

# Shabbat Kodesh: A Weekly Reader from Kodesh Press

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## MAIMONIDES' UNDERSTANDING OF THE NEW COMMANDMENTS IN EGYPT

**Rabbi Alec Goldstein**

*"In Egypt, Amram was commanded with additional commandments, until Moses came and by his hand the Torah was completed" (Melakhim 9:1).*

Maimonides' source for this statement is opaque. The Meshekh Chokhmah argues it is from the verse "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exod. 3:6). This implication is that just as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had separate new commandments, so too did Amram, since it says, "God of your father" — Amram.

A second answer is from the Yad Eitan, quoted in the Sefer Likkutim of the Frankel edition, who writes, "In the Mekhilta (Yitro), it is stated that they were given commandments in Egypt beyond the Noahide laws. And it makes sense that these were given through Amram, who was the greatest scholar of his generation."

And what were these commandments? Rabbi Israel Eliezer Rubin analyzed this question, and presents several possibilities:

First, the Tzafnat Pa'ane'ach suggests Amram instituted the laws of marriage. Rabbi Rubin rejects this answer, since Isaac and Rebekah had a formal marriage, and Joseph also had a marriage contract.

Second, he quotes from the Yad Eitan that Amram learned the law of remarrying one's ex-wife, since Amram re-married Jochebed; this too Rabbi Rubin rejects, since Abraham married Keturah, whom the Sages identify as Hagar.

Third, according to the Torat ha-Melekh, Amram learned the prohibition of abortion, which is why the midwives refused Pharaoh's decree (Exod. 1:16). Rabbi Rubin rejects this opinion, since the verse clearly refers to killing the babies after they were born.

Rabbi Rubin argues that Amram was given the commandment of procreation, and he marshals the opinion of Tosafot that non-Jews (and similarly Jews before Sinai) do not have the commandment to procreate (*Sanhedrin* 59b, s.v. *ve-ha*)

## JOHN LENNON AND THE PLAGUE OF AROV

**Mitchell First**

Most of us assume that this plague consisted of an attack by various wild animals. This is essentially the approach taken by Rashi. However, according to R. Yehudah, the plague consisted of a mixture of wild animals. According to R. Nehemiah, the plague consisted of various species of hornets and mosquitoes/gnats. Both of these Sages are interpreting the word *arov* as mixture. So according to perhaps all of the views that I have described so far, the Torah is interpreted as having not described the actual animal involved, but having used a word that meant only "mixture."

At first glance, this seems unusual. But perhaps we are dealing with a common ancient idiom and in biblical times everyone understood what particular mixture was implied by the word *arov*. Many scholars believe that there are a few grounds to prefer the very small animal view. First, the verses refer to the *arov* entering the houses of the Egyptians. If the animals involved were large ones, the houses could have been secured to prevent them from entering. Also, if the securing would have been to no avail, the text would have described the animals breaking down the premises upon entering.

## ONKELOS CORNER

**Rabbi Jack Abramowitz**

4. Pharaoh will not accept it from you and I will place a plague of My strength on Egypt and take out My legions, My people the children of Israel, from the land of Egypt with great judgments. (Shemot 7:4)

The Torah says *yadi*, which Onkelos translates as *machat gevurti*, as "a plague of my strength" as opposed to "My hand."—

— *Adapted from The Complete Targum Onkelos*

A second reason to prefer the very small animals approach is that the root ערב with the meaning of “mixture” is more naturally applied to small objects. Large objects, each taking up its own space, are inherently less of a mixture. A third reason to prefer the very small animals approach is based on a widespread view that the plagues came in pairs. For example, the first and second plagues, blood and frogs, were both primarily addressed towards the Nile. The seventh and eighth plagues, hail and locusts, were both primarily addressed to the crops. If our fourth plague, *arov*, was meant as a pair to the third plague, *kinim* (=lice), obviously the very small animal interpretation fits better.

There is, however, an alternative approach to identifying the biblical *arov*. A scarab is a type of beetle. It was called *karabos* in Greek. *Karabos* is very close to the Hebrew *ayin-reshebet*, due to the guttural sound that the *ayin* made. The “-os” in the Greek word is likely just a Greek addition to a foreign word.

Isaac Mozeson explained that the ancient Egyptians had “beetlemania.” They worshipped this particular beetle! In ancient Egypt, the scarab was sculptured on monuments, painted on tombs, and worn around the neck as an amulet. Many of the plagues were attacks on the various deities of Egypt, and this plague would then be another such attack on a deity. In contrast, a plague of “a mixture of animals” is not a clear judgment on an Egyptian deity.

The “scarab” suggestion (originally made by a nineteenth century British scholar named Marcus Moritz Kalisch) was referred to by Rabbi J.H. Hertz but he did not sufficiently explain it. The suggestion was also referred to without sufficient explanation by R. Aryeh Kaplan. But the suggestion was explained well by Isaac Mozeson in his book *The Word* and in his [edenics.net](http://edenics.net) site, entry “scarab.”

## THE HAND OF GOD

### Rabbi Amnon Bazak

Moshe and Aharon were almost always involved in bringing the plagues upon the Egyptians. In advance of the first three plagues (blood, frogs, and lice), Aharon stretches out his staff (7:19, 8:1, 12). Before the third group of three (hail, locusts, and darkness), Moshe stretches out his staff (9:22, 10:12, 21). Before the plague of boils, Moshe and Aharon act together: “Then the Lord said to Moshe and Aharon, ‘Each of you take handfuls of soot from the kiln, and let Moshe throw it toward the sky in the sight of Pharaoh. It shall become a fine

dust all over the land of Egypt, and cause an inflammation breaking out in boils on man and beast throughout the land of Egypt’” (9:8–9).

Three of the plagues – insects, pestilence, and death of the first-born – do not fit this pattern. For those, God acts alone: “And the Lord did so. Heavy swarms of insects invaded Pharaoh’s palace and the houses of his courtiers; throughout the country of Egypt” (8:20); “And the Lord did so the next day: all the livestock of the Egyptians died, but of the livestock of the Israelites not a beast died” (9:6); “In the middle of the night the Lord struck down all the first-born in the land of Egypt” (12:29). Why are these three plagues different?

All three of these plagues share an emphasis on the separateness of the Jews. At the beginning of the plague of insects, we read, “But on that day I will set apart the region of Goshen, where My people dwell, so that no swarms of insects shall be there, that you may know that I the Lord am in the midst of the land” (8:18). The Jews already know that God is in the midst of the land. When animals are struck with pestilence, “the hand of the Lord will strike your livestock... the Lord will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of the Egyptians, so that nothing shall die of all that belongs to the Israelites.... And the Lord did so the next day: all the livestock of the Egyptians died, but of the livestock of the Israelites not a beast died” (9:3–6). The death of the first-born sons is described thus: “And every first-born in the land of Egypt shall die, from the first-born of Pharaoh who sits on his throne... and all the first-born of the cattle. And there shall be a loud cry in all the land of Egypt... but not a dog shall snarl at any of the Israelites, at man or beast – in order that you may know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel” (11:5–7). While the Jews escaped the effects of hail and darkness, only in these three cases is the distinction made in the warning of the plague, and only in these three cases does the Torah explicitly mention a separation between the Jews and the Egyptians.

There are many lessons to be learned from the plagues of Egypt, and one is that God directly watches over His people. Therefore, when the Jews are singled out, it is important to see that God Himself is bringing the plague. Had Moshe or Aharon been involved, one might think that they were acting directly against the Egyptians. When God acts Himself, and plagues the Egyptians while sparing the Jews, no one can doubt God’s presence on earth.