



The War of the Plagues

ובזרוע נטויה...זו החרב כמו שכתוב... (הגדה של פסח)

“And with an outstretched hand (zero’ah netuyah)..this refers to the sword as is written(Hagaddah shel Pesach)

The fourth and final verse of the section known as “*arami oved avi*” describes various aspects of the divine redemption: “G-d liberated us from Egypt with a strong hand and an **outstretched arm**...”. These physical descriptions of hands and arms are incompatible with a non-physical G-d. Evidently, they are metaphors, signaling various redemptive features of the exodus from Egypt. Each of the five terms of the final verse of “*arami oved avi*” is associated with a different aspect of our redemption.

The Haggadah interprets the second term of this verse- the “outstretched arm “ זרוע נטויה - by citing a verse in Divrei Hayamim

in which Dovid views an angel threatening Yerushalayim with his extended arm clasping a sword. Recognizing this ominous threat to his capital city, Dovid begins to fast and pray. Based upon this image of a sword clutched in the “outstretched arm” of an angel, the Haggadah translates the phrase “outstretched arm” in the “*arami oved avi*” section of the Torah as a reference to a sword. Effectively, the verse in *arami oved avi*, which describes redemption from Egypt through Hashem’s outstretched arm, is referring to a “sword”. The haggadah does not clarify which sword the verse it is referring to and we have absolutely no record of any makkah or plague which included a sword. Yet the Torah spotlights a sword as a highlight of our redemption.

An interesting Midrash Tanchumah (Bo perek 4) helps decode the sword which the Haggadah refers to. There are numerous strategies for classifying the series of plagues. The most popular system is based upon Rebbe Yehuda’s division of the ten plagues into a 3-3-4 configuration, known by its acronym of *detzach*, *adash* and *b’achav*. There are, undoubtedly, numerous other permutations by which the makkot can be assembled and organized. This midrash suggests a different classification method: all ten were part of one long incremental process. The makkot were sequenced as a 10-part series which resembled ancient warfare.

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Ancient battles began by laying siege to a city. A siege would starve, and choke the population, softening them for ultimate defeat. Initially, all water and food were denied, weakening the health and resolve of the population. As the siege wore on, deafening sounds were blared night and day to disorient and terrify the inhabitants. Lacking sleep, water and nutrition, the strength and morale of the besieged citizens would slowly deteriorate.

Stage two of the siege could be called the “pre-war” hostilities. Archers would periodically attack the city, but, ultimately an air offensive cannot conquer the city. Freakish mercenaries were set loose upon the city, murdering, raping and generally sowing fear and panic amongst the inhabitants. As the war effort mounted, fiery boulders were catapulted into the city in the lead up to a

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full-blown infantry invasion.

The 10 plagues in Egypt mirrored this “combat model”. Initially, the Nile was converted into blood, denying both fresh water and fish to the Egyptians. For a country that didn’t eat animal meat, fish was the essential source of protein. The deafening and endlessly croaking frogs shattered their sanity. Soon afterwards, hoards of insects bit and gnawed at the Egyptians, simulating the attack of archers. During arov, ferocious animals invaded the land, mimicking the rampage of ogres or the charge of freakish brutes.

Barad simulated the catapulting of fiery boulders and arbeh symbolized a full-blown infantry invasion. Nothing epitomizes an invading army more than the swarm of innumerable and uniform locusts.

The entire series of makkot was designed based upon a military template. When the Haggadah portrays the “sword” which liberated us, it refers to a metaphoric sword of war. The ten plagues were a figurative war, or a metaphoric sword raised against the Egyptians.

The exodus from Egypt, not only emancipated the slaves, but it also introduced us to Hashem. In addition to identifying Him as our Father and our Creator, it was imperative that the newly liberated people acknowledge Him as Warrior. This fledgling nation would soon be expected to defeat over 30 formidable armies of Kena’an. Originally, we were meant to arrive in early summer and to wage these wars against ferocious local militias. It was crucial that we view Hashem as a warrior who understands ancient warfare and military tactics. How else would we garner the confidence to go to battle against these dominant armies?

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After all, a few months earlier, we had been suffering the crushing weight of slavery!

Sadly, our desert sins delayed these wars by 40 years, but the original plan had us arriving in Israel within a few weeks of our emancipation. It was crucial to envision Hashem as a capable warrior in Egypt.

Ultimately, this vision was solidified at Yam Suf, when we proclaimed ה' איש מלחמה Hashem is a Warrior! Witnessing the Egyptian chariots being tossed among the ocean waves convinced the people of Hashem's military prowess, imbuing them with the confidence that they could wage successful war against all odds. Hashem would fight on our behalf! The plagues in Egypt – modeled after combat strategy – first presented Hashem to his people as a Warrior.

For centuries, this image of Hashem as a warrior was almost irrelevant, as we were dispossessed of Land and army and wandered through the sands of history. Having returned to our Land and to our history we are forced to once again take up arms to defend our Homeland- once again against all odds. We have merited dramatic military triumphs which can only be attributed to divine intervention.

We daven that Hakadosh Baruch Hu continue to wage war on our behalf; we further pray that our efforts, coupled with His providence will yield a world which acknowledges His sovereignty, embraces His chosen people and stills the sounds of war for all eternity. Pesach Sameach! ■



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