

Parashat Vaera

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THE SIGNS AND THE SORCERERS

- What is the purpose of the signs that Moses is commanded to perform before the Israelites?
 - Do they serve the same purpose as the signs performed before Pharaoh?
 - How do the signs accomplish this goal?
 - What is the significance of turning the staff into a serpent?
 - In which other biblical books do the magicians appear?
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A. Signs to Convince the People

In our Torah portion, *Parashat Vaera*, Moses and Aaron challenge the sorcerers of Pharaoh, the magicians (*chartummim*) when the latter transform his staff into a serpent (*tannin*), as detailed in Exodus 6:8-13.¹ The Torah devotes a significant section to this confrontation, emphasizing its importance beyond the pragmatic consideration of establishing Pharaoh's good faith in Moses and Aaron. In this lesson, we will deal with the purpose of the signs (*otot*) and the significance of Moses and Aaron's victory over the magicians.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations are from the Book of Exodus.

In order to understand the matter, let us briefly review the commands related to the signs, including both the signs given to Moses to gain the trust of the Israelites and the signs which Moses performs before Pharaoh.

“THAT THEY MAY BELIEVE THAT THE LORD... HAS APPEARED TO YOU”

In the previous verse (4:1-9), Moses receives three signs which will establish the veracity of his words: the sign of the staff which turns into a serpent, the sign of the hand which becomes leprous, and the sign of the water which turns into blood. The purpose of these signs is explained in the verses:

<p>“That they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you... “If they will not believe you,” God said, “or listen to the first sign, they may believe the latter sign.” (Ex. 4: 5, 8)</p>	<p>לְמַעַן יֵאֱמִינוּ כִּי נִרְאָה אֵלֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב... וְהִיָּה אִם לֹא יֵאֱמִינוּ לְךָ וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ לְקֹל הָאֵת הָרִאשׁוֹן וְהֵאֱמִינוּ לְקֹל הָאֵת הָאַחֲרוֹן.</p>
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The purpose of the signs is to encourage the people to have faith in God’s revelation to Moses.

However, do the signs really constitute a proof that Moses’ words come from a genuine prophecy?

Signs are not a proof of prophecy

Faith based on signs is weak and temporary

In the view of Maimonides (*Laws of the Fundamentals of the Torah* 8:1), faith which comes through signs is an incomplete faulty faith since the signs might be magic tricks.² Therefore, the foundation of the faith of the Jewish people in Moses is not because of the signs he performed, but rather due to the experience of the Convocation at Mount Sinai.

The Jews did not believe in Moses, our teacher, because of the miracles that he performed. Whenever anyone’s belief is based on miracles, his heart is unsure, because it is possible to perform a miracle through magic or sorcery. All the miracles performed by Moses in the desert were not intended to serve as

משה רבינו לא האמינו בו ישראל מפני האותות שעשה, שהמאמין על פי האותות יש בלבו דופי, שאפשר שיעשה האות בלט וכשוף. אלא כל האותות שעשה משה במדבר לפי

2 Based on Deuteronomy, the signs of certain alleged prophets may come true because God is testing the listeners, not because of the righteousness of their claims:

כִּי יִקוּם בְּקִרְבְּךָ נְבִיא אוֹ חֹלֵם חִלּוּם וְנָתַן אֵלֶיךָ אוֹת אוֹ מוֹפֵת: וְיָבֵא הָאוֹת וְהַמּוֹפֵת אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֵלֶיךָ לֵאמֹר נִלְכָה אַחֲרַי אֱלֹהִים אַחֲרַי אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִדְעֶתֶם וְנִעְבְּדֶם: לֹא תִשְׁמַע אֵל דְּבַר הַנְּבִיא הַהוּא אוֹ אֵל חֹלֵם הַחִלּוּם הַהוּא כִּי מִנְּסֵה ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֶתְכֶם לְדַעַת הַיִּשְׁכֶּם אֲהַבִּים אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם בְּכֹל לִבְבְּכֶם וּבְכֹל נַפְשְׁכֶם.

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a miracle, and the sign or miracle that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, “Let us go after other gods,” which you have not known, “and let us serve them,” you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. (Deut. 13:2-4)

See Rashbam *ibid.* v. 4.

proof of his prophecy, but rather were performed for a purpose. It was necessary to drown the Egyptians... The same applies to the other miracles. What is the source of our belief in him? The Convocation at Mount Sinai – our eyes saw, and not a stranger's; our ears heard, and not another's...

הצורך עשאו, לא להביא ראיה על הנבואה, היה צריך להשקיע את המצריים... וכן שאר כל האותות. ובמה האמינו בו? במעמד הר סיני שעיינינו ראו ולא זר ואזנינו שמעו ולא אחר...

Why, if so, does Moses receive these signs?

Maimonides explains (*ibid.* 2):

This may be seen in the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him at the beginning of his prophecy, at the time that He gave him the signs to perform in Egypt and told him (3:18), "And they will listen to your voice." Moses, our teacher, knew that one who believes because of signs has apprehension in his heart; he has doubts and suspicions. Therefore, he sought to be released from the mission, saying: "They will not believe me" (4:1), until the Holy One, Blessed be He, informed him that these miracles were only [to suffice] until they left Egypt.

וזהו שאמר לו הקב"ה בתחילת נבואתו בעת שנתן לו האותות לעשותן במצרים ואמר לו "ושמעו לקולך". ידע משה רבינו שהמאמין על פי האותות יש בלבבו דופי ומהרהר ומחשב, והיה נשמט מליך, ואמר "והן לא יאמינו לי", עד שהודיעו הקב"ה שאלו האותות אינן אלא עד שיצאו מצרים ואחר שיצאו ויעמדו על ההר הזה יסתלק הרהור

After they would leave, they would stand on this mountain, and all doubts which they had about him would be removed. [God told him:] Here, I will give you a sign so that they will know that I truly sent you from the outset, and thus, no doubts will remain in their hearts. This is what is meant by (3:12) by the verse which states: "This will be your sign that I sent you: when you take the people out of Egypt, you will serve God on this mountain."

שמרה ריך אחריך, שאני נותן לך כאן אות שידעו שאני שלחתיך באמת מתחילה ולא ישאר בלבם הרהור. והוא שהכתוב אומר: "זוהי לך האות כי אנכי שלחתיך בהוציאך את העם ממצרים תעבדון את האלהים על ההר הזה."

At the Burning Bush, Moses also is aware that any faith based on signs is not a complete faith, and God informs him that Israel's faith in him by virtue of the signs is only temporary;³ in the future, it will turn

3 In his introduction to the commentary on the Mishna, Maimonides writes:

ובהיות המתנבא הגון לנבואה כפי מה שראוי, נאמר לו הבטיחנו ביעודים והגד לנו דברים מאשר למדך הקב"ה, ויגיד ויבטיח. ואם יתקיימו יעודיו כולם, או נדע שכל נבואתו אמת, ואם ישקר בה, או נפל אחד מדבריו ואפילו דבר קטן, נדע שהוא נביא שקר. וזה כתוב בתורה בענין הבחינה הזאת (שם): "וכי תאמר בלבבך איכה נדע את הדבר אשר לא דברו ה', אשר ידבר הנביא בשם ה' ולא יהיה הדבר ולא יבוא". וכשיצדק לנו בהבטחה אחת או בשתיים, אין לנו להאמין בו ולומר שנבואתו אמת, אבל יהיה ענינו תלוי עד ירבו מופתיו האמתים ככל אשר ידבר בשם ה', פעם אחר פעם.

When the one prophesying is fit for prophecy according to what is appropriate, we will say to him: "Make for us predictions and tell us what the Holy One, Blessed be He, will teach you," and he will tell and predict. And if his predictions come true in their entirety, then we will know that all his prophecy is true; and if it will prove false, or

into a complete faith, by virtue of the Convocation at Mount Sinai.

Indeed, the weakness of a faith based on signs is apparent. At first the people believe in the signs:

And the people believed; and when	וַיֵּאֱמָנוּ	הָעָם
they heard that the Lord had taken	וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ	כִּי
account of the people of Israel and	פָּקַד ה' אֶת בְּנֵי	
that he had seen their affliction, they	יִשְׂרָאֵל וְכִי רָאָה	
bowed their heads and prostrated	אֶת עֵגְוֵיהֶם וַיִּקְדּוּ	
themselves. (Ex. 4:31)	וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ.	

However, the faith of the Israelites does not last long,

if one of the things will fail to come true, even a small thing, we will know that he is a false prophet. This what is written in the Torah in terms of this test (Deut. 18:21-22): “And if you say in your heart, ‘How may we know the word that the Lord has not spoken?’ When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the matter does not come to pass or come true.” When he will be vindicated in one or two predictions, we should not believe him and say that his prophecy is necessarily true; this depends on his true miracles being as numerous as everything that he will say in the name of God, time after time.

If so, in the view of Maimonides, a prophet’s reliability is not dependent on his signs, but rather on whether his prophecies come true. In his words (*Laws of the Fundamentals of the Torah* 10:1):

כל נביא שיעמוד לנו ויאמר שה' שלחו אינו צריך לעשות אות כאחד מאותות משה רבינו או כאותות אליהו ואלישע שיש בהם שינוי מנהגו של עולם, אלא האות שלו שיאמר דברים העתידים להיות בעולם ויאמנו דבריו...

Any prophet who arises and tells us that God has sent him does not have to perform a sign like one of the signs of Moses, our teacher, or like the signs of Elijah or Elisha, which altered the natural order. Rather, his sign will be the fulfillment of his prediction of future events...

and in our portion, *Parashat Vaera*, the Torah tells us that “they did not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery.” (Ex. 6:9)

B. Signs to Convince Pharaoh and the Magicians

WILL THE EGYPTIANS BELIEVE IN GOD BECAUSE OF THE SIGNS?

What is the purpose of the signs before Pharaoh?

Even if we assume that the three signs are initially supposed to strengthen the faith of the people, we still must understand the purpose of performing a sign in the presence of Pharaoh and his magicians. Did it serve the same purpose?

Was the aim of performing the signs before Pharaoh and his magicians to validate God and Moses’ prophecy? In order to understand this, we will delve into the verses which tell of the performance of the signs before Pharaoh.

The command to perform the signs before Pharaoh

In the initial command about the signs, Moses is instructed to perform the signs before the Israelites, but he is not told to perform them before Pharaoh. Only afterwards on Moses’ way to Egypt does God appear to him and tell him to perform signs before Pharaoh:

And the Lord said to Moses,	וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה
“When you go back to Egypt,	בְּלָכְתְּךָ לָשׁוּב מִצְרַיִם
see that you do before Pharaoh	רְאֵה כָּל הַמִּפְתִּימִים אֲשֶׁר

all the miracles that I have put
in your power. But I will harden
his heart, so that he will not let
the people go.” (Ex. 4:21)

שְׁמַתִּי בְיַדְךָ וְעֲשִׂיתֶם
לִפְנֵי פַרְעֹה וְאֲנִי אֶחְזַק
אֶת לְבוֹ וְלֹא יִשְׁלַח אֶת
הָעָם.

The purpose of performing the signs before Pharaoh is not explained; on the contrary, God explicitly says to Moses that the signs will not convince Pharaoh to listen to His voice and let the Israelites go! ⁴

Our confusion about the purpose of the signs only grows in light of the fact that in the first encounter with Pharaoh (5:1-3), when Moses and Aaron tell him to let the Israelites go, they do not perform the signs before Pharaoh despite his refusal! ⁵

When God speaks to Moses afterwards, once again signs and miracles are mentioned, proving “that I am the Lord.”

“But I will harden Pharaoh’s
heart, and though I multiply **my
signs and miracles** in the land
of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen

וְאֲנִי אֶקְשֶׁה אֶת לֵב
פַרְעֹה וְהִרְבִּיתִי אֶת
אֹתֹתַי וּמוֹפְתֵי
בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: וְנִתְתִּי

4 Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor relates to this point and writes: “See... all the miracles’ – at first, He commanded him to do them before the people, so that they would listen to him, and now He told him to perform them before Pharaoh, not because [Pharaoh] would listen to [Moses], but in order to warn him.”

5 Furthermore, in the second encounter with Pharaoh Moses and Aaron only perform one sign before Pharaoh, and Hizkuni questions this explicitly: “Of the three above-mentioned signs, we have only found that he did one before Pharaoh, ‘It may become a serpent?!’” He does not answer this question.

to you. Then I will lay my hand
on Egypt and bring my hosts, my
people, the children of Israel, out
of the land of Egypt by great acts
of judgment. **The Egyptians shall
know that I am the Lord**, when
I stretch out my hand against
Egypt and bring out the people
of Israel from among them.” (Ex.
7:4-6)

אֶת יָדִי בְּמִצְרַיִם
וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶת צְבָאוֹתַי
אֶת עַמִּי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם
בְּשִׁפְטִים גְּדֹלִים:
**וְיָדְעוּ מִצְרַיִם
כִּי אֲנִי ה' בְּנִטְוֵתִי**
אֶת יָדִי עַל מִצְרַיִם
וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶת בְּנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל מִתּוֹכָם.

Even this time these are not signs of proof and warning, rather signs of punishment hinting to the **plagues** that God is planning to bring upon Egypt – “when I stretch out my hand against Egypt.” Initially Moses is told that the signs performed before Pharaoh will not cause Egypt to know God; only the plagues and the “great acts of judgment” will sway him. If so, we must ask the question once again: what is the purpose of these signs?

AARON AS THE BETTER SORCERER

The significance of the signs is found below, in the second encounter with Pharaoh:

The sign of the staff turning into a serpent

Then the Lord said to Moses and
Aaron, “When Pharaoh says to
you, ‘Prove yourselves by working
a miracle,’ then you shall say to
Aaron, ‘Take your staff and cast it
down before Pharaoh, that it may
become a serpent.’” So Moses

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה
וְאֶל אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: כִּי
יְדַבֵּר אֲלֵכֶם פַּרְעֹה
לֵאמֹר תִּגְנוּ לָכֶם מוֹפֵת
וְאָמַרְתָּ אֶל אַהֲרֹן
קַח אֶת מִטְנֶךָ וְהִשְׁלַךְ
לִפְנֵי פַרְעֹה וְהִי לְתַנִּין:

and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the Lord commanded. Aaron cast down his staff before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent. Then Pharaoh summoned the sages and the sorcerers, and they, the magicians of Egypt, also did the same by their secret arts. For each man cast down his staff, and they became serpents. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. Still, Pharaoh's heart was strengthened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said. (Ex. 7:8-13)

וַיָּבֹא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן
אֶל פְּרֹעֹה וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כִן
כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' וַיִּשְׁלַךְ
אַהֲרֹן אֶת מִטְהוֹ לִפְנֵי
פְּרֹעֹה וּלְפָנֵי עֲבָדָיו
וַיְהִי לְתַנְיִן: וַיִּקְרָא
גַם פְּרֹעֹה לַחֲכָמִים
וּלְמַכְשָׁפִים וַיַּעֲשׂוּ גַם
הֵם חֲרָטְמֵי מִצְרַיִם
בְּלַהֲטֵיהֶם כִּן: וַיִּשְׁלִיכוּ
אִישׁ מִטְהוֹ וַיְהִיו
לְתַנְיָנִים וַיִּבְלַע מֹשֶׁה
אַהֲרֹן אֶת מִטְתָּם:
וַיַּחֲזֶק לֵב פְּרֹעֹה וְלֹא
שָׁמַע אֶלֶהֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר
דִּבֶּר ה'.

Here we encounter first the explicit command of performing a miracle before Pharaoh – **turning the staff into a serpent.**

Pharaoh asks for a sign

God's command regarding the signs is conditional upon Pharaoh's request. "When Pharaoh says to you..."

Why does Pharaoh need to initiate the request for a miracle⁶? Why do the signs have to be given

6 Rabbeinu Bachya (Exodus 7:9) relates to this point:
 "When Pharaoh says to you" – God notified Moses that Pharaoh would ask him for a miracle. We do not consider a person to be a prophet until he presents a sign or miracle, or an established prophet vouches for him.
 In other words, he is stressing that the clause is not

specifically as a reaction? Is their purpose to cause Egypt to believe in the prophet or in God?

The signs do not cause Pharaoh to believe in God

It is difficult to say that the purpose of the signs is to engender belief in God on the part of Pharaoh and the Egyptians, because it is clear that Pharaoh will not request a sign to prove God's existence, and indeed the signs are unsuccessful in convincing Pharaoh since the magicians succeed: "and they, the magicians of Egypt, also did the same by their secret arts." However, Aaron succeeds in doing things which they do not succeed in doing – his staff swallows their staffs (v. 12). Furthermore, this occurs after Aaron's staff has reverted to its original state, "a miracle within a miracle" (Rashi *ad loc.* quoting the Talmud, *Shabbat* 97a). Is this enough to inspire faith among Pharaoh and his servants? Is the fact that Aaron is a more capable and skillful sorcerer enough to form a conviction as to the truth of God and his servant Moses?

The signs serve to strengthen Pharaoh's heart

It appears that the purpose of the signs is the opposite. At the end of the verse, we read, "Still, Pharaoh's heart was strengthened, and he would not listen to them." What is the meaning of strengthening one's heart? The common understanding is that God takes away Pharaoh's free will and prevents him directly from acquiescing to the release of Israel. However, it may be that God allows the strengthening of Pharaoh's heart

conditional, but chronological, "**When** Pharaoh says." The Hebrew word "*ki*" may also be translated as "if": "If Pharaoh says..."

out of true free will, by misleading him to believe that the signs of God's messengers are equal to the signs of his magicians. It turns out that performing the signs is what gives Pharaoh the mistaken impression that he has the ability to contend with Moses and Aaron and even with God,⁷ and perhaps because of this, even when the plagues begin, he is not intimidated by God.

The signs prove that Aaron is the equal of the magicians

Consequently, we may explain why Pharaoh initiates this entire scene by asking for signs; this is not an attempt to find the evidence to allow him to believe in God and His emissary, but rather a pretext to reject Moses and Aaron categorically.

Indeed, Pharaoh is convinced that the signs will prove that Moses and Aaron are **inferior** to the magicians. In order to undermine his scheme, it would be sufficient to present before him signs which are somewhat superior to those of his magicians. However, in practice, the sign which Aaron provides establishes its total superiority over the signs of the magicians.

This fact leads us to understand the entire process differently. For this purpose, let us recall the additional biblical encounters with the king's magicians.

 ⁷ The same Pharaoh asks Moses and Aaron: "Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover, I will not let Israel go." (Ex. 5:2) Now Pharaoh learns who God is, but this realization does not motivate him to let the Israelites go. See Rabbeinu Bachya's comment *ad loc.*

C. The Signs as Symbols

THE MAGICIANS OF THE DREAMS AND THE MAGICIANS OF THE SERPENTS

Where do we first encounter the Egyptian magicians?

The magicians and Joseph in Pharaoh's dreams

We meet them in Joseph's narrative, in the episode of Pharaoh's dreams (Genesis 41). A surprising similarity arises from a comparison of the narratives.

Points of similarity between the two confrontations with the magicians

In both of them, the magicians compete against the Hebrews (Joseph or Aaron).

In both of them, the Hebrew defeats the Egyptian magicians.

In both of them, one body consumes another of its kind (ears and cows in Pharaoh's dreams, staffs in Aaron's case).

In both of them, the narrative begins with Pharaoh's concerns: in the first instance, Pharaoh's mind is troubled by the dreams – "So in the morning, his spirit was troubled" (Gen. 41:8); in the second instance, he is troubled by Israel – "And he said to his people, 'Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us... lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they will join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.'" (Ex. 1:9-10)

The distinction between the two challenges – does Pharaoh believe?

However, despite the similarities, the conclusion is noticeably different:

In the Joseph narrative, this leads to recognizing God: “And Pharaoh said to his servants, ‘Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?’ Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are.’” (Gen. 41:38-39)

In Exodus, on the other hand, Pharaoh does not believe, and the same is true of the magicians: “and he would not listen to them” (Ex. 7:13).

Despite this, when we look at the continuation of our story, we will see that the results are indeed quite similar: indeed, Pharaoh does not believe, but the magicians reach, at the end of the day, in the plague of gnats, the recognition that “It is the finger of God!” and they even say this to Pharaoh (Ex. 8:15).

Let us see the comparison in a table:

	Genesis 41	Exodus 7
Subject of Confrontation	Pharaoh’s dreams	The staff and the serpent
Pharaoh’s Concern	“So in the morning, his spirit was troubled”	“Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us...”
Disputants	Magicians vs. Joseph	Magicians vs. Aaron

Advantage of the Hebrew	Joseph’s dream interpretation	“But Aaron’s staff swallowed up their staffs.”
Swallowing	“And the thin ears swallowed up the seven plump, full ears”	“But Aaron’s staff swallowed up their staffs.”
Recognizing God	“And Pharaoh said... ‘Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?’”	“And the magicians said to Pharaoh, ‘It is the finger of God!’”

What is the meaning of the parallels between these two different narratives?

THE SIGNS AS A MESSAGE

The signs have a message similar to the dreams

The parallels between the signs and the dreams indicate that the signs have not come to strengthen the faith of Pharaoh in God; on the contrary, their purpose is the same as the dreams – **transmitting a message and presenting a vision.**⁸ The signs teach

⁸ The word “sign” appears in the Scripture in two senses. It has the meaning of a proof: “And he said to him, if I may find favor in your eyes, perform for me a **sign** that you are speaking to me.” (Judg. 6:17) See also II Kings 20:8. However, it also has the meaning of a symbol and memento, for example in the book of Joshua:

“This may be a **sign** among you. When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do those stones mean to you?’

the Egyptians the meaning of their struggle with the Jewish people.

If so, we must investigate how the signs act as transmitters of the divine message: what is the meaning of the staff which turns into a serpent and its swallowing of the magicians' staffs?

**Pharaoh –
the great
serpent**

The prophet Ezekiel (chapters 29-32) offers seven prophecies about the destruction of Egypt. His first prophecy, which is the portion from the Prophets for *Vaera*, opens by describing Pharaoh's arrogance and the punishment it earns him):

In the tenth year, in the	בְּשָׁנָה הָעֲשִׂירִית
tenth month, on the twelfth	בְּעֶשְׂרֵי בְּשָׁנִים
day of the month, the word	עָשָׂר לַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה
of the Lord came to me:	דִּבֶּר ה' אֵלַי לֵאמֹר:
“Son of man, set your face	בֶּן אָדָם שֵׁים פָּנֶיךָ
against Pharaoh king of	עַל פַּרְעֹה מֶלֶךְ
Egypt, and prophesy against	מִצְרַיִם וְהִנְבֵּא עָלָיו
him and against all Egypt;	וְעַל מִצְרַיִם כָּלָה:
speak, and say, Thus says	דִּבֵּר וְאָמַרְתָּ כֹה
the Lord God: Behold, I am	אָמַר אֲדֹנָי ה' הִנְנִי

then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever.” (Jos. 4:6-7)

The same is true in Ezekiel: “And you, take an iron griddle, and place it as an iron wall between you and the city; and set your face toward it, and let it be in a state of siege, and press the siege against it. This is a **sign** for the house of Israel.” (Ez. 4:3)

against you, Pharaoh king	עָלֶיךָ פַּרְעֹה מֶלֶךְ
of Egypt, the great serpent	מִצְרַיִם הַתַּנִּינִים
that lies in the midst of his	הַגָּדוֹל הַרְבִּיץ
streams, that says, ‘My Nile	בְּתוֹךְ יְאֹרֵי אֲשֶׁר
is my own; I made it for	אָמַר לִי יְאֹרֵי
myself.’ I will put hooks in	וְאֲנִי עָשִׂיתִנִּי:
your jaws, and make the	וְנָתַתִּי חַחִים
fish of your streams stick to	בְּלַחְיֶיךָ וְהִדְבַקְתִּי
your scales; and I will draw	דָּגְתֵךְ יְאֹרֶיךָ
you up out of the midst of	בְּקֶשֶׁתְּךָ
your streams, with all the	וְהִעֲלִיתִיךָ מִתּוֹךְ
fish of your streams that	יְאֹרֶיךָ וְאֵת כָּל
stick to your scales. And I	דָּגְתֵךְ יְאֹרֶיךָ
will cast you out into the	בְּקֶשֶׁתְּךָ
wilderness, you and all the	תִּדְבַק: וְנִטְשִׁתִּיךָ
fish of your streams; you	הַמִּדְבָּרָה אֹתְךָ
shall fall on the open field,	וְאֵת כָּל דָּגְתֵךְ
and not be brought together	יְאֹרֶיךָ עַל פְּנֵי
or gathered. To the beasts	הַשָּׂדֶה תִּפּוֹל לֹא
of the earth and to the	תֵּאֱסָף וְלֹא תִקְבָּץ
birds of the heavens I give	לְחַיֵּי הָאָרֶץ וְלַעוֹף
you as food. Then all the	הַשָּׁמַיִם נִתְּתִיךָ
inhabitants of Egypt shall	לֵאכְלֹה: וַיֵּדְעוּ כָּל
know that I am the Lord.	יֹשְׁבֵי מִצְרַיִם כִּי
Because you have been a	אֲנִי ה' יַעַן הָיִיתָם
staff of reed to the house of	מִשְׁעֶנֶת קָנָה
Israel.” (Ez. 29:1-6)	לְבֵית יִשְׂרָאֵל.

The prophet thus describes Pharaoh as “the great serpent”.⁹

⁹ In other places, Scripture describes Egypt as “serpent”, e.g.

Pharaoh represents himself as the great serpent, ruling over everything, as well as someone who also made the Nile itself: “My Nile is my own; I made it for myself.” The prophet notifies the great serpent about his fall and the fall of the Nile,¹⁰ so that “all the inhabitants of Egypt shall know that I am the Lord.”

Moreover, Pharaoh is represented as a serpent in historical sources: Roman coins portray Augustus’ victory over Cleopatra as a chained serpent;¹¹ similarly, Plutarch details Egypt’s unique regard for the serpent and the special powers they attributed to it.¹²

The great serpent of Pharaoh aims to swallow the people of Israel, weak and dejected.

“In that day the Lord with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the serpent that is in the sea.” (Is. 27:1) Rashi (*ad loc.*) explains that the serpent is Egypt.

Similarly we find, “You crumbled the sea with Your might; You shattered the heads of the serpents on the water.” (Ps. 74:13) Rashi (*ad loc.*) explains: “The heads of the serpents’ – they are the Egyptians, who are called serpents, as it is said ‘the great serpent,’ etc.”

10 This may be the meaning of the additional sign which is given to Moses at the Burning Bush: “If they will not believe even these two signs or listen to your voice, you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground.” (Ex. 4:9) Changing the waters of the Nile, the icon of Egypt, into blood alludes to the imminent expiration of Pharaoh’s kingdom.

11 See Y.Z. Moskowitz, *Da’at Mikra: Ezekiel 29*, n. 12

12 See S.H. Bodenheimer, “*He-chai Be-artzot Ha-Mikra*” vol. 1, p. 102.

The serpent vs. the dry stick

Now, we can understand the purpose of the signs: they clarify and expose the true power of the serpent. Initially, it is evident that the nation of Israel, which appears to be a desiccated stick,¹³ is destined to resurrect and change itself into a serpent. Of course, in Hebrew the term “*matteh*” means both “staff” and “tribe.”

In the next stage, Aaron’s staff swallows the staffs of Egypt – the pride of the great serpent is smashed, and its defeat is specifically executed by Israel, whom it has persecuted. This idea is expressed in the Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni, Vaera*, no. 181):

“Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh, that it may become a serpent” – the Holy One, Blessed be He, said: “This villain prides himself and calls himself a serpent, as it says, ‘the great serpent’; go and say to him: ‘See this staff! It is a dry stick, but it turns into a serpent, having spirit and life, and it swallows all of the staffs. Finally, it turns back into a dry stick. I too created you from a putrid drop, and I gave you a kingdom; now, you

רשע זה מתגאה וקרא עצמו תנין, דכתיב: “התנין הגדול” לך ואמור לו: ראה מטה זה הוא עץ יבש ונעשה תנין ויש בו רוח ונשמה והוא בולע כל המטות וסופו לחזור עץ יבש, אף אתה בראתי אותך מטפה סרוחה ונתתי לך מלוכה ונתגאה אתה

13 More than once in the Prophets, we find the use of the metaphor of the dry stick to represent the downtrodden nation of Israel – see Isaiah 56:3; see also Ezekiel 17:24.

pride yourself and you have said, ואמרת "לי יאורי
'My Nile is my own; I made it for ואני עשיתני",
myself." I return you to chaos and הרני מחזורך לתהו
nothingness! You swallowed all ובהו! אתה בלעת
the staffs of the tribes of Israel; I כל מטות שבטי
will take out what you swallowed ישראל הרני מוציא
from your mouth!" בלעך מפיד!

The nation of Israel will be resurrected, while the great serpent will be cast into chaos and nothingness.¹⁴

The small
and weak
swallows the
great and
mighty

The parallel story of Pharaoh's dreams can emphasize this idea. We are neither talking only about a dry stick which blooms and comes alive, nor about the mere victory of one nation over another nation. In Pharaoh's dream, we see that the thin ears swallow the healthy ears, and the emaciated cows eat the full cows. The same is true here: Aaron's staff represents the people of Israel, a weak nation which contends with the superpower of Egypt, as one staff of Aaron opposes the many staffs of the magicians. Despite this, the one weak staff of the people of Israel swallows the staffs of the Egyptians – and the meaning is clear.

14 See Chizkuni's explanation of Exodus 7:9; he explains as we do:

"Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh, that it may become a serpent" – before Pharaoh, for Pharaoh took pride in himself and called himself "the great serpent", so God said to Moses: Go and say, just as this staff becomes a serpent and swallows other staffs, finally turning back into a dry stick, so too you may swallow the twelve staffs of the tribes of Israel, but you will end up as dry and dead wood.

The satiety
and the
power of
supremacy
can
disappear

An additional point arises from this comparison: a strong feeling of security (satiety, control, honor, power, etc.) can be overturned in a moment. When Pharaoh sees the staffs of the magicians swallowed by Aaron's staff, he is supposed to recall the dream of the previous Pharaoh, in which it becomes clear that years of satiety can turn into years of famine abruptly and irrevocably. He is supposed to understand that the current satisfaction of Egypt, the confidence in their power and their dominion, may also disappear in a moment.

The signs as
a message
of God's
ability to
change
reality

In light of this process, we can say that the main purpose of the signs before Pharaoh is **not to cause his faith in God**, but **to express a critical message**. The confrontation with the magicians is not designed to investigate the sorcerous skill of Aaron in comparison to Egypt's enchanting elite, because there is no need to prove that Aaron is a better conjurer! The confrontation with the magicians is meant to send Pharaoh a message about the significant changes which are destined to happen, when God's hand intervenes in the world.

The magicians
vs. Daniel for
Nebuchadnezzar's
dream

In the book of Daniel, there is a third mention of *chartummim*, as a similar event befalls Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon:

In the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his spirit was troubled, and his

ובשנת שְׁתַּיִם
לְמַלְכוֹת נְבֻכַדְנֶצַּר
חָלַם נְבֻכַדְנֶצַּר
חַלְמוֹת וַתִּתְפַּעֵם רוּחוֹ

sleep left him. Then the king commanded that the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers and the Chaldeans be summoned to tell the king his dreams. So they came in and stood before the king. And the king said to them, "I had a dream, and my spirit is troubled to know the dream." (Dan. 2:1-3)

וַיִּשְׁנֶתָּהּ נְהִיָּתָה עָלָיו:
וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְקָרֵא
לְחַרְטָמִּים וְלְאַשְׁפִּים
וְלְמַכְשָׁפִים וְלְכַשְׂדִּים
לְהֵגִיד לְמֶלֶךְ חֲלֻמֹתָיו
וַיָּבֹאוּ וַיַּעֲמְדוּ לִפְנֵי
הַמֶּלֶךְ: וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם
הַמֶּלֶךְ חֲלוֹם חֲלַמְתִּי
וְתַפְּעֵם רוּחִי לְדַעַת
אֵת הַחֲלוֹם:

Nebuchadnezzar also does not know the meaning of his dream, and his reaction is similar to that of the Pharaoh, "his spirit was troubled." The magicians try to interpret the dream and fail to do so, until Daniel arrives and succeeds in interpreting the dream. Here as well, there is an explicit struggle with the magicians and the Israelite representative proves to be their superior:

And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore they stood before the king. And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom. (Dan. 1:19-20)

וַיְדַבֵּר אִתָּם הַמֶּלֶךְ
וְלֹא נִמְצָא מִכֻּלָּם
כְּדַנְיָאֵל חַנַּנְיָהּ
מִישָׂאֵל וְעַזְרִיָּה
וַיַּעֲמְדוּ לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ:
וְכֹל דְּבַר חֵכְמַת
בֵּינָהּ אֲשֶׁר בִּקֵּשׁ
מֵהֶם הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיִּמְצְאוּ
עֲשָׂר יָדוֹת עַל כָּל
הַחַרְטָמִּים הָאַשְׁפִּים
אֲשֶׁר בְּכָל מַלְכוּתוֹ:

As Daniel interprets it, the dream corresponds to the four kingdoms, the last of which is the kingdom of heaven, which will be established throughout the world (*ibid.* 2:44). The conclusion of the dream foretells the inevitability of divine providence directing the world in its entirety. In other words, for Daniel, as for Joseph and Aaron, the moral of the struggle with the magicians is **that one should not trust in human power and strength.**

D. Reality and God's Vision

Religious
struggle
with the
magicians

Even though Moses and Aaron perform their signs before Pharaoh, their main confrontation is with the magicians. This demonstrates that the character of the struggle is religious – they are contending with the way of the magicians, who represent the Egyptian faith.¹⁵

God's actions
changes reality;
God's revelation
lies beneath its
surface

What is the struggle about? Pharaoh's dreams transmit an important message. Through Egypt's perspective everything is good: the harvests are full and bountiful. However, from the divine and faith-based point of view, there is another angle: the good years are a prologue to bad and hard years. Only

¹⁵ *Chartum* seems to go back to the Egyptian term *hery-tep*, meaning a lector-priest, priests who were appointed over magical acts, which were an indispensable part of the Egyptian faith. See *Pardes Yosef* to Exodus 10:8, "Among all peoples, their sacred writ was shrouded in darkness, and the masses were prohibited to peruse them, as this was limited to the lectors and priests." See also Nahmanides, Exodus 7:11.

someone who succeeds in interpreting reality from God's point of view can contend with it in a more appropriate way.

Similarly, Daniel's interpretation of the dream causes Nebuchadnezzar to understand that there is a divine revelation beneath the surface of reality:

The king answered and said to Daniel, "Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery." (Dan. 2:47)

ענה מלכא לדניאל
 ואמר מן קשט די
 אלהון הוא אלה
 אלהין ומרא מלכין
 וגלה רזין די יבלת
 למגלא רזה דנה.

By way of a dream that the king and all of his advisers have difficulty interpreting, it is evident that God's vision is different and deeper than a limited human vision, and therein lies another reading of reality.

Let us return to Pharaoh's magicians. From a realistic point of view, it appears that the people of Israel is progressively being exterminated – the Egyptian empire rules over everything and Pharaoh is the serpent of the world, while the Hebrews are a nation of slaves, despised and miserable.

The magicians – using the powers of nature

However, from the divine and faith-based perspective, something else becomes clear: beyond the regular powers of nature there is divine control of all things, even those which appear omnipotent; the great serpent is replaceable and it is also destined to be swallowed.

This approach is echoed by the Ran in his *Derashot* (Third Essay, s.v. "Ve-hateshuva al zeh"):

It is a land of magicians and sorcerers, and what is analyzed there is one branch of the branches of natural wisdom; it is appropriate to believe that it is done by divine power, without a doubt, and what is impossible in nature is not impossible by the law of God.

לפי שהיא ארץ
 החרטומים והמכשפים,
 ומה שייבחן שם הוא
 סעיף מסעיפי החכמה
 הטבעית, ראוי שייאמן
 שהוא נעשה בכוח אלוהי
 בלי ספק, ושהנמנע אצל
 הטבע אינו נמנע בחוק ה'
 יתברך.

The magicians relate to their magic as 'scientific' wisdom, or in the words of the Ran, "natural wisdom".¹⁶ They believe that this wisdom gives them superiority over the masses, who do not understand the secrets of nature and magic. However, they do not understand that there are powers **beyond the powers of nature**. They do not understand that there is also a **divine vision** of reality.

Divine intervention cannot be forecasted

The magicians are indeed good sorcerers, and they know to see the future based on a **given reality** at a given moment; however, their ability to see is limited. They cannot see the **upheavals** that God is about to cause in **reality and its laws**. Therefore, they fail to

¹⁶ Also see the words of the Metzudat David (Daniel 2:2), who explains the magicians of Daniel in this way: "To the magicians' – they are the sages of nature, and they know the essence of dreams, and how the soul sees visions at the time of sleep."

interpret Pharaoh's dreams – only God's hand can turn the good years to bad, against all predictions. The victory of the divine signs of Moses and Aaron over the signs of Pharaoh's magicians indicates that God's hand can topple the reality of Pharaoh and Egypt's dominion over the world; it can free Israel from Egypt.

The magicians, in particular, recognize God's finger

As mentioned above, the debate is a philosophical-religious one¹⁷ and it therefore occurs between the magicians, and Moses and Aaron. Ultimately, specifically the magicians are the ones to understand and announce: "It is the finger of God!" – the magicians, not Pharaoh. This may be a result of Pharaohs' unique obstinacy, but there could be another factor. Pharaoh knows that the magicians are able to accomplish unique things with their scientific powers, and therefore he values Moses and Aaron's 'sorcerous' powers as well. However, the magicians know the limit of their scientific powers, so they are forced to concede by saying, "It is the finger of God!"

17 This is how the aim of the plagues is defined more than once; before the frogs are removed Moses says, "Be it as you say, **so that you may know that there is no one like the Lord our God.**" (Ex. 8:6) Similarly, we find: "That you may know **that I am the Lord in the midst of the earth.**" (Ex. 8:22) Finally, we find in the plague of hail:

Moses said to him, "As soon as I have gone out of the city, I will stretch out my hands to the Lord. The thunder will cease, and there will be no more hail, **so that you may know that the earth is the Lord's. But as for you and your servants, I know that you do not yet fear the Lord God.**" (Ex. 9:29-30)

The signs – a message of encouragement for the nation of Israel

Even the signs which Moses performs in front of the Israelites may not be tests of faith or proof of the validity of Moses' prophecy. Granted, there is an inevitable result that their faith is strengthened, but this is not the purpose of the signs. For the Israelites as well, the signs are **symbols of reinforcement and encouragement** – a symbol which shows that the inanimate staff is destined to live again and that the Egyptians are destined to have their water turn to blood. These symbols, along with the rejuvenating promise of God: "I have certainly taken account of you" (Ex. 3:16) are the ones which strengthen the nation of Israel and give them faith in their ability to be redeemed by God's emissary, Moses. The verse reports:

And the people believed; and when they heard that the Lord had taken account of the people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and prostrated themselves. (Ex. 4:31)

וַיֵּאמְרוּ הָעָם וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ
כִּי פָקַד ה' אֶת בְּנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל וְכִי רָאָה
אֶת עֲנִיָּם וַיִּקְדּוּ
וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ.

Belief in the wake of God's revelation in nature

The people's bowing and prostration comes from the very fact that God has remembered them and borne witness to their suffering. They are thanking God for His revelation in nature, not allowing the deterministic laws of nature to direct the course of history. Even though they are still Pharaoh's servants, their faith in the temporary nature of their exile and their ability to be redeemed is awakened. "And

the people **believed**” does not indicate that they accept Moses’ prophecy as a true prophecy; rather, it describes the reinforcement¹⁸ and encouragement of the people’s spirit.

18 This is similar to the dictum, “The wounds of the lover are trustworthy” (Prov. 27:6), which means: powerful are the wounds of the lover.