of Rabbi Shimshon. He notes that the plague of “arbeh” was unique. It was associated with an extreme famine that was not present with any of the other plagues, including the plague of “barad”—hail. As the Torah states explicitly (Shemos 10, 14): **“ייעל הארבה על כל ארץ: מצרים וינח בכל גבול מצרים ככד מאד... ויאכל את כל עשב הארץ ואת כל פרי העץ אשר הותיר הברד, ולא נותר כל ירק בעץ ובעשב השדה בכל ארץ מצרים.”** **The swarm of locust ascended over the entire land of Mitzrayim, and it settled in the entire border of Mitzrayim; it was very severe . . . it ate all the grass of the land and all the fruit of the tree that the hail had left over. There did not remain any greenery on the trees or grass in the field throughout the land of Mitzrayim.**

Now, in parshas Vayigash, it is written (Bereishis 47, 10): **“ויברך יעקב את פרעה ויצא מלפני פרעה Pharaoh, and he left Pharaoh’s presence. Rashi comments in the name of the Midrash Tanchuma: In the manner of all who depart from the presence of noblemen; they bless**

them, and take permission to leave. And what berachah did he bestow upon him? That the Nile should rise to his feet. For, Mitzrayim is not provided with sufficient rainwater; instead, the Nile rises and irrigates it. And from the time of Yaakov’s berachah and onward, Pharaoh would come to the Nile, and it would rise toward him, and irrigate the land.

Clearly, Pharaoh received a marvellous berachah from Yaakov Avinu. This berachah prevented famines from affecting the land of Mitzrayim. All Pharaoh had to do was go down to the Nile River, and it would rise to greet him, and it would irrigate the land, causing the trees to bear fruit and the land to produce vegetation. Similarly, we find that when Yaakov descended to Mitzrayim, the famine stopped. In the words of Rashi (Bereishis 47, 19): **Once Yaakov came to Mitzrayim, berachah came to his feet; and they began to sow, and the famine ended.**

According to the Chasam Sofer, Pharaoh reaped the benefits of the berachah bestowed by Yaakov Avinu on account of the tranquility and peace of mind Yaakov enjoyed in Mitzrayim at the end of his life (together with his beloved son Yosef). Essentially, those last seventeen years transformed the rest of his life into a good life (all’s well that ends well). Therefore, as long as the berachah bestowed by Yaakov Avinu was in effect, it was impossible to subject Pharaoh and Mitzrayim to the plague of “arbeh” with its resultant famine. However, after Pharaoh began to make the lives of Yisrael, Yaakov’s offspring, miserable, by imposing upon them backbreaking labor, he forfeited the right to benefit from Yaakov Avinu’s berachah. Hence, it was possible to subject him to the plague of “arbeh.”

The 147 Years of Yaakov Avinu’s Life Were Depleted from the Name פרע"ה

Based on this understanding, the Chasam Sofer explains the implication of the allusion presented by the holy Rabbi Shimshon. Recall that he asserts that **HKB”H** instructed Moshe—with the words **בא אל פרעה**—to substitute the letters **“beis”** and **“aleph”** for the letters **“pei”** and **“ayin”** in the name **פרע"ה**; in this manner, the plague of **ארב"ה** was alluded to. Now, the numerical value of the two letters **“pei”** and **“ayin”** is **150**; the numerical value of the letters **“beis”** and **“aleph”** is **3**. Thus, as a result of this substitution, the numerical value

of the name פרעה is reduced by 147, the number of years of Yaakov Avinu's life. This alludes to the fact that Pharaoh had forfeited the right to Yaakov's berachah. As a consequence, it became possible to visit the plague of "arbeh" on him.

Then the Chasam Sofer adds a fascinating point. As long as Pharaoh was deserving of the merit and blessing of Yaakov Avinu—whose midah was "rachamim"—he was protected from the midah of "din" associated with Yitzchak. However, once, due to his wickedness, he was no longer protected by the merit of Yaakov, and the equivalent of the 147 years of Yaakov's lifetime was reduced from his name, then Yitzchak's midah of "din" prevailed over Pharaoh. Therefore, HKB"H visited the plague of ארבה upon him, which has the same gematria as יצחק (208). This concludes his sacred explanation.

Let us add a pleasant tidbit of our own to this matter based on a passage in the Tanna D'Vei Eliyahu (end of Chapter 31):

Why is the letter "beis" different from all the other twenty-two letters of the aleph-Beis with which HKB"H created His universe? . . . Wouldn't it have been more appropriate for the Torah to begin "אלקים ברא בראשית", beginning with the word "Elokim" and the letter "aleph"? So, why does it begin with the passuk "בראשית ברא אלקים" with the letter "beis"? It answers: The Torah begins with the letter "beit," which is associated with "berachah," and does not open with the letter "aleph," which is associated with the curse of "ארור". A similar teaching is found in the Midrash (B.R. 1, 10); it concludes with the following: HKB"H said, "Behold, I am creating it with the language of berachah; hopefully, it will endure!"

Thus, we can propose that this is why HKB"H chose to insert the letters ב"א into Pharaoh's name. HKB"H was conveying the message that Pharaoh was no long deserving of the berachah of Yaakov Avinu. Therefore, the letter "beis" associated with berachah was switched to an "aleph" associated with cursedness; and he was cursed with the plague of "arbeh." This then is the underlying message of HKB"H's directive to Moshe: "בא אל פרעה". He employed the word ב"א rather than "לך" indicating that Pharaoh was no longer blessed (as indicated by the letter "beis"); on the contrary, he was now cursed (indicated by the letter "aleph").

A Person's Name Reflects His Essence

Following this line of reasoning, we will now resolve our inquiry: Why only with the plague of "arbeh" did HKB"H instruct Moshe to alter the name פרעה (by substituting interchangeable letters to form the word ארבה)? We do not find that HKB"H instructed him to do so with any of the other plagues—to alter the name of **Pharaoh**.

The son of the Chasam Sofer, the brilliant Rabbi Shimon Sofer, adds a wonderful insight. He explains that the modification of Pharaoh's name had a negative impact on him. After all, a person's name reflects his essence. Thus, it can be modified in a positive way or conversely in a negative way. In this case, the transformation of the name פרעה to ארבה had a definite, negative impact on the ruler of Mitzrayim and his entire populace. Let us summarize what he says:

A person's name reflects on his essence and experiences. He cites the names of Avraham and Ruth as examples. He also cites proofs from the Gemara that a person's life is affected by his name (Berachos 7b, Yoma 83b). In fact, this was one of the unique abilities of Adam HaRishon; he had the wisdom and perception to give each and every animal and species a specific name that reflected its essence and being . . .

It is a good omen to combine a person's name with the name of the blessed Havaya. It is also a good omen to combine a person's name with words and letters that have positive connotations. This can imbue a person with divine mercy, life, berachah, and shalom. Conversely, it is possible to combine the letters of a person's name with letters and words that are associated with the attribute of "din."

This ability has been transmitted to preeminent Torah-scholars, whose Torah-studies have imbued them with "ruach hakodesh." With this special, sacred intuition, they know how to combine words and letters that reflect "rachamim." For, it is well-known that there are letters of the "aleph-Beis" that are uniquely associated with "rachamim" and others that are associated with "din." Betzalel the son of Uri the son of Chur was blessed with this gift (Berachos 55a); he knew how to combine the letters with which the heavens and the earth were created; this knowledge enabled him to construct the Mishkan.

This ability is also possessed by “talmidei-chachamim,” in addition to the influence of their speech and teaching. They know how to combine letters and interpret the significance of gematrias, first letters, and final letters, and how to apply them as needed. This is what happened with Pharaoh; his name was transformed with interchangeable letters to afflict him with the “arbeh.” This concludes the summary of his remarks.

We find a lengthier discussion and analysis of this subject in the Arvei Nachal (Pinchas). He applies this concept to interpret the passuk (ibid. 2, 19): **“וכל אשר יקרא לו האדם נפש חיה הוא שמו”**—**and whatever the man would call a living being is its name.** This emphasizes the point that a being’s name relates to its essence. A person is sustained by the letters of his name. So, if the letters of a person’s name are corrupted by sin and iniquity, his very being will also be corrupted. This explains why we curse reshaim by saying **“ימח שמם”**—**let their name be erased!** For, if the letters of their name are erased, they will not continue to be sustained; they will cease to exist.

It is worth noting that Rabbi Shimon Sofer was privileged to intuit that which is brought down by the divine kabbalist Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch of Zidichov, zy”a, in Ateret Tzvi on the Zohar hakadosh (Vayeitzei p. 82), in the name of the Ba’al Shem Tov hakadosh, zy”a, which is brought down in the sefer Ba’al Shem Tov (Bereishis 133). He explains that this is the rationale for mentioning the name of a sick person to a tzaddik. We want the tzaddik to use his kedushah to remedy the letters of the sick person’s name and modify them, so that they attract “rachamim.” Here is what he writes in “lashon hakodesh”:

“דע לך אחי ידידי, המקובל אצלנו מרבותינו, אשר עיקר נפש והגשמה הוא שמו של אדם, כח הצירוף אותיות אשר בא לתקן בזה העולם, וכח היחוד אשר צריך לייחד שמו ברוך הוא וברוך שמו, וכן קיבלתי בשם הבעל שם טוב, והוא דבר ידוע ומפורסם בתפלה וביחוד על החולים וכל צרה שלא תבוא על האדם, הוא בהזכיר שם החולה, ולעשות היחוד בשמו להמתיק הדין האחוז באותיות שמו.”

This enlightens us as to why it was necessary to alter the name פרעה and transform it to ארב—which we have explained is the implication of the directive issued by HKB”H: **“בא אל פרעה”**. Since the plague of “arbeh” would cause a devastating famine in Mitzrayim, it was necessary to first annul the berachah that Yaakov had bestowed upon the name

of Pharaoh, as indicated by the passuk: **“And Yaakov blessed Pharaoh.”** By transforming his name, which is his root and essence, using the appropriate interchangeable letters, to ארב, Yaakov’s berachah was annulled. Consequently, the “midas hadin” of יצה—possessing the same gematria as ארב—was able to mete out justice to Pharaoh.

At this point, we can begin to comprehend the teaching of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in the Zohar hakadosh. He explains why HKB”H instructs Moshe specifically with regards to the plague of “arbeh”: **“בא אל פרעה”** rather than **“לך אל פרעה”** (“come” rather than “go”). Due to Moshe’s intense trepidation of confronting Pharaoh, HKB”H promised that He would accompany him. In keeping with this discussion, let us explain. Moshe knew that he had been instructed to modify the letters of Pharaoh’s name, which were the root and essence of Pharaoh’s klipah. Therefore, he only became fearful with this particular plague, because he realized that he would come face to face with the source of the klipah of Pharaoh. Therefore, HKB”H said to him: **“בא אל פרעה”**, which can be interpreted in two ways: (1) That HKB”H would accompany him to confront the essence of Pharaoh and (2) that he was to modify the name פרעה and transform it into the configuration ארב in order to annul Yaakov’s berachah. Once Yaakov’s berachah was annulled, it would be possible to inflict the plague of “arbeh” with its attendant famine on the land of Mitzrayim.

“Praised are the people who know the significance of the ‘teruah”

It gives me great pleasure to complete this sacred journey with my brothers. We will now revisit the enigmatic passage cited from the Zohar hakadosh: **“Come to Pharaoh, because I have hardened his heart, etc.”** Rabbi Yehudah began by saying: **“Praised are the people who know the significance of the teruah; Hashem, in the light of Your countenance they walk.”** To understand the connection between these two pesukim, we will introduce what our sages expound on the latter passuk in the Midrash (V.R. 29, 4): **“It is written, ‘Praised are the people who know the significance of the shofar-blast (teruah).’ Do the nations of the world not know how to make that sound? How many horns do they have? . . . Yet, you say, ‘Praised are the people who know the significance**

(effect) of the teruah.” Rather, it implies that they know how to sway their Creator with the sound of the teruah; and this prompts Him to rise from the Throne of Din and move to the Throne of Rachamim, and He becomes extremely merciful toward them; then he reverses for them the “midas hadin” to “midas harachamim.”

We will interpret the Midrash based on a teaching in the Zohar hakadosh in the Raiya Mehemna (Pinchas 226b): The three sounds of the shofar—**tekiah, shevarim, and teruah**—correspond to the three holy Avos (the first three legs of the Chariot). **The tekiah corresponds to Avraham, the shevarim to Yitzchak, and the teruah to Yaakov.** In the Magen Avraham authored by the holy Maggid of Trisk, zy”a, he adds that the final tekiah corresponds to David HaMelech, the fourth leg of the holy Chariot.

In keeping with what we have discussed, we can comprehend a teaching in the Zohar hakadosh (Emor 99b) concerning the focus we should have when fulfilling the mitzvah of blowing-shofar. When the sounds **tekiah, shevarim, and teruah** are sounded, Avraham Avinu (corresponding to the tekiah) stands to the right of Yitzchak Avinu (corresponding to the shevarim). This prompts Yaakov Avinu (corresponding to the teruah) to take his place to the left of Yitzchak. Thus, the “midas hadin”—strict judgment—of Yitzchak is enclosed between Avraham and Yaakov, preventing it from getting out.

This then is the interpretation of the Midrash. **אשרי**—“praised are the people who know the significance of the teruah. They know how to blow the sounds of the shofar that correspond to Avraham, Yitzchak,

and Yaakov—the **tekiah, shevarim, and teruah.** The purpose of this focus is to have the teruah, corresponding to Yaakov, prevent “midas hadin” from exerting its influence. As a result: **“Hashem, in the light of Your countenance they walk”**—HKB”H will judge us with the attribute of Yaakov Avinu, “midas harachamim.” This is the message conveyed by the conclusion of the Midrash: **“Rather, they know how to sway their Creator with the teruah. It prompts Him to rise from the Throne of Din and move to the Throne of Rachamim; and He becomes extremely merciful toward them; then he reverses for them the “midas hadin” to “midas harachamim.”**

We have now shed some light on the cryptic teaching in the Zohar hakadosh, and we can understand it as follows: HKB”H says, **“בא אל פרעה”**. He is instructing Moshe to take the letters of **ב”א**—the **“beis” and the “aleph”**—and substitute them for the **“pei” and “ayin”** in the name **פרעה**. This will inform Pharaoh that he has forfeited the berachah of Yaakov Avinu, who lived a total of **147** years. By losing the protection of Yaakov’s “midas harachamim,” he was now vulnerable to the “midas hadin” of **יצחק**, possessing the same gematria as **ארב”ה**.

This explains magnificently the elucidation of Rabbi Yehudah. Regarding the mitzvah of blowing-shofar, it says: **“אשרי העם יודעי תרועה ה’ באור פניך יהלכון”**. By means of this mitzvah, Yisrael possess the unique ability to stimulate Yaakov to stand to the left of Yitzchak and block the influence of his “midas hadin.” In this manner, they entice their Creator to respond to the sound of the teruah by transforming the midah of “din” into “rachamim.”

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