

Stick it To 'Em

PARSHA INSIGHTS - VA'AIRA (5760)

KEEP YOUR EYE ON THAT ROD!

To prove that the transformation of Aharon's rod into a serpent was merely a magic trick, Paroh summoned his own sorcerers. They all cast their sticks to the ground, and lo and behold, every one turned into a snake, just like Aharon's! Did this prove that it was all a hoax? Was no one impressed by Aharon's feat?

The evidence was short-lived. Before anyone could conclude anything, Aharon's staff had consumed those of the Egyptian wizards (7:12). Notice that the *pasuk* [verse] is precise in its description of the event: "Aharon's ROD swallowed their rods." The *Chazal* [Sages] cited by *Rashi* is famous, that only after the snake turned back into a stick, it ate up the other sticks. Thus, it was no fake. Moshe and Aharon meant business; one could not deny that it was a miracle.

This reminds me of a *Ramban* in *Parshas Vayaishev*, 38:3-4. He cites a *Midrash Rabba* concerning Yosef's supernatural success in serving his Egyptian master, Potifar. Yosef would constantly be whispering as he walked. Commentaries explain that he never stopped reviewing the Torah he had learned in his father's house. (But see the *Netziv's Harchev Davar* on *Vayaishev* 39:6, based on *Chazal*, that Yosef DID forget some of his Torah learning. Explore the matter.) This is similar, albeit on a different level, to *tzadikim* [righteous people] who go around reviewing their learning by heart, and their mouths seem to always be in motion. Also, when Potifar requested a hot drink, Yosef somehow caused it to materialize without delay. The same was true for a warm or lukewarm beverage. Potifar, thoroughly acquainted with the occult arts, was convinced that Yosef was simply a master of witchcraft like so many others in the land of Egypt. This could explain the mysterious whispering (casting secret "spells") and the rest of Yosef's "magic tricks". Potifar accused his young servant of bringing black magic into a land already saturated with it. This suspicion remained until Potifar witnessed a dazzling manifestation of Hashem's presence with Yosef. Only then He realized that Yosef was not utilizing occult forces to succeed. Similarly, when Moshe and Aharon began displaying their "pranks", they were met with typical Egyptian skepticism, similar to that of Potifar in *Parshas Vayaishev*. Very soon afterward, however, the truth became abundantly clear to all.

(I later discovered that in fact, the *Midrash* 9:7 on our *parsha* [Torah portion] uses the same words as the one quoted by the *Ramban* in *Vayaishev*. Paroh's magicians said to Moshe and Aharon what Potifar had said to Yosef. "Are you bringing straw to sell into a city which is already full of straw?! Egypt already has plenty of wizards; you entertainers are nothing special." Their colossal blunder became apparent when the land of Egypt began to get destroyed by these "magic tricks"—the plagues. Finally, the entire country acknowledged that it was the "hand of Hashem" rather than powers of the occult.)

Why did Hashem cause the staff to ingest the others only AFTER it got back to itself? Why didn't Aharon's SNAKE eat those of the magicians? There is much to say about this; we will only delve into two answers. The *Midrash Rabba* 9:7 states: if one snake devours other ones, this is a normal event. Therefore, Hashem decreed that it return to its natural, inanimate existence before doing anything. Only then, declares the *Midrash*, Aharon's rod ate up the rest. When Paroh observed the phenomenon, he was terrified. What if Aharon orders the staff to ingest me and my throne? Surely, it will come true!

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin suggests another reason Hashem wanted the miracle to look as it did. If Aharon's snake would have devoured the other snakes, people might have questioned the authenticity of the deed. Perhaps the snake that ate up the rest actually belonged to one of the Egyptian sorcerers! Who could prove that it was Aharon's? All the serpents looked alike! On the other hand, Aharon's ROD had a distinct look to it, and no one could claim it belonged to an Egyptian wizard. It was necessary for it to consume the others in its rod state, so the miracle would be conspicuous. In case you wonder how this staff was different from every other in the world, that is a separate discussion. Perhaps we will explore it at a different time. Suffice it to say that there was no mistaking Aharon's rod for any other.

Hashem proved His existence to Paroh through miracles that occurred with great precision. There was no possibility for error; they were obviously supernatural. All this led to the magnificent *Yetzias Mitzrayim* [Exodus from Egypt] outlined in next week's *parsha*.

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