

Parshat Vaera 5776

This piece focuses on the מטה - Moses' staff - one of the minor 'players' in the huge drama that is this week's פרשה. The staff had an exotic history - it was created at twilight on the 6th day of creation (5.8 פרקי אבות) and the מדרש תנחומא notes that - like the לחות - the מטה was made of a type of sapphire or lapis lazuli, סמפיריון (ad loc) notes that inscribed on the מטה was the שם המפורש, the explicit name of ה'.

The story of the מטה is detailed in פרקי דרי אליעזר (Ch 40). It was given to אדם, from him to חנוך, thence to נח, אברהם, יצחק and יעקב [the staff with which he crossed the ירדן (see תהלים on ילקוט)]. After being given to יוסף, it was left in פרעה's palace and taken by a particular one of the מצרים - חרטומי - יתרו who put it in his garden and no one could take it until משה came to his house.

In the חומש, the מטה's first appearance is in last week's סידרא (IV.2), when ה' instructed משה to cast it to the ground and it became a נחש, a serpent. משה was told to seize its tail and it resumed being a staff. According to many מפרשים, following רש"י, an important symbolic aspect was that it alluded to משה's speaking about לשון הרע in imputing them with lack of faith, even before presenting G'd's message of imminent redemption. In our פרשה, though, it is the use of the מטה against פרעה that is at the forefront.

As is well known, the מטה was turned into a snake. The snake can refer to פרעה; as the snake would bite and cause death so did פרעה. Despite פרעה seeming to have great power, משה would hold sway over him. The אור החיים notes that משה was shown that he would have such power that he could even grasp the tail of the snake - normally a very unsafe way to approach it - and yet it would be lifeless and dry as a rod. פרעה would be punished, as was the original serpent. The latter blasphemed in encouraging חוה to break ה' 's sole command to Man and פרעה also blasphemed in saying אשר אשמע בקולו.

There is an interesting apparent discrepancy - for the sign to משה in שמות, the rod becomes a נחש. In our פרשה, when displayed to פרעה, it becomes a תנין, which might be translated as a crocodile. The latter fits well with the imagery of the הפטרה - יחזקאל (Ch 28) who inveighs against פרעה, as ' the great crocodile who crouches within its rivers who says mine is the river and I have made myself. כלי יקר accepts this

distinction, However, רש"י and others (e.g. אור החיים) equate the נחש and the תנין.

רש"י distinguishes the מטה משה from the מטה אהרן (פרקי אבות in) רש"י. The latter was the staff of אהרן, upon which שבת לוי's name was inscribed.

יקר explores an interesting question - was there one staff or were there two in action against פרעה? According to him, there were two staffs, reflecting the different roles of משה and אהרן. The staff of משה was that of the faithful shepherd, who nurtured and guided his people. However, it was also the sceptre of authority of משה as leader, appointed by G'd, to dominate the Egyptians and bring about freedom.

In יקר's view, it was the מטה אהרן which became a תנין, a much more powerful creature than just a snake, and one that could swallow up the תנין - like conjuring products of the Egyptian magicians. The swallowing up of the תנינים resembled the way the cows and sheaves in פרעה's dream had been swallowed up. If we follow שמואל's view (11a סוטה) that פרעה was not a מלך חדש, then the swallowing up should have been something he remembered. The מטה אהרן was the mediator of the plague that transformed all the waters of Egypt to blood. משה could transform the river water, but it was אהרן 's that could affect all the other waterways (streams, brooks etc).

The מטה משה remained the symbol of a level of action that was miraculous. According to נצי"ב, this is why משה was instructed to take it with when he was to speak to the rock at מריבה. כלי יקר argues that on the latter occasion, it was the מטה אהרן that משה had to bring with as a symbol that, just as ה' made a dry stick blossom and bear almonds, (פרשת קרח) so could the barren rock bring forth water.

The מטה could be a double edged sword - a staff of strength to the good, but a fiery serpent to those who sinned. Interestingly both are combined in the universal medical symbol which the world in general ascribes to the Greek Asclepius, but which clearly predates him by many centuries. The staff of משה was in the hand of דוד (1, 17 שמואל) and from there passed to all the Kings of יהודה until the end of ראשון. בית אהרן מטה was displayed in the קדש קדשים during those centuries. According to אבות דרבי נתן (Ch 41), both staffs were hidden by ימות משיח and will remain so until יאשיהו המלך.