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THE MAKKOT, REDUX

I. BACKGROUND

After the completion of *yetsi'at mitsrayim*, climaxing in the elimination of the Egyptians at *keri'at yam suf* and the singing of *Az Yashir*, we encounter a sequence of brief colorful episodes leading up to *matan Torah*. They do not appear to share a common theme or structure, but rather each goes in its own direction, a seemingly random series of events, complaints, travails, and miracles.

The first of these episodes, immediately following *Az Yashir*, is that of Marah. Thirsty after three days without water, the Jewish people finally encounter a body of water, only to learn that it is undrinkable. Moshe promptly performs a miracle, rendering the water potable, and relays from Hashem:

And He said, if you hearken to the voice of the Lord, your God, and you do what is proper in His eyes, and you listen closely to His commandments and observe all His statutes, all the sicknesses that I have visited upon Egypt I will not visit upon you, for I, the Lord, heal you. (Exodus 15:26).¹

What about this episode prompts such a declaration? The surrounding context suggests that Bnei Yisrael had just experienced avoiding “the sicknesses...visited upon Egypt.” But how so?

Ibn Ezra explains that the episode at Marah was:

the opposite of the first of the plagues, for the waters of the Nile had been sweet and became undrinkable, whereas here the bitter waters turned

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¹ Translations throughout are from chabad.org, Aryeh Kaplan's *The Living Torah*, and jewishvirtuallibrary.org.

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sweet...therefore you should be careful not to rebel against [God]...as He will be good to you. (Exodus 15:26).

Whereas in Egypt sweet water was miraculously turned undrinkable, at Marah undrinkable water was miraculously turned sweet. It is noteworthy that the incidents are not perfect mirror images of each other. The Nile waters became bloody, not bitter. Hashem was intentionally not recreating the plague, even in reverse, but rather providing a “bizarro” version of it—similar enough to be vaguely reminiscent of the plague, but not enough to be an obvious replica of it. After all, besides Ibn Ezra, other commentators do not even notice—or deem significant—the resemblance of the Marah incident to the plague of *dabm*. By providing a variation of the plague that conjures up the memory of it without precisely repeating it, Hashem subtly conveys the intended message.

While Ibn Ezra’s comment is limited to the Marah incident and its abstract parallel to the first plague, it raises the intriguing possibility that underlying the entire series of otherwise disconnected and seemingly random “vignettes” from *yetsi’at mitrayim* through *matan Torah* lies a recurrence of this theme.

II. ORGANIZING THE MAKKOT

Although there are multiple ways of segmenting the plagues into various subgroups,² one common approach is to divide the makkot in half into two units, the first five and the last five. Dividing the makkot in this manner is supported by the parallel codas at the end of each unit—death of (exclusively Egyptian) animals at the end of the first unit and death of (exclusively Egyptian) humans at the end of the second—as well as the precedent of dividing our most iconic unit of 10 in the Torah—the 10 commandments—similarly into two units of five. A close analysis reveals that this approach yields some noteworthy insights into the makkot narratives.

A. *The Nature of Arbeh*

If the makkot are indeed to be divided into these two halves, the common theme of each half seems relatively clear: the first group are terrestrial,

² Most famous is Rabbi Yehuda’s division of *Detza”kh Ada”sh Be’aha”v*, implying commonalities of some sort among the first three, middle three, and last four of the makkot. Other segmentations include dividing the plagues into consecutive couplets or pairs, see e.g. *Da’at Mikra*, 174 at footnote 77a; or distinguishing the first seven plagues, which appear in *parashat Va’eira*, from the latter three, which appear in *parashat Bo*.

creature-focused plagues,³ while the second group, coming from the heavens,⁴ are focused on the direct impact upon man, his spirit, and his perceptions. If so, however, there is one plague that clearly seems to stand out as not belonging in its grouping: locusts. What is locusts doing in the second group? It would seem to belong perfectly to the first grouping, somewhere in between, say, *kinim* and *arov*.⁵

However, upon a close reading of the text, three critical characteristics of this plague warrant its placement squarely in the second grouping. First, consistent with the upward, rather than terrestrial, focus of the latter group, the origin of this plague is not from the river or the dust, but from the heavenly winds:

...and the Lord led an east wind in the land all that day and all the night. [By the time] it was morning, the east wind had borne the locusts. (Exodus 10:13).

Second, the emphasis of the plague is not on infestation per se, as it is in the case of the first grouping, but on the economic impact on man:

...and they ate all the vegetation of the earth and all the fruits of the trees, which the hail had left over, and no greenery was left in the trees or in the vegetation of the field[s] throughout the entire land of Egypt. (Exodus 10:14-15).

Third, and perhaps most importantly, in a clear reference and segue to the subsequent plague of darkness, is the emotional impact on the observer:

The locusts ascended over the entire land of Egypt...They obscured the view of all the earth, **and the earth became darkened.** (Exodus 10:14-15).

A key characteristic of this plague was the terror it visited upon man, in much the same way as the plague of darkness does next. Thus, at least with respect to the plague of *arbeh*, the bipartite structure of the makkot actually provides insight into the substantive nature of a particular plague, in this case *arbeh*. *Arbeh*'s placement in the second group of plagues helps

³ The first plague, blood, not only concerns the rivers of Egypt—the same rivers from which the second plague of frogs emerged—but also, the text emphasizes twice, results in the death of all fish (Exodus 7:18, 21), no less than the fifth plague results in the deaths of the livestock.

⁴ The plague of boils is initiated via ash thrown up to the heavens (Exodus 9:8).

⁵ This question is worthy of consideration even outside of the specific framework of dividing the makkot into halves.

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the reader to understand the plague itself. This opens up the door to the possibility of utilizing this structure to learn about other plagues as well.

B. The Definition of Arov

The plague of *arov* is uniquely cryptic. The very definition of the word “*arov*” is subject to wide-ranging debate among scholars and commentators. The first fault line in interpretation is between the views that the *arov* were flying insects and that they were wild animals.⁶ While the word itself and its etymology are vague,⁷ perhaps we can glean a clue as to the definition of the plague from our “5+5” structure and from *arov*’s context and position therein.

If we examine the two sets of five plagues side by side, commonalities emerge beyond just that between the codas of *dever* and *makkat bekhorot*. The first two plagues of each group come from the same source, the next two paint a similar scene to each other, and then each group is punctuated by death. This symmetry would seem to support the “insect” school of interpretation of *arov*^{8,9}:

Concept	Plagues 1-5 (Lower order)		Plagues 6-10 (Higher order)	
Source	River	<i>Dahm</i> <i>Tsefarde’a</i>	Sky	<i>Shehin</i> <i>Barad</i>
Visual Impact	Insect Infestation	<i>Kinim</i> <i>Arov</i>	Darkness	<i>Arbeh</i> <i>Hoshbekh</i>
Death	Animals	<i>Dever</i>	Man	<i>Makkat</i> <i>Bekhorot</i>

⁶ Rabbi Nehemia and Rabbi Yehuda in the midrash argue whether *arov* were flying insects or wild animals (Exodus Rabbah 11:3). Rashbam identifies *arov* as wolves (Exodus 8:17), and the Midrash Psalms, *Shoher Tov*, 78:11, cites a view that it was panthers (78:45). On the other hand, ancient sources including the Septuagint identify *arov* as species of blood-sucking flies or insects.

⁷ See, e.g., Mitchell First, “The Plague of Arov: A New Understanding,” *Jewish Link*, January 19, 2017, <https://www.jewishlinknj.com/features/16800-the-plague-of-arov-a-new-understanding>.

⁸ See also Psalms 105:31: “He spoke and *arov* arrived, lice throughout their borders.” In this chapter of Psalms in which most of the plagues are recounted, lice and *arov* are the only two that are equated, or at least connected in the same verse.

⁹ The insect school of interpretation would be similarly supported by alternatively grouping the makkot into five couplets. See M. First, “The Plague of Arov.”

Mitchell First suggests additional reasons to prefer the view that *arov* consisted of insects. First, assuming that the word “*arov*” is translated as it is usually understood, meaning “mixture,” that word is more naturally applied to small objects; lions, tigers, and bears, each taking up their own space, are “inherently less of a mixture.”¹⁰ Second, the text describes the *arov* entering and “filling” (Exodus 8:17) the Egyptian houses; this too reads more naturally in the case of swarms of small creatures; and, First argues, if they were large animals, the houses could have been secured to prevent their infiltration¹¹—or else the text should have more relevantly described them breaking into the premises rather than just entering.¹²

A further argument against the “wild animals” school of interpretation is the presumably lethal nature of the plague under that approach. *Arov*’s placement so early in the progression of makkot seems incongruous if it truly resulted in gruesome deaths by mauling or consumption by ferocious beasts. Conversely, the implied gravity and the climactic nature of *makkat bekhborot* would seem to be undermined if it was indeed preceded six plagues earlier by an ordeal no less lethal or fearsome. Similarly, whereas in the case of the other plagues the text is not shy about describing the damage and effects of the plague, a description of widespread attacks on humans is sorely lacking.¹³

In addition, parallelism with how all of the other plagues are identified would seem to support Aryeh Kaplan’s¹⁴ and Isaac Mozeson’s¹⁵ translation of the word “*arov*” not as “mixture” (without defining what

¹⁰ See M. First, “The Plague of Arov.”

¹¹ Cassuto notes as well that entering houses is much easier for insects than for beasts of prey (Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967), 107). I thank Yitzchak Blau for pointing me towards this source.

¹² I thank Yitzchak Blau for pointing out that the arguments in this sentence assume a relatively naturalistic perspective on the makkot; certainly Hashem could have engineered a wave of wild animals who miraculously appeared inside the Egyptian homes in any way He wished. The important point here, though, is that if the intention were so, the text should have described it more clearly as such.

¹³ William Propp in his Anchor Bible similarly adduces Psalms 78:45 (“He sent upon them *arov* that devoured them...”) in support of the insect view: “since there is no indication in Exodus that the *‘arov* are deadly, it follows that they can devour without killing, i.e., are biting insects” (*The Anchor Bible: Exodus* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 1:328).

¹⁴ Aryeh Kaplan, *The Living Torah* (New York: Maznaim, 1981), footnote at Exodus 8:17.

¹⁵ Isaac Mozeson, *The Word*, cited in M. First. See also Marcus Kalisch, *An Historical and Critical Commentary on the Old Testament, with a New Translation—Exodus* (London: Longman Brown Green and Longmans, 1855).

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the mixture comprised, unlike all of the other plagues whose name denotes what they are) but as derived from Ancient Greek or Egyptian words meaning “beetle,” or more specifically, the dung beetle.¹⁶ Strikingly, precisely the dung beetle, or scarab, was a prominent object of worship in ancient Egypt,¹⁷ widely “sculptured on monuments, painted on tombs, engraved on gems, worn round the neck as an amulet and honoured in ten thousand images.”¹⁸ This interpretation gives enhanced meaning to the verse, describing the Exodus and the plagues:

... and [the Lord] had wrought vengeance against their deities (Numbers 33:4).

Even if the word “*arov*” does not derive from the Egyptian word for dung beetle, however, there is still ample etymological basis for the view, supported by our bipartite structure for the plagues, that *arov* consisted of insects rather than wild zoo animals. First, the Septuagint translates “*arov*” using a Greek word for dog fly,¹⁹ a species of blood-sucking fly abundant around cattle whose maggots²⁰ are often seen in the rotting manure near cattle and poultry.²¹ Second, the word *arov* may alternatively be derived from the Akkadian word “*urbatu*,” meaning worm.²²

¹⁶ The Ancient Greek word for dung beetle or scarab was *karabos*, (see, e.g., S. C. Woodhouse, *English-Greek Dictionary: A Vocabulary of the Attic Language* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1910), 69, which M. First notes is very close to the Hebrew *ayin-resh-bet* due to the guttural sound that the *ayin* made. The ancient Egyptian word for scarab was *khpr* (Leonard H. Lesko, *A Dictionary of Late Egyptian*, 2nd ed. (Providence: B.C. Scribe Publications, 2002), 357; see also [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Scarab_\(hieroglyph\)](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Scarab_(hieroglyph))), which M. First notes could potentially have had a variant *kbrp*, which would also be very similar to *ayin-resh-bet*. Alternatively, it is possible that *arov* is related to the ancient Egyptian *a’ov*, also denoting the scarab (Kaplan, footnote at Exodus 8:17).

¹⁷ See, e.g., [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scarab_\(artifact\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scarab_(artifact)).

¹⁸ Joseph H. Hertz. *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs: Hebrew Text, English Translation and Commentary* (London: Soncino Press, 1960), citing Cunningham Geikie, *Hours with the Bible: or, The Scriptures in the light of modern knowledge* (New York: J. Pott, 1897).

¹⁹ Kaplan and M. First. See also Philo, *De Vita Mosis* 2:101, cited in Kaplan.

²⁰ A maggot is the larvae of a fly. Flies lay hundreds of eggs at a time, which become maggots, which then grow into adult flies.

²¹ “Stable fly, house fly (Diptera: Muscidae), and other nuisance fly development in poultry litter associated with horticultural crop production,” *Journal of Economic Entomology*, 92, no. 6 (1999): 1352–7, cited by https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stable_fly#cite_ref-5.

²² See M. First, “The Plague of Arov.”

Thus, the plague of *arov* represents another instance of the grouping of the plagues into two parallel sets of five helping to provide insight into the substantive definition of a particular plague. In turn, independent evidence as to the definition of *arov* and the resulting parallelism illustrated above further supports this method of grouping or dividing the plagues. We have two sets of five plagues, each to some degree mirroring the other, but with the first group of a lower, terrestrial order, and the second group of a higher order, coming from the heavens and more focused directly on man himself.

This returns us to the interpretation of the Ibn Ezra. We suggested the possibility of applying the idea espoused by Ibn Ezra with respect to the first plague and the first narrative after *Az Yashir* (which is the endpoint of *yetsi'at mitsrayim*), to all of the plagues and all of the narratives from *yetsi'at mitsrayim* through *kabbalat ha-Torah* (the purpose of *yetsi'at mitsrayim*). Given the aforementioned thematic division between the two sets of makkot, we might expect that the first five makkot would be referenced during the pre-*matan Torah* “vignettes,” whose focus is on Benei Yisrael’s lower, more basic needs, and the latter five referenced during *matan Torah* itself, whose focus is on the heavenly rather than the terrestrial and on the spiritual rather than the physical.

We begin with *matan Torah* and the latter five makkot.

III. PLAGUES 6-10

A. *Shehin*

The plague of *shehin* is introduced in Exodus:

The Lord said to Moses and to Aaron, “Take yourselves handfuls of **furnace** (*kivshan*) **soot**, and Moses shall **cast it heavenward** before Pharaoh’s eyes (9:8).

Benei Yisrael are given a subtle reminder of this image at the beginning of the Sinai spectacle, in the description of Hashem coming down from the heavens:

Now Mount Sinai was altogether on smoke, because **Hashem descended upon it** in fire; and the smoke thereof **ascended as the smoke of a furnace** (*kivshan*) (Exodus 19:18).

This is, in fact, the only remaining usage of the word *kivshan* in the rest of the Torah and even the rest of the Tanakh.

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B. Barad

Here is the description of the plague of *barad*:

So Moses stretched forth his staff heavenward, and **the Lord gave forth thunder** and hail, **and fire** came down to the earth (Exodus 9:23).

Note the terrifying nature not only of the hail itself but also of the accompanying thunder, which it is not often noticed that Pharaoh mentions even before—and is thus arguably even more terrified by than—the hail!:

So Pharaoh sent and summoned Moses and Aaron and said to them, “...**Entreat the Lord, and let it be enough of God’s thunder and hail**, and I will let you go, and you shall not continue to stand” (Exodus 9:27-28).

It would appear that the biggest impact of the plague, at least in Pharaoh’s mind, may not even be the damage it caused but the terror instilled by the intense scene of thunder and fire.

The next (and only other) time Benei Yisrael encounter a terrifying combination of fire and thunder is, of course, at Sinai:

It came to pass on the third day when it was morning, that **there were thunder claps and lightning flashes**, and a thick cloud was upon the mountain, and a very powerful blast of a shofar, **and the entire nation that was in the camp shuddered**... And the entire Mount Sinai smoked because the Lord had descended upon it **in fire** (Exodus 19:16-18).

This terror experienced by Benei Yisrael is, like that of Pharaoh during the *barad* plague, a direct result of overwhelming thunder and fire:

And all the people saw **the thunder and the torches**...and the people saw and **trembled; so they stood from afar**...They said to Moses, “You speak with us, and we will hear, but let God not speak with us **lest we die**” (Exodus 20:15-16).

And I stood between the Lord and you at that time, to tell you the word of the Lord, **for you were afraid of the fire** (Deuteronomy 5:5).

C. Arbeh and Hoshekh

As our focus here is not on the damage per se but on the memorable images of the plagues, a common thread between plagues eight and nine is noteworthy and clearly intended:

The locusts ascended over the entire land of Egypt... They obscured the view of all the earth, **and the earth became darkened** (Exodus 10:14-15).

This dense darkness created by the all-encompassing locusts segues, of course, to the terrifying and immobilizing darkness of the plague so named:

There was thick darkness over the entire land of Egypt for three days... They did not see each other, **and no one rose from his place** for three days (Exodus 10:22-23).

At Sinai as well, of course, Benei Yisrael experience a darkness no less terrifying and paralyzing:

And it was, when you heard the voice from the **midst of the darkness...** that you approached me, all the heads of your tribes and your elders... **And you said**, “Behold, the Lord, our God, has shown us His glory and His greatness... **So now, why should we die?** (Deuteronomy 5:19-21).

D. *Makkat Bekhorot*

Finally, the parallel between the firstborn Jews being spared while the firstborn Egyptians died, and the subsequent selection of the Jewish firstborns as a sacred class is well known and is overt in the Torah:

As for Me I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel in place of all firstborns among the children of Israel who have opened the womb, and the Levites shall be Mine. For all the firstborns are Mine; since the day I smote all the firstborns in the land of Egypt, I sanctified for Myself all the firstborns of Israel, both man and beast, they shall become Mine, I am the Lord” (Numbers 3:12-13).

Insofar as the taking of the Levites—who are replacing the firstborn—was for purposes of priestly service, presumably the taking of their predecessors—the firstborn themselves—was for the same purpose. This is the textual basis for the prevalent idea that the sacred service was originally designated for, and performed by, the firstborn.²³ Such service, however, existed during only one brief window: beginning and ending at *Har Sinai*, where the firstborns served as the priests, presumably for the first time. Thus, the Talmud understandably interprets the ambiguous “youths” in the verse “And he sent the youths of the children of Israel, and they

²³ See, e.g., *Zevahim* 112b.

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offered up burnt offerings, and they slaughtered peace offerings to the Lord, bulls” (Exodus 24:5) as referring to the firstborns.²⁴

This service of the firstborn not only began at Sinai but also ended there, as the priestly service was transferred to the Levi'im subsequent to the *Heit ha-Egel* at Sinai.

IV. PLAGUES 1-5

As mentioned, beginning with blood, the first five plagues are referenced during the series of otherwise disconnected and seemingly random “vignettes” that take place from *yetsi'at mitsrayim* until *matan Torah*.

A. *Dahm*

As noted by the Ibn Ezra and described above, taking place immediately following the completion of *yetsi'at mitsrayim* and *Az Yashir*, the episode of the bitter waters rendered potable at Marah is intended to evoke, in the abstract, the memory of the first plague, in which potable waters were transformed into undrinkable blood. The message, as stated at Marah, is “if you do what is proper in His eyes, and you listen closely to His commandments and observe all His statutes, all the sicknesses that I have visited upon Egypt I will not visit upon you” (Exodus 15:26). In conveying this message, Hashem subtly provides a symbol similar enough to be vaguely reminiscent of the plague, but not enough to be an obvious replica of it.

B. *Tsefarde'a*

The next “vignette” we encounter is Benei Yisrael's request for meat (Exodus 16:3). We normally do not question the extremely strange, and seemingly random, response to this request. Of all types of meat—cows, sheep, goats, common fowl—perhaps the least expected way for the request to be granted is in the form of quail. What a strange choice of meats to provide. This *slav*, quail, is not a word that appears anywhere else in Tanakh other than in reference to this episode.²⁵ On a peshat level, why present meat in this fashion, at this time?

²⁴ Ibid., 115b.

²⁵ There is much discussion in the *mefarshim* regarding the relationship between this episode and its “mirror” episode in *Parshat Be-ha'alotkha*. See, e.g., Bekhor Shor on Exodus 16:13 and Ramban on Exodus 16:12.

If one accepts our extension of the Ibn Ezra’s premise, however, the choice of quail makes good sense. Quail, as described in the Torah, come in large swarms of small creeping creatures seemingly all over the place. If there is any doubt that this conjures the image of the plague of frogs, note the striking similarity in descriptions:

Frogs:	Quail:
<i>Vayeit Aharon et yado al meimeit Mitsrayim vata'al ha-tsefardea va-tekhas et Eretz Mitsrayim.</i>	<i>Vayehi ba'erev va-ta'al haslav va-tekhas et ha-mahaneh.</i>
And Aaron stretched forth his hand over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs came up and covered the Land of Egypt (Exodus 8:2).	It came to pass in the evening that the quails went up and covered the camp (Exodus 16:13). ²⁶

It is also not hard to imagine the “calling” sounds of these millions of quails covering the entire ground evoking memories of the sounds of the millions of frog chirps during the second plague.²⁷

C. Kinim and Arov

The next vignette we encounter, like the others, seems to include some “random” or otherwise unexpected details. We are told that the *mahn* must be consumed, with none left over from day to day. This is essentially the first commandment given to Benei Yisrael after the warning they had just received at Marah to “listen closely to His commandments,” in reference to the makkot, and it is a command explicitly intended “so that I can test them, whether or not they will follow My teaching” (Exodus 16:4).

The following somewhat “random” consequence, if this command is unheeded, is specified: If *mahn* was left over after having fallen and formed a layer “on the ground” (Exodus 15:14), it became infested with tiny, revolting bugs:

²⁶ See also Numbers 11:31: “A wind went forth from the Lord and swept quails from the sea and spread them over the camp about one day’s journey this way and one day’s journey that way, around the camp, about two cubits above the ground.”

²⁷ The species of quail thought to be described in the Bible, *Coturnix coturnix*, has a characteristic chirping sound. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_quail for a description. Its most distinctive sound is what is known as the “wet-my-lips” repetitive song of the male, *ibid.*, which sounds unmistakably like the “ribbit” of a frog. See <https://www.hbw.com/ibc/species/53434/sounds> for recordings.

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“[The *mahn*] became maggoty with worms.... And maggots” (Exodus 16:20, 24).

This, of course, evokes the tiny, revolting lice that appeared “from the dust of the earth” and infested Egypt. It also evokes the *arov*, as defined above as swarms of insects. This is particularly striking according to the views, cited above, that the *arov* were indeed specifically worms,²⁸ or flies whose maggots are often seen in the rotting manure near cattle.²⁹

After Hashem’s warning at Marah that failing to adhere to His commandments could result in a similar fate to that of the stricken Egyptians, the very first command, explicitly presented as a test, follows through with a subtle reminder of this implicit threat.

There is also a noteworthy parallel in language used both with the plague of *arov* and during these later, pre-Sinai episodes. Uniquely in announcing the plague of *arov* as compared to the rest of the first five plagues, Hashem for the first time describes a grander purpose behind imposing the plague and specifically behind keeping Bnei Yisrael in Goshen, safe from it:

And I will separate on that day the land of Goshen, upon which My people stand, that there will be no *arov* [*ayin-resh-bet*] there, in order that **you know that I am the Lord in the midst of the earth** (Exodus 8:18).

Note the similarity between this phraseology and the following phrase from the episode of the *mahn* and then in the subsequent episode at *Masah u-Merivah*:

[In the] evening [*erev: ayin-resh-bet*], **you shall know that the Lord brought you out of the land of Egypt.... Is the Lord in our midst or not?** (Exodus 16:6, 17:7).

D. Dever

In the last of the first five plagues, the parallel to the capstone of the second five—death of the firstborn—a severe pestilence caused the death of the Egyptians’ animals:

Behold, **the hand of the Lord will be upon your livestock** that is in the field...a very severe pestilence (Exodus 9:3).

²⁸ See text accompanying Note 22.

²⁹ See text accompanying Note 21.

In the final vignette before the Amalek war preceding *parashat Yitro* and *matan Torah*, at *Masah u-Merivah*, we usually associate, correctly, Benei Yisrael's complaint about their thirst with the lives of their own selves and families. It is noteworthy and perhaps even a bit strange, then, that upon close inspection of the verse, we see that they are equally preoccupied with the lives of their animals:

The people complained against Moses, and they said, **Why have you brought us up from Egypt to make me... and my livestock die of thirst?** (Exodus 17:3).

Again, we have a subtle but direct parallel between the plague and the pre-*matan Torah* episode. In case there is doubt regarding the intentionality of this parallel, note how Hashem describes the mechanism to solve the thirst epidemic in this episode:

And the Lord said to Moses, pass before the people... **and take into your hand your staff, with which you struck the Nile...** (Exodus 17:5).

Presumably Moshe only had one staff; yet Hashem specifically highlights the parallel we have established between the makkot and these episodes.

V. CONCLUSION

Many readers of the Torah are accustomed to viewing the narratives between the Exodus and *matan Torah* merely as a series of seemingly random, disconnected episodes without any underlying pattern, unified purpose, or meaning. The approach advanced in this essay, building upon the insight of Ibn Ezra as well as our bipartite segmentation of the makkot, suggests otherwise. There is order to the apparent chaos and a "master plan" behind the disparate stories.

In hindsight, having received the Torah, we rightfully consider the concept of reward and punishment as fundamental to Judaism and, for the most part, religion generally. Yet a systematic scheme of reward and punishment is largely absent from the worldview of the Jewish people from their beginnings in Genesis³⁰ all the way through the Exodus. Only

³⁰ While there were certainly instances of punishment in Genesis, such as in the episodes of the Tree of Life, Cain, the Flood, Sodom, etc., those episodes did not involve some or any of (1) a communication to the Jewish people, (2) a systematic program of advance warning/command and consequence, or (3) a broad framework of obligations, as opposed to a single one.

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after the Exodus, finally a full nation and, more importantly, a free one, are they directly introduced, beginning at Marah, to the centrality of the concept: “If you hearken to the voice of the Lord, your God, and you do what is proper in His eyes, and you listen closely to His commandments and observe all His statutes, all the sicknesses that I have visited upon Egypt I will not visit upon you, for I, the Lord, heal you” (Exodus 15:26). With this introduction, the narratives from after the Exodus through *matan Torah*, utilizing the makkot as a foil and starting with Marah, play an essential role in establishing this concept as a critical axiom underlying the forthcoming Sinaitic covenant. It is thus no wonder that the very first words that Hashem says to Benei Yisrael once they arrive at Sinai are:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians (Exodus 19:4).

We are accustomed to hearing that the seven weeks between Pesah and Shavu’ot were a preparation for *matan Torah*. However, the question not often asked is, where in the narrative of this time period do we see such a connection? In what way were Benei Yisrael being prepared and how did they progress from their experience in Egypt to the experience of the covenant at *matan Torah*? The subtle message in the narratives identified here answers that question. While each individual allusion to the plagues is certainly not unmistakable, taken in the aggregate, there appears to be a pattern. It is a pattern reflecting an intention to remind Benei Yisrael of the system of reward and punishment which they just witnessed, firsthand and traumatically, during the plagues in Egypt—and which they are about to enter into, permanently and covenantally, at Sinai.