Paired Perspectives on the Parashah: Vaera

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VaEra:

Did the Israelites Suffer from the Plagues?

Miracle, Nature, and Divine Protection in Egypt

The Torah carefully distinguishes between Egypt and Israel during the plagues, but it does not do so uniformly. Some plagues explicitly spare the Israelites, while others make no such distinction. This uneven textual pattern gave rise to a fundamental debate among classical commentators: were the Israelites entirely insulated from the suffering of the plagues, or did they endure at least some of them alongside their Egyptian neighbors?

Supernatural Distinction: Israel Untouched

Many Midrashic sources assume that the Israelites did not suffer from any of the plagues. *Midrash Tanhuma* (*VaEra* 13; *Bo* 3), *Shemot Rabbah*, and *Bemidbar Rabbah* all describe a reality in which God's direct intervention ensured that Israel was entirely spared. This approach emphasizes the overtly supernatural character of the plagues. God's hand is not subtle; it is unmistakable. Egypt is struck, Israel is protected.

Rambam gives this position textual weight. In his commentary on *Avot* (5:4), he stresses that the plagues were supernatural precisely because they did not affect the Israelites. Rambam supports this claim through close textual analysis. The Torah states that *the Egyptians* could not drink the water of the Nile after it turned to blood (Exodus 7:21), implying that others could. The frogs are described as entering “your (i.e., the Egyptians’) houses… your beds… and your people” (7:28–29). Boils appear “upon the magicians and upon all the Egyptians” (9:11). Locusts are said to fill the homes of Egyptians and their servants (10:6). The Torah’s repeated emphasis on Egyptian suffering, Rambam argues, reflects a consistent pattern of divine discrimination.

In this reading, the plagues are described as punishments of the oppressor. From this perspective, redemption begins with total insulation. God demonstrates absolute sovereignty over nature and history by striking Egypt while sparing Israel entirely.

Natural Exposure: Protection Without Insulation

A very different approach emerges from Ibn Ezra. Reading the same verses with a more restrained methodology, he argues that only where the Torah explicitly states a distinction can such a distinction be assumed. Where the text is silent, one should not infer miraculous separation. According to Ibn Ezra, several plagues—blood, frogs, lice, boils, and locusts—likely affected Israelites as well. God protected Israel from the most dangerous and destructive plagues, but not from every form of discomfort or suffering.

This view locates divine providence within a more naturalistic framework. Redemption, in this reading, does not mean exemption from hardship. Israel remains embedded within the world even as it is guided toward freedom.

Radbaz (Rabbi David Abi Zimra, Spain, Egypt 1479-1573), in a responsum (no. 813), sharply rejects Ibn Ezra’s position, going so far as to deem it religiously unacceptable. In his view—which dovetails Rambam’s approach above—when the

Torah states that Egyptians could not drink the water, it implies that Israelites could; when frogs are said to enter “you and your people,” the reference must be exclusive. From these cases, Radbaz infers a general rule: once the Torah establishes divine distinction, it applies even where not reiterated.

The intensity of Radbaz’s response is revealing. The notion that Israelites might have suffered alongside Egyptians felt theologically threatening to later tradition. It seemed to blur the line between oppressor and redeemed, to diminish the clarity of miracle, and to complicate the meaning of chosenness itself.

Ibn Ezra could respond that phrases such as ‘you and your people.’ While clearly referring to Pharaoh and the Egyptians, these verses not prove that the Israelites were not plagued as well. After all, Moses was addressing Pharaoh, and the plagues’ primary purpose was to punish the Egyptians and free the Israelites. The decisive evidence for Ibn Ezra is the explicit division between the Egyptians and Israelites for five of the plagues, implying to him that there was no such distinction for the other five.

Location, Not Identity: Shadal’s Approach

Shadal (Rabbi Shemuel David Luzzatto, Italy 1800-1865) offers a third approach that reframes the debate entirely. He suggests that the first nine plagues affected anyone present in Egypt, regardless of ethnicity, while sparing the land of Goshen. Israelites who lived in Goshen were protected; those who ventured into Egypt proper were not. Conversely, Egyptians in Goshen would have been spared.

Distinction, in this view, is geographic rather than ethnic. God’s providence operates through nature. The plagues follow natural patterns of spread and containment, even as they serve a divine purpose. This model preserves meaningful distinction without requiring constant supernatural intervention. It also aligns closely with the Torah’s emphasis on land—Egypt versus Goshen—rather than on individual immunity.

The Plague of the Firstborn: Absolute Boundary

The final plague stands apart. Unlike the first nine, the death of the firstborn is explicitly attributed to God's direct action: "I will pass through the land of Egypt" (12:12). Here, there is no ambiguity. No Israelite dies. The Torah emphasizes that God Himself, not an intermediary force, executes the plague.

Even within more naturalistic frameworks, this moment marks a decisive shift. Israel may have endured hardship earlier, but the boundary is now absolute. Redemption is not defined by comfort, but by survival. Israel may suffer within history, but it will not be erased by history.

Redemption and Suffering

The Torah thus preserves two models of divine action. In one, redemption begins with total separation from suffering, underscoring God's absolute power and supernatural intervention. In the other, redemption unfolds within the natural order, shielding Israel from annihilation but not from all pain.

What unites all views is the final outcome. However the plagues are understood, Israel emerges intact and redeemed. The exodus teaches not that the redeemed are untouched by hardship, but that their destiny is secured. God's protection does not always take the form of insulation—but it always draws the line between suffering and destruction.