



Parshat Vaeira -24 January 2025 Shabbat times start 4:17 finishes 5:33

Rabbi Mordechai Rubin

In one of their initial encounters with Pharaoh, Aaron performs a supernatural feat to prove that he and Moses are genuine messengers of G-d: he casts his staff to the ground and it miraculously turns into a serpent. Not to be outdone, Pharaoh summons his “wise men and the magicians,” who are able to replicate the stunt. Subsequently, however, Aaron’s staff swallows the magicians’ staff.¹

Pharaoh’s magicians also reportedly replicated the plagues of blood and frogs. But when it came to the plague of lice, they were thwarted: “And the necromancers did likewise with their secret rites to bring out the lice, but they could not.”

The plain reading of the verse implies that genuine magic was indeed used. Was this really the case? And if so, why were the lice immune to their incantations?

1. Magic Does Not Exist

Some—most famously Maimonides—are of the opinion that sorcery and witchcraft do not exist. In Mishneh Torah, after describing the various prohibitions regarding witchcraft, **Maimonides** writes:

All the above matters are falsehood and lies with which the original idolaters deceived the gentile nations in order to lead them after them. It is not fitting for the Jews who are wise sages to be drawn into such emptiness, nor to consider that they have any value ... Whoever believes in [occult arts] of this nature and, in his heart, thinks that they are true and words of wisdom, but are forbidden by the **Torah**, is foolish and feeble-minded ... The masters of wisdom and those of perfect knowledge know with clear proof that all these crafts which the Torah forbade are not reflections of wisdom, but rather, emptiness and vanity which attracted the feeble-minded and caused them to abandon all the paths of truth. For these reasons, when the Torah warned against all these empty matters, it advised [**Deuteronomy 18:13**]: “Be of perfect faith with God, your Lord.”

Clearly, Maimonides believes sorcery does not exist. If indeed this is the case, what does the verse refer to in our context?

2. It Was Sleight of Hand

This view is articulated by Saadia Gaon, who explained that the Egyptians were skilled in trickery and conjuring, which is what they used to produce the serpents.

The Malbim provides an elaborate description as to how this could have been achieved:

The method of their deceit is further clarified in the verse: “And the sorcerers of Egypt also did the same.” This implies they used the skins of dead serpents. The sorcerers concealed themselves under the skins, moving underneath them in a way that made it appear as though they were live, writhing creatures.

DID THE EGYPTIANS ACTUALLY PRACTICE MAGIC?

The phrase “and they did” refers to the wise men and sorcerers who made themselves appear as snakes by wrapping themselves in serpent skins. When they threw their staffs, the sorcerers quickly exchanged them for the serpent skins, using their speed and sleight of hand to create the illusion that they had turned into living creatures.

The Ralbag adds that the magicians were unable to use sleight of hand to conjure lice because lice are too minute for such tricks.

These approaches, however, are in the minority view. As we shall soon see, most of the classical commentators agree that the Egyptians did indeed possess magical powers, as this seems to be quite evident from a cursory reading of the text and the Talmud.

3. Magic Is Very Real

On the other end of the spectrum is Nachmanides, who argues that magic is a very real phenomenon. He comments on this episode that he will expand on the topic later, possibly a reference to his treatment of this subject in Deuteronomy:

And now, understand and comprehend the matter of sorcery. The Creator, blessed be His name, when He created everything from nothing, established the higher realms to govern those beneath them. He endowed the earth and all that is upon it with powers derived from the stars and constellations, according to their influence and alignment, as demonstrated in the science of astrology.

This is the secret of sorcery and its power, as our sages stated (Chullin 7b): Sorcery contradicts the heavenly host. That is, sorcery opposes the natural powers and thereby conflicts with the heavenly host in a certain way. For this reason, the Torah forbids sorcery, so the world may follow its natural order, which reflects the will of its Creator, blessed be He.

Many pious individuals dismiss sorcery entirely, claiming it is false—asking, “Who informs a raven or a stork of what is to come?” But we cannot deny phenomena that are widely observed. Even our sages acknowledged such matters. For instance, the Midrash interprets the verse, “The bird of the heavens shall carry the voice,” as referring to the raven and the wisdom of those skilled in interpreting birds.

To explain why these magical forces were not powerful enough to replicate the plague of lice, Nachmanides suggests that G-d intervened to show Pharaoh’s magicians that there was a Greater Power at play.

4. They Utilized Demons

Several commentators, including Rashi¹ and Nachmanides, quote the Talmud, which states that (at least some of) the sorcery was engineered by demons. A demon does not have power over an entity smaller than the size of a barley grain. Since the lice were too small for the demons to work with, the necromancers realized that this must be the Hand of G-d.

5. It Was No Big Deal

The Rebbe tackles this from a different angle. Following Rashi and the Talmud, he takes for granted that this kind of sorcery was widely practiced in Egypt. He therefore wonders what purpose this sign engineered by G-d served. Would it be impressive for Moses and Aaron to perform a commonplace trick?

The Rebbe suggests that the main novelty here was the fact that Aaron’s staff consumed their staffs after it itself had turned back into a staff. This explains why Rashi does not mention here—as he does in the case of the hail, which contained fire and ice—that it was a “miracle within a miracle.” In the case of the hail, the miracle was twofold—the fact that the fire did not consume the water and that the water did not extinguish the fire. However, the fact that a staff turned into a serpent and back did not seem like a novelty in Egypt. Hence, the miracle was the fact that a staff swallowed the staffs of the sorcerers, which seems to have been an impressive feat even in Egypt.

Taking a lesson from this episode, the Rebbe explains that a serpent represents something that sows fear and causes damage. In spiritual parlance, this represents the need to negate negative influences. There are times when we need to overcome ideas or individuals that pose a challenge to the observance of Torah and mitzvahs. However, it is paramount that this be done in the spirit of Aaron, “who loves peace, pursues peace, loves G-d’s creatures and draws them close to Torah.” In other words, when constructive criticism is called for, it’s important to do so in a way that causes the least amount of damage, remaining cognizant that you are working for the ultimate good of the individual.

This idea is symbolized by Aaron’s staff swallowing the other staffs. Even when it is necessary to override or correct someone who is not behaving appropriately, it should not be done like a serpent. The rebuke should not be with anger or sharpness in a way that can cause damage. Rather, it should be done once the serpent has already figuratively changed back into a staff. Any rebuke should be done in the way of the “staff of Aaron” in a loving and caring manner.

This self of which we are conscious is but a tiny portion of the whole, the tip of a peninsula, a finely focused ray of an infinite source of light.

Upstream lies unimaginable wealth, storehouses of treasures left by many generations. Upstream lies every G-dly act of our holy mothers and fathers, the strength and courage of every martyr, the unlimited power of G-d's breath within us.

When you dance and sing in the joy of a beautiful deed, listen to the music. You will hear your holy mothers and fathers of ages past, dancing and singing along.

Joke

Iranian president Mahmud Ahmadinejad calls President Bush and tells him, "George, I had a wonderful dream last night. I could see America, the whole beautiful country, and on each house I saw a banner."

"What did it say on the banners?" Bush asks. Mahmud replies, "UNITED STATES OF IRAN." Bush says, "You know, Mahmud, I am really happy you called, because believe it or not, last night I had a similar dream. I could see all of Tehran, and it was more beautiful than ever, and on each house flew an enormous banner."

"What did it say on the banners?" Mahmud asks. Bush replies, "I don't know. I can't read Hebrew."

Story time

A number of chasidim were gathered with Rabbi Yitzhak Meir of Ger, partaking of the festive meal after a brit mila, when the rebbe asked a certain chasid to relate a story about Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev. The chasid began: "One of the followers of the Berdichever Rebbe was a cattle dealer. And it happened that once when he had many heads of cattle to sell the market price dropped drastically. The chasid was worried about the heavy loss he would have to sustain, so he travelled to Berdichev to consult his Rebbe for advice in the matter and a blessing. "When he arrived in the rebbe's presence, Levi Yitzhak asked him, 'Is there any particular mitzva with which you occupy yourself?' " 'Yes, replied the man, 'I am a mohel.' [one who performs ritual circumcisions]. " 'And what do you do in the case that an infant bleeds heavily after the circumcision?' asked the Rebbe. "The man described at length the medications and salves he applied, and then the Rebbe responded: 'I will give you a certain medicinal herb to use if you are ever, G-d forbid, in such a situation. If you apply this to the wound, it will stop bleeding immediately.' And the Rebbe handed him some herbs. " 'But Rebbe,' beseeched the chasid, 'what shall I do about the cattle?' "But the Rebbe only replied, 'I have already explained that if you encounter an infant who bleeds excessively, just apply the herbs and the bleeding will stop immediately.' "The chasid didn't repeat his question. He took his belongings and returned to his home." At this juncture in the story Rabbi Yitzhak Meir interrupted the story with a comment: "From the behavior of this man we can tell that he was a true chasid, since he didn't persist in his questioning of the Rebbe, but simply assumed that the Rebbe's words contained the advice he sought, although he didn't as yet perceive the meaning in them." The storyteller continued:

"The chasid stopped at an inn on his way home, and in casual conversation found out that the innkeeper's infant son had not been circumcised. He was surprised and asked the reason for this. The innkeeper told him that his two previous sons had died because of excessive bleeding after circumcision. The chasid, remembering his Rebbe's words, asked the innkeeper, 'If I were to tell you that there existed a cure for this problem of bleeding, would you allow a brit to be performed on your son?' "If my son could be circumcised without the possibility of danger, I would be prepared to pay the mohel a sum of four hundred silver rubles.' "I have a very potent medication which will stop any bleeding. Allow me to perform the brit, and I will assume all responsibility. I will even give you four hundred silver rubles of my own, forfeit in the case of any problem, G-d forbid.' "The innkeeper agreed on the stipulation that the mohel remain with them for a full month to watch the child, should any complications develop. The circumcision was performed, and in fact the child did bleed a great deal. But the mohel applied the herbs he had received, and all went well; the bleeding stopped at once. A few days after the brit, news reached the inn that the price of cattle had risen considerably. The chasid-merchant was anxious to return home and sell his livestock, but the innkeeper was adamant about their agreement, and refused to allow him to leave. Several more days passed, and word arrived that the price of cattle had gone even higher, and the chasid pleaded with his host to allow him to leave, as the baby was doing quite well. But the innkeeper was unmoved by his

argument, and answered that a deal was a deal, and he must remain the full four weeks. "After the entire month had passed the chasid left the inn. The grateful innkeeper paid him the four hundred silver rubles he had promised and also returned the other four hundred he had held on bond. The cattle dealer was able to sell his cattle for a price far greater than he had ever imagined, making an enormous profit. "When the time came for his customary visit to Berdichev he happily presented his Rebbe with four hundred silver rubles to be used charity, saying: 'Rebbe, this money rightfully belongs to you!'"

Parsha Summary

The name of the Parshah, "Va'era," means "and I appeared" and it is found in Exodus 6:3. G-d reveals Himself to Moses. Employing the "four expressions of redemption," take out the Children of Israel from Egypt, deliver them from their enslavement, redeem them, and acquire them as His own chosen people at "Mount Sinai"; He will then bring them to the land He promised to the Patriarchs as their eternal heritage. Moses and Aaron repeatedly come before Pharaoh to demand in the name of G-d, "Let My people go, so that they may serve Me in the wilderness." Pharaoh repeatedly refuses. Aaron's staff turns into a snake and swallows the magic sticks of the Egyptian sorcerers. G-d then sends a series of plagues upon the Egyptians. The waters of the Nile turn to blood; swarms of frogs overrun the land; lice infest all men and beasts. Hordes of wild animals invade the cities; a pestilence kills the domestic animals; painful boils afflict the Egyptians. For the seventh plague, fire and ice combine to descend from the skies as a devastating hail. Still, "the heart of Pharaoh was hardened" and he would not let the children of Israel go, as G-d had said to Moses."

