

Message from the Haftara

*Rabbi Katriel (Kenneth) Brander
President and Rosh Halyeshiva
Ohr Torah Stone Institutions*

God's Awesome Power in Nature

VA'EIRA

In Parshat Va'eira, God begins to inflict the ten plagues on Par'o and on Egypt. Our Sages teach that each plague has symbolic significance, not only in its content but in where and how it strikes. The very first plague, that of blood, for example, was not introduced in the throne room or Egyptian halls of state. Rather, Moshe was commanded to intercept Par'o in his morning descent to the Nile river. The significance of this setting is explored by the commentaries, emphasized by themes in the haftara, and brought home by events occurring around the world today.

It is fitting that the first plague, turning Egypt's water into blood, results from an encounter on the bank of the Nile, the life source of the civilization there, in the early morning. God specifies both the place and the time at which Moshe should confront Par'o: "Go to Par'o in the morning as he goes out to the water. Place yourself by the bank of the Nile where you will encounter him, taking in your hand the staff ..." (7:15). Why did

this meeting need to occur in the morning? Midrash (Sh'mot Rabba, Va'eira 9) provides some background:

"By the bank of the Nile" – Why did Par'o go out to the water? Because that villain glorified himself as a god, declaring that he never needed to relieve himself. Therefore, he went out in the morning [when he would not be observed]. You, Moshe, confront him when he is taking care of his needs.

Par'o's early visit to the Nile was not an innocent morning constitutional. It was part of his elaborate deception of the Egyptian people. In order to emphasize his power and standing among the people, he claimed to have supernatural divine powers that made it unnecessary for him to perform normal bodily functions. To maintain this fraud, Par'o would steal out in the early hours of the morning to relieve himself in the Nile at a time when no one would observe him.

Moshe's interception of Par'o during this ritual intended to disarm and humiliate the monarch, exposing his presumption and hubris for all the world to see. When the Almighty's power revealed Par'o's charade, everyone – Israelite and Egyptian alike – could see that God's strength, witnessed through the might of nature, dwarfs any plots and schemes that human beings might devise. The plague of blood thus not only

demonstrated God's superiority over Par'o, but instilled a lasting sense of awe and humility in all those who saw the Nile running red.

Our haftara also takes up this theme of measuring God's power against the insolent hubris of human beings. In this prophecy, Yechezkel (29:3) cartoonishly portrays the Par'o of his own time as an arrogant crocodile: "Behold, I am upon you, Par'o, king of Egypt, great crocodile crouching in his Nile streams who says, 'It is mine, this Nile; I made it for myself.'" This Par'o's haughty attitude, which Yechezkel mocks, echoes that of his predecessor hundreds of years earlier, when such ridiculous claims about creating the Nile and controlling it were belied by the plagues of blood and frogs detailed so vividly in our parsha. In this haftara, God similarly pledges to smash the later Par'o's arrogance by turning the power of the Nile against him: "I will fix hooks into your jaw; I will make the fish from your Nile stick to your scales; I will drag you up out of your Nile" (v. 4).

This prophecy shows how the arrogance of mankind is revealed when we witness God's control over nature. It is a lesson that is still audible and visible today. The power of nature created by God has been especially clear in recent weeks as winter weather has wreaked havoc in the United States, Europe and the

Middle East. In Israel, storms with high winds and torrential rain have taken at least two lives, as well as torn apart human-built structures and disrupted countless people's plans in several cities. Powerful rains and snowstorms also caused deaths, major damage, closures and travel disruptions across the United States and Europe.

Through the power of nature, God reminds us that while humanity is given dominion in the world, we are not its true masters. We remain subservient to God, albeit with capacity in the creative process. No matter the heights of human creativity, cleverness, and achievement, we are not gods, and our futures remain at the mercy of the Almighty. This awe-filled recognition of God that we are enjoined to preserve echoes in both the closing verse of the haftara and the opening verse of the parasha: "And they will know that I am the Lord" (Yechezkel 29:21); "He said to him: 'I am the Lord'" (Sh'mot 6:2). When we maintain the proper sense of perspective, when we understand that our own efforts and talents have efficacy and meaning when directed in God's service rather than against it, we know that He is the Lord and we are His junior partners. 