

SICHA SUMMARY

PROJECT LIKKUTEI SICHOS | 5783 - YEAR OF HAKHEL



Likkutei Sichos, Vol. 16

Va'era, Sicha 4

The Verse:

Describing the initiation of the second plague, the plague of frogs, the verse states: "Aharon stretched forth his hand over the waters of Egypt, and the frog came up and covered the land of Egypt." (Shemos 8:2)

The Rashi:

The frog came up — It was one frog, and they [the Egyptians] hit it, and it split into many swarms of frogs. This is its midrashic interpretation (Tanchuma, Va'era 14); for its simple meaning, it can be said that the swarming of the frogs is referred to in the singular, and likewise, "and the lice were (וַתְּהִי הַכְּנָם)" (verse 13), the swarming, pedoiliyere in Old French, swarming of lice, and also וַתְּעַל הַצְּפַרְדֵּי, grenoylede in Old French, swarming of frogs.

The Questions:

1. Why does Rashi give primacy to the Midrashic interpretation by placing it first, over the simple interpretation, which justifies the use of the singular when referring to "swarms of frogs"?
2. If Rashi is insistent on the idea that there was originally only one frog, why did he not cite the Talmud's more rational, natural explanation, that the one frog whistled and summoned the swarm? (Sanhedrin 67b) This is more consistent with the plain understanding of the verse than a seemingly unnecessary miracle of one frog being struck and morphing into a swarm.
3. Earlier, Rashi wrote that the Torah uses the singular noun to refer to an entire species. (Bereishis 32:6) Why does he not offer the same explanation here?

A Rejected Explanation:

Perhaps Rashi recorded the Midrashic explanation first because it is faithful to the literal meaning of the singular noun, "frog."

This cannot be the case, however, for the following reason:

Rashi uses two phrases to identify an explanation that is faithful to the straightforward meaning of the text: a) "Its simple meaning is..."; and b) "The straightforward interpretation of Scripture is..."

Rashi uses "a" when the explanation strictly applies to the meaning of the word. He uses "b" when the explanation is the simplest way of understanding the entire story in context.

The strength of the Midrashic explanation is that it is compatible with the literal meaning of the word "frog," however, its weakness is that it is not alluded to in the continuation of the narrative, which does not allude to a spontaneous spawning of frogs. The second explanation, that swarms of frogs rose from the river, fits neatly into the broader narrative.

This being the case, then in our context, Rashi should have prefaced the second explanation with the phrase, "the straightforward interpretation of Scripture is..." being that this second explanation is compatible with the continuation of the narrative. Instead, Rashi prefaced this explanation with "its simple meaning is," implying that this explanation is somehow compatible with the literal word of "frog" itself.

The Explanation:

In G-d's command to Aharon to initiate the plague, He said: "Say to Aharon, stretch forth your hand with your staff over the rivers... and bring up the frogs on the land of Egypt." Rashi was bothered by this question: G-d commanded Aharon to bring up "frogs," in the plural; how did Aharon fulfill this command by calling forth a single frog?

Rashi's first explanation, that the frog itself split into streams of frogs, satisfies this question. The frog itself became many frogs. This is why Rashi did not cite the Talmud's more natural explanation of the frog signaling for other frogs to leave the river, because this would still leave Aharon with only summoning one frog, falling short of G-d's instruction.

According to this explanation, the verb in the phrase, "and the frog came up" carries two meanings: 1) The frog ascended from the river; and 2) the individual frog caused other frogs to "come up."

But this presents the challenge of one word bearing two meanings. Rashi therefore offers a second explanation according to "its simple meaning," which allows the verb "came up" to retain just one meaning, like every other word. According to this explanation, the word "frog" itself implies a swarming of frogs. Now the verb "came up"

only refers to the swarming of frogs which then covered the land of Egypt.

The Deeper Dimension:

According to the Midrash, Aharon initiated the fulfillment of G-d's command, but the command was completed by those who struck the frog, eliciting the swarming of frogs that was G-d's original intention. According to the simple explanation, Aharon completed G-d's command.

In the "Midrashic" or symbolic reading of this narrative, the plagues were meant to inspire Pharaoh to take action and free the Jewish people. The punishment aspect of the plagues is not paramount here, and therefore, even one frog ascending from the

river may be enough to grab Pharaoh's attention. Therefore, according to the Midrash, Aharon did not raise swarms of frogs from the river; he only raised one.

According to the simple meaning of the story, the plagues were meant to punish Pharaoh and subdue him. Therefore, Aharon had to fulfill the full extent of the plague, calling forth swarms of frogs to terrorize Pharaoh.

The lesson from the Midrash is that when it comes to punishment, it is wise to do the bare minimum that is required. The lesson from the simple interpretation is not to leave a mitzvah unfinished, but to complete what you began.
