

## Nature in the Parasha

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum

### *Parashat Va'erah* –The Late Blooming Grain

#### The Plague of Hail Corresponds to *Chesed*

This week's *parasha* includes the first seven of the Ten Plagues, corresponding to the Seven Emotional *Sefirot*. Knowing G-d to be a G-d of kindness, why did He have to afflict the Egyptians with such cruel plagues? Couldn't He have rescued Israel in other ways? All the miracles of the Exodus prove that Hashem created the world. At the Exodus G-d revealed His power of being in charge of Nature. Only the one who created the world has the power to completely change and revert nature. This is why Pharaoh's magicians were unsuccessful in their attempts to copy all the plagues. Moreover, each of the plagues came to teach its own lesson to the Jewish people who were sunken into the slave mentality of the 49<sup>th</sup> level of impurity. The plagues also taught important lessons to the Egyptians. Why did Hashem bring hail upon the Egyptians?

This is because they had made the Israelites planters of their vineyards, gardens, orchards, and trees. On this account Hashem brought upon them hail, which destroyed all these plantations (*Midrash Shemot Rabbah* 12:3). The Zohar tells us that since the Egyptians did not repent, the *דֶּבֶר/dever* – Pestilence, literally turned about its letters and became *בָּרָד/barad* – Hail, which killed all those that survived the Pestilence (*Zohar* 2:31b). We just emerged from a bout of hail and snow here in our part of Israel. The harshness of the hail really feels as a slap on the face. This stands in sharp contrast to the soft caress of the snowflakes covering our landscape with its white winter blanket. The hail in this week's *parasha* was everything but gentle. However, according to the Zohar, the seventh plague, hail, corresponds to *Chesed*, which is the seventh *sefirah* when you count from *Malchut*. Although this plague has the severity of a killing hail, it also has the aspect of Loving/kindness. This was the only plague where something could be done to be saved from its harshness. Pharaoh was told that the cattle could be saved if it was brought to shelter (*Shemot* 9:19). Another connection between hail and *Chesed*, is that hail is frozen rain and we all know that water is *Chesed*. While the plague of hail affected all the plants, it distinguished between barley and wheat. "The flax and the barley were smitten; for the barley was in the ear, and the flax was in bloom. But the wheat and the spelt were not smitten; for they ripen late" (*Shemot* 9:31-32). It is interesting to note that wheat, which correspond to the *sefirah* of *Chesed* was spared by the plague of hail which likewise correspond to the *sefirah* of *Chesed*.

Why exactly was the wheat not affected by the plague of hail? What caused it to survive?

## The Softest Survives

Rashi explains, "The [wheat] was late in growing and it was still soft and able to resist the blow of anything hard..." This softness of the wheat concurs with the attribute of *Chesed*, which means kindness. Perhaps it is the kindness and softness of the wheat that makes it late growing, not pushing itself forward like the tough barley and flax, the first grains to ripen. The way of the world is to think that you need to be tough to survive in a tough world, but the nature of wheat, in this week's *parasha*, teaches us the very opposite. Head on confrontations usually don't get us very far, even when we win we lose. The resentment of the one we knocked down or preceded is not worthwhile any kind of victory. When we are unassuming and pliable we can withstand hard strokes and bounce right back. With softness, we can withstand the rigid frozenness of the hail melting it into the waters of kindness. This is the lesson of the wheat, which was saved because its stems were still pliable.

## Miracle of Miracles

The word used by the Torah to explain why wheat and spelt were not affected by the hail is אֲפִילוֹת/*afilot*. This word is usually translated to mean unripe or not grown up. The Midrash makes a pun with the letters of the word, אֲפִילוֹת/*afilot*, which can be unscrambled to spell out the word for wonder or miracle in Hebrew פְּלִאוֹת/*p'laot*. "Miracles of miracles פְּלִאוֹת פְּלִאוֹת/*p'lei p'laot* happened to the wheat, that it was not smitten (Rashi *ibid.*). In the first place, the plagues were all miracles anyway so what was the big deal about the miracle of the wheat? It seems natural that it wasn't stricken since it hadn't become full-grown yet. However, the hail did mite all the other soft weeds of the field (*Shemot* 9:25), and since the hail included fire in it, even the young wheat sprouts would naturally have been burned up (*Nachalat Ya'acov*). This is what made Rashi conclude that the survival of the wheat was a miracle within the miracle. It was natural that the hard barley and flax would be smitten, but it was a miracle that the soft grasses also were smitten, and it was a miracle within miracles that the wheat was spared from sharing the same fate as the rest of the soft grasses. The Torah verses about the wheat and the barley appears inside of Moshe's speech to Pharaoh. This is because Moshe hinted to Pharaoh that he shouldn't think that he is safe, just because nothing happened to him yet. This is only because his time had not yet come, as it is known that Hashem never punishes people until their sins have accumulated enough to make them ripe for the punishment. Pharaoh should take the hint from the wheat. Just as it had not yet ripened enough to be destroyed, the only reason why Pharaoh was still unharmed, is that his time had not yet come (The Taz on the Torah).

## Firstborn among the Produce

Another reason why the hail smote only the barley, was that the Egyptians venerated all kind of 'firstborn' whether among plants, animals or people. Therefore, the barley and flax, the 'firstborn' among the produce was stricken, in order to allude to the last and hardest plague of the death of the firstborn. Perhaps this is why the Kohanim wore linen garments spun from fibers of flax, as they take the place of the firstborn. Yet, for sacrifices, wheat is preferred over the 'firstborn' of the plants (*Chatam Sofer*).

## Establishing the Time of 'Spring'

I love to watch the ripening of the green grasses turning into grain during the spring period between Pesach and Shavuot. The Torah explicit instructs us to celebrate the Exodus from Egypt during the month of אֲבִיב/Aviv.

“You shall observe the Feast of Matzah; for seven days you are to eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, at the appointed time in the month Aviv, for in it you came out of Egypt” (*Shemot* 23:15).

In Modern Hebrew “Aviv” means ‘spring.’ However, our Torah verse teaches us that the word more correctly refers to a stage of ripeness in grain crops – when the stalks are stiff but the heads of the grain are still green. For this reason, before we had a fixed calendar, our sages would pay great attention to the progress of the barley crop, in order to ensure that the month of Nissan would correlate with the time in the agricultural cycle of the original month of Nissan in which the plague of hail took place. We must also celebrate Pesach specifically during the season of ‘Aviv,’ when we emerge from the harsh shell of Egypt compared to barley and metamorphoses into the soft pliable wheat.

## Enlightening the Dusk

Wheat is a metaphor for Israel as it states, “Your belly is a heap of wheat” (*Song of Songs* 7:3). Spelt (קֹסֶמֶת/*kosemet*), is a metaphor for the Kohanim as it states, “Neither shall they shave their heads, nor allow their locks to grow long; they shall only יִקְצְמוּ יְקָסוֹם/*kasom yiksemu* – crop their heads” (*Yechezkiel* 44:20). The word אֲפִילוֹת/*afilot*, which we translated as unripe can also mean dark or dusk. Metaphorically, Israel (wheat) has been darkened in exile, but in the future Hashem will illuminate their dusk as it states, “The sun shall be no more your light by day, neither for brightness shall the moon give light to you; but Hashem shall be to you an everlasting light, and your G-d your glory” (*Yesha'yahu* 60:19), (*Tzror Hamor*). It is interesting to note that the word אֲפִילוֹת/*afilot* shares the numerical value with the word תְּחַזֵּק/*techezek*, which means to harden or become strong. We look forward to the time when the dark will turn into light, and the strength of the soft will be revealed in the world.