

Patterns in the Plagues

Introduction

R. Yehuda's Acronyms

A very famous set of acronyms for the Ten Plagues is cited in the Passover Haggadah¹ in the name of R. Yehuda:

רבי יהודה היה נותן בהם סימנים: דצ"ך עד"ש באח"ב.

What is the need for and significance of R. Yehuda's teaching?² Is he simply providing a mnemonic to facilitate keeping track of all of the miracles,³ or is he attempting to convey a more profound understanding of how to categorize and comprehend the relationships between the various plagues?

Multiple Divisions

Regardless of R. Yehuda's personal intent, his acronyms have inspired many commentators, even some who do not ordinarily engage in structural analysis, to search for patterns among the plagues and to attempt to understand their ordering. While some suffice with showing how the Plagues form a cohesive linear progression, others split the larger series into pairs, triads, pentads, and hexads, each unified either in purpose or by certain common characteristics.

¹ See also Sifre Devarim and Midrash Tannaim.

² See the formulation in the Haggadah commentary of R. Yeshayah MiTrani: "מה סימן נתן ר' יהודה? וכי תימה, מה סימן נתן ר' יהודה? וכי? אין אדם יודע ליקח מכל תיבה אות ולעשות סימן "זיל קרי בי רב הוא".

³ See R. N"H Wessely who suggests exactly that, and see R. Yehuda b. Yakar, Ritva, and R. Shimon b. Tzemach Duran in their commentaries on the Haggadah who note that R. Yehuda offers a mnemonic also in a different context in Bavli Menachot.

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Exegetical Approaches

One Unified Process

All of the Plagues form one cohesive unit with unifying patterns.

SOURCES: Pesikta DeRav Kahana, Tanchuma Bo¹

Gradual progression – These Midrashim compare the process of the Plagues to a series of increasingly severe measures a king takes to subdue a rebellious country.² There is no indication of any internal division in this analogy.

Origin – The source of the Plagues gradually moves from the waters up to Hashem Himself.³

Paroh's reactions – Paroh's negotiating stance becomes more flexible as the series continues.



Two Pentads

The Ten Plagues can be divided into two sets of five, from דם to דָּבָר and from שְׁחִין to בְּכוֹרוֹת.⁴

SOURCES: Tanchuma Vaera, Shemot Rabbah, Maharal,⁵ Vilna Gaon (GR"A)

Hardening of Paroh's heart – The Midrashim highlight the switch between Paroh's hardening of his own heart and Hashem's more active role in the hardening which begins in the Plague of שְׁחִין. See Hardened Hearts.

Introductions – The introductions to the miracles of the תַּגִּין and שְׁחִין are unique in that they include both Moshe and Aharon – "וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אַהֲרֹן".

Origin – Abarbanel notes that the first five plagues came from the water and earth, while the second set of five came via fire and air.

First plagues of the set – The miracles of the תַּגִּין / דָּם and שְׁחִין parallel the three signs which were given to Moshe already in Shemot 4.⁶ As such, they serve as appropriate opening warnings for each set of plagues.⁷

Final plagues of the set – Each set of five ends with a particularly devastating plague, דָּבָר and בְּכוֹרוֹת, the only two plagues which explicitly caused death.⁸



Three or Four Triads

The two variations of this approach differ regarding the total number of plagues and about whether the relatively lighter plagues of כָּנִים, שְׁחִין, and חֹשֶׁךְ are the openings or conclusions of the various groupings.

Three Triads

The first group consists of דָּם, צָפָרְדֵּי, and כָּנִים, the second includes עֲרָב, דָּבָר, and שְׁחִין, and the third is composed of בָּרָד, אֲרָבָה, and חֹשֶׁךְ.

SOURCES: R. Yehuda in Sifre Devarim and Midrash Tannaim,⁹ Lekach Tov, Rashbam, R. Avraham b. HaRambam, Ramban, R. Bachya, Ritva, Ralbag, Akeidat Yitzchak, Abarbanel, Sforno, Keli Yekar, R. S"R Hirsch, Malbim, most commentators

Number of miracles – This approach views the nine plagues from דָּם to חֹשֶׁךְ as a distinct unit.

Commentators who count ten or eleven miracles,¹⁰ need to still view תַּנִּין as an introductory sign,¹¹ and the Plague of the Firstborn and Splitting of the Sea as separate from the main cycle of the Plagues.¹²

Three Lessons – The Akeidat Yitzchak and Abarbanel¹³ explain that each set was designed to teach a different lesson and therefore begins with an explicit statement to that effect.¹⁴ The Plague of דָּם is introduced with "בְּעִבּוֹר תִּדְעֵ כִּי אֵין כְּמִנִּי" by בָּרָד with "לְמַעַן תִּדְעֵ כִּי אֵין ה' בְּקִרְבֵּי הָאָרֶץ", and עֲרָב by "בְּזֹאת תִּדְעֵ כִּי אֵין ה'".¹⁵ Thus, the first triad was intended to verify Hashem's existence,¹⁶ the second set to proclaim His providence,¹⁷ and the final group to demonstrate His unique and incomparable abilities.¹⁸

Progression – Ralbag points out that each set was more severe than the previous one.¹⁹ The first triad was composed mainly of nuisances, rather than threatening calamities.²⁰ The second set more seriously attacked the Egyptian's livestock sources of sustenance and brought bodily pain through the שְׁחִין. The third set, in attacking crops, affected even future livelihood, and the darkness caused more distress. Finally, the last plague brought death itself.²¹

Target – Ralbag suggests that in each threesome there was both an attack on the food supply²² and on the Egyptians' own bodies.²³

Agent – The Tanchuma²⁴ notes that Aharon brings the first set, Moshe initiates the plagues of the final triad, Hashem directly brings עֲרָב, דָּבָר, and בְּכוֹרוֹת,²⁵ while שְׁחִין is brought by both Moshe and Aharon together.²⁶

Warning – Many of these commentators point out that in each set, the first two plagues were preceded by a warning, while the last one was not.²⁷

Language and location – Ramban²⁸ notes that before the first plague of each set, Moshe is told "הִתְיַצֵּב לִפְנֵי ה' בְּרָעָה", while in the second plague the language is "בֹּא אֶל פְּרָעָה". He explains that the warning for the first wonder of each set took place by the Nile,²⁹ while the warning for the second plagues of each group was delivered in the palace.³⁰

Timing – The warning for the first plague of each set took place in the morning.³¹

Hardening of Paroh's heart – This division does not account for the shift midway through the Plagues from Paroh himself hardening of his heart to Hashem doing so.



Four Triads

The first group consists of תַּגִּינִין,³² דָּם, and צְפַרְדֵּי, the second includes כְּנִיָּם, עֲרֹב, and דְּבָר, the third is composed of שְׁחִין, בְּרָד, and אֲרָבָה, and the fourth contains חֲשָׁה, בְּכוֹרוֹת, and יָם סוּף.³³

SOURCES: R. Yosef ibn Kaspi,³⁴ R. N"H Wessely, R. Y"S Reggio, Shadal³⁵

Nature of the miracles – R. N"H Wessely suggests that the first wonder of each set served as a warning sign while the other two plagues served as punishments. He thereby explains that there is no warning for כְּנִיָּם, שְׁחִין, and חֲשָׁה, as they themselves constituted warnings for the plagues which followed.³⁶

Origin – According to R. N"H Wessely, each triad stemmed from a different source: water,³⁷ land, air, and heavens.³⁸

Target – R. N"H Wessely notes a progression in the severity of the Plagues from one set to the next. The plagues of the first triad destroyed the fish of the Nile, those of the second group attacked the cattle,³⁹ the third set ruined the agricultural produce, while the final plagues brought death to humans.

Agent – The pairs of punishment plagues in each set were brought by different agents. Aharon initiated דָּם and צְפַרְדֵּי, Hashem directly brought עֲרֹב and דְּבָר, Moshe was responsible for bringing the בְּרָד and אֲרָבָה, while Hashem and Moshe combine to bring about בְּכוֹרוֹת and יָם סוּף.⁴⁰

Hardening of Paroh's heart – According to this approach it is exactly midway through the Plagues (after the first two triads) that Hashem (rather than Paroh himself) begins to harden Paroh's heart.

Magicians – There is a gradual lessening of the magician's roles and status between the triads. In the first cycle the magicians are able to replicate all three wonders. By the second set, though, they can no longer bring the signs. In the third, their stature decreases even further, as due to the שְׁחִין they can no longer even stand before Paroh. In the last set they are missing from the story altogether.⁴¹

Tehillim 78 – Wessely suggests that his structure helps explain why the wonders of the תַּגִּינִין, כְּנִיָּם, שְׁחִין, and חֲשָׁה are absent from the Psalmist's description of the plagues, as all of these were only preparatory warning signs, not actual plagues.⁴²



Five Pairs

The Ten Plagues from דָּם until בְּכוֹרוֹת are divided into five groups of two.

SOURCES: R. Yehuda HaLevi, U. Cassuto⁴³

Origin – R. Yehuda HaLevi sees a progression through the pairs of plagues from the water to the heavens: דָּם and צְפַרְדֵּי were plagues originating from the water, כְּנִיָּם and עֲרֹב were scourges from the land,⁴⁴ while

בְּדָבָר and שְׁחִין were airborne.⁴⁵ Both בְּדָבָר and אֲרָבָה were windswept, the former as part of a storm, the latter brought by an easterly wind. Finally the last two calamities were heavenly-sent.⁴⁶

Nature and effects – Cassuto points to the similarity of the plagues in each of the five pairs: דָּם and צְפַרְדֵּי both attacked the Nile, כְּנִים and עֲרָב were both plagues of insects,⁴⁷ דְּבַר and שְׁחִין were both diseases, with the former affecting animals and the latter affecting humans, while בְּדָבָר and אֲרָבָה both caused agricultural devastation. Finally, the last pair brought darkness, first a literal absence of light, and then the darkness of death.

¹ The Tanchuma is also cited by Rashi Shemot 8:17.

² Cf. Ralbag below.

³ See the opinion of R. Yehuda HaLevi cited below, and the development of this theory by the Maharal.

⁴ Alternatively, according to those who count twelve plagues – see How Many Plagues, they can be divided into two hexads, from תַּנְיִן to דְּבַר and from שְׁחִין until יָם סוּף.

⁵ The Maharal attempts to delineate the correspondences between the plagues in each half. However, in other places in Gevurot Hashem, Maharal also develops the tripartite division.

⁶ שְׁחִין is a form of צָרַעַת – see Vayikra 13:18-23.

⁷ Cf. מאיר שפיגלמן, "פרשת וארא", בית המדרש הוירטואלי של ישיבת הר עציון ע"ש ישראל קושיצקי, תשס"ג (available here).

⁸ Cf. Benno Jacob. As a whole, the second grouping is more severe than the first; by three of the plagues we are told that there had never been such a phenomenon, and it is only in this section that Paroh considers sending the nation even after the ending of the various plagues.

⁹ It is possible, however, that R. Yehuda intended his acronyms only to be a mnemonic, rather than a fundamental categorization of the Plagues.

¹⁰ See How Many Plagues.

¹¹ This is apparently Ralbag's position.

¹² See Sforno.

¹³ The roots of this proposal can be found already in Ramban's commentary to Shemot 13:16 where he delineates the three principles the Plagues came to teach. However, Ramban's version assigns two of the lessons to the same plague (בְּדָבָר). R. Bachya, in contrast, ascribes the three lessons to the three different plagues of עֲרָב, צְפַרְדֵּי, and בְּדָבָר, but he also does not view each entire triad as imparting a particular lesson.

¹⁴ See Malbim who maintains that the Plague of the Firstborn had a completely different goal, to convince Paroh to let the nation go. He further suggests that while the first two plagues of each set were meant to serve as "two witnesses" to impart the lesson, the third plague was meant to punish Paroh's obstinacy.

¹⁵ Scattered throughout the description of the Plagues there are other statements that similarly express a purpose of the Plagues "So that you shall know..." See Shemot 8:5-6, 9:14, 9:29, 10:1-2, 14:4, 18. As such, there might be less significance to the fact that such declarations appear in the opening plague of each set.

¹⁶ The magicians' statement "אָצְבַּע אֶל־הַיָּם הוּא" suggests that this was, in fact, achieved.

¹⁷ As the two plagues in this unit are the first in which we are told that there was a distinction between the Egyptians and Hebrews, the lesson of God's providence is highlighted.

¹⁸ By both בְּדָבָר and אֲרָבָה, the verses emphasize how such catastrophes had never before been seen in Egypt, underscoring the unique powers of Hashem. Cf. the Ritva who suggests that the third triad was

intended to validate the existence of prophecy.

¹⁹ Cf. Ramban above who thinks that the third plague of each set was less harmful than the previous two, though he might agree that on the whole each set was progressively more destructive.

²⁰ One might disagree and suggest that the lack of water in the first plague was a more severe problem. However, Ralbag views it as less serious because the Egyptians could get water by digging.

²¹ The increase in severity is likely responsible for Paroh being more willing to negotiate during the course of the third triad.

²² דם and צפֿרדע afflicted the Nile, ערב and בָּרַד decimated the cattle, while אַרְבֵּה and בָּרַד ruined the agricultural produce.

²³ שָׁחִין, כְּנִים, and חֶשֶׁךְ affected the people directly.

²⁴ See also R. Avraham b. HaRambam's development of this idea.

²⁵ Cf. Raavan in his Commentary on the Passover Haggadah who suggests that the middle triad was also brought by Moshe, but just without a staff.

²⁶ See also Philo. The structure would be simpler if שָׁחִין, too, were brought directly by Hashem to match the rest of the unit. One might also have expected a progressive order, with the first set being brought by Aharon, the second by Moshe and finally the last by Hashem.

²⁷ Lekach Tov, drawing on Sanhedrin 81a, explains that if after an initial punishment, one still repeats one's offense, a third warning is no longer granted. Malbim offers an alternative that while the first two plagues of each set were educational, the third was simply a punishment for Paroh's obstinacy and thus did not merit a warning. See also Ramban who suggests that a warning was necessary only before life-threatening plagues (see צפֿרדעִים – Frogs or Crocs for Ramban's understanding of the fatal effects of that plague).

²⁸ See also the clearer formulation of R. Bachya following in Ramban's footsteps.

²⁹ The setting by the water is mentioned explicitly by the plagues of ערב and דם, though not by בָּרַד.

³⁰ Ramban explains that Moshe publicly warned Paroh about the plagues that were potentially life threatening to humans to give the Egyptians a chance to dissuade Paroh, while he sufficed with a private warning to Paroh by the lesser plagues. Ramban's position is somewhat contradictory as elsewhere he suggests that the first two plagues of every set were life-threatening. Cf. R. Bachya who suggests that the choice of locations served to counter Paroh's pride in both his land (symbolized by the Nile) and his position of power (epitomized by the palace).

³¹ In the first triad, the first two plagues were brought immediately after the warning while in the last two sets the first two plagues were brought the day afterwards.

³² Ibn Kaspi does not count the תַּנִּין, but instead splits the Plague of Blood into two.

³³ Ibn Kaspi does not count the Splitting of the Sea as part of the series.

³⁴ In contrast to the other exegetes in this subcategory, Ibn Kaspi counts only eleven plagues – see How Many Plagues. He divides these into three groups of three and one group of two.

³⁵ See also מאיר שפיגלמן, "פרשת וארא", בית המדרש הוירטואלי של ישיבת הר עציון ע"ש ישראל קושיצקי, תשס"ג (available here).

³⁶ According to R. N"H Wessely, the four warning signs were less damaging than the eight additional plagues. Cf. Ralbag who takes the opposite view in noting that שָׁחִין, כְּנִים, and חֶשֶׁךְ all afflicted the Egyptians' bodies.

³⁷ To facilitate this division, he adopts the position that the תַּנִּין is a water based creature – see תַּנִּין – Serpent or Sea Monster.

³⁸ Ibn Kaspi similarly suggests that the Plagues are divided among the four classical elements of water, earth, air, and fire, and see also the citation of R. Saadia in the Tur. The concept of the Plagues affecting all four elements is found already in Philo, but he does not divide them by triad.

³⁹ He apparently understands that ערב refers to a mixture of wild animals. See ערב – Beasts or Bugs for the various possibilities. It should be noted, though, that even if animals might be a unifying feature of this set, in the plague of ערב it was the animals who attacked, while in דבר the animals were the ones affected.

⁴⁰ This approach would work more neatly if the warning plague of each set matched the pattern. However, with the exception of the sign of the תנין, they do not.

⁴¹ According to R. N"H Wessely a uniting feature of the four signs is that each involved a belittling of the Egyptian magicians. Aharon proves himself superior during the sign of the תנין as his staff swallowed theirs. By the sign of כנים the magicians are forced to admit that "it is the hand of God", and by the sign of שחין, they can no longer stand before Moshe. While there is nothing explicit in the text by the sign of חשך, Wessely attempts to suggest that here, too, the magicians were embarrassed.

⁴² However, R. N"H Wessely neither accounts for the different order presented in the Psalm nor does he resolve the discrepancy in the description in Psalm 105 in which כנים and חשך are mentioned but דבר and שחין are not.

⁴³ See also the דבר אחר interpretation which appears in Midrash Tannaim and the Passover Haggadah.

⁴⁴ To bring כנים, Aharon smote the dirt of the earth. R. Yehuda HaLevi identifies ערב as land animals – see ערב – Beasts or Bugs.

⁴⁵ R. Yehuda HaLevi believes that דבר is caused by some change in the temperature of the air, while by שחין the verse explicitly states that Moshe threw ashes into the air to bring the plague.

⁴⁶ In חשך, the celestial bodies did Hashem's bidding and in בכורות an angel was sent from on high to destroy.

⁴⁷ Cassuto adopts the opinion that ערב was a type of fly – see ערב – Beasts or Bugs.

