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THE CONFRONTATION BETWEEN MOSES AND  
PHARAOH: THE RABBINIC VIEW

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
Requirements for Ordination

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## Acknowledgments

The discipline of midrashic study opens many avenues of thought. It sheds new light on biblical text and provides new insight into the Rabbinic Age.

In order to derive the full meaning from the midrash one must possess a skill and a dedication to it in understanding the material. Rabbi Norman J. Cohen possesses such skill and devotion to midrash. It is with a great sense of pride that I call him my teacher. For in working with him, his love for midrash became my love for midrash. His encouragement and enthusiasm for this project is largely responsible for the resulting product. To Rabbi Cohen I offer my deep thanks. His inspiration has and always will motivate me as I embark on my career in the Rabbinate.

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## Introduction

## Introduction

The tale of Moses' confrontation with the king of Egypt has been told by many generations of Jews. Sometimes the story is told as a chapter of ancient history, while at other times it is meant to engender new hope and inspiration.

The simple biblical account of the meeting between Moses and Pharaoh, in itself, does not provide great insight into what actually happened. The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible supports this feeling:

"... there is little in the biblical narrative upon which to reconstruct Moses' strategy in Egypt. In itself the tradition that Pharaoh granted audience to the Israelite leader is not implausible."<sup>1</sup>

The Rabbis, however, filled in the gaps and embellished the narrative in order to provide a paradigm of redemption for the Jews of their day. During the Rabbinic period, Jews suffered persecution at the hands of the Romans, Babylonians and others. The Rabbis recognized that they very much needed a source of hope and support in order to cope with their struggle.

I selected the confrontation story as my thesis topic because of my general interest in the Rabbinic approach to the Bible, and because of my specific interest in the profound message of hope conveyed in this narrative.

(1) The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, 1962-1976. Nashville. p. 445.

In researching this topic, I began by isolating biblical verses directly related to the confrontation story. These verses are concentrated in the Book of Exodus: Exodus 10:1-6, Exodus 11:1-6, and Exodus 12:29-36. With these verses as a starting point, I then used the various verse indices, such as Torah Temimah, Torah Ketubah U'Mesurah Al Torah Nivi'im Uk'tuvim and Torah Shelemah, to locate the rabbinic treatment of these verses. I also consulted the verse indices to such midrashim as the Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, notes and translation by Jacob Lauterbach, the Theodor Albeck edition of Bereshit Rabbah by Epstein-Melamed, the index volume to Soncino's Midrash Rabbah, among others. In order to get a more complete picture about the Rabbinic view of the confrontation, I also checked several thematic anthologies. These included: The Index volume to Legends of the Jews compiled by Boaz Cohen, Ozar ha-Aggadah (3 volumes) by Moshe Gross, The Sages (2 volumes) by E. Urbach, and Sefer ha-Aggadah, Ed. Bialick and Ravnitsky. After gathering all the extant rabbinic material, I divided the information into thematic categories, each of which constitutes a chapter of this thesis.

Chapter I, entitled "The Rabbinic view of Pharaoh and Moses" deals with the way in which the Rabbis view the personalities of Moses and Pharaoh. In it, I examine those character traits which the Rabbis deem important. For example, at the outset, Moses is most reluctant to accept the responsibility



of speaking on behalf of God before the Egyptian ruler. Yet at the climax of the confrontation, Moses is a confident, even aggressive spokesman for the God of Israel. Pharaoh, on the other hand, is portrayed by the Rabbis as a evil but confident leader, determined to destroy the Israelites as a people. At the climax, he is forced into submission and acknowledges the God of Israel as the only God. What were the reasons for the drastic changes in the characters of both men? Why did the Rabbis choose to underscore some character traits and downplay others? These are just some of the questions broached in the first chapter.

In chapter II, entitled "The Actual Confrontation: God versus Pharaoh", I attempt to show that the Rabbis emphasized that the confrontation actually was between God and Pharaoh. While the unskilled reader might think that the confrontation which took place in Egypt was simply between Moses and Pharaoh, it is clear that more is at stake. It is my contention, as will be made clear in the second chapter, that, according to the Rabbis, we are faced with a show of strength between two deities: Pharaoh, the god of Egypt and the God of Israel. It is the struggle between these two forces which is the basis for the real confrontation.

The third and final chapter of the thesis, entitled "The Significance of the Plagues in the Confrontation", deals with the concrete demonstration of God's power. The Ten Plagues are thought by the Rabbis to be the method by which God shows the extent of His power. The Rabbis perceived the plagues as

being implemented according to a carefully conceived plan, and through them, God accomplished specific goals: the unconditional release of the Israelites from bondage, and the undisputed establishment of the God of Israel as the ultimate power in the world.

Essentially, the confrontation story is used by the Rabbis as a source of inspiration and hope for the future. Just as Pharaoh was forced to acknowledge God as the most powerful force in the world, so too, all of Israel's enemies would ultimately be defeated. This is the message the Rabbis attempt to relate to their constituents through their midrashic treatment of this biblical narrative.

**Chapter I: The Personalities of Pharaoh  
and Moses: The Rabbinic View**

Chapter I: The Personalities of Pharaoh and Moses:  
The Rabbinic View

The Biblical account of the Exodus from Egypt is one of the most fascinating though familiar stories in the Bible. It is recounted yearly around the Seder Table and retold often as part of a Hebrew School Curriculum.

In the story, Moses is portrayed as the hero who responds to God's call. A modest shepherd with no desire for greatness, he is thrust into a position of authority. The Bible tells us (Exodus 4:10):

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל ה' בִּי אֲדֹנָי  
לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אֲנִי גַם מְתָמֹל גַּם מְשַׁלֵּשׁ גַּם  
מֵאֲז דְּבָרִים אֶל עַבְדְּךָ כִּי כְבֹד-פֶּה וְכֹבֵד לִשׁוֹן  
אֲנִי.

"And Moses said unto the Lord: 'Oh Lord I am not a man of words, neither heretofore, nor since Thou hast spoken unto Thy servant: for I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue.'" This is an illustration of the Bible's image of Moses as modest and reluctant to assume the role that God has chosen for him.

Pharaoh, in contrast, is pictured as the classic villain. This is evident in Exodus (7:3):

וְאֲנִי אֶקְשָׁה אֶת לִבְךָ וְהָרַבְתִּי אֶת  
אֲחָתִי וְאֶת מִוְפְתִי בָאָרֶץ מִצְרַיִם.

"And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt."

Pharaoh is the opposite of the meek representative of the Israelites. Pharaoh is bold, as kings must be; he is

articulate, and he is not intimidated by any situation or any person. In the book of Ezekiel (29:3), Pharaoh is quoted as saying:

לִי יְאֻרִי וְאֲנִי עָשִׂיתִנִּי

"My river is my own and I have made it for myself"

The Bible is very deliberate in contrasting these two figures in order to highlight the difference in their characters and personalities.

However, the Biblical account of the Israelite exodus from Egypt raises a number of questions. For example: Was the character of the real Pharaoh as projected by the Bible his true character? Was the historical Moses truly humble or was he more confident than the Biblical text would indicate? In relating the Exodus story, we must face such questions and recognize that behind the apparent confrontation there are two individuals in human interaction. The Rabbis, in interpreting these events, answer these questions and provide us with new insights into the text.

Let us then consider the Rabbinic view of the personalities of both Pharaoh and Moses. How did the Rabbis relate the two men? What did they choose to emphasize in Moses' personality and character, and how did they portray Pharaoh?

In the following pages, we will explore such questions through close examination and evaluation of various passages from Rabbinic literature.

## Part I: Pharaoh

### A. Pharaoh: An Evil Leader with Evil Intentions

The Rabbis frequently emphasize Pharaoh's genuinely evil nature. He acts on the basis of evil inclinations. An example of this is found in Midrash Lekah Tov (Bo: 10:1):

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה בֹּא אֶל פַּרְעֹה כִּי אֲנִי  
הַכְבַּדְתִּי אֶת לְבֹו שָׂאֲמָר: וְאֲנִי אֶקְשֶׁה אֶת  
לֵב פַּרְעֹה (שְׁמוֹת ז:ג) אֲמַר רִישׁ לְקִישׁ  
בֹּא לִישָׁמָא פּוֹתְחִין לוֹ. כִּיּוֹן שֶׁהַכְּבִיד  
פַּרְעֹה אֶת לְבֹו אֲמַר הַקַּב"ר: כִּי אֲנִי  
הַכְבַּדְתִּי אֶת לְבֹו הוּא הִתְחִיל מַעֲשֶׂה כְּבוֹדוֹת וְאֲנִי אוֹסִיף  
לוֹ כְּבוֹדוֹת וּטְפָפוֹת כְּדִי לְסוּרְדּוֹ מִן הָעוֹלָם.

This passage clearly shows that Pharaoh was inherently evil. God merely had to provoke him to bring out the worst in him. The proof comes from the end of the passage which states:

"He (Pharaoh) began the process of hardening (of his heart), and I added (for him) hardness and stupidity in order to drive him from the world."

Additional proof of Pharaoh's evil nature as seen by the Rabbis is found in the midrash Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer (48:30):

שָׁנָה וּשְׁלִישׁ שָׁנָה עַד שֶׁלֹא נִוְלַד מֹשֶׁה שָׂאֲמָר  
הַחֹרְטוּסִים לַפַּרְעֹה עֲתִיד נֶעַר לִילֵד וְהוּא  
יֹוצֵא אֶת בְּלִיבּוֹ הַשְּׁלִיכּוֹ אֶת כָּל הַיְּהוּדִים  
הַזְכָּרִים לִיאֻרִים, וְהוּא מוֹשֶׁלֶךְ עִמָּהֶם.

Here we have a case of Pharaoh listening to a future prediction of the wise men of his court. "And the magicians said to Pharaoh: 'In the future a child will be born who will



rescue Israel from Egypt.'" Pharaoh is neither willing to consider the prediction nor willing to wait and see if it would come about. Rather, he is determined to take immediate action: "He decided to cast all male children into the sea." The intention to do evil was implanted in Pharaoh's heart.

Another illustration of Pharaoh's decidedly evil nature is found in Midrash HaGadol (Shemot 4:2):

ד"א למה נחש, שהוא הכופר הראשון  
שאמר לו "פות תמותוך" (בראשית ג:ד)  
והקב"ה אמר: כי ביום אכלם ממנו פות תמות.  
(שם כז) אלא שכפר הנחש וטעה את חוה. וכך  
פרעה כפר בעיקר ואמר: "לי יאורי ואני  
עשיתני" (יחזקל כט:ג) שלח לכופר השני  
בדמות הכופר הראשון לומר שדינו כמותו.

Pharaoh was overcome by his ego. He neglected and refused to recognize that his power had limits. The thrust of the passage is seen through the proof text (Ezekiel 29:3):

"The great dragon that lieth  
In the midst of rivers. That hath said:  
My river is mine own. I have made it for myself."

Like the snake in the garden, who thought the apple was his to do with as he pleased, Pharaoh, pictured by the Rabbis as a greedy dragon, was engulfed by his thirst for power and enslaved by his greed. The term "כפר בעיקר" "he denied the essence" - underscores the issue. The sin which Pharaoh brought upon himself was his refusal to acknowledge God's existence. He ruled a kingdom, which is more than most men achieve and yet laid claim to the creation of the seas, arguing that they were made for him and no other.

Through the character of Pharaoh, the Rabbis emphasized that to be greedy and selfish could only lead to self destruction.

These are but a few examples of passages which reflect the Rabbis underscoring of Pharaoh's inherent sinful nature.<sup>1</sup>

#### B. Pharaoh's Selfish Desire to Block Israel's Destiny

Another aspect of Pharaoh's evil character which the Rabbis highlighted was his apparent desire to impede Israel from becoming the chosen nation. It is as if by his action Pharaoh was saying that if he could not have the Israelites serve him as slaves, he would rather destroy them. He would never allow them to freely worship their God.

An illustration of the emphasis of the Rabbis upon this aspect of Pharaoh's nature can be seen in Midrash Lekah Tov (Bo 11:9)

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֹא יִשְׁמַע אֲלֵיכֶם  
פֶּרַע, זֶה הַדְּבָר קֹדֶם, לִכְן נֹאמַר  
לוֹ לִמְשָׁה רַבִּינוּ וְלֹא יִשְׁמַע אֲלֵיכֶם פֶּרַע,  
שֶׁאֵמַר: וְאֲנִי יֹדְעִי כִּי לֹא יִתֵּן אֲתֶכֶם  
מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לְהִלִּיךְ (שְׁמוֹת ג': י"ט) זֶה הַפֶּסוּק  
מִקֹּדֶם וּמֵאַחֵר.

The Rabbis indicate that Pharaoh's desire to block Israel is evident to God. God's remark to Moses indicates that God is well aware of Pharaoh's intention. As it is written: "לֹא יִשְׁמַע אֲלֵיכֶם פֶּרַע" God says to Moses: "Pharaoh will not listen to you." The Rabbis explain what is taking place by having God himself give a fuller explanation of events:

וְאֲנִי יֹדְעִי כִּי לֹא יִתֵּן  
אֲתֶכֶם מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לְהִלִּיךְ



God states emphatically: I know (for a fact) that the king of Egypt will not permit you to leave. Here it seems clear that the Rabbis are emphasizing the stubbornness of the king of Egypt and that God is not actually in control of Pharaoh's behavior. The implication is that Pharaoh has taken this action on his own. God allows him to do so in order to display the wicked traits in his character.

A second example of Pharaoh's determination to see the Israelites fall comes from Midrash HaGadol (Shemot 14:3):

נבונים אמר פרעה ולא ידע  
מה אמר שעתידין ישראל לבכות  
במדבר כענין שנאמר: "ותשא כל העדה  
ויתנו את קולם ויבכו מעם" (במדבר יד:א)  
סגר עליהם המדבר. אמר פרעה ולא  
ידע מה שעתידין ישראל ליפול במדבר  
שנאמר: במדבר הזה יפול פגריכם (שם כט)

This is an intriguing passage. Here we can see an exegetic manipulation of the biblical text by the Rabbis. The simple meaning (pshat) of Numbers (14:29) is as follows:

במדבר הזה יפול פגריכם  
וכל פקדיכם לכל מספרכם מן  
עשרים שנה ומעלה אשר הליניתי  
עלי.

"Your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness, and all that were numbered of you, according to your whole number, from twenty years old and upward, ye that have murmured against Me."

The Rabbis credit Pharaoh with this statement. In so doing, they imply that Pharaoh brought suffering upon the Israelites on his own. The biblical text indicates that suffering is in store for the Israelites sometime in the future by the direct hand of God. Pharaoh is evil to such a degree that he

seems to rejoice at the opportunity to inflict suffering,<sup>2</sup> regardless of what awaits Israel in the future. Perhaps it was Pharaoh's hope that by making Israel suffer, they would never reach their destination as the chosen people.

### C. Pharaoh's Faulty and Untrustworthy Character Judgment

The third aspect of the Rabbis' personality portrait of Pharaoh is his faulty judgment, and his untrustworthiness when making promises. An example of these traits is found in Midrash Tanhuma ha-Nidpas (Va'era #16):

אמר לו משה: כך אמרת במכה הראשונה  
והתפללתי ולא שלחתם, למתי אעתיך לך  
ולעבדך, השיבו פרעה: חטאתי לה'  
אלהיכם ולכם. עכשיו אני משלחן. כששמע  
משה כך ויצא משה מעם פרעה את  
העיר ויפרש בפיו אל ה'

Moses, while talking to Pharaoh indicates his surprise that he, Pharaoh, did not release the Israelites after the first plague. Moses questions the prudence of Pharaoh's stubbornness. Pharaoh responds by acknowledging that he was wrong, and that indeed, he had sinned:

השיבו פרעה: חטאתי לה'  
אלהיכם ולכם עכשיו אני משלחן

"I have sinned before your God and to you and now I will send them out."

Based on Pharaoh's evil reputation, we know that he was not particularly oblidging and that, in fact, he had no intention of releasing the people that easily. Therefore, why was he pictured by the Rabbis as making that statement?

Perhaps the Rabbis wanted to show that he would change his mind as soon as he made the statement.

Evidence of Pharaoh's faulty judgment is found in Midrash Shemot Rabba (18:3):

הנקבות הבכורות אף הן מתות  
חוץ מבתיה בת פרעה שנמצא לה  
פרקליט טוב זה משה שנאמר:  
(שמות ב) ותרא אותו כי טוב הוא  
לפיכך אמר שלמה (מסלי לא:יה)  
שעמה כי טוב סחרה ותקם בעור  
ליטה.

In this passage about Bitia, the daughter of Pharaoh, the text speaks of Moses as a פרקליט - a "defense attorney." Concerning Pharaoh's daughter's discovery of Moses, the text observes:

מבתייה בת פרעה שנמצא לה  
פרקליט טוב זה משה

"Pharaoh's daughter found for herself someone to stand up for her, namely Moses." Through this citation, the Rabbis clearly understand that Pharaoh's daughter accepted Moses as a positive factor in the royal household. In contrast, why did Pharaoh question Moses' credentials? Had he not heard from his own daughter that Moses was a good and a well-meaning individual? Pharaoh would not accept the opinion of his own daughter who raised Moses from infancy and who could testify to his worth. Yet, as later history reveals, when Pharaoh and Moses met in Egypt, there is no mention made of Moses' childhood in Pharaoh's household. It was as though they were meeting for the first time.

The extent of Pharaoh's perception of his ego is demonstrated by a passage from Shemot Rabbah (18:1):

אמר לא פרעה עד מתי אתה  
נכנס לכאן, לך מעלי השמר לך  
אל תוסיף עוד ראות פני. אמר  
לו משה, יפה דברת לא אוסיף  
עוד ראות פניך.

This passage is relevant because of the phrase

"עד מתי אתה נכנס לכאן"

"How many times are you going to come here?" Again, in keeping with Pharaoh's inflated view of himself, it seems ironic that he should ask such a question. Moses would have no need to return over and over again unless Pharaoh insisted on it based on his refusal to meet certain demands made by Moses. Pharaoh is well aware of the total situation, yet persists. The Rabbis provide Moses with a reply to Pharaoh's inquiry:

יפה דברת, לא אוסיף עוד לראות פניך

"You have spoken correctly, I will not appear before you again." The implication is of a sarcastic nature, the words are spoken in a wishful manner indicating that Moses would not choose to appear before Pharaoh again.

In the Rabbinic view, Pharaoh is looked upon with disdain. This passage lends itself to the concept of Pharaoh's over inflated perception of himself.

## Part II: Moses

In contrast to Pharaoh's character, stands the personality of Moses. Moses is always characterized in the Bible as a great leader of the Jewish people, but rarely are his qualities as a human being stressed. He did not seek greatness, but rather had greatness thrust upon him. He did not approach Pharaoh with vengeance and hatred, but rather with humility and uncertainty. He did not derive pleasure from seeing his enemy fall, but rather was very reluctant to cause suffering to other human beings. With these major biblical considerations in mind, let us now explore the Rabbinic view of Moses' personality.

### A. Moses' Humility: Hesitancy to Meet Pharaoh

A primary example of the humility of Moses is found in Midrash Lekah Tov (Shemot 6:30):

ויאמר משה לפני ה' הן ערל שפתיים, שלשה  
פעמים אמר משה זה; הודור האחד. כי כבוד  
פה (שמות ד:י) ה' ואני ערל שפתיים  
(פסוק יב) והג' הן אני ערל שפתיים. כל כך  
למה? כדי שיהפוך מילולי לשון נחות.  
אמר לפניו: כב"שע אם אני הולך אצל פרעה  
ואני ערל שפתיים ואומר לי כי לא היה  
עבד טוב מסך לשלוח אלי. אמר לו  
הקב"ה.

The Rabbis stressed that Moses pointed out to God repeatedly that he had difficulty expressing himself: "שלשה פעמים"

"אמר משה זה" Moses said it three times. God was fully aware of Moses' shortcomings, yet Moses felt the need to reiterate

them. Moses was not so much concerned that he would not know what to say to Pharaoh. Rather he was concerned that he may not have been a worthy representative of the Lord.

As the text reflects:

אם אני הולך אצל פרעה  
ואני ערל שפתיים. ואומר לי  
"וכי לא היה עבד טוב ממך לשלוח אלי."

Moses voiced his anxiety about confronting Pharaoh on account of his speech problem. God then assured him that there was no servant as faithful as he, and He, God, would not hesitate to send him to Pharaoh.

Another example of the humility of Moses is found in the Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael (Bo)

"ויקרא למשה ולאחרון" מגיד שהיה  
פרעה מחזר ושואל בכל ארץ מצרים היכן  
משה ואחרון שרין?

One would think that, considering the great power that he possessed in relation to Pharaoh, Moses would stand over him until he, Pharaoh, met their demands. Yet, Moses did not think of himself in those terms. He was reticent to speak to Pharaoh and willing to wait his turn to appear before the king. How do we know that Moses did not pressure Pharaoh? The Rabbinic text informs us what happened:

שהיה פרעה מחזר ושואל בכל ארץ  
מצרים היכן משה ואחרון שרין?

Pharaoh was forced to inquire in all the land of Egypt as  
4  
to the whereabouts of Moses and Aaron?



## B. Moses: A Man of Human Qualities

One of Moses' most attractive traits as emphasized by the Rabbis is the fact that he possessed human qualities with which we can all identify. He was very human! We all feel more comfortable with people whom we feel are on the same level with us. They make mistakes. They are scolded. They experience fear. In Moses, we have such a character.

Moses' very human qualities are typified in Midrash Tanhuma Buber (Va'era 16):

"ויאמר ה' אל משה השכם  
בבקר וחתיצב לפני פרעה"  
(שמות ט:יג) אחז בו והודיעו  
שהוא בשר ודם. מה עשה משה?  
סיו כששאל הקב"ה השכם אל פרעה,  
אחז בו משה אמר: הנח לי  
שאעשה צרכי ואחרי כך אני מדבר  
עמך. אמר משה יש אלוה שהוא  
עושה צרכיו לפניך אמר לו  
הקב"ה: השכם בבקר והודיעו  
כי הוא בשר ודם.

The Almighty addresses His instructions to Moses, preparing him for the important mission to Egypt, and we read that Moses responded:

אמר הנח לי שאעשה צרכי ואחר כך  
מדבר עמך

Moses informs God that before he engages in conversation, he must attend to his personal needs. In addition, the Rabbis make sure to characterize Moses as only a human being. After the exchange between Moses and God, the passage states:

אמר לו הקב"ה השכם בבקר והודיעו כי  
הוא בשר ודם.

It appears to me that this phrase can be interpreted in three different ways: first, it is possible that God is asking Moses to rise early to meet Pharaoh and inform him that he is only human; second, it might be that God informs Moses not to forget the fact that he is only human; finally, Moses might be telling God not to expect too much because he, Moses, is only human. I think that the last interpretation is most probable: that it is Moses reminding God that he is only human and that he will do the best job he can acting as God's representative before Pharaoh.

In another illustration of the human qualities of Moses, the midrash states (Midrash Sekhel Tov (Va'era 7:1)):

"וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה רֵא רָאָה נִתְתִּיךָ  
אֱלֹהִים לְפָרְעֹה" רֵאָה בְּפֶה שֶׁחֵתְרָתָהּ  
בּוֹ עַד כֹּאֵן. כֹּל כֵּךְ כִּנְגְדוֹ וְלֹא יְכוּל  
לָךְ, אַתָּה רוֹאֵה שְׂאִימַתְךָ מוֹשְׁלֵת  
עָלֶיךָ כְּאִימַת יִכְאֲתוּ דַּהֲיִינוּ עֲבוּדָה  
זָרָה שְׁלֹא. וְאִם תִּמְצָא לֹמֵר שֶׁאַתָּה  
עָרַל שְׂפֵתִים: וְאַחֲרוֹן אַחֶיךָ יִהְיֶה  
נְבִיאָךְ. אַתָּה דוֹמֵה עַל פִּרְעֹה כְּאֵלוֹת.  
וְאַחֲרוֹן כְּנְבִיא אֱלֹהִים.

This is an interesting passage because it truly points to Moses' weakness as a human being. God scolds Moses for his hesitancy to meet Pharaoh and his inferiority complex. Moses is pictured as wanting to escape responsibility when it states:

וְאִם תִּמְצָא לֹמֵר שֶׁאַתָּה עָרַל שְׂפֵתִים וְאַחֲרוֹן  
אַחֶיךָ יִהְיֶה נְבִיאָךְ

God says: If you say you are one who has difficulty speaking, then Aaron will act as your spokesman. Of additional interest



is the phrase:

כמה שהתרסתי בו עד כאן

"Look how much you have resisted or avoided until now."

God and Moses are thus involved in a very close relationship in which God does not hesitate to point out faults to Moses. Moses, according to the Rabbis, responds to a difficult situation as would any human being, either by putting it off<sup>5</sup> or by finding an excuse why it cannot be faced and overcome.

### C. Moses: Becoming a Forceful Leader

Nevertheless, Moses overcame various character deficiencies to become a strong and forceful leader. The Midrash underscores this change and growth. A good example is found in Midrash HaGadol (Shemot 25):

ויאמר משה - גם אתה תתן בידינו  
זבחים ועולות, אתה זה פרעה. גם  
לרבות שריו ועבדיו, אמר להם: כלם  
אתם הולכים אלא לאלהכם חרי לכם  
אלף צאן, אלף בקר וכל שתדעו  
אמרו לו: אין אנו יודעין כמה אנו  
צריכין עד באנו שם.

This passage presents Moses in a strikingly different manner from the personality we have seen up to this point. Moses, the same man who claimed to have difficulty expressing himself, now is portrayed as saying:

ויאמר משה - גם אתה תתן בידינו  
זבחים ועולות

"Moses said: You will give us one thousand sheep, one

thousand cattle, and all that we shall require." Moses is not making a request; he is demanding that Pharaoh meet his requirements.

The final example is equally striking. It comes from the Midrash Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael (Bo Parashah 13):

וַיֹּאמֶר קוֹמּוּ צֵאוּ סָתוּךְ עִמִּי אִמְרָ לֹ  
מֹשֶׁה מוֹזְהָרִין אֲנִי שְׁלֵא לְצֵאתָ אֵלָא  
בְּפִרְהֶסְיָא, שְׁנֹאמְרִי: וְאַתָּם לֹא תֵצְאוּ  
אִישׁ בְּפֶתַח בֵּיתוֹ עַד בֶּקֶר.

Here again Moses is forceful. Pharaoh seems to be on the verge of letting the people go. But Moses is not satisfied. If Pharaoh does agree to release the people, the release must be according to Moses' conditions. The text states:

אִמְרָ לֹ מֹשֶׁה מוֹזְהָרִין אֲנִי שְׁלֵא לְצֵאתָ  
אֵלָא בְּפִרְהֶסְיָא

"Moses said, we have been warned to go out except in broad daylight in public." Although humble and unsure, Moses has gained enough confidence to stand up to the king of Egypt. The Rabbis have actually altered the biblical passage in order to make their point.

וְאַתָּם לֹא תֵצְאוּ אִישׁ בְּפֶתַח בֵּיתוֹ עַד  
בֶּקֶר

From what might have been a royal edict by Pharaoh, we now see an emphasis upon the strength of Moses. Moses is now pictured as insisting: "We will hold our ground until  
6  
we are ready to leave."

The Rabbinic views of Moses and Pharaoh are geared towards setting a mode of behavior. Pharaoh is the classic example of an individual who appears to have authority, self-confidence, and wealth, but when put to the test, he fails. His oversized opinion of himself ultimately is cause for his destruction. The Rabbis indicate: Do not follow Pharaoh's example.

The Rabbinic view of Moses is opposite. He started from a humble background, experienced uncertainties about accepting God's task but saw it through as a growing experience. Moses underrated himself but was better for it. Of the two portraits presented, the Rabbis are indicating that it is more advisable to be like Moses.

## Notes: Chapter 1

1. Other passages which reflect the same motif include Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael (parasha Bo 13; Midrash HaGadol, Shemot 5:4; Tanhuma Buber Va'era 12; Midrash Shemot Rabbah 18:4.
2. See also Midrash HaGadol Shemot 13:3.
3. For a parallel passage, see Midrash Yalkut Shemoni Va'era #7.
4. Other passages which speak of the humanity of Moses are: Tanhuma (Buber) Bamidbar 2; Tanhuma Va-Ayra, 10; Exodus Rabbah 15:15.
5. In this regard see also: Canticles Rabbah 1:10.
6. See these additional passages: Lekah Tov Va'era 8:5; Exodus Rabbah 4:4; Yalkut Shemoni Va'era: 7.

**Chapter II: The Actual Confrontation:  
God versus Pharaoh**

## Chapter II: The Actual Confrontation: God Versus Pharaoh

### A. God: The Real Power in the Confrontation

Reading the Midrash can indeed be a most enjoyable exercise. However, to see it only as an exercise would be to miss the purpose that the Rabbis had in mind.

Each element in the Bible, each word, each grammatical form is interpreted with a purpose - to relate a particular concept or idea to the reader. The Rabbis skillfully derive "hidden" meanings from the biblical text and use these to indicate values to their constituents. In the use of the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh, the Rabbis elicit a deeper meaning beneath the surface of the biblical narrative.

Though it might appear that Moses is the moving force behind the confrontation, it is actually God who determines what action should be taken and when. This concept of God as the real power behind the confrontation is represented in a passage from Midrash Lekah Tov (Bo 10:1):

ויאמר ה' אל משה: בא  
אל פרעה כי אני הכבדתי  
את לבו. שאמר ואני אקרא  
אל לב פרעה (שמות י:ג). אמר  
ריש לקיש: בא ליטמא פותחין  
לו, כיון שהכביר פרעה את  
לבו, אמר הקב"ה: זו אני  
הכבדתי את לבו. הוא התחיל  
מעשה כבודות ואני אוסיף לו  
כבירות וטפשות...

In this citation, God clearly emerges as the force behind the confrontation. He instructs Moses to appear before Pharaoh,

because, He, God, has hardened Pharaoh's heart, and He, God, will continue to maintain that attitude in Pharaoh. It is at this point that the Rabbinic manipulation of the text embellishes the original intent of the biblical narrative by adding:

הוא התחיל מעשה כבודות ואני  
אוסף לו כבודות וטפשות

Pharaoh's inclination might have been swayed in that direction, but it was through the direct and willfull desire of God that this attitude was enhanced.

A good indication of the extent of God's influence in the confrontation is found in Shemot Rabbah (15:11):

בשביל מי נגלה הקב"ה בשביל  
עצמו. משל לבן בית שנתפס  
על ידי בעל מלאכתו ונחבש.  
אמר לו אדוני: אל תירא אני  
בא ומוציאך. שלח עבדו והוציאו  
ולא רצה הפונדקי לשלחו. אמר  
יפה עשה הפונדקי שאני אמרתי  
לו אני מוציאו ולא פקדתי שאת  
משלח את עבדי. כך אמר הקב"ה  
לאברהם עתידין הן בניך להשתעבד  
במצרים ואחר כך אני גואלן שנאמר:  
(בראשית טו) "ידוע תדע כי גר יהיה  
זרעך וכתוב (שם) "גם את הגוי  
אשר יעבדו דן אנכי" שלח  
הקב"ה משה לגואלן ולא רצה פרעה  
אמר הקב"ה: כראוי עשה פרעה  
כי אני אמרתי לאברהם דן אנכי:  
לא אמרתי אלא (תהלים פא)  
אנכי ה' אלהיך המעלך מארץ  
מצרים.

This passage strikes at the roots of the confrontation. It indicates without question that no matter what the appearance, it is God who is the final judge in all matters, including

the procedure for the release of the Israelites from Egypt.  
Proof of God's dominant role is underscored by the phrase:

כראוי עשה פרעה אמרתי לאברהם  
דן אנכי

'Pharaoh acted as he was expected to  
for I told Abraham that I am the judge'.

God fully expects that Pharaoh will not respond to Moses.  
The final determination will be in God's hands.

Additional evidence that God played a major role in the  
confrontation comes from another citation from Midrash Lekah  
Tov (Bo 11:9):

"ויאמר ה' אל משה לא ישמע  
אליכם פרעה. זה הדבור קודם  
לכן נאמר לו למשה רבינו  
ולא ישמע אליכם פרעה, שנאמר  
ואני ידעתי כי לא יתן אתכם  
מלך מצרים להולך (שמות ג: יט)

The Rabbis build on the statement in the biblical text and  
emphasized the notion of God's insight into the events of  
the confrontation. Again, as was shown in the previous passage,  
they (the Rabbis) stress that Pharaoh will not respond until  
He, God, makes that determination. In this case, the Rabbis  
stress God's dominant role in the confrontation by playing on  
the biblical verse in Exodus 3:19:

שנאמר: ואני ידעתי כי לא  
יתן אתכם מלך מצרים להולך

"As it says: 'I know that the king of  
Egypt will not allow you to leave.'"

The conclusion that is derived from these, and similar  
passages is the fact that God is carrying out a 'master-plan'



in His conduct of the confrontation episode. He knows what He is doing, and each action taken by Him is purposeful and meaningful.<sup>1</sup>

In carrying out a 'master-plan', God controls every aspect of the plan. Pharaoh is a key figure in God's plan. We know of Pharaoh's evil inclination. The Rabbis take advantage of that to display the way in which God is able to utilize Pharaoh's evil nature for His own ends. This idea is exemplified in a citation from Pesikta d'Rav Kahana (Piska 11:1):

את מוצא כיון שבא משה אצל  
פרעה ואמר לו: "כה אמר ה'  
שלח עמי ויעבדוני" אמר אותו  
רשע: מי ה' אשר אשמע בקולו לא  
ידעתי את ה' וגם את ישראל  
לא אשלח. "הפה שאמר סי ה'  
אשר אשמע בקולו חזר ואמר  
ה' הצדיק ופרעה ועמו הרשעים.  
הפה שאמר: "לא ידעתי את ה'  
וגם את ישראל לא אשלח" הוא  
היה מחזר על היכליהם של ישר  
ואמר צאו לשלום לכו לשלום.  
לכך נאמר: ויהי בשלח פרעה  
את העם.

In this passage we come to understand the reality of the situation: God controls Pharaoh. Pharaoh is for God the 'agent' through whom He can operate, and through him the Rabbis emphasize two things. First, they again stress Pharaoh's wickedness. Note how they continue to use the terms רשע ('evil-one') and פרעה (Pharaoh) interchangeably. Second, they show that God controls Pharaoh's actions. The degree of God's ability to do so is far-reaching. The Rabbis remind the reader of Pharaoh's original attitude and underscore his

change of heart in the following manner:

הפה שאמר מי ה' אשר אשמע  
בקולו חזר ואמר ה' הצדק ופרעה  
ועמו הרשעים.

"The same lips that said: Who is this God that I should listen to Him' returned and said: 'God is the just one and Pharaoh and his people are wicked.'"

This complete change in attitude, according to the Rabbis, could only have taken place if God was in control. That control extended even to the inner thoughts and actions of Pharaoh. In demonstrating God's ability to sway Pharaoh's thoughts, the Rabbis have also provided evidence that ultimately Pharaoh will acknowledge and recognize God's authority.

In Midrash Shemot Rabbah 9:2 we have additional proof that God's control of Pharaoh is a further display of God's power:

אמר לו הקב"ה פרעה רשע הוא  
אם אומר לכם תנו מופת הכה  
אותו אל אהרון קח את פסך  
והשלך לפני פרעה יהי  
לתנין.

This passage demonstrates how the Rabbis emphasized that God anticipated (caused) Pharaoh's demand for a proof of the existence of the God of Israel. As has been discussed, everything that God says and does has a purpose. He would not have sent the rod with Aaron nor given him the ability to change it into a snake, if He did not think that Aaron would use it. On the contrary. God was the cause of Pharaoh's requiring

a sign of proof. Knowing then that Pharaoh would demand a sign, God utilized the request to demonstrate His power.

#### B. Moses: God's Messenger

Having established God as the moving force behind Pharaoh in particular, and in the confrontation, in general, the role of Moses must be more clearly defined. We have already seen how God had to go to great lengths to convince Moses to accept his mission. In fact, God did not give Moses a choice. He commanded him to go to Egypt and appear before Pharaoh.

The Rabbis emphasize how God tried to increase Moses' credibility as His messenger. This is illustrated in the following citation from Midrash Lekah Tov (Va'erah 7:1):

ראה נתתיך אלהים לפרעה אף  
על פי שאתה ערל שפתיים  
אלהים אתה לפרעה, שהרי ניסי  
אלהינו כך הם: הברזל צף לפני  
העץ, והמים חמרים נסתקו בעץ  
דפנא, וכן ביסי אלישע במלח  
כיפא המים הרעים, כדי לעשות  
נס בתוך נס.

Although it is clear that God performs the miracles, it is Moses' implementation of them that made an impression on Pharaoh. The phrase used in the text:

אלהים אתה לפרעה

'You are as a god to Pharaoh'

served two purposes: First, it emphasized that Moses was God's representative on the mission. Second, it underscored to Pharaoh the importance with which the meeting was seen by the

God of Israel. The reader who may have previously been concerned with the question of how Moses would appear as a god-figure to Pharaoh, has now been supplied with the answer. Moses is God's 'agent' to Pharaoh, and is thought of by Pharaoh as his equal. In truth, the confrontation to which we are witness is a show of strength between two deities: Pharaoh the god of Egypt and the God of Israel. The fact that Moses is known to have had difficulty expressing himself is an even greater demonstration of the underlying theme of God as the real force behind the confrontation.

Aside from attributing a certain degree of status to Moses, this passage also emphasizes some of the miracles of which God is capable.

הברזל צף לפני העץ

'Iron floating on water'

and

המים המרים נמתקו

'Bitter waters turned sweet'

A man could not achieve these acts alone. They require the assistance of a supernatural force that is beyond human comprehension. It is with this thought in mind that the passage ends as it does:

כדי לעשות נס בתוך נס

'In order that one miracle be provided within another'.

Just as God enabled men to do these miracles, so, too, he lent His support to a common man, in the person of Moses.

Not only is he a common man, but he is cast in a role for which, he himself declares, he is totally unfit; the role of an articulate spokesman. Yet, he is placed on equal terms with a king. -

The portrayal of Moses as God's messenger is a vital theme in the Rabbinic construction of the confrontation story. A further demonstration of this motif is found in Midrash Sekhel Tov (Va'era 7:19):

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה: אֲמֹר אֶל  
 אֲהֲרֹן קַח מִטֶּבֶל שִׁנְתִּי לָךְ, וְאַתָּה  
 מִשָּׁה בַעֲצֶמֶךָ נִטָּה אֶת יָדְךָ עַל סִימִי  
 מִצִּרִּים בִּיד וְלֹא בַמֶּסֶה.

In this instance, Moses is clearly acting as God's messenger. Moses is given a set of instructions and requested to carry them out. It makes sense that in as much as it is pointed out by the Rabbis that God provided the rod, He should be credited with the miracle that results from it. And so we can deduce that the transformation of Aaron's rod into a snake is no mere work of magic but an exhibition of God's might transmitted through Moses His messenger. There is a distinction drawn in this passage between that which God will do and that which is to be delegated to Moses. As is stated by the text:

וְאַתָּה מִשָּׁה בַעֲצֶמֶךָ נִטָּה אֶת יָדְךָ  
 עַל סִימִי מִצִּרִּים בִּיד וְלֹא  
 בַמֶּסֶה.

It is evident that the relationship between God and Moses has reached an important stage, as is pointed out by God's instructions: The transformation of the sea into blood will

be done by Moses himself. It seems important for the Rabbis to emphasize that God will seemingly allow Moses to be recognized in his own right. The use of the terminology:

וְאַתָּה מֹשֶׁה בְּעַצְמְךָ

'You alone Moses...'

indicates that in this instance God is willing to assume a position in the background so that Moses can receive his due<sup>2</sup> for having performed so nobly in the service of his God.

### C. The Role of Pharaoh

In light of the discussion presented in this chapter, the role of Pharaoh is most interesting. Pharaoh is portrayed in the biblical text as a confident leader of his people. To the Egyptians, Pharaoh is god and king. As king, his word is law and his people must accept it.

The impact of God's influence in the confrontation is enhanced by the Rabbis' portrayal of Pharaoh as the wicked antagonist. By emphasizing his evil qualities, they could better illustrate the positive qualities of God. For the Rabbis, Pharaoh represented more than just a character in a play. He was a paradigm of the wicked, secular authority that the Jews encountered in both Palestine and Babylonia. The Rabbis' task, as they understood it, was to convince their constituents that in spite of all the suffering that the people of Israel had experienced, belief in the God of Israel was still the best option. Even if conditions looked hopeless, even



if it looked as though the God of Israel had forsaken His people following the destruction and defeat of 70 C.E. and 135 C.E., in fact God would return as a shield of protection in the very near future.

God's ability to convince even the wicked Pharaoh of His power and righteousness is illustrated in the following citation:

אמר אותו רשע: "מי ה'  
 אשר אשמע בקולו לא ידעתי  
 את ה' וגם את ישראל לא  
 אשלח". הפה שאמר: "מי ה'  
 אשר אשמע בקולו חזר ואמר  
 ה' הצדיק ופרעה ועמו הרשעים.<sup>3</sup>

The Rabbis exploit Pharaoh's wickedness to prove that even the stubborn Pharaoh eventually will come to acknowledge God's righteousness. If that is so, certainly persecuted Jews could retain the hope that God would ultimately save them.

The perception of Pharaoh as a god by the Egyptians allowed the Rabbis to display the unlimited nature of God's ability to save. In a passage from Midrash Vayosha,<sup>4</sup> God's capacity to intercede is illustrated:

ראה נתתיך אלהים לפרעה  
 למי שעשה עצמו אלהים  
 הודעו שאינו כלום, הריני  
 עושה אותך אלהים עליו.

God recognizes that Pharaoh is, in the eyes of the Egyptians, a god-like figure. He therefore instructs Moses to appear before Pharaoh and to inform him that, in reality, he is not a god. This is an example where God allowed Pharaoh to adhere

to a certain mode of behavior until He felt he was going too far. At that point, God sent Moses to put a stop to it. Just as the Rabbis emphasized that God was able to limit Pharaoh's power, He also would make His presence felt and put an end to Jewish suffering in their day. Pharaoh thought he was a god, but in reality, there is no equal to the God of Israel.

Another illustration of God's tempering of Pharaoh's conceit is found in Midrash HaGadol:<sup>5</sup>

ויקרא פרעה למשה ולאהרן אמרו  
עליו על פרעה הרשע שנעטר  
בבגדי מלכות וישב על כסאו  
וכל גדולי מלכות לפניו.  
ובאותו שעה נזדמנו להם צפרדעים  
והיו נכנסין מטבעתו ויוצאין  
מפיו וכל אכלוסיו כך לקיים  
"ובך ובעמך". והיה הצפרדע  
קורא ממעי פרעה ועונין לו  
חביריו ממעי אכלוסיו וגדוליו.  
וצפרדע אמר לחביריו: אימתי נצא  
מיכאן ועונין צפרדעים זה, לזה עד  
שיבוא בן עמרם ויתפלל בעדונן. לכן  
"ויקרא פרעה למשה ולאהרן".

Pharaoh is pictured as sitting in the castle and adorned with regal garments. Suddenly frogs enter his kingdom. The frogs are even pictured as entering Pharaoh's body and escaping through his mouth. They also entered the bodies of the people and their screams were heard throughout the land. Again, the Rabbis stress that although Pharaoh assumed the role of king, God did not hesitate to remind Pharaoh that in the confrontation between two "Gods", the God of Israel was far superior.

The final citation illustrates even more clearly that the God of Israel will ultimately rule supreme. The selection



from Midrash VaYosha underscores God's capacity to strike at  
 6  
 the core of Pharaoh's authority:

מקודם באה המכות על  
 אלהיהם ועל צלמיהם אותן  
 שהיו של כסף וזהב  
 ונחושת וברזל ועופרת  
 נתוכין ונמסין וכל צלמים  
 של עץ נרקבים ונשברין.

In this passage, the point is poignantly made that before God imposed the tenth plague upon the Egyptians, He made sure to destroy the idols and the graven images found in Egypt. God's skillful display of might was for the Rabbis the decisive blow which brought about His victory in the confrontation. As God had destroyed the statues in Egypt, and as He had diminished Pharaoh's power in his eyes and in the eyes of his people, so too would He rule supreme in the world as the one and only God. The gods of all other peoples and religions would appear to be nought compared to Him!

In summary, the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh was embellished by the Rabbis through their interpretation of the biblical narrative. The meeting between these two characters involved three distinct elements: God as the real source of power in the confrontation; the role of Moses as God's messenger, and lastly, the role of Pharaoh as the wicked antagonist. All of these ingredients are essential to the Rabbinic reconstruction of the confrontation story and the Rabbis message of hope to the Jews of their day.

-- The confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh was, in fact,

a struggle between two forces: The God of Israel and Pharaoh, the God/King of Egypt. The God of Israel represents that which is good in the world, while Pharaoh portrays the evil inherent in the world. It was the Rabbis' intention to underscore the victory of the good over the evil.

## NOTES: Chapter II

1. For further evidence of God as the real source of power in the confrontation see:  
Aggadat Bereshit, Shemot 10:2; Midrash HaGadol Shemot 10:1;  
Midrash Lekah Tov Va'erah 7:9; Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael  
Beshalach parashah 13.
2. Additional references to Moses as the messenger of God to Pharaoh can be found in:  
Midrash Shemot Rabbah 20:1; Midrash Sekhel Tov Va'era  
7:26; Midrash Lekah Tov va'era 7:26.
3. Pesikta d'Rav Kahana (piska 11:1).
4. Otzar Midrashim vol. 1, p.152.
5. Midrash HaGadol to Shemot 8:4.
6. Otzar Midrashim vol. 1, p. 152.

Chapter III: The Significance of the  
Plagues in the Confrontation

### Chapter III: The Significance of the Plagues in the Confrontation

In the preceding chapters we have seen how the Rabbis emphasize that God was the source of Moses' power and the prime mover behind Pharaoh's actions. In addition, emphasis has been placed on the wonders the Almighty could accomplish were He so obliged. The vital question that must now be examined is: How did the God of Israel actually demonstrate his power to both the Egyptians and the Israelites?

God's method of presentation is important because of the circumstances of the confrontation episode. The Israelites were surrounded by alien gods. They constantly viewed graven images and were exposed to foreign worship. If in fact this One God was to convince a down trodden people that He had come to save them and offer them something better. He had to produce evidence that such an alternative was possible. He could not accomplish this through promises; he would fail were He to attempt feats simply equal to those of the Egyptian magicians. Therefore, the God of Israel was obliged to prove to both the Egyptians and the Israelites that His power extended beyond anything they had ever seen.

The implementation of the Ten Plagues should be seen in the context of the dramatic demonstration of God's salvational power. Therefore, according to the Rabbis, they were carefully planned actions directed towards a two-level goal: First, the plagues were to provide a concrete sign of God's power. Following the plagues, there is no longer any

doubt concerning the capabilities of the God of Israel. Second, the impact of His power was so strong that it would force the other nations to acknowledge and recognize God's power.

#### A. The Demonstration of God's Awesome Power

As pointed out earlier, the plagues are intended to demonstrate God's power. This theme is illustrated in the following passage from Midrash Va-Yosha:

יְמִינָךְ ה' נֹאדָר בְּכֹחַ -  
אָמַר חֲזִ"ל: בְּשַׁעָה שֶׁבִּיאָה  
הַקִּבְ"ה מְכוּת בְּכוּרוֹת עַל  
הַמִּצְרִיִּים בְּמִצְרַיִם מְקוּדָם  
בָּאָה הַמְכוּת עַל אֱלֹהֵיהֶם  
וְעַל צִלְמֵיהֶם, אוֹתָן שֶׁהֵיוּ שֶׁל  
כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב וְנִחְשׁוֹת וּבְדִיף  
וְעוֹשֶׁת נְתוּכִין וְנִמְסִין וְכָל  
צִלְמֵים שֶׁל עֵץ נִרְקָבִים וְנִשְׁבָּכִין.  
כִּשְׂרָאָה פָּרַע כֶּךָ, עַמִּד בְּחַצִּי  
הַלַּיְלָה וְקִרְאָה לְמֹשֶׁה וּלְאַהֲרֹן וַעֲצֵק  
וְהוֹלֵךְ בְּכָל חֲצוֹת מִצְרַיִם וְאָמַר  
הֵיכָן מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן עִמָּדִין?

Up to this point, the Rabbis have presented Pharaoh as a rather obstinate individual. He was unwilling to free the Israelites regardless of what Moses would say or do.

This excerpt, which is introduced by the biblical phrase (Ex. 15:6):

יְמִינָךְ ה' נֹאדָר בְּכֹחַ

'God's right hand is wondrous in power', reflects a basic change in Pharaoh's attitude. This change occurs as a result of Pharaoh's experiencing God's power when his first-born is killed and the Egyptian gods are destroyed. According to the Rabbis, when bringing about the destruction of the first-

born, God first abolished the foundation of Pharaoh's power:

מְקוֹדֵם בָּאָה חֲמֹת עַל אֱלֹהֵיהֶם וְעַל  
צִלְמֵיהֶם

'First, the plagues (struck down) their gods and their images.' Before the full impact of the plagues was felt by the people and the animals, their force was brought against the very pillars of Egyptian belief- the idols and images in which the people of Egypt placed their faith. The God of Israel, in performing this deed, strongly indicated that He intended to rule supreme over all other gods.

As a result of the defeat of his gods, Pharaoh was in a state of panic. He sensed that he had been beaten:

כַּשְׂרָאָה פָּרַעַה כֵּךְ, עָמַד בַּחֲצִי  
הַלַּיְלָה וּקְרָאָה לְמֹשֶׁה וּלְאַהֲרֹן  
וַיִּצְעַק וַהֲוִלֵךְ בְּכָל חֲצוֹת  
מִצְרַיִם וַאֲמַר הִיכָן מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן  
עוֹמְדִין.

'When Pharaoh saw this, he arose in the middle of the night and summoned Moses and Pharaoh and he screamed in every passageway in Egypt and inquired as to the whereabouts of Moses and Aaron.'

Pharaoh started the search calmly enough, but as he began to grasp the magnitude of God's might, he grew uneasy and became excited, as is indicated by the terminology:

"וַיִּצְעַק וַהֲוִלֵךְ בְּכָל חֲצוֹת מִצְרַיִם" God's power was no longer a mere threat or possibility; it had now become a reality with which Pharaoh had to cope.

Further proof that the plagues were symbolic of God's power is located in Midrash HaGadol Shemot 9:27:



וישלך פרעה ויקרא למשה  
ולאחריו ויאמר אליהם חטאתי הפעם  
כיון שראה אש וברד נלחמים כאחד לא  
אש מלחכת את הברד ולא ברד  
מכבה את האש. מיד היצה ואומר:  
"ה' הצדיק" הוא שהצדיק בן  
בריותיו והשלוםס זה לזה.

Once again, the Rabbis emphasized the change in Pharaoh's attitude as a result of his seeing for himself what God could accomplish:

כיון שראה אש וברד נלחמים  
כאחד

'Because he saw the fire and hail fighting as one.' This passage reflects perhaps the ultimate combination of might and wisdom which makes God's power so superior to that of the other gods. Pharaoh observed that these two opposite forces, namely fire and hail, were able to co-exist. In doing so, they also carried out God's will. Pharaoh was forced to re-examine his position. He now admits: "חטאתי הפעם" 'I have sinned this time.' Pharaoh sees God's power and is aware of what He can do. This statement implies that Pharaoh understands that he has misjudged God's power. He had indeed miscalculated the ability and the resolve of his enemy. Another sign that Pharaoh had come to acknowledge God's power is shown by another phrase from the same passage:

מיד הוצה ואומר: "ה' הצדיק" -  
הוא שהצדיק בן בריותיו והשלוםס  
זה לזה

"At once, he (Pharaoh) acknowledged and said: God is the



just one, He that causes His creatures to live in harmony."

The term **מִיָּד** -immediately is significant because it reflects a sense of urgency in Pharaoh's mind. He must immediately acknowledge God's power. According to the Rabbis, it was God's ability to bring harmony to two such contrasting natural forces that convinced Pharaoh to change his mind.<sup>2</sup>

On the basis of Pharaoh's inherent evil reputation, one might conclude that the force of the fire and hail as part of the plagues had to have been overwhelming to have caused such a complete change in his attitude. The Rabbis leave it to the reader to imagine the actual power and extent of the plagues.

The view that God's power is superior to that of any other god is further supported by a passage from Midrash Lekah Tov (Va'era 6:29):

"וידבר ה' אל משה לאמר:  
אני ה', דבר אל פרעה פלך מצרים  
את כל אשר אני דובר אליך" שלשה  
דברות בפסוק אחד, כנגד שלשה אותות  
הראשונים.

Of special interest in this passage in this phrase is:

'The first three signs' "שלשה אותות הראשונים"

The first three signs are understood by the Rabbis to be the first three plagues, namely:

'Blood, frogs, and lice'

דם, צפרדע, כנים

The use of the term אות -sign is also significant. 'Sign' is being used interchangeably with the word 'plague.' The concept reflected in the text that a sign is needed buttresses the idea that the plagues are the focus of God's power.

God understood that in order to convince the Egyptians of His power, He had to directly involve Pharaoh. God's intention to affect Pharaoh directly is revealed in the following selection from Pesikta d'Rav Kahana (7:7):

מכּוּר פּרעה (שמות יב:כט),  
מכּוּר שפרעה היה בכּוּר  
נתכנסו כל הבכורים אצל  
אבתיהם. אמרו להם בנין דאמר  
משה ומת וכל בכּוּר (שם יא:ה)  
כל מהדאמר על הליון עמא אתא  
עליהון, אלא איתון ונפיק אלין  
עברייא מביניכון ואי לא הליון  
עמא פיייתון. אמרו: "בנים לחד  
מנא ימות חד מנהון ולא תקום  
על אלין עבריא." אמרין, כל סמא  
דמילתא ניזיל גבי פּרעה דהוא  
בכּוּר, דלמא הוא חיים על נפשיה  
ונפיק אלין עבריא מבינינן,  
הלכו להם אצל פּרעה, אמרו לו,  
בנין דאמר משה ומת כל בכּוּר בארץ  
מצרים, וכל דאמר על הליון עמא אתא  
עליהון, אלא קום ואפיק אלין עברייא  
מבינן ואי לא הליון עמא פיייתון.  
אמרו דאו וקפחו שוקיהם של אליו, אנא  
אמר נפשי נפשתון דאילין עבראי,  
ואותן אומרין הכדין. מיד יצאו  
הבכורות והרגו באבתיהם ששים  
כבוא,

3

Translated into English, the citation reads:

"All the first-born gathered around their fathers and pleaded with them: 'Now that Moses has said: 'All the first-born in the land of Egypt shall die (Ex 11:5) and all he had predicted heretofore concerning the Egyptian people had befallen them, we must bestir ourselves and

get the Hebrews out of our midst, else the Egyptian people will die.' The fathers replied: 'Each one of us has ten sons: Let one of them die just so the Hebrews not be permitted to go out! The first-borns then said: There is no way to settle this matter, let us go to Pharaoh, himself a first-born, who may take pity upon himself and let the Hebrews go out of our midst.'

Pharaoh cannot be objective in his action. He has now become directly involved. The passage gives basis to the confrontation because on one hand Pharaoh wants the Israelites to remain enslaved. On the other hand, God makes known His weapon: the killing of the first-born. God now involves Pharaoh directly in His demonstration of power. Pharaoh is forced to weigh the importance of retaining the Israelites as slaves in comparison to the preservation of his own life and that of his first-born son. The Rabbis portray Pharaoh in a state of desperation as a result of the plagues. As a witness to God's awesome power, little remains for Pharaoh to do but retreat from his steadfast position and recognize God's superiority.

Pharaoh's frustration and desperation are best exemplified<sup>4</sup> by a passage from Midrash HaGadol:

וִיקְרָא פֶּרַעַה אֶל מֹשֶׁה  
וְאָהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמֶר לָכֵן זָבִיתִי  
לְאַלְהֵיכֶם בָּאֶרֶץ. מִלֵּמַד שֶׁהִיא  
מִתְעוּלָּל עִמָּהֶם כִּמְהָ עֲלִילָה  
וּמִשְׁתַּדֵּל לַעֲשׂוֹת תְּשׁוּבָה, וְלִשְׁלֹחַם,  
וְאֵינוּ יָכוֹל, שֶׁכֵּבֵד נִמְנָע הַתְּשׁוּבָה.  
נִמְנָע מִתְנַמֵּץ וּמִתְעַקֵּל עַל כָּל מִכָּה וּמִכָּה.

This passage reflects the fact that Pharaoh wanted to let the people go, but he wasn't able to do so. He was very

distressed! The aloof leader, who earlier refused to recognize the power of a rather unfamiliar God, will now consent to almost anything in order to rid himself and his people of a menace that has become all too familiar.

There are a number of fascinating statements contained in this selection. Pharaoh says:

לכו זביתו לאלהיכם בארץ

'Go and sacrifice to your God in this land.' Having seen the -'wild beasts' and sensing that his very life might be endangered, Pharaoh now allows Moses and the Israelites to worship their God in Egypt.

According to the Rabbis, Pharaoh is even prepared to repent from his wrongdoing. This notion is shown by the words:

"משתדל לעשות תשובה"

'He (Pharaoh) tried to repent.'

The scenario, according to the Rabbis, was meant to proceed on a certain course. First, as has been discussed in earlier chapters, Pharaoh was portrayed as stubborn and immovable. As the plan progressed, God's might manifested itself, forcing Pharaoh into submission. He wants to repent but has wrought such evil that repentance is impossible.

"ואינו יכול שכבר נמנע התשובה"

Pharaoh has now reached a point of desperation: He cannot achieve repentance, for at this point any opportunity for forgiveness has vanished.

This passage concludes with the following statement:

נמצא מתנמק ומתעקל על כל מכה ומכה

the implication being that even though Pharaoh truly wanted to repent, he found it hard to accomplish it. It was something that was not in the make-up of his character. Each plague seemed to underline Pharaoh's twisted character which made repentance difficult, if not impossible.

Hence, the plagues are also indicators of the extent of Pharaoh's sinister character. Pharaoh's wickedness outlasted God's patience. Using the plague motif in which the punishment was only gradually increased, the Rabbis illustrated that God, in His mercy, gave Pharaoh ample opportunity to repent, though he was unable to do so.

Simply stated, the Rabbis see the plagues as a demonstration of God's ultimate power and, at the same time,<sup>5</sup> Pharaoh's inclination for evil.

#### B. The Impact of the Plagues on Pharaoh

We have already seen that a recurring theme in rabbinic literature is the direct impact of the plagues on Pharaoh. The best illustration of this motif is found in Shemot

Rabbah 20:1:

התחיל הקב"ה אומר למשה אמור  
לפרעה שלח עמי ויעבדוני. הלך  
ואמר לו. התחיל אומר מי ה' אשר  
אשמע בקולו. התחיל משה ואמר  
לקב"ה הרי הוא אומר: מי ה' ואינו  
רוצה לשלח. אמר לו: היכן מצרים

שותים. אמר לו מנילוס. אמר לו  
 הפוך אותו לדם. אמר לו איני  
 יכול להפכו יש אדם שותה מן הבאר  
 ומשליך אבן לתוכה. אמר לו ילך  
 אהרון והכהו ויהפכו. הלך אהרון  
 והכהו ונהפך לדם. ולמה לא הכה  
 אותו משה אמר אני נשלחתי לתוכה  
 ולא הזיקני ובשביל כן הכה אהרון.  
 התחילו המצרים מבקשים לשתות ולא  
 היו מוצאין. חזר ואמר שלח עמי  
 ולא רצה. אמר לו היכן בהמתו רועה  
 במדבר שלח עליהן ברד ושיבר כל עץ  
 שלהם ושרף את הכל שנאמר: (שמות ט):  
 ויהי ברד ואש מתלקחת וגו'. ואחר  
 כך שלח להם ארבה ואכל כל ירק העץ.  
 ונטל מקל ושרף כל בהמות שנאמר:  
 הנה יד ה' הויה וגו'. הביא עליו  
 כל המכות ולא רצה לשלחם ואמר כך  
 נשל בנו וחבשו שנאמר: (שמות יב)  
 וה' הנה כל בכור. באותה שעה אמר  
 קומו צאו. רדף אחריהם תפשו וחבשו  
 בצד בנו שנאמר וניער פרעה והילו  
 בים סוף התחיל פרעה אומר ולואי  
 לא שלחתיים. והם אומרים ראה איש  
 שעמד בדבריו שמשלחן הרי הורגו הוי  
 (משלי כו) ושבת לגו כסילים. למה  
 נאמר בהם שבת. לפי שכל מכות  
 הראשונים לא הרגישו עד שהביא  
 עליהן את השחין שכן איוב אומר  
 (איוב ט) יסר מעלי שבטו. לכך נאמר  
 ושבת לגו כסילים. אמר פרעה הרי  
 לקו עמי והרג את בני והרי בניו  
 יוצאין כיון ששלחם התחיל קורא  
 וי וי הוי ויהי בשלח פרעה.

This citation is very significant since it exemplifies  
 and emphasizes the place of the plagues in the confrontation.  
 The Rabbis clearly indicate that until the tenth plague,  
 Pharaoh maintained an unyielding position: God turned the  
 drinking water to blood, caused fire to destroy trees; yet



nothing would alter Pharaoh's posture. The text then attests to a radical change which came only after God exhibited a final show of strength which affected Pharaoh.

ואחר כך נטל בנו וחבשו

'And following that he took his son and detained him'

It was only after God took action which directly affected Pharaoh and the people he loved that he wept in regret about the things he had done. It took the cumulative effect of the first nine plagues and, finally, the slaying of the first born to make Pharaoh realize that he should have released the Israelites much sooner.

### C. The Plagues: A Military Confrontation

The Rabbis occasionally portray the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh in highly militaristic terms. Perhaps the most graphic example of this is found in a passage from Midrash Tanhuma HaNidpas (parasha Bo #4):

ארז"ל כשקסין של מלכים הביא  
הקמה עליהן את המכות מלך בשר  
ודם כשמדינה מורדת עליו משלח  
עליה לגיונות ומקיפים אותה בתחלה  
סור אמת המים שלהם חזרו. מוטב.  
ואם לאו מביא עליהם קלאניות חזרו  
מוטב ואם לאו יורה בהם חצים. חזרו  
והרי מוטב. ואמר לו מביא עליהם  
ברבריים. חזרו מוטב. ואמר לו  
מביא עלינם דורמוסיות. חזרו  
מוטב ואם לאו זורק בהם נפל.  
חזרו מוטב. ואם לאו משליך עליהן  
אבני בליסטראות חזרו מוטב ואם  
לאו סגרה בהן אוכלוסין הרבה.  
חזרו יפה. ואם לאו אוסר אותן



בבית האורסין. חזרו יפה. ואם  
לאו חורג גדולים שבהם. כך הקב"ה  
בא על מצרים כשקסין של מלכים...

In this passage, the Rabbis compare the plagues to different stages of a military attack. If the enemy survives one encounter you come back at them with new and different weapons until they are defeated. The Rabbis point out that this was God's approach. He began by turning the waters to blood. Seeing, however, that the Egyptians survived, he attempted something a bit more severe. Having survived most of God's 'weapons,' He was forced to utilize His ultimate weapon, the killing of the first born. The Rabbis view of the confrontation in military terms, lends support to the dramatic build up within the plagues. This buttresses the previous points about the dramatic build-up within the plagues.

This chapter has focused upon the concept that the plagues were viewed by the Rabbis as a concrete demonstration of God's power. In exhibiting His power, God showed both the people of Israel and the people of Egypt that His strength is without equal. In the process of illustrating His capabilities, God was forced to involve Pharaoh and his people, and, by so doing, the Egyptians were forced to acknowledge His power and supremacy. In this manner the Rabbis created a paradigm to be followed by all nations in generations to come.

## Notes: Chapter III

1. J.D. Eisenstein, ed. Otzar Midrashim (N.Y. 1915) vol. I p. 152.
2. For parallel passage see Pesikta d'Rav Kahana (Pesikta I #2).
3. Braude, William G., Kapstein, Israel J Pesikta de-Rab Kahana (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1975), p. 147.
4. Midrash HaGadol, Shemot 8:21.
5. Further proof of the plagues as the ultimate demonstration of God's power can be seen in:  
Shemot Rabbah 15:11; Midrash Lekah Tov Bo 10:9; Midrash Tanhuma ha-Nidpas Va'era #10; Midrash Lekah Tov Bo 10:24.
6. For a parallel passage on the Rabbinic view of the confrontation as a military action see: Midrash Pesikta Rabbati Piska 17:7.

## Chapter IV: Conclusion

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The Rabbis interpreted the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh in the light of the situation they faced as Jews living in Palestine during the first millenium. By underscoring certain aspects of the confrontation and by embellishing it in places, they were able to respond polemically to the challenges Judaism faced. The sages of old understood all too well that the Jews of Palestine were constantly exposed to pressure from many alien religions: Onosticism, Christianity, and many Pagan religions. In addition the Palestinian Jewish community was subject to unrelenting religious and economic persecution under Roman rule and faced the hardship of having witnessed the destruction of the Temple. It was therefore clear to the Rabbis that under such conditions of persecution and destruction, it was not unlikely that the Jews would suffer a loss of faith. Realizing this, they focused on the confrontation episode and inquired beneath the surface. Their intent in doing so was clearly to establish a lesson for survival. A historical case firmly illustrating God's salvation of the Jews in the past could promote the belief that this saving power would be rekindled for the Jews in the near future.

A number of key points emerge from the preceding analysis which clearly indicate what the Rabbis sought to accomplish in interpreting the story of the confrontation of Moses and Pharaoh.

First, the Rabbis more closely defined the characters of

both Moses and Pharaoh in order to allow a closer identification on the part of the reader. Although Moses had begun his mission with fear and hesitation, he displayed great courage and confidence during the final stages of the confrontation. It was the aim of the Rabbis to provide a positive role model for the Jews who suffered under Roman persecution. They hoped that as Moses had gained courage to confront Pharaoh, those who read the account of Moses' experiences would also gain the courage to overcome what might seem to be overwhelming odds against them. In the case of Pharaoh, the reader initially sees a picture of a strong and confident leader. Yet, by the time his son is slain, he is brought to his knees and forced, albeit reluctantly, to concede defeat. As the Jews of Palestine continued to experience unwarranted persecution, it was vital that the Rabbis provided them with hope to carry on their struggle. As Pharaoh attempted to conquer the Jews and was destroyed by God, so, too, God would destroy the immediate enemy of the Jews. The story of the confrontation especially the Rabbinic portrait of Pharaoh, was meant to inspire a new determination amongst the people. With the help of the Almighty, they could conquer any and all enemies of Israel. The conditions in Egypt were temporary; God was preparing His people for a great mission.

Second, in light of the despair of the people due to their witnessing the destruction of the Temple as well as the constant and unexplained persecution, the Rabbis sought to

emphasize God's presence and focus on His ability to save. The Rabbis go to great lengths to underscore the fact that, although it may appear to be Moses who is working the miracles, in truth it is God. Moses may seem to be a protagonist in the story of the confrontation, but the Rabbis emphasize that the power of God is the moving force against Pharaoh. The Rabbis understood that mere speculation about God's power would never satisfy a population yearning for a concrete sign illustrating God's ability to work wonders. Therefore, the role that the plagues played within the confrontation between Pharaoh and Moses was shaped by the Rabbis to meet that need. Certainly God's strength could have been demonstrated by one sweeping and destructive act against the whole of Egyptian society. The Rabbis, however, sensing that such a momentary occurrence might not sufficiently dramatize God's unequalled saving powers, fashioned the plagues into a systematic plan for Pharaoh's surrender. The Ten Plagues carefully spaced and building to a dramatic climax, emphatically display all of which God is capable of inflicting on His enemy. At the conclusion of the ten-step process, there remains little doubt that when God's ire is aroused, He can convincingly destroy His adversary. So, too, the Romans, Babylonians, and all Jewish enemies would fall and the Temple would be saved.

Another of the Rabbis' aims was to show that the God of Israel is the sole power in the universe. The Rabbis were aware of the claims that religious sectarians made concerning



the power of their Gods and had to prove that the one God, the God of Israel, was the only power in the world. The Rabbis clearly stress that the confrontation that took place in Egypt took place between two gods. The god of Egypt was Pharaoh, and the One God fought on behalf of Israel. By His act of killing the first-born and inflicting that hardship on Pharaoh directly, the God of Israel demonstrated His ultimate domination and triumph over Pharaoh, god of Egypt. They stressed that the confrontation was really between two divine entities and that the God of Israel emerged victorious.

Finally, through their interpretation of the confrontation in Egypt, the Rabbis issued an important message of hope: Ultimate universal acceptance of the God of Israel. This notion is conveyed by the complete reversal of Pharaoh's attitude following the death of his son. Though prior to that event Pharaoh appeared to be immovable, following the tenth plague he is pictured by the Rabbis as acknowledging God's power and authority. The message is clear: as Pharaoh came to accept God, so too, in time, all the peoples of the world will come to recognize Him.

In conclusion, I have come to see that that Midrash is an attempt by Rabbis to communicate God's message for their day. The Rabbis' reading of the biblical text and their underscoring and embellishing of its key points is an effort to buttress the hope and faith of their own constituents.

In modern times, the role of the Rabbi has not changed. On entering the Sanctuary, the congregants hope that the Rabbi



will inspire them by breathing interpretation into the words of the Bible. They look for relevance in the ancient words of the Torah and answers to their own problems. They seek comfort and hope, and are given it when they are told that as God has shown His strength in the past, He will again show His strength in our own time.

Through the interpretation of the Bible, the Rabbis maintain a vital link with the past and provide a much needed spark of hope for the future. Just as God delivered the Israelites from Egypt, so, too, will he ultimately redeem all mankind.

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