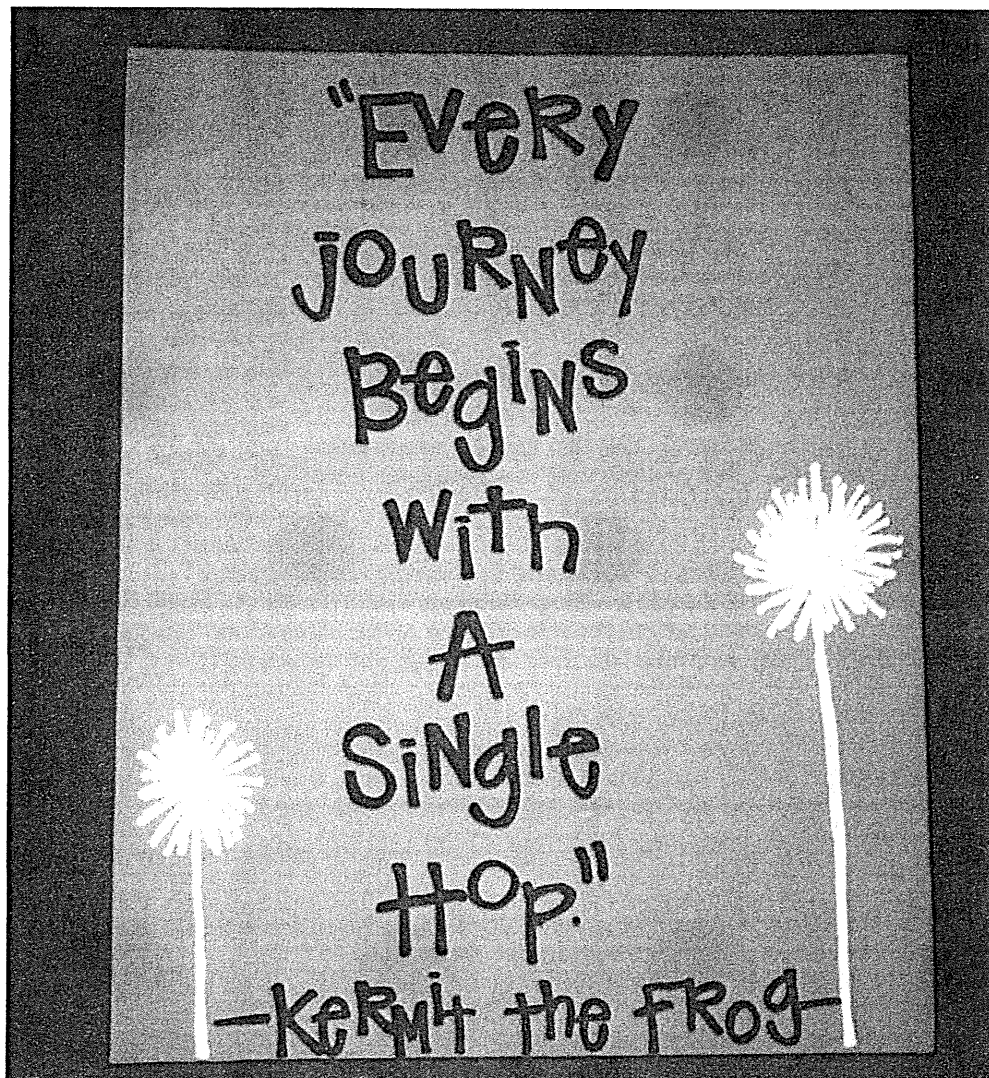


“Frogs Everywhere”

Parashat Va'era 5779

Temple Beth El, Stamford CT



NJPS 25 When seven days had passed after the LORD struck the Nile, 26 the LORD said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh and say to him, 'Thus says the LORD: Let My people go that they may worship Me. 27 If you refuse to let them go, then I will plague your whole country with frogs. 28 The Nile shall swarm with frogs, and they shall come up and enter your palace, your bedchamber and your bed, the houses of your courtiers and your people, and your ovens and your kneading bowls. 29 The frogs shall come up on you and on your people and on all your courtiers.'"

8 And the LORD said to Moses, "Say to Aaron: Hold out your arm with the rod

RASHI 25 When seven days had passed. Without the Nile turning back into water. More precisely, with OJPS, "when seven days were fulfilled." For each plague lasted a quarter of a month, and the other three-quarters of the month Moses would exhort and forewarn them.

27 I will plague. The word does not imply that death would result. The same verb is used when one of the men in a brawl accidentally "pushes" a pregnant woman (21:22).

28 They shall come up. From the Nile. Enter your palace and then the houses of your courtiers and your people. Since it was Pharaoh who originated the idea of "dealing shrewdly" (1:10) with the Israelites, he was punished first.

29 On you and on your people. Literally, in you and in your people: The frogs would get into their guts and croak.

NAHMANIDES 25 When seven days had passed. Note that the Hebrew text links this verse with what precedes it, as does OJPS. The Egyptians were unable to drink from the Nile, and had to dig around it for water, until seven days had passed.

Aaron would go with him, since Moses would not speak with Pharaoh if Aaron did not come along.

27 I will plague your whole country. That is, destroy it—"frogs to destroy them" (Ps. 78:45). Frogs. Some say the word translated "frog" really refers to a kind of water creature found only in the Nile called in Arabic *al-timsah*, a "crocodile," which comes out of the water and seizes people. But given that they also came from "the rivers, the canals, and the ponds" (8:1), it is more plausible that it refers to the more well-known creature.

28 Shall come up. Because the river is always lower than the city.

29 On you and on your people and on all your courtiers. According to Japheth b. Ali, this means: on them only, not on the Israelites. But this expression is no proof of that. In my opinion, it means what it says, that the frogs will come up everywhere—in his clothes and on his head. There was no need to say explicitly that they affected the Israelites as well.

8:1 Hold out your hand. In every direction. Over the rivers, the canals, and the ponds. Note that the phrase "all its bodies of

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS 25 When seven days had passed. Each plague lasted seven days. The Torah customarily spells out the details once and leaves them to be inferred in similar circumstances (Gersonides).

26 Go to Pharaoh. Note that the plagues are divided into groups of three. In each group, for the first plague Moses is to "station" himself before Pharaoh publicly; for the second he is to "go" to Pharaoh privately; and the third he simply does in public without announcing it to Pharaoh. The first set of plagues was to convince Pharaoh of God's existence, the second set was to convince him of God's providence, the third to convince him of God's power (Abarbanel).

27 Frogs. Rather, the Hebrew word does indeed mean "crocodiles," as R. Hananel explained it. Rashi says the word "plague" here does not mean that death would result, but unless some lesser result is specified, this is just what it does mean—and frogs do not kill people. Carnivores do not live in sweet water, but God brought the crocodiles up the Nile from their habitat in the ocean off Ethiopia. Once the Nile turned to blood, the crocodiles would have to come up on land to get food (Abarbanel).

29 On you and on your people. Ibn Ezra rejects Japheth's comment that this means they did not affect the Israelites. But I think it is a fine interpretation, according with what our Sages said about all the plagues (Abarbanel).

8:1 Hold out your arm. To show that you control when the plague starts (Hizkuni).

OJPS 25 And seven days were fulfilled, after that the LORD had smitten the river. 26 And the LORD spoke unto Moses: "Go in unto Pharaoh, and say unto him: Thus saith the LORD: Let My people go, that they may serve Me. 27 And if thou refuse to let them go, behold, I will smite all thy borders with frogs. 28 And

the river shall swarm with frogs, which shall go up and come into thy house, and into thy bed-chamber, and upon thy bed, and into the house of thy servants, and upon thy people, and into thine ovens, and into thy kneading-troughs. 29 And the frogs shall come up both upon thee, and upon thy people, and upon all thy servants."

8 And the LORD said unto Moses: "Say unto Aaron: Stretch forth thy hand

RASHBAM 25 Seven days. That is how long the plague of blood lasted.

26 The LORD said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh." Moses twice gave warning to Pharaoh, before each of the first two plagues, but not before the third. The same is true all the way through. Every third plague (lice, boils, and darkness) takes place with no warning.

IBN EZRA 25 When seven days had passed. The plague went on for seven days. But this does not apply to the subsequent plagues. After the LORD struck the Nile. Despite Moses' saying, "I shall strike the water in the Nile with the rod that is in my hand" (v. 17), it was really the Lord who performed the miracle. He made it appear that Moses had done it so that everyone who saw him would realize that he was the messenger of God.

26 Go to Pharaoh. To his palace, not to the water. It was taken for granted that

וַיִּמְלֵא שְׁבַע יָמִים אַחֲרֵי הַכּוֹת יְהוָה אֶת-הַיָּאֵר: פ 26 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בֹּא אֶל-פַּרְעֹה וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה שְׁלַח אֶת-עַמִּי וַיַּעֲבֹדֵנִי: 27 וְאִם-מָאֵן אַתָּה לְשַׁלַּח הַגָּה אֲנֹכִי נֹגֵף אֶת-כָּל-גִּבּוֹלְךָ בַּצִּפְרָדַּיִם: 28 וְשַׂרְץ הַיָּאֵר צִפְרָדַּיִם וְעָלּוּ וַיָּבֹאוּ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְחֲדָר מִשְׁכָּבְךָ וְעַל-מִטְתְּךָ וּבְבֵית עֲבָדֶיךָ וּבְעַמֶּךָ וּבְתַנּוּרֶיךָ וּבְמִשְׁאֲרוֹתֶיךָ: 29 וּבָכָה וּבָעֵמָה וּבְכָל-עֲבָדֶיךָ יַעֲלוּ הַצִּפְרָדַּיִם:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אָמַר אֶל-אַהֲרֹן נִטָּה אֶת-יָדְךָ בְּמַטֶּךָ עַל-הַנְּהָרוֹת

29. יתיר ה'

ABARBANEL'S QUESTIONS + Why does this plague last seven days (v. 25), and why must its duration be given at all? + Why does the plague of frogs begin with "go to Pharaoh" (v. 26), while other plagues begin with the instruction "station yourself" and still others with no such instruction? + Why is v. 29 necessary?

NJPS over the rivers, the canals, and the ponds, and bring up the frogs on the land of Egypt.” ²Aaron held out his arm over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt. ³But the magicians did the same with their spells, and brought frogs upon the land of Egypt.

⁴Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, “Plead with the LORD to remove the frogs from me and my people, and I will let the people go to sacrifice to the LORD.” ⁵And Moses said to Pharaoh, “You may have this triumph over me: for what time shall I plead in behalf of you and your courtiers and your people, that the frogs be cut off from you and your houses, to remain only in the Nile?” ⁶“For tomorrow,”

OJPS with thy rod over the rivers, over the canals, and over the pools, and cause frogs to come up upon the land of Egypt.” ²And Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt; and the frogs came up, and covered the land of Egypt. ³And the magicians did in like manner with their secret arts, and brought up frogs upon the land of Egypt.

⁴Then Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron, and said: “Entreat the LORD, that He take away the frogs from me, and from my people; and I will let the people go, that they may sacrifice unto the LORD.” ⁵And Moses said unto Pharaoh: “Have thou this glory over me; against what time shall I entreat for thee, and for thy servants, and for thy people, that the frogs be destroyed from thee and thy houses, and remain in the river only?” ⁶And he said: “Against tomorrow.” And he

עַל-הַיָּאֲרִים וְעַל-הָאֲגָמִים וְהָעַל אֶת-
הַצְּפֹרְדִּים עַל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: ²וַיִּטֵּא
אֶהָרֹן אֶת-יָדוֹ עַל מִימֵי מִצְרַיִם וְהָעַל
הַצְּפֹרְדִּים וְתָכַס אֶת-אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:
³וַיַּעֲשׂוּכֶן הַחֹרְטָמִים בְּלִטְיָהֶם וַיַּעֲלֻ
אֶת-הַצְּפֹרְדִּים עַל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:
⁴וַיִּקְרָא פָּרְעֹה לְמֹשֶׁה וּלְאַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ
הָעֲתִירוּ אֶל-יְהוָה וְיִסַּר הַצְּפֹרְדִּים מִמֶּנִּי
וּמֵעַמִּי וְאֶשְׁלַח אֶת-הָעָם וְיִזְבְּחוּ
לַיהוָה: ⁵וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְפָרְעֹה הֲתִפְאֵר
עָלַי לְמָתִי | אֶעֱתִיר לָךְ וְלַעֲבָדֶיךָ וְלַעֲמֶיךָ
לְהַכְרִית הַצְּפֹרְדִּים מִמֶּנִּי וּמִבְּתֵיךָ רַק
בִּיָּאֵר תִּשְׁאָרָנָה: ⁶וַיֹּאמֶר לְמָחָר וַיֹּאמְרוּ

ABARBANEL'S QUESTIONS + Why is the plague of frogs, unlike that of the blood, performed by Aaron alone (v. 2)? Why aren't the Ten Plagues performed either all by Moses or all by Aaron? + Why was Pharaoh's heart not hardened when "the magicians did the same with their spells" (v. 3)? + What makes Pharaoh plead with Moses and Aaron (v. 4) to remove the frogs, which he did not do with the more serious plague that turned all the drinking water to blood?

RASHI 8:2 The frogs came up. Literally, "the frog came up." There was just one frog. They kept hitting her, and she would squirt out swarm after swarm. Thus the midrash. But in context the explanation would seem to be that in Hebrew the singular can refer to a swarm of frogs. [M]

5 You may have this triumph over me. The Hebrew word used here means "boast," as in Isa. 10:15. Here the implication is: "You may boast of how wise you are by asking me to do something great that (you think) I will be unable to do." And see my comments to Deut. 4:24. **For what time shall I plead.** Not "what time" (which would have meant "when shall I plead?") but "for what time." That is: I will pray today on your behalf that the frogs shall be cut off at a time fixed by you. Tell me which time you choose. Then you will see whether I can fulfill my word at the time specified by you.

6 For tomorrow. Pray today that they be cut off tomorrow.

[M] As if to say, "The locust has descended on the fields."

NAHMANIDES 8:5 For what time shall I plead. Rashi takes it to mean, "I will pray immediately for the plague to cease at whatever time you choose." The straightforward reading suggests that the plagues would depart as soon as Moses prayed. See v. 9, where it says, "the LORD did as Moses asked"—not "on the next day, the LORD did as Moses asked." Nor does our verse imply that Moses would pray immediately; "for what time" merely means "when." The preposition "for" is used superfluously quite often in Biblical Hebrew, especially with expressions of time. **That the frogs be cut off.** "Cutting off" implies their death; see 12:19 and 1 Kings 21:21.

6 For tomorrow. See the comment of Samuel b. Hophni cited by Ibn Ezra. But in my

ness. [P] **Plead with the LORD.** This plague was much worse than the previous one—"frogs to destroy them" (Ps. 78:45).

5 You may have this triumph over me. With OJPS, "this glory." I will let you have the glory of knowing that the whole world will see that they will be removed at exactly the moment specified by you. **To remain only in the Nile.** Where they had been to begin with. It obviously applied also to the other rivers and ponds where they had been before.

6 Tomorrow. Samuel b. Hophni explains as follows: It would have been more natural for him to say, "Immediately." But Pharaoh

[P] Ibn Ezra assumes that Pharaoh understood that it was Moses who would intervene with God.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS 3 Brought frogs. Brought them, but could not actually create them (Sforno).

4 Plead with the LORD. Since Pharaoh did not ask for this with the subsequent plague of lice, it is clear that he was trying to determine whether this was a natural phenomenon that Moses and Aaron knew was coming, or one that they had produced themselves (Gersonides).

5 For what time. Moses' ability to dictate the end of the plague demonstrated that it was a divine action, not a magical one. For magic works only for a limited time, and the instant the time expires, nature returns to its normal state (Sforno). **To remain only in the Nile.** More proof that they are really crocodiles; for there are frogs everywhere, not just in the Nile (Abarbanel).

6 There is none like the LORD our God. For the stars that control the world cannot change their courses—but God can change the course of events when those who cleave to Him request it (Gersonides).

RASHBAM 8:5 You may have this triumph over me. You may set yourself above me, to ask of me what you want and have me do it. One finds the same verb when God tells Gideon, "Israel might claim for themselves the glory due to Me" (Judg. 7:2). **For what time shall I plead in behalf of you?** By what day and time do you want the frogs to be gone? I will plead, immediately, that they be dead by the time you request. For it would not be normal for them all to die at a single instant.

6 For tomorrow. Pray now that they all be dead by tomorrow.

IBN EZRA water," referring to fountains, wells, and cisterns, is not included here.

2 Aaron held out his arm. But he did not strike the water as he did with the plague of blood. He merely signaled that the frogs could come up. **The frogs.** Literally, "the frog"; it refers to the species as a whole.

3 The magicians did the same. But only with a small amount of water. Hence Pharaoh saw that what the magicians could do was only a pale imitation of what Aaron did, and that they could only make more frogs, not eliminate them. That is why "Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron" (v. 4).

4 Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron. He summoned both out of politeness.



NJPS he replied. And [Moses] said, "As you say—that you may know that there is none like the LORD our God; ⁷the frogs shall retreat from you and your courtiers and your people; they shall remain only in the Nile." ⁸Then Moses and Aaron left Pharaoh's presence, and Moses cried out to the LORD in the matter of the frogs which He had inflicted upon Pharaoh. ⁹And the LORD did as Moses asked; the frogs died out in the houses, the courtyards, and the fields. ¹⁰And they piled them up in heaps, till the land stank. ¹¹But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he became stubborn and would not heed them, as the LORD had spoken.

¹²Then the LORD said to Moses, "Say to Aaron: Hold out your rod and strike the dust of the earth, and it shall turn to lice throughout the land of Egypt." ¹³And they did so. Aaron held out his arm with the

RASHI 8 Moses ... left and ... cried out immediately that the frogs be cut off on the next day.

11 As the LORD had spoken. Where did He speak this? "When Pharaoh does not heed you" (7:4).

12 Say to Aaron. The dust, which had defended Moses when he killed the Egyptian (2:12) and hid him in the sand, did not deserve to be struck by him. So it was struck by Aaron.

13 Vermin. The word means "a swarm."

NAHMANIDES view, since Moses asked, "For what time?" Pharaoh thought Moses was playing for time, and so he gave him a very short time, just until the next day. **As you say.** Since you are willing to wait until tomorrow, they shall not retreat until then.

7 The frogs shall retreat. Moses emphasizes that as soon as he prays they will all retreat, to keep Pharaoh from fearing that these frogs would die but others would come up from the Nile. The plague will depart entirely, even though some of the frogs remain in the Nile. All of this was to make clear to Pharaoh that the plague was carried out by God, and for no other reason than to make Pharaoh let Israel go.

8 Moses cried out to the LORD. That the frogs should be gone by the next day.

9 The LORD did as Moses asked. What Moses had promised Pharaoh on his own initiative.

11 Relief. As I have explained in my note to Gen. 32:17, the metaphor is one of extra space, breathing room. Thus when David would play his lyre, the evil spirit would leave Saul, and "Saul would find relief" (1 Sam. 16:23). **He became stubborn.** OJPS "He hardened his heart" gives the correct sense of the word; the grammatical formulation suggests an intense activity.

12 Say to Aaron. Know that the first three plagues, which were of the "lower" sort—two with water and one with dust—were all performed by Aaron; see my comment to 7:9. The plagues performed by Moses with the rod were of the "upper" sort—the hail and locust were brought by the wind, and the darkness was also in the air—since his status was higher than that of Aaron. Three plagues were performed without the use of the rod [Q]—the swarm, the pestilence, and the slaying of the first-born—and one, the boils, without the rod but by Moses with the slight participation of Aaron. **It shall turn to lice.** As in 9:9, the small amount of dust struck by Aaron would rise up and beget lice all over the land of Egypt.

13 They did so. Moses said it and Aaron did it. **Vermin.** The -am at the end of this Hebrew word is not part of the root; it is simply a [Q] That is, by God without either Aaron or Moses using the rod.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS **7 They shall remain only in the Nile.** Moses repeats this to remind Pharaoh that the crocodiles will remain at hand should God need them again (Abarbanel).

10 The land stank. As had the water in the previous plague (7:21) (Bekhor Shor).

11 Became stubborn. He steeled himself to ignore the stink, in order not to obey God (Sforno). **Would not heed them.** I presume that they indeed came before him to ask for the Israelites' release, that he refused, and that Moses warned him about the lice, as he had done the previous times (Gersonides).

OJPS said: "Be it according to thy word; that thou mayest know that there is none like unto the LORD our God. ⁷And the frogs shall depart from thee, and from thy houses, and from thy servants, and from thy people; they shall remain in the river only." ⁸And Moses and Aaron went out from Pharaoh; and

Moses cried unto the LORD concerning the frogs, which He had brought upon Pharaoh. ⁹And the LORD did according to the word of Moses; and the frogs died out of the houses, out of the courts, and out of the fields. ¹⁰And they gathered them together in heaps; and the land stank. ¹¹But when Pharaoh saw that there was respite, he hardened his heart, and hearkened not unto them; as the LORD had spoken.

¹²And the LORD said unto Moses: "Say unto Aaron: Stretch out thy rod, and smite the dust of the earth, that it may become gnats throughout all the land of Egypt." ¹³And they did so; and Aaron stretched out

RASHBAM 11 He became stubborn. Rather, with OJPS, "he hardened his heart" (see my comment to 7:22). This plague was so great that his heart did not stiffen on its own, but he was so evil that he hardened it himself.

13 Vermin ... lice. Kinnam, "vermin,"

IBN EZRA believed that the alignment of the stars had brought the frogs to Egypt and that Moses knew this. So Pharaoh figured that the plague was about to come to an end anyway, and he tested Moses to see whether he could prolong it beyond its natural extent.

7 The frogs shall retreat. Moses made the promise without consulting God, confident that He would not embarrass him. **From you and your courtiers and your people.** Notice that Moses adds "your courtiers" (as in 7:29), though Pharaoh omitted them in asking (v. 4).

under the care of an Israelite, who would escort the five in the street. A lion would snatch one, a wolf another, a bear another, a leopard another, and a fiery serpent still another, so that the Israelite would come back to the house of the Egyptian alone. The Egyptian would ask, "Where are my children?" and the Israelite would reply, "Sit down, and I will give you an accounting—a lion took one, a wolf another, a bear another, a leopard another, and a fiery serpent still another." The Egyptians intended that Israelites tend their cattle. So He sent murrain upon their cattle. The Egyptians intended that Israelites serve as bath attendants for them. So He brought boils upon them. The Egyptians intended to stone the Israelites. So He brought hail upon them. The Egyptians intended that Israelites be their vintagers. So He brought locusts, which consumed their vines. The Egyptians intended to put them in prison. So He brought darkness upon them. The Egyptians intended to slay them. So "the Lord smote all their first in rank" (Exod. 12:29). The Egyptians intended to drown them in water. So He "hurled Pharaoh and his host into the Red Sea" (Ps. 136:15).¹

→ 56. "And the frogs² came up, and covered the land of Egypt" (Exod. 8:2). R. Akiva said: It was only one frog, but it bred so rapidly that it filled the entire land of Egypt. R. Eleazar ben Azariah said to him: Akiva, what business have you with *Aggadah*? Leave your attempts at homiletical interpretation and turn to *Negaim*³ and *Ohalot*.⁴ True, at the beginning there was only one frog, but this one croaked for the others, and they came in swarms.⁵

57. "The Nile shall swarm with frogs, which shall go up and come into thy house . . . and into thine ovens, and into thy kneading troughs" (Exod. 7:28). Whenever an Egyptian woman was kneading dough, or heating her oven with bread inside, frogs would come and settle on the dough and devour it, or hop into the oven, cool it,⁶ and get at the bread.

R. Aha said: From the phrase "And upon thee" (Exod. 7:29), the inference may be drawn that when an Egyptian drank water and a drop fell on his chest, the drop would burst apart and become a frog.

R. Yohanan said: Wherever there was a little earth and a drop of water touched it, it would become a frog.⁷ Hezekiah Berabbi said to R. Yohanan: But according to your line of interpretation, noblemen's palaces made of marble and massive piers could not have been affected. The fact is, as Scripture tells us, the frog coming up from the deep would say to the marble, "Make room for me,

that I may come up [into the palace] and do the will of my Maker." At that, the marble split apart and the frog came up, took hold of the nobleman's private parts, and mutilated them.⁸

58. "But when Pharaoh saw that there was respite," etc. (Exod. 8:11). This is just like the wicked: when they are in trouble, they affect humility; but as soon as they have respite, they return to their perversity.⁹

59. "And the Lord said unto Moses: 'Say unto Aaron: Stretch out thy rod, and smite the dust of the earth'" (Exod. 8:12). [Aaron, not Moses, was told to smite the earth], for, according to R. Tanhum, the Holy One said to Moses: It is not proper that the earth, which protected you when you slew the Egyptian,¹⁰ should now be smitten by you.¹¹

60. "There was . . . fire flashing continually amidst the hail" (Exod. 9:24). A miracle within a miracle! R. Judah said that vials made of hail and filled with fire came down, yet the frozen water did not quench the fire nor did the fire consume the frozen water. R. Nehemiah said: Fire and hail, mingling, were made to work together. R. Judah's explanation, said R. Hanan, brings to mind the pomegranate, whose seeds are visible through its pulp; while R. Nehemiah's explanation, R. Hanan went on to say, brings to mind a crystal lamp in which water and oil work together to keep the flame of the wick burning.¹²

The interaction of the water and the oil may be illustrated by the parable of two fierce legions that were bitter rivals. When the time came for the king to wage war, what did he do? He made peace between them, and they both marched out and executed the king's orders together. So, too, fire and hail are bitter rivals, yet when the time came to wage war against Egypt, the Holy One made peace between them, and together they smote the Egyptians. Hence the verse is to be read, "There was fire flashing up within the hail," so that when an Egyptian sat down, he was scorched by hail, and when he stood up, he was scorched by fire.¹³

61. "Behold, tomorrow at this time¹⁴ I will cause it to rain a very grievous hail" (Exod. 9:18). Zavdi ben Levi said: Moses scratched a mark on a wall and said: When the sun reaches this mark tomorrow, the hail will descend.¹⁵

62. R. Yohanan taught: When the locusts came, the Egyptians, endeavoring to find some joy in their plight,

¹ Tanhuma, *Bo*, §4.

² The word for "frogs" is in the singular in the Hebrew text.

³ A treatise dealing with laws concerning suspected leprosy.

⁴ A treatise dealing with laws concerning staying under the same roof with a ritually unclean object. The two treatises, which are very difficult, are, according to R. Eleazar, appropriate subjects for R. Akiva's keen mind.

⁵ B. Sanh 67b.

⁶ By their natural coldness.

⁷ He interprets "their land swarmed with frogs" (Ps. 105:30) as suggesting that the land itself—the earth—turned into frogs.

⁸ Exod. R. 10:2-3.

⁹ Exod. R. 10:6 and 12:7; Tanhuma B, *Va-era*, §22.

¹⁰ The earth "protected" Moses because he hid the Egyptian in it. See Exod. 2:12.

¹¹ Exod. R. 10:7.

¹² The oil, being lighter than the water, floats on its surface and feeds the burning wick.

¹³ Exod. R. 12:4; Num. R. 12:8; Song R. 3:11, §1.

¹⁴ The word *ka-et* ("at this time") implies "at exactly the same time." Cf. Gen. R. 33, end.

¹⁵ Exod. R. 12:2.

From the Atlantic: Frogs: The Surprising Star of the Passover Table

Throughout history, the amphibians have often been symbols of change and liberation, making them a fitting symbol for the Jewish celebration.

ERIC SCHULMILLER - APR 2, 2015

Open the door, my honey, my heart. — The Frog King

Over the past decade or so, I've noticed a fundamental shift in the thematic focus of the Passover Seder—the ritual meal that recalls the Jews' journey from slavery to freedom. My childhood memories are of songs and symbols of liberation: a trail of matzah crumbs leading out of the wilderness, fresh green sprigs of parsley emerging from salty water like an enslaved people emerging from a sea of tears. The Seder also contains equally vivid recollections of the horrors of divine wrath (blood, boils, darkness, gefilte fish). But in the 21st century, one symbolic element has usurped the focus at countless American Seders I've attended: frogs.

Biblically speaking, frogs were the second of 10 divine plagues unleashed upon Egypt when the Pharaoh refused to free the Hebrews from slavery. Today, frog napkin rings, plush dolls, plastic figurines, table cloths, t-shirts, matzah covers, and candle sticks—all can be found in abundance at the Seder table. But rather than bemoan this amphibious invasion, I've begun to embrace it. Why? Because the more I looked, the more examples I found throughout history, science, and the arts of how the frog symbolizes the struggle for liberation—the very liberation Jews celebrate on Passover. But as the Israelites soon learned on their generation-long trek through the desert, the path to freedom is paved with many obstacles—not the least of which is, according to the Torah, the human heart's resistance to change and its refusal to confront the status quo.

Sometimes this resistance to change takes the form of human stubbornness. A thousand years ago, medieval rabbis wrote a midrash (essentially biblical fan fiction), which imagined that the second plague started out as a single, massive frog that multiplied exponentially every time the Egyptians struck it in their obdurate efforts to drive it back into the Nile. As explained in a commentary to the midrash by 20th century Rabbi Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky, "When the Egyptians saw the result of their beating the frogs, why did they not stop? Rational thinking told them to stop, but they became enraged when they saw the result of their beating the frogs—and they lost control." In the imagination of the medieval rabbis, the plague of proliferating frogs is a vivid reminder of the danger posed by the humans' resistance to such change—the "hardened heart" the Torah warns of.

Frogs also represent stubbornness in a comedy written by the Athenian playwright Aristophanes, written in the early 5th century BCE. In *The Frogs*, the eponymous creatures symbolize resistance to using art as a mode of change: They try to thwart Dionysus, the god of theater, from his journey to the underworld to rescue the recently deceased master playwright Euripides from the dead. Likewise in the playwright Stephen Sondheim's version (first performed with a student cast that included Meryl Streep and Sigourney Weaver in the Yale swimming pool!), the frogs are vehemently opposed to any effort to change things for the better. Nathan Lane, who starred in and freely adapted Sondheim's version in the early 2000s, said, "After September 11 ... there's something idealistic about the notion of someone

believing that the arts can make a difference.” The frogs are emblematic of all who would deny that such change is possible: “[We’re]Frogs/Of the pond/And the fronds we never go beyond ... Whaddya care the world’s a wreck?/Leave ‘em alone, send ‘em a check,/Sit in the sun and what the heck,/Whaddya wanna break your neck for?” In this play, the frog’s cry is a challenge to those stuck in the mud of indifference.

The dangers of remaining stuck in the mud are made perfectly clear in the famous 19th century fairy tale: “On the Variation of Reflex Excitability in the Frog Induced by Changes of Temperature.” In this oft-cited study, scientists claimed they had proven that a frog would remain in increasingly hot water even to its death, provided the temperature was raised gradually enough. These claims were later disproved, but the image is still powerfully lodged in the collective imagination. James Fallows has advocated in *The Atlantic* against the retelling of the boiled-frog myth as fact. But as Paul Krugman wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed in July of 2009: “The hypothetical boiled frog is a useful metaphor for a very real problem: the difficulty of responding to disasters that creep up on you a bit at a time.” Whether the disaster is the Cold War, climate change, the erosion of civil rights, or the hardening of the human heart mentioned in the Torah, the frog in boiling water is yet another reminder that it’s all too easy to avoid confronting the status quo until it’s too late.

Alas, as every devotee of the old-school video game Frogger knows, the journey toward change isn’t an easy one. But as every elementary-school child will tell you, the metamorphosis from tadpole to frog is a stunning transformation to behold. And so it’s no surprise that some authors use the frog not as a symbol of human stubbornness, but rather as the embodiment of the very change people seek to avoid.

Certainly this is true of the German folk tale, *The Frog King* (aka *Frog Prince*). The hero’s transmogrification from frog to prince clearly echoes the frog’s biological gift for evolution. Yet the frog is also a reminder that a person cannot change on his or her own: Change comes when a heart is opened to another, such as a loved one. When it comes to frogs, we see this theme again and again—when a frog transforms, it only happens in relationship to another living being.

A perfect example is the film that Stephen Spielberg once called, “The *Citizen Kane* of animated film,” *One Froggy Evening*. In this 1955 Chuck Jones classic, a frog is discovered by a construction worker inside inside the cornerstone of a soon-to-be-demolished building. To his amazement, the frog bursts into a singing, dancing ragtime routine, transforming from a dull, croaking lump into a song and dance sensation. Yet despite the man’s attempts to cash in on his protegee’s talents, Michigan J. Frog (as he came to be known) does not change for the sake of fame or profit, but only for the one who uncovered his hidden self, who witnessed his potential for change in the first place.

Of course, there’s one frog who’s a teacher par excellence: that harried herder of chaos, Kermit the Frog, who in his big-screen debut is the heart and soul of a modern-day *Canterbury Tales*. Throughout Henson’s *The Muppet Movie*, Kermit reminds his fellow travelers the importance of sticking together on the journey toward transformation. He may have escaped from the swamp on his own, but Kermit teaches his friends that the only way to “write your own ending” is to see in each other their true potential to change, to grow, to realize their dreams.

Finally, there is *Magnolia*, which writer director Paul Thomas Anderson called, “for better or worse, the best movie I’ll ever make.” And thanks to its surreal frog-filled climax, I would argue that it’s also the best Passover movie ever made. The 1999 film is a three-hour epic that weaves different storylines together, all of which deal with the painfully troubled relationships of a diverse group of grown children and their flawed parents. Parents who, like Pharaoh, have cast children down regret-filled rivers, forcing them to navigate the rocky shores of their own adulthood filled with resentment and angry memories of abandon or abuse. These children now struggle as adults, their hearts closed by the pain of their childhoods, unable to grow and change in the ways which they so desperately need.

The pain of these flawed parent-child relationships is epitomized by a heart-wrenching scene where Frank Mackey (played by Tom Cruise) finally agrees to visit his terminally ill, cancer-ridden father Earl Partridge (Jason Robards) on his deathbed. Earl had cheated on Frank’s mother repeatedly during their 23-year marriage, eventually abandoning her when she herself was dying of cancer, forcing their 14-year-old son Frank to care for his mother alone—a sin Frank had never forgiven.

Frank himself had compensated for this early trauma by becoming a shallow, manipulative, power-hungry professional womanizer—his motto: “I am the one who’s in charge!” In his father’s weakest moment, all of Frank’s anger and schadenfreude floods to the surface. But Cruise, perhaps channeling the experience of reconciling with his own estranged, dying father as a young man, poignantly shifts Frank’s agony from rage to loss. Speaking to James Lipton about his own father, in an *Inside the Actors Studio* interview, Cruise said, “We create our own suffering in our life. Our own isolation.” And so it feels powerfully real when Cruise’s character sobbingly pleads with his father, “Don’t go away, you fucking asshole! Don’t go away!” Frank realizes in that moment that he is not a slave to his hardened heart. He’s ultimately freed by this need for connection.

And then...

Frogs. Hundreds. Thousands. As they rain from the sky in literally biblical proportions, it finally makes sense why there are allusions to Exodus 8:2 throughout *Magnolia*. The verse warns Pharaoh that frogs will come if he doesn’t *let go*. Every character who was struggling with the past or with loved ones becomes a witness to this unexplained event. But it’s the aptly-named Stanley Spector, a former boy genius played by William H. Macy, who sees the “miracle” for what it truly is. As he watches the frogs rain down all around him, he says, “This happens. This is something that happens.”

When do frogs happen? If Passover, ultimately, is about fighting against the heart’s tendency to close itself off to change, then frogs deserve their new-found place of honor at the Seder table. So as I sit in my froggy pajamas and gaze at my children, my wife, my relatives, I’ll raise my frog-shaped wine glass, and ask, as Brett McKenzie put it in his 2012 Oscar-winning song: “Am I a man, or am I a muppet?” Do I, like Pharaoh, allow my heart strings to be pulled taut by an ineluctable calcification, stuck in the muddy status quo that closes me off from others? Or will I allow myself to take the leap necessary to change, to forgive, to love, to connect with those around me, even when they push me to the boiling point? Frogs appear again and again, with their demanding riff on the Seder’s essential question: *Will this night be different.*

Rationalist Judaism

Exploring the legacy of the rationalist Rishonim (medieval Torah scholars), and various other notes, by Rabbi Dr. Natan Slifkin, director of The Biblical Museum of Natural History in Beit Shemesh

Friday, December 27, 2013

Frogs Challenge Rationalism

(I posted this a few years ago - I am re-posting it because of its relevance to the parashah.)

Once in a while, I come across something that I personally cannot reconcile with the strict rationalist Maimonidean-type approach. Previously, I have discussed two such cases. One is antisemitism (discussed [here](#)); but I am quite content to reject the strict rationalist view in such a fundamental issue. Another is the Pi gematriya (see [here](#) and especially [here](#)), which is somewhat more difficult to integrate into my worldview, but at least it's Scripture. But this one is really challenging: The strange reality that relates to the Midrashic account of the frog plague.

The Torah speaks about the "frog," in the singular, coming up from the Nile. Previously, I have discussed how many people are oblivious to the *pshat* in this *passuk*. But for now, let's discuss the famous *derash* - that there was one frog, which multiplied to become hordes:

"And the frog came up, and it covered the land of Egypt" ... Rabbi Akiva said, there was one frog, which then multiplied all over the land of Egypt. Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya said, Akiva, Why do you involve yourself with aggadata? Finish with your words and go to study *nega'im* and *ohelos*. There was one frog, it called to the others, and they came. (Talmud, Sanhedrin 67b; Midrash Shemos Rabbah 10:5; Yalkut Shimoni Shemos 8:183)

Rabbi Akiva states simply that the frog multiplied, without explaining how this took place. It could well be that he means that it procreated in the way that frogs usually do. However, the Midrash cites a more unusual version of Rabbi Akiva's opinion:

One verse says, "and the river swarmed with frogs," and another verse says, "and the frog came up." Rabbi Akiva said, There was one frog, and the Egyptians were beating it, and many frogs showered from it (*matezes*). (Midrash Tanchuma, va'era 14; Tanna D'Vei Eliyahu Rabbah 7)

There is also a well-known version of this Midrash (I have seen it cited from Midrash Aggada, but I haven't yet been able to track down the original) in which it produced new frogs from its mouth.

Now, the phenomenon of childbirth, as with all other areas of life, takes on remarkably diverse forms in the natural world. However, whether producing eggs or live young, most animals are identical and ordinary in that the young emerge into the world from an orifice located at the rear end of their mother's body. Of the entire animal kingdom, the only exceptions to this rule that I know are seahorses, in which the male takes the eggs into a pouch until they are ready to hatch, and certain species of frogs/ toads (scientifically, there is no distinction between the two names).

The female pipa toad (also known as the Surinam toad) carries her eggs embedded in a spongy layer of skin on her back. After four weeks, the young pop out of her back as perfectly formed toadlets, as you can see in this amazing video:

Then there is the remarkable Darwin's frog, *Rhinoderma darwinii*. After the female Darwin's frog lays 20-

30 eggs on land, the males gather around and wait for the eggs to begin to hatch into tadpoles, which takes 10-20 days. When the tadpoles move inside the eggs, the males flick several of the eggs into their mouths with their tongues and place them into their vocal sacs. Inside the vocal sacs, the eggs hatch and develop into froglets, whereupon they emerge from the males' mouths.

A similar but even more extraordinary amphibian is the Australian gastric brooding frog. The species include the Northern gastric brooding frog (*Rheobatrachus vitellinus*) discovered in 1972, and the Southern gastric brooding frog (*Rheobatrachus silus*) found in 1984. These frogs are already presumed extinct; the former was last seen in the wild in March 1985 and the latter in September 1981. In the few years that they were known to man, however, they made a remarkable impression.



The female gastric brooding frog actually *fully swallows* her 18-30 fertilized eggs, which then develop in her stomach. The tadpoles have undeveloped tails, lack teeth and do not feed; they live off their yolk sacs. As the tadpoles grow inside their mother, her stomach expands until it occupies most of the body cavity and she cannot even fully inflate her lungs. Remarkably, the stomach does not produce hydrochloric acid (the digestive juices) during the brooding period; this prevents the digestion of the young, but it also prevents the female from feeding. The gestation period inside the mother is 6-8 weeks; she then gives birth by opening her mouth. Baby frogs come up to her mouth and then gradually leave, while the mother keeps her mouth wide open. If a baby tadpole does not leave the mother's

mouth, she re-swallows it, to be born later.

Remarkably, then, the same extraordinary birthing procedures that are attributed to the frog of Egypt are actually found in real frogs today. What are we to make of this?

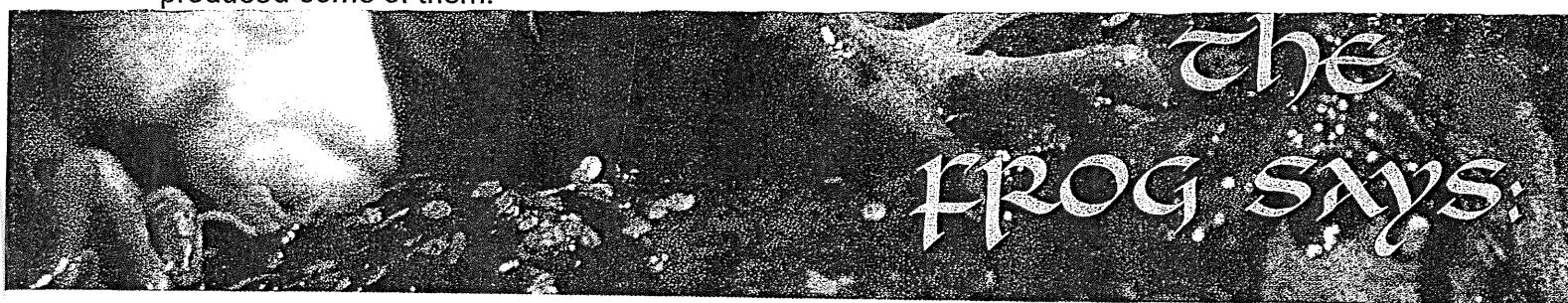
I would not infer that it was those species of frogs that acted in the Egyptian plague. After all, these frogs are not found anywhere near Egypt and were unknown until quite recently; nor are they capable of giving birth to enough young to swarm over the entire country.

When I was more mystically inclined, I used to explain it as follows: that the concept of giving birth through the mouth, or from the skin of the body, must relate to the fundamental spiritual essence of the frog. This therefore has manifestations in both the unusual frog species, and in the unique frog of the Egyptian plague. I related this to how the frog often appears in rabbinic literature as symbolic of a Torah scholar (who studies at night, just as the frog croaks at night), and of a tzaddik who is *mosar nefesh* (see Perek Shirah for details). The frog that gives birth through its mouth is parallel to the Torah scholar who produces his students – rated as his progeny – through his mouth, the medium of teaching Torah. The other explanation, of the frogs being produced from the frog's skin, parallels the Torah scholar producing students through his body's actions and good deeds. The Egyptians, who tried to suppress all this (which is given in the Zohar as the reason for the frog plague), were thereby taught a lesson.

But this whole idea of spiritual essences which are manifest as various creatures in this world, while considered by many to be an absolutely normative understanding of Judaism (as per the Torah being "the blueprint of the world,") is not at all consistent with a rationalist, Maimonidean style understanding. Yet on the other hand, it seems just too extraordinary to dismiss as coincidence - that the two bizarre methods of reproduction described in the Midrash just so happen to actually occur with frogs, of all the different creatures in the world.

2. The Plague of Frogs:

Frogs (tsphardeim, probably "marsh-leapers" (Exodus 8:1-15)) are very abundant just after the high Nile when the waters begin to recede. Spawn in the mud is hatched by the sun, and the marshes are filled with myriads of these creatures. The frog was the hieroglyph for myriads. The frogs usually remain in the marshes, but in this case they came forth to the horror and disgust of the people. "Frogs in the houses, frogs in the beds, frogs baked with the food in the ovens, frogs in the kneading troughs worked up with the flour; frogs with their monotonous croak, frogs with their cold slimy skins, everywhere--from morning to night, from night to morning--frogs." The frog was also associated with Divinity, was the symbol of Heqt, a form of Hathor, and seems also at times to have been worshipped as divinity. This plague created such horror that thus early Pharaoh came to an agreement (Exodus 8:8-10). A time was set for the disappearance of the frogs that he might know that "there is none like unto Yahweh our God," but when the frogs were dead, Pharaoh hardened his heart (Exodus 8:15). In this plague "the magicians did in like manner with their enchantments" (Exodus 8:7). Frogs were plentiful, and it would not seem to be difficult to claim to have produced some of them.



FROM PEREK SHRA

ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו לעולם ועד
(יומא, פ"ג מ"ח).

Blessed is the name of His glorious kingdom
for ever and ever (*Mishnah Yoma 3:8*).

The frog symbolizes self-sacrifice to do the will of God. When God brought the plague of frogs upon Egypt, they were commanded to swarm throughout the land, even jumping into hot, burning ovens. When King Nebuchadnezzar threatened to throw Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah into a furnace unless they bowed to his idol, they said, "If a mere frog jumped into a furnace to serve God, should we do less?" And when King David felt pride in his rapturous Psalms, a frog chastened him, "I sing the praises of God all day and all night!" Is a frog's croaking comparable to the *Psalms of David*? Yes, because the greatest praise of God is that His creatures serve Him with whatever ability He gives them.

