

After being rejected by Pharaoh and suffering the decree to make bricks without being provided straw, Moshe and Aharon return to Pharaoh.

כִּי יִדְבַר אֲלֵיכֶם פַּרְעֹה לֵאמֹר תָּנִינוּ לָכֶם מוֹפֵת וְאָמַרְתָּ אֶל־אֱהֲרֹן קַח
אֶת־מִטְּבֵךְ וְהִשְׁלַךְ לִפְנֵי־פַרְעֹה יְהִי לְתַנִּין:

“Because when Pharaoh speaks to you saying, ‘bring for yourselves a wonder,’ you will say to Aharon, ‘take your staff and cast it before Pharaoh,’ it will be a *Tanin*.” (Shemos 7:9).

There are a few questions we have on this passuk. Whose staff was cast down? What is a ‘Tanin?’ And, why produce a ‘wonder’ that Pharaoh can reproduce?

Moshe and Aharon have a second chance. Pharaoh did not kill them. According to the Midrash, since Pharaoh’s predecessors’ time there was the fear of a ‘savior.’ That is why he had the male children of the Hebrews killed. (Shemos 1:16,22). Even according to plain reading, there was a standing decree to kill male children, to curb the population. The purpose of this was so the Hebrews not rebel and come free. (See Shemos 1:10,12). Certainly, if someone came to Pharaoh and requested that slaves go free it would be treason and he would kill the messenger.

This is why Moshe and Aharon did not ask for freedom. The entire request that they made through the ten plagues was that the entire nation would be able to go out to the desert to serve HaShem for three days. To Pharaoh—we will leave the question if this Pharaoh remembered Moshe growing up in the royal household to a different discussion—this request meant stopping work for three days. It also meant no control over an entire population of slaves once they leave the borders of Egypt.

Pharaoh reacted to the request in two ways: (1) “Who is HaShem that I should listen to him?” (Ibid 5:2). (2) “You are stopping the people from their labors.” (Ibid 5:4). This culminates in Pharaoh’s response in our passuk. *You have come to me a second time. Give me a sign that (1) your HaShem is real and (2) worthy of disturbing the work for three days.*

In response, Aharon produces a creature from his staff. What is the significance?

Gemara Menachos 85a says, *this is how the conversation took place: Pharaoh’s two leading necromancers, Yoḥana and Mamre, said to Moshe: Are you are bringing straw to Afarayim? Performing necromancy in Egypt, the world leader in sorcery, is like bringing straw to Afarayim, which is rich in the finest grains. Moshe said to them: It is as people say: To a city*

rich in herbs, take herbs. If you want to guarantee that people will appreciate your merchandise, bring it to a place where they are familiar with it.

Clearly, Egypt was familiar with this creature tanin. Of everything that a staff can turn into, this was the wonder.

The Gemara Avos D'Rabbi Nason 39:3 says, the creature that came from the staff was a serpent. *The snake has six names: Nahash, Saraf, Tanin, Tzifoni, Efeh, and Akhshuv.*

Rashi says, *“A wonder” to prove who sent Moshe and Aharon. “Tanin” is a serpent.*

What is interesting about Rashi is that usually Rashi will provide the translation of a word and give examples of other places in Tanakh. However, here Rashi ignores his own commentary to Bereishis 1:21. *“And the Lord brought forth all manner of great Tanins.”* Rashi says, *the large fishes that are in the sea; and according to the statement of the Agada (Bava Batra 74b) it means here the Leviathan and its consort which He created male and female. He, however, killed the female and preserved it in salt for the benefit of the righteous in the time to come, for had they been permitted to be fruitful and to multiply the world could not have endured because of them.*

Without even commenting on that earlier commentary Rashi says that here the tanin is a serpent. The simple explanation is derived from a later passuk in this section. *“Go to Pharaoh in the morning....and the staff that was turned into a snake you shall take in your hand.”* (Shemos 7:15). There, HaShem uses the term *“nachash”/snake*. Therefore, it seems that this passuk explains what the tanin is. On closer look, it does not.

When did a staff turn into a nachash/snake? Moshe tells HaShem that perhaps the Israelites will not believe him that HaShem sent him. (Shemos 4:1). So HaShem says, *“Take the staff that is in your hand and cast it to the ground.”* (Ibid 4:2-3). *“He cast it down to the ground and it became a nachash/snake.”* (Ibid 4:3). That is the staff that became a snake. That was Moshe’s staff.

Now we determine whose staff started the plague of blood. *“Moshe and Aharon did just as HaShem commanded, and he raised the staff and struck the water.”* (Ibid 7:20). Without going off on a digression as to who is *“he”* in the passuk, this passuk does not say *“his staff”* or *“Aharon’s staff.”* It says *“the staff.”* The staff that HaShem asked Moshe to take in verse 15, the staff that turned into a snake.

Now, this nuanced difference is staffs only makes a difference if we learn that Moshe had a different staff than Aharon. If they were the same staff then the verse will be referring to the same staff that turned into a snake and a tanin. If so, the only reason for verse 15 to mention the staff turning into a snake (we know it already did in Shemos 4:3 because there is only one staff) is to clarify that a tanin is a snake.

Ibin Ezra learns our passuk, *the reference is to Moshe's staff which Moshe had given to Aharon. Say unto Aharon: Take your rod, and stretch out thy hand (v. 19); and he lifted up the rod (ba-matteh), and smote the waters (v. 20) is proof of this. Now by employing a beis that has a pattach beneath it Scripture is informing us that when He told him, 'Take your rod,' He was referring to the well-known rod. And your rod, wherewith you smote the river, take in your hand, and go (Shemos 17:5) is additional proof of the above.*

The Ibin Ezra learns our verses differently. He says there is only one staff. However, even if there were two staffs, like I learn (a verse clearly says it was Aharon's staff – Shemos 7:12), then even Shemos 17:5 is talking about Moshe's staff, because we just proved that Aharon actually used Moshe's staff (*the staff*) to strike to hit the water of the spring that came out of the Nile.

It is also notable that the first sign to prove that Moshe was HaShem's messenger to the Israelites was the staff turning into a snake. The sign for Pharaoh was also his staff transforming into a creature. If the tanin is not a snake, what is it, and why was the snake for the Israelites and the tanin for Pharaoh?

Ibin Ezra is unsure if the tanin is the same as the nachash/snake. He says it was a different wonder before Pharaoh than the one Moshe was to do before the Israelites. However, he ponders if they were the same. He does say, *the great wonder was that Aharon's staff ended up swallowing their staffs—after all staffs returned to being staffs. (Shemos 7:12).*

Sforno says, *"Identify yourselves by means of a miracle which shows that the One Who has sent you is capable of carrying out what He promises so that we should obey Him. The expression אֹת as opposed to מִוִּפֶת is meant to identify the messenger, i.e. to prove that he is not a pretender, a charlatan. This was the reason why Moshe performed אֹתוֹת before the Israelites so that they should not entertain any doubt as to his being an authentic messenger from the Lord to them. Pharaoh, whose doubts did not relate to the authenticity of Moshe as the people's representative, had to be convinced of the identity of the Lord who Moshe claimed had sent him.*

It was he who had said that he did not recognize even the existence of such a god. Hence Moshe had to perform miracles proving that such a Lord did in fact exist. The fact that the same miracle could help establish two separate facts is no hindrance to Moshe performing the same miracle in two locations for two different audiences.

Thus, Sforno explains the purpose of the ‘wonder,’ and also says that both the tanin and the nachash are the same.

Rabbeinu Bechaya says, *“When Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, etc.” Here HaShem informed Moshe that Pharaoh would demand that he perform a miracle in order to legitimize himself. This was standard practice. A person is not accepted as a genuine prophet before he has performed some miracle (see Mishne Torah Hilchos Yesodey Hatorah 7:7). The Midrash phrases it thus. Seeing that even righteous people demand legitimization by the performance of a miracle, it is clear that wicked people will do no less. We find that after the great deluge HaShem said to Noach that He would not ever again bring a deluge to wipe out all the people. Noach asked for a sign. Thereupon HaShem gave him the sign of the rainbow (Bereishis 9:12). When King Chiskiyah was told by the prophet Yishayahu that HaShem had accepted his prayer for an extension of his life, the King (a very loyal Judean who almost became Meshiach) asked for a sign that the message from Yishayahu which contradicted his earlier message that he should make his last will and testament was true (Yishayahu 38:1-7). Seeing that these righteous people asked HaShem for a sign, we cannot blame Pharaoh for asking Moshe to perform some miracle. (Shemos Rabbah 9:1).*

Chizkuni says, *“Perform a miracle in order to legitimize yourselves!” According to Rashi the word מופת refers to a miracle that would prove who it is that authorized Moshe to become the redeemer of the Israelites. The Lord would have to demonstrate not only being a ruler, but also His capacity to enforce His decrees. We have a source for this Rashi in Devarim Rabbah 2:11, which while not exactly what Rashi says nevertheless approximates it. Basically, it explains why paganism in Jewish literature is called “worshiping stars as gods.” The reason being is that Rabbi Yossi claims that these deities cannot be called elokim, for if they were, it would follow that such a force must be obeyed. This is why the Torah in Devarim 32:17, quotes Moshe as referring to these so-called deities as “Demons and non-deities.” Onkelos translates it as “something that is misleading,” as there is absolutely no need for it. For if there had been a need for such phenomena why would HaShem be jealous of them, so to speak?”*

“Throw it in front of Pharaoh so that it will turn into a monster.” The reason for this was that Pharaoh boasted of his power to the extent that HaShem referred to him as “the great sea monster.” (Yechezkel 29:3). The prophet there ridicules the actual power of Pharaoh who people were afraid of. Moshe’s performing the miracle was to show him that awe-inspiring monsters are only an illusion and can be turned into a stick by merely taking hold of their tail. Similarly, Pharaoh’s power is also only an illusion. Even though it appears that at this time he is all powerful, this can change in the time it takes to drop a stick to the ground.

This paragraph has already appeared in Shemos 4:21 “see that you perform all the miracles that I have put at your disposal and carry them out in the presence of Pharaoh.” The reason that this has been repeated here is that a new element has been added, that only the miracle of turning the staff into a monster is to be performed.

According to this explanation, the tanin is a monster, not a simple snake. The purpose of the wonder is clear, to humble Pharaoh. Also, the passuk reiterates the command because a new wonder is to be performed, not a repeat.

Daas Zekeinim also quotes Yichezkel 29:3 because Pharaoh thought himself a mighty monster, so a monster appeared from a staff and returned to a staff. He also says, *the principal feature of serpents is that they bend and twist, so Pharaoh would also be forced to bend and twist. (Shemos Rabbah 9:4) He also afflicted him with the plague of tzoraas, (Shemos 11:1) reminding him that he should have learned a lesson from what happened to the first Pharaoh when he tried to rape the wife of the first Hebrew, Avraham (Bereishis 12:17).*

Thus, tanin is more than a snake. It is some type of monster serpent.

Tanin is mentioned throughout tanakh. The verse in Bereishis can be referring to snakes. The Torah is telling that great snakes that came out of the water, along with all the creepy crawling things. (Bereishis 1:21). The passuk before tells us how the water is to bring forth all the creepy crawling things. (Ibid 1:20). In our own Parsha, the waters brought forth the frogs. (Shemos 7:28). Further, the giant ‘serpent’ that the Passuk in Bereishis could be talking about is the snake that talked to Adam and Chava. It may also be referring to the sea monsters referred to by Yishayahu and Yirmiyahu. *Infra.*

Moshe compares the Gentile’s wine to the poison of a tanin. (Devraim 32:33). It is some creature that has venom, perhaps a serpent. In Yishayahu, the prophet refers to on The Day when HaShem will destroy the “the Great Leviathan, the elusive nachash/serpent, the Leviathan, the

twisting nachash/serpent, He will destroy that great tanin/monster.” (Yishayahu 27:1). This passuk seems to qualify what the great Leviathan is. Leviathan is not merely a snake. It is a monster, even if it looks like a giant snake. Later on, the same prophet also refers to tanin, which, in the context, means a dragon or similar monster. (Yishayahu 51:9). Likewise, Yermiahu talks about how Nebuchadnezzar swallowed up Yerushalyaim like a tanin/monster. (Yermiahu 51:34). This can be referring to a snake that eats by swallowing whole. It must, then, be a monster snake.

Likewise, tanin clearly references monsters/dragons in Tehillim 74:18, 91:23, 148:7 (referring to a sea monster), Iyuv 7:12 (also a sea monster), Eicha 4:3 (where it refers to a creature that suckles its young, unlike a snake), and Daniel 7:5. In modern Hebrew, tanin refers to an alligator.

I translate Tanin as a huge monster that has lizard-like or serpent like qualities. Most likely it lives in the sea, at least part-time, where it can move around more easily. It is a real creature with mythical qualities perfect for a prophet’s allegory and lamentations.

Pharaoh wanted a sign to know if this HaShem god was worth all the trouble in leaving labor to go worship. In a way, that’s an odd query. It matters not if Pharaoh thinks HaShem is real. Clearly, he didn’t. (Shemos 5:2). It would only matter if the Hebrew slaves thought HaShem was real. Yet, Pharaoh challenged Moshe to prove that HaShem was real. Pharaoh was trying to prove to Moshe that HaShem was not real. In that way, this entire inquiry would be over and not only would the Hebrew slaves not want to worship this HaShem god, but they would also give up the notion of wanting to go free. They would know there was no power that can set them free. Pharaoh was their god. The gods of Egypt would be their gods.

Moshe, himself, never asked for a sign. When HaShem spoke to Moshe by the Burning Bush, Moshe does not ask for signs, pacts, wonders, or covenants. He immediately knows it is HaShem, *the HaShem*. Just as Yaakov knew when he awoke from his dream. (Bereshis 28:16). The signs were for those that did not speak directly to HaShem, the Israelites and Pharaoh.

Moshe was not told to simply show a staff turning into a snake. He was to show Pharaoh something that would scare him. Moshe was to show the Israelites the staff turning into a snake and then back into a staff. That would show the Israelites that Pharaoh can be easily manipulated. Just as the nature of the staff was manipulated, so too, Pharaoh will likewise be manipulated. The nature of them as slaves will change. The snake, specifically, may not have been important.

The wonder being through a snake was significant. Looking at Egyptian culture, we know that the Pharaohs wore the symbol of the cobra snake on their royal headgear. The Uraeus was worn on Pharaoh's crown. Just as the snake turned into a staff in Moshe's hand, so too, Pharaoh was nothing more than a piece of wood. To their credit, the Israelites believed Moshe immediately and never needed that wonder as proof.

There were two deities in Egypt with the head of a crocodile. A crocodile is similar to a snake in that it is a reptile and is also twisty in the way it moves. It is much larger and looks like it swallows its prey whole. Nile crocodiles can grow to be twenty feet long. One deity is the Sobek. It is a deity that heals. Then there is the Ammit which is a demon of the underworld. It is known as "eater of the dead" or "eater of hearts." Ancient Egyptians believed that those who do not make it to the river of the kings for their afterlife get devoured by this monster.

Either way, Moshe's wonder to Pharaoh proved HaShem's point. Pharaoh who thinks himself a god and wears an uraeus/cobra on his headgear can be turned back into a piece of wood. If tanin was a crocodile or similar sea monster, then it hearkened to the Egyptian deities, one prayed to and one feared. The healer of Egypt can be controlled just as easily as turning it back into a staff. As we see, this foreshadows the plagues of blood, pestilence, and boils. The Egyptians were powerless to heal themselves of these plagues. It also harkened to Pharaoh's afterlife. Moshe can control the great demoness Ammit, putting fear in Pharaoh.

Indeed, this wonder did the trick. At first, it seems like Pharaoh was unmoved because his necromancers and magicians were able to do the same. (Shemos 7:12). So, Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he did not listen to Moshe and Aharon. (Ibid 7:13). He was emboldened because he saw that his magicians can also conjure up his gods. Therefore, he believed they had the power, with his priests, to still call upon his gods for favor.

Hashem tells Moshe, however, that Pharaoh was indeed saddened and frightened. "Pharaoh's heart is heavy." (Ibid 7:14). Pharaoh now worries about his heart. The demon Ammit is called the 'eater of hearts' because a heart not light enough to travel to the river of the kings does not merit bliss in the afterlife. Pharaoh now had a heavy heart. He was full of worry. He also was frightened that he would not join his fathers in the river of kings. Even though Pharaoh was able to resist, for now, this wonder did have an effect on him. The demonstration proved its point. HaShem now had power over his gods. His magicians could not conjure up and control HaShem because "Aharon's staff swallowed up their staffs." (Ibid 7:12). Pharaoh still had faith

in his own power and that the gods were mere magician tricks, but the splinter of worry was now in his heart and mind. This became more and more worrisome as each “wonder” plague struck Egypt unimpeded.

BONUS SHTIKEL

Many commentators ask the question: How can Pharaoh be punished for not allowing the Beni Yisrael to go free if it was HaShem that hardened Pharaoh's heart?

Indeed, the Torah tells us outright that HaShem hardened Pharaoh's heart. "HaShem said to Moshe, 'When you go to return to Egypt, see all the signs that I have placed in your hand and perform them before Pharaoh, but I will strengthen his heart, and he will not send out the people.'" (Ibid 4:21). "But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and I will increase My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt." (Shemos 7:3). If so, then where is the free choice? Why would Pharaoh be punished if he had no free choice to send out the Bnei Yisrael?

To answer this, we ask one more question. Why didn't HaShem just start with the plague to end all plagues? HaShem even told Moshe about it before Moshe arrived in Egypt to speak to Pharaoh. "And you shall say to Pharaoh, 'So said HaShem, 'My firstborn son is Israel. So, I say to you, 'Send out My son so that he will worship Me, but if you refuse to send him out, behold, I am going to slay your firstborn son.'" (Ibid 4:23). One plague, Pharaoh yields, and the Israelites are free.

Many will give the reflexive answer: HaShem wanted to punish the Egyptians. Answer: Death is the ultimate punishment. Losing a child is second. There also could have been suffering in many other ways, after the geula. It would also answer the question of why the entire Egypt had to suffer for Pharaoh's political decrees. The Bnei Yisrael were slaves to the crown, and treated by royal decree, unlike the lawful slavery in the Torah or European slavery of the Africans, in which slaves are governed by individual owners.

The answer is in the same pesukim. The end goal wasn't only about punishment. HaShem wanted His nation to see something. "I will increase My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt." (Ibid 7:3). The Bnei Yisrael didn't ask for proof that Moshe was HaShem's messenger, but HaShem felt they needed to see signs and wonders for their faith for the future generations. As to Pharaoh's free choice, he had it all along.

Pharaoh increased the work and took away the straw without a hardened heart. (Ibid 5:7). However, HaShem does not ask Pharaoh to let them out to the Land promised to the avos. He tells that to Moshe and to the Israelites. (Ibid 3:8 and 6:8). Instead, He started simple, to worship in the desert. (Ibid 5:1). This was twofold: (1) Pharaoh thought himself their god. So, Moshe mentions them changing their allegiance and serving a different Lord. (2) Moshe only asked for a

three-day Holiday. They ended up free. After that was the wonder of the staff turning into the serpent monster. (Ibid 7:10). Each meeting built on the last. Human nature is that we can tolerate a little at first and more as we gain more tolerance. A severe illness can be tolerated if it starts off mild and gets progressively worse. The same is true of sin. A large sin can be committed after many smaller sins lead the way. So too, with Pharaoh. After five plagues “Pharaoh's heart became hardened.” (Ibid 9:7). It follows that after the sixth plague—boils—“And HaShem hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not listen to them; just as HaShem foretold to Moshe. (Ibid 9:12). He had free choice the entire time. However, HaShem said, "Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh, for with a mighty hand he will send them out, and with a mighty hand he will drive them out of his land.” (Ibid 7:1). See how I will manipulate him, starting small and building on it. Let him be faced with plagues and wonders his magicians can reproduce. They can't however, reverse them. Nor will they be able to reproduce my later and grander wonders. HaShem said this knowing the future. All the while Pharaoh had free choice, but his human nature and his hubris led him right down the path to destruction.