



Likkutei Sichos

Volume 15 | Vaera | Sichah 5

How Deep?

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1.

HOW MANY PLAGUES?

Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva¹ argue about the plagues that Hashem brought upon the Egyptians:² “Rabbi Eliezer says... each plague... consisted of **four** plagues.... Rabbi Akiva says... consisted of **five** plagues.”

What is the basis of these two opinions whether there were either “four plagues” or “five plagues”?

*Kolbo*³ explains, in the name of “*Baal HaMelamed*,” that the crux of their dispute is as follows:

Rabbi Eliezer maintains that the plagues penetrated the four fundamental elements⁴ of every entity affected by a plague. In other words, the plagues did not only affect the stricken entities as they were already a composition of all four elements. Instead, the plagues penetrated each entity's depth, reaching each element's core. Therefore, every plague actually “consisted of **four**.”

For example, in the Plague of Blood, not only the *mitzius*⁵ of water was afflicted, but also the elemental fire, wind, and earth making up the water.

¹ Regarding the opinion of Rabbi Yossi HaGelili cited earlier in this passage {in the *Haggadah*}, see sec. 5 below, and fn. 21 in the original.

² *Haggadah Shel Pesach*; *Mechilta* on *Shemos* 14:31; *Midrash Tehillim*, on *Tehillim* ch. 78; and in *Shemos Rabbah* (ch. 23, sec. 9) only the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer is cited.

³ *Kolbo*, “Commentary on the Haggadah”; cited also in *Orchos Chaim* (“Commentary on the Haggadah”); *Abudraham* (“*Seder HaHagadah uPeirushah*”); et al.; similarly, *Ritva*, “*Haggadah Shel Pesach*” (cited in *Akeidah*, “*Beshalach*,” shaar 40); *Rashbatz* (“*Maamar Chametz*”; “*Peirush HaHagadah*”); et al.

⁴ See *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*,” beg. of ch. 4; {“These four bodies — fire, wind, water, and earth — are the fundamental elements of all the creations beneath the heavens. Everything that exists — be it man, beast, fowl, crawling creature, fish, plant, metal, precious stone, pearl, building stone, mountain, or lump of earth — the body of all these entities combines these four fundamental elements.”}; *Moreh Nevuchim*, vol. 1, ch. 72, et passim.

⁵ {Lit., “existence”; in the context of this *sichah*, *mitzius* refers to an object as its underlying elements are manifest as created, autonomous, matter.}

Rabbi Akiva adds that the plague also affected the “*hiyuli* matter”⁶ of the entities stricken by each plague. This “*hiyuli* matter” is completely **unalloyed**,⁷ abstracted from (the form placed on the entity by) the four elements. It emerges, then, that each plague “consisted of **five**” — the four elements and the “*hiyuli* matter.”

2.

HOW DEEP?

The intent of the plagues was — as they are called {in Hebrew, מַכּוֹת} — to smite, לְהַכּוֹת, and to break Egypt. In light of this purpose, we understand that the principle above, namely that the plagues penetrated the afflicted entities, depends on the degree to which the impurity of Egypt penetrated these entities, since the plagues were intended to neutralize this impurity. Accordingly, the penetration of the plagues was commensurate with the depth of impurity. {Hence, the Sages’ perspectives on the depth of the impurity determined their opinion regarding the penetration of the plague:} (a) According to both opinions, the plagues did not only affect the “visible” aspects of the entities afflicted by the plague; they also affected the “concealed” aspects and the *etzem*⁸ of the entities. (b) These two opinions differ about whether the plague (also) penetrated the *hiyuli* matter or only the entity’s substance as it assumed a form (its form being comprised of the four elements).

⁶ This is how it is referred to in *Ritva*, *ibid.* (“The plague of the *hiyuli*, which is the general element”); and in *Orchos Chaim* and *Kolbo* (and similar in *Abudraham*), *ibid.*, “the element of the Spheres, which is the fifth element {comprising any created entity}”; and *Rashbatz* describes it as the fifth element, which is the Sphere that is the foundation of the elements. [Note *maamar* “*HaChodesh 5700*,” ch. 2, that the plagues caused a change not only in the *yesh* {existence} but also in its {vivifying} G-dly power; see there.]

⁷ {*Simple* in the sense that it is not comprised of parts or elements.}

⁸ {Lit., “essence,” or “being.”}

3.

CHAMETZ – THREE LEVELS OF PROHIBITION

This idea — that the impurity of Egypt penetrated the *etzem* of the *mitzius* of every entity, and the above dispute concerning this — is mirrored, as all matters of *aggadah*⁹ (and the inner dimension of Torah), in the revealed dimension of Torah, even in the determination of halachah: It relates to the makeup and manner of the prohibition {on Pesach} of *chametz* (which is a consequence of Egypt's impurity):

It is prohibited not only to eat and benefit from *chametz*; it also “shall not be seen and shall not be found” (prohibitions that give rise to the mitzvah to destroy *chametz*).

The difference between these three prohibitions (the prohibition of eating, of benefiting, and that *chametz* “shall not be seen and shall not be found” (and the mitzvah to destroy *chametz* it entails) is as follows:

Eating (and the prohibition of eating) is linked with the “form” (of the food) — as the food is, with its totally complete form (to the degree that the food is fit to be consumed) — and not with the food's “substance” itself, the *etzem mitzius* of the food. Deriving benefit from something (and the prohibition to do so) is (also) related to the *etzem* of the food.

[This is one of the explanations¹⁰ for the fact that some foods are prohibited from being eaten, yet one is permitted to benefit from them. If an entity contains a spiritual toxin¹¹ and is prohibited, on what basis may one benefit from it?

⁹ {*Aggadah*, also known as *midrash*, is the method that uses homiletics to explain the Torah. The *Zohar* sees *midrash* as the portal to the secrets of the Torah; see *Zohar*, vol. 2, 99a.}

¹⁰ See another (divergent) explanation in the *sichah* delivered on Shabbos *parshas Acharei*, 5736; *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 7, p. 299.

¹¹ {In the Hebrew original, “*ra.*”}

The explanation: When something is prohibited from being eaten, the spiritual toxin within it exists only in the “form” of the food — its extrinsic aspect that makes it edible. Therefore, one is permitted to derive benefit from such a food because the “substance” and *etzem* of the food, from which benefit can be derived, contains **no** spiritual toxin.]

Nonetheless, also deriving benefit (and the prohibition of deriving benefit) from an object relies on **using the** object. Such usage is only feasible when the object has assumed a particular “form.” This illustrates that deriving benefit also relies upon the object already possessing a “form.”

Chametz, however, is also prohibited from being possessed by a Jew, even if he makes no use of it at all. Meaning, the prohibition penetrates to the substance and *etzem* of the *chametz* itself as **divested** of any sort of “form.” Consequently, *chametz* “found” in a Jew’s possession is also germane. The **very existence** of *chametz* in a Jew’s possession is prohibited.

4.

DESTROYING CHAMETZ

There is a dispute¹² between Rabbi Yehudah and the Sages regarding the mitzvah of destroying *chametz*:¹³ Rabbi Yehudah maintains that *chametz* can only be destroyed by burning, whereas the Sages maintain that *chametz* can also be destroyed by crumbling it and scattering it in the wind, or by throwing it into the sea.

The Rogatchover¹⁴ explains the basis for this dispute. Rabbi Yehudah maintains that the ***etzem metzius*** of the *chametz* must be destroyed. Thus, it must be burned because the *chametz* continues to exist by crumbling and

¹² Mishnah, *Pesachim* 2:1.

¹³ {On the morning of the 14th of Nissan, the *chametz* collected the previous night during the search is to be destroyed.}

¹⁴ *Tzafnas Paaneach on the Torah*, “*Bechukosai* 26:1”; *Mefaneach Tzefunos*, loc. cit., sec. 9; and the references cited there; see *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 7, p. 189; vol. 16, pp. 134 ff.

scattering it into the wind or the like. In contrast, the Sages maintain that it is sufficient to annul and efface the “semblance” of the *chametz*, making it impossible to consume or derive human benefit from it. This can be accomplished by crumbling and scattering it in the wind or the like.

Clearly, the degree to which *chametz* must be destroyed depends on the depth to which the prohibition of *chametz* penetrates the prohibited food: If the prohibition reaches the *etzem metzius* of the *chametz*, its destruction must be to the degree that the *etzem metzius* of the *chametz* is destroyed. If the prohibition is only connected to the “**semblance**” and “form” of the *chametz*, it suffices to (break up its “form” and) make it impossible to eat the *chametz* or to benefit from it. But there is no need to destroy the *etzem* of the *chametz* because nothing is prohibited in it.¹⁵

We can posit that these two opinions correspond to the opinions of Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva concerning the plagues:

The opinion of Rabbi Eliezer — who maintains that “each plague... consisted of **four** plagues,” meaning that the plagues only affected the entity as it had the “form” of the four Elements — corresponds to the position of the Sages: It “can also be destroyed by crumbling and scattering it in the wind...” The Sages maintain that only the *mitzius* of *chametz* connected with a particular (form and) **semblance** (the ability to eat it and benefit from it) must be destroyed.

In contrast, Rabbi Akiva asserts that “each plague... consisted of **five** plagues,” meaning, the plagues also penetrated the *hiyuli* matter because Rabbi Akiva aligns with the position of Rabbi Yehudah, maintaining that “*chametz* can only be destroyed by burning.”¹⁶

¹⁵ See *Mefaneach Tzefunos*, *ibid*, which explains that this is also the reasoning behind the dispute between Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Shimon (*Pesachim* 28a ff) regarding *chametz* owned by a Jew over Pesach.

¹⁶ *Pesachim* 5b.

5.

THE PROHIBITION OF BENEFIT

Just as there are two opinions regarding the destruction of *chametz* — whether the Torah prohibits the **etzem** (*mitzius*) of *chametz*, unconnected with any sort of “form,” or only prohibits the *etzem mitzius* of *chametz* that is linked with a particular “form” or “semblance” as something **fit** to benefit from — similarly, there are two ways of looking at the prohibition of deriving benefit itself (which differ concerning their view of how deeply the spiritual toxin has penetrated the food):

- a) Benefit that “leads to eating,” because “commonly, benefit leads to eating, for {benefit could be exchanged for money and} he buys food with that money.”¹⁷ In a broader perspective, this benefit category includes all sorts of gains that generate profit¹⁸ for the person, and consequently, “leads to eating... he buys food with that money.”
- b) Usage that does not generate profits for the person. For example, feeding prohibited food to ownerless dogs. Such a benefit will not lead to eating.

There is a dispute in the *Jerusalem Talmud*¹⁹ concerning feeding *chametz* to ownerless dogs. One authority maintains that this is permitted, and another maintains that the verse,²⁰ “*chametz* may not be eaten” also prohibits (using *chametz* by) feeding it to ownerless dogs.

We can say that this dispute is related to the question (to what extent the prohibition of *chametz* is correlated with the substance and *etzem* of *chametz*):

Does the prohibition attach itself to the *etzem* of the food only as it has a {discernable} semblance and form? If so, the prohibition to derive benefit (which

¹⁷ Rashi on *Pesachim* 21b, s.v., “*lo yeiachel*.”

¹⁸ See *Maharam Chaluah* on *Pesachim* 21b.

¹⁹ *Jerusalem Talmud*, beg. of ch. 2.

²⁰ *Shemos* 13:3.

is connected to the *etzem* of the food, as explained above) is limited to benefit linked with eating (it “leads to eating”).

However, if the prohibition attaches itself also to the *etzem* of the food (as unrelated with the semblance and form of the food), the prohibition of deriving benefit is an **independent** prohibition that includes the prohibition of using the *chametz* in any way — including usage that does not “lead to eating.”

[On this basis, we can posit that the opinion of Rabbi Yossi HaGelili — whose opinion is cited in the *Mechilta*²¹ before those of Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva, and who says, “How do you know that the Egyptians were stricken by (only) **ten** plagues in Egypt and fifty plagues struck them at the sea...?” — is based on his opinion²² that benefit from *chametz* is **permitted**. This opinion indicates that only the form of *chametz* is prohibited and that the impurity of Egypt only attached itself to the semblance and the external dimension of affected entities. Consequently, every plague affected only the *metzius* of those entities, as comprised of four elements.]

6.

EGYPT AND THE FOUR EXILES

According to the above discussion (in Section 2), the dispute between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva is based on the outlook of these authorities as to how deeply the impurity of Egypt penetrated the land of Egypt and its contents, we can explain why the midrashim differ concerning the four exiles:²³

In most sources,²⁴ the Egyptian exile is **not** counted among the four Kingdoms and the four exiles. The reason²⁵ is that Egypt was “equivalent to all of

²¹ *Mechilta* on *Shemos* 14:31; and similarly, in the sources cited above in fn. 2.

²² *Pesachim* 23a, and the sources cited there.

²³ {Our Sages taught that throughout history, the Jewish people experienced four exiles; each was under the dominion of one of the four Kingdoms; see the next two fns. for sources.}

²⁴ See, for example, *Bereishis Rabbah*, ch. 2, sec. 4; ch. 16, sec. 4; ch. 44, sec. 15, 17; *Vayikra Rabbah*, end of *parshas Shemini*.

²⁵ Arizal's *Likkutei Torah* and *Sefer Halikkutim*, beg. of *parshas Ki Seitzei*.

them, and greater than all of them... and that is why the Egyptian exile is not included among the others because it was of greater magnitude.” On the other hand, several sources²⁶ **list** Egypt among the four Kingdoms and exiles — and Egypt appears first on the list.

We can posit that **these** two opinions on whether Egypt should be listed as one of the four exiles also relate to the above dispute about the depth to which Egypt's impurity penetrated Egypt's land.

The explanation: Egypt is not counted among the four Kingdoms and exiles (in most sources) because the four Kingdoms and exiles “correspond to the four letters of the name *Havayah*,”²⁷ whereas the Egyptian exile “corresponds to the serif of the letter *yud*”²⁸ {of the name *Havayah*}. As well known, the four elements “are the four letters of *Havayah*,”²⁹ and “the serif of the letter *yud*” (*keser*) is “emblematic of the primordial matter called *hiyuli*.”³⁰ Based on all the preceding, it emerges that the four exiles correspond to the four elements, whereas the Egyptian exile also impinged upon the *hiyuli* matter.

Those works of our Rabbis that include Egypt among the (four) Kingdoms follow the opinion³¹ that Egypt corresponds to *chochmah*.³² Even though also according to **this** opinion, Egypt is the root of all exiles,³³ it is a root that incorporates all the exiles³⁴ {and not just gives rise to the other exiles}. According to this opinion, the *kelipah*³⁵ of Egypt negatively affected only matter with form — only its four elements.

²⁶ *Megillah* (29a, in *Ein Yaakov*; see *Dikdukei Sofrim*, ad. loc.): “They were exiled to Egypt... to Eilam... to Babylonia... to Edom.”

²⁷ {*Havayah*, also known as the Tetragrammaton, is the four-letter name of Hashem, spelled *yud-hei-vav-hei*.}

²⁸ Arizal's *Likkutei Torah* and *Sefer HaLikkutim*, beg. of *parshas Ki Seitzei*.

²⁹ *Eitz Chaim*, beg. of “*Shaar Derushei Abiya*”; *Meorei Or*, “*ois daled*,” sec. 24, cited in *Likkutei Torah*, “*Bamidbar*,” beg. of 5b.

³⁰ *Eitz Chaim*, *ibid.*, further on in this chapter.

³¹ See *Zohar*, vol. 1, 125a, in *Midrash HaNeelam*; *Likkutei Torah*, end of “*Tzav*.”

³² {*Chochmah*, lit., “wisdom,” is the first of the ten *sefiros*. *Sefiros* are Divine emanations. There are ten *sefiros*, which are various phases in the manifestation of Divinity, generally categorized by intellectual and emotive faculties. *Chochmah* is the highest of the intellectual faculties.}

³³ For this reason, all the Kingdoms are named after Egypt (*Bereishis Rabbah*, ch. 17, sec. 4).

³⁴ Note the two explanations in the *maamar* entitled *Kol Dodi 5709* concerning the concept that all the Kingdoms are named after Egypt.

³⁵ {*Kelipah* translates literally as “a shell” or “a peel.” The term refers to anything that conceals and thus opposes G-dliness, just as a shell or a peel conceals the fruit within.}

OUR AVODAH

The Egyptian exile and exodus also applies to our *avodah*:³⁶ Egypt, מִצְרַיִם, is etymologically and thematically related to מִיְצָרִים, boundaries and limitations. The “Egyptian exile” is the limited *avodah* of a Jew, an *avodah* that is bounded and limited, whereas the “exodus from Egypt” is the freedom from the limitations of his *avodah* (even the limitations of the G-dly soul).

In light of this explanation, we can understand the spiritual underpinnings of the dispute between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva concerning the plagues — whether the plagues affected only four elements or also the *hiyuli* matter. Their dispute is based on the question concerning the nature of a Jew’s *avodah*: Must a Jew perform the *avodah* of the “exodus from Egypt” {transcending limitations} only concerning his ten soul powers? Such *avodah* finds expression in the following four areas (corresponding to the four letters of the name *Havayah*):³⁷

- (a) actual *avodah* involving thought, speech and action (“*malchus*”);³⁸
- (b) *avodah* involving the emotions (“*zeir anpin*”);³⁹
- (c) the intellectual faculties (“*binah*”);⁴⁰
- (d) self-sacrifice (“*chochmah*”).

Or is the *avodah* of the “exodus from Egypt” also needed regarding the level of “*yechidah*”⁴¹ of the soul (corresponding to the *hiyuli* matter)?⁴²

Rabbi Eliezer maintains that “each plague... consisted of **four** plagues.” This refers to the *avodah* of the “exodus from Egypt” aimed at all four categories of the soul powers — a person must free himself from their limitations:

³⁶ {Divine service.}

³⁷ *Tanya*, “*Iggeres HaKodesh*,” ch. 4, et passim.

³⁸ {Lit., “kingship”; the last of the ten *sefiros*.}

³⁹ {Lit., “the small face”; the configuration of the six *sefiros* from *chessed* to *yesod*, corresponding to a person’s emotional faculties.}

⁴⁰ {Lit., “comprehension”; the second of the ten *sefiros*.}

⁴¹ {The highest of the five levels of the soul.}

⁴² *Eitz Chaim*, beg. of “*Shaar Derushei Abiya*.”

On the lowest level, there may be limits in a Jew's battle with his {evil} inclination, which can lead, G-d forbid, to a Jew violating the Torah in actuality — in action (and in speech, and thought)⁴³ — and, at any rate, violating prohibitions that demand a great and fierce battle.⁴⁴

A more subtle type of “Egypt” — although he may be extremely careful not to do anything prohibited (he is careful even with the fine details of Rabbinic law), still, he conducts himself (in permissible activities) in a way that is aligned with popular norms. Whatever he does, he always ponders, “What will people say?” This deportment stems from the limitations and restrictions he feels from the world around him, in his “emotions.” (His emotions are sensitive to his surroundings, which he constantly considers⁴⁵ before he does anything.)

Even after a Jew has already freed himself from these limitations — the limitations of his environment — it is possible that he still remains bound by his own limitations: He performs his *avodah* based on his intellect alone — rational, reasonable *avodah*, with the coldness of his intellect.

According to Rabbi Eliezer, the *avodah* involving self-sacrifice (his soul-power of *chochmah*) is the highest level at which a person must still ensure that he applies the *avodah* of the “exodus from Egypt.” Despite one's *avodah* transcending reason and rationale, it is possible that the *avodah* still remains limited and measured. **This resembles** what the {Previous} Rebbe related about a Jew who extended the word “One”⁴⁶ while reciting the *Shema*, contemplating the significance of this word. Later, this Jew declared that his contemplation had lasted “almost a full minute.” Put simply, he had pondered the meaning of the word “One,” which connotes *mesirus nefesh*,⁴⁷ while simultaneously looking at the clock and calculating how long he was in a state of *mesirus nefesh*.

⁴³ For he who willingly indulges in such thoughts is deemed a rasha at that moment (*Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 12).

⁴⁴ See *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 30.

⁴⁵ See *Sefer HaMaamarim 5708* (p. 273), **et al.** — regarding the difference between the intellectual and emotional faculties.

⁴⁶ {“... Hashem is One.”}

⁴⁷ {Lit., “giving over the soul”; self-sacrifice, a state of complete selflessness.}

This {self-delusion} can also be more subtle: One still feels that **he deports himself** with *mesirus nefesh*, proving that he was not yet completely freed from the limitations of his own *mitzius*.⁴⁸

8.

RABBI AKIVA FIXES THE ESSENCE OF HIS SOUL

Concerning freeing oneself from limitations, Rabbi Akiva introduces a novel concept and says that “each plague... consisted of **five** plagues.”

Rabbi Eliezer, אֱלִיעֶזֶר — whose name corresponds to the verse, “the G-d of **my father** came to my aid, בְּעֵזְרִי”⁴⁹ — was the son of Hurkenus⁵⁰ and the son of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov,⁵¹ and as such, he had the support of “the G-d of my father.” Therefore, he assumed that nothing can harm the essence of a Jew’s soul, for even in the midst of a sin, “it remains faithful to Him.”⁵²

In contrast, Rabbi Akiva descended from converts.⁵³ Thus, he cared and kept a lookout for individuals who first needed to be brought “under the wings of the Shechinah.” More subtly, he referred to the *avodah* alluded to by the verse,⁵⁴

⁴⁸ See *Hemshech 5672*, ch. 214.

⁴⁹ *Shemos* 18:4; see *Pesikta*, “*Parshas Parah*”; *Bamidbar Rabbah*, “*Chukas*,” (*Bamidbar* 19:7); Rav David Luria’s introduction to *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer*.

⁵⁰ When Rabbi Eliezer is mentioned without further qualification, it refers to Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurkenus — see *Seder Hadoros*, “Rabbi Eliezer Hagadol.”

⁵¹ See *Bikkurim* 1:4; *Responsa of Rambam* (Yerushalayim, 5720), vol. 2, p. 293.

⁵² *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” end of ch. 24 (31a).

⁵³ See *Seder HaDoros*, “Rabbi Akiva.”

⁵⁴ {*Tehillim* 35:17.}

“my essence from the young lions”⁵⁵ — an *avodah* to repair “the essence of the soul.”⁵⁶

However, due to these very issues, a great elevation is achieved: Specifically through this *avodah*, an “**exodus** from Egypt” is also brought about at **this** level — freedom from the limitations that may exist even for “the essence of the soul” — by reaching the essence of the G-dly soul, which has no limitations.⁵⁷

This *avodah* brings about an “exodus from Egypt” on all levels and is consummated by the physical “exodus from Egypt” — the exodus from this final exile. “As in the days when you left the land of Egypt, I will show you wonders.”⁵⁸

— From a talk delivered on the 2nd night of Pesach, 5714 (1954) and *Acharon Shel Pesach*, 5718 (1958)

⁵⁵ This is explained in *Likkutei Torah*, “*Reeh*,” 25a ff. {In that source, the Alter Rebbe elucidates that parallel to the level of *yechidah* in the soul, evident in a Jew’s yearning to become one with Hashem beyond logical bounds, the impure forces possess a corresponding level expressed through an irrational desire for worldly matters. This level is called “young lions” due to its powerful nature. When King Dovid requested that Hashem save “my essence (*yechidah*) from the Young Lions,” on a deeper level, this signifies his plea for his *yechidah* to be safeguarded from falling into the grasp of this level of impure forces, ensuring its continued absolute connection with Hashem.}

⁵⁶ Note the explanation of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai’s declaration, “I do not know on which path they will lead me.” The reason for his uncertainty in this matter {whether he would be admitted straight into Gan Eden} was that he was unsure if he was also serving Hashem at the essence of his soul.

⁵⁷ Note *Maamar* “*Or LeYud Daled 5700*,” beg. of sec. 6.

⁵⁸ *Micah* 7:15.