

HAFTARAH



God vs god

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Haftarah

The story of the Exodus would have been lackluster without the ten plagues, especially since we did not suffer from them. Some of the plagues invite art and evoke imagery. Images of frogs jumping everywhere (whether in picture or song) makes the story accessible to children of all ages.

To some commentators (see Ibn Ezra and Abarbanel on 7:27) the second plague is not about innocent frogs leaping around but rather about crocodiles. Reading the haftarah from Ezekiel it seems that those who chose this section indeed considered them crocodiles, monsters that controlled the Nile.

In this haftarah Ezekiel speaks of Pharaoh the king of Egypt as “the great crocodile who lies in the midst of his rivers, Who has said, ‘My Nile is mine; And I have made me.’” (Ezekiel 29:3) Pharaoh considers himself not merely a monarch but a god, a creator. No wonder he responds to Moshe’s message from the LORD with derision “who is the LORD that I shall hearken to His voice?!” (Shmot 5:2).

The choice of the image of the crocodile by Ezekiel is not incidental. In his book *Teva VaEretz BaTanakh* (*Nature and Land in the Tanakh*) the botanist Yehuda Feliks writes about the crocodiles in ancient Egypt. These reptiles were considered holy in Egypt; they believed that the crocodile could foretell the future water level of the Nile and would lay its eggs at that line. As the Nile was the source of life in Egypt, this was a crucial part of the economy. There were many crocodiles in the Nile in ancient times. Interestingly, of all the pictures of hunting scenes that have been recovered from ancient Egypt, none include hunting of crocodiles. This, presumably, has to do with the reverence that the Egyptians had for this animal.

In response to the divine picture the Pharaoh has of himself, God mocks him “I will put hooks in your jaw” (29:4) as a fisherman may do to a hapless fish to pull it out of the water. Attaching the Nile fish to his cheeks would mock the very image of the well-manicured Egyptian kings we are familiar with from Egyptian drawings. God will prove to Pharaoh who is truly in power. It is God who will control both the Nile that Pharaoh claimed to be his own, and the image of the Nile - the crocodile.

When we consider Ezekiel’s prophecy as a comment on our parashah we understand a bigger picture. The purpose of the plagues is to undermine the Egyptian deities. The revered Nile with its crocodiles, a visual symbol of the horrifying Pharaoh and all that the Egyptian State stood for (remember babies being thrown into the Nile?) will be struck by the LORD, the God of Israel. Ezekiel himself explains this in 29:6: “And all the dwellers of Egypt will know that I am the LORD...” This haftarah is not merely a

diatribe against Pharaoh, it highlights the purpose of the plagues: educating Egypt and its sphere of influence about the LORD as the supreme God. It is a God vs. god battle. The ancient Jews probably understood this very well.
