

The Tongue of a Dog teaches all of Egypt

R. Mois Navon

The narrative of the Exodus from Egypt centers around the ten plagues which serve to both deliver the Jews from their oppression as well as introduce a clear knowledge of God as involved in the affairs of man.¹ The process climaxes with the tenth plague – death of the firstborn – that ultimately effectuates God's objectives.

Reference to God's first objective, release of the people, is made clearly in the text when God tells Moses, "Yet one plague more will I bring upon Pharaoh, and upon Egypt; afterwards he will let you go hence; when he shall let you go, he shall surely thrust you out hence altogether" (Ex. 11:1). However the second objective, that of demonstrating God's involvement to all Egypt, is found couched in the declaration of the plague by Moses to Pharaoh (Ex. 11:4-8):

4 And Moses said [to Pharaoh]²: "Thus saith the LORD: About midnight will I go out into the midst of Egypt; **5** and all the first-born in the land of Egypt shall die, from the first-born of Pharaoh that sitteth upon his throne, even unto the first-born of the maid-servant that is behind the mill; and all the first-born of cattle. **6** And there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there hath been none like it, nor shall be like it any more. **7** But against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog move his tongue (*lo yeheratz kelev leshono*), against man or beast; that ye may know that the LORD distinguishes between Egypt and Israel. **8** And all these thy servants shall come down unto me, and bow down unto me, saying: Get thee out, and all the people that follow thee; and after that I will go out.' And he went out from Pharaoh in hot anger.

God's involved nature is referred to in the words, "that ye may know that the LORD distinguishes between Egypt and Israel." Rabbi Naphtali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, in his *HaAmek Davar* (on Ex. 11:7), notes that the expression, "that ye may know" (*lemaan teidun*) is here used in the plural as opposed to its previous three occurrences (Ex. 8:6³, 8:18, 9:29) wherein the expression was used in the singular "*lemaan teida*". This change in usage, explains the Netziv, indicates that the first instances made only Pharaoh himself cognizant of God's involvement, whereas the last plague brought the message to all of Egypt.

Through the tenth plague all Egypt became painfully aware of the mighty hand of the God of Israel, not only of an all powerful God, but one eminently concerned for the welfare of His people. Strangely, a close reading of the text indicates that God's involved nature is made manifest not by the death of the firstborn but by the tongue of a dog!

¹ God Himself explains His objective of redeeming the people (Ex. 3:7-10, 7:2) along with the goal of demonstrating His power (Ex. 7:3, 11:9) in order that both Jew (Ex. 10:1-2; Rashi, Ex. 7:3) and Gentile (Ex. 7:5, 8:18, 32:11-12) recognize Him as involved.

² See Rashi (on Ex. 11:4) and Rashbam (on Ex. 11:1).

³ Frogs. Though here it does not say explicitly that there was a distinction between Jew and Gentile, the text (ex. 8:7) implies it; for Moses explains that the frogs will be removed from "you", "your houses", "your servants", "your people."

This anomaly did not go unnoticed by the commentators who consequently offer various solutions.⁴ R. Shmuel Ben Meir (Rashbam) attempted to deal with the incongruence by adding the word “even”, such that, “while the angel kills the Egyptian firstborn not *even* the bark of a dog will disturb the Jews.”⁵ Rashbam acknowledges that the efficacy of the tenth plague lies in the fact that the firstborn of Egypt died while the firstborn of Israel remained alive; the reference to the dogs simply being a way to magnify the miracle.

R. Chaim ben Atar, in his commentary Ohr HaChayim, similarly recognizes that the essence of the tenth plague depends on the distinction between the firstborn of Egypt versus the firstborn of Israel. He explains that this distinction was made manifest to all by the dogs not “screaming” around the Jews because, according to the Gemara (Baba Kamma 60b), “dogs scream when the angel of death is present”. In this manner, R. Atar avoids amending the text in any way; rather, he explains that it was through the dogs’ not crying around the Jews that all in Egypt became aware that no Jews died.⁶

While these explanations solve our initial quandary, they leave unanswered a critical anomaly in the text, and that is the expression “*yeberatz leshono*” itself, translated by Rashi as “whet its tongue”. Rashi finds support for this translation in several Biblical uses⁷ whereas the translations employed by Rashbam and R. Atar of “bark” or “scream”, which do not find biblical support, are interpretive. One could argue, as does R. Avraham Ibn Ezra (in his *peirush haaroch*), that “whetting its tongue” implies an intent to attack that would presumably be attended by barks, cries, or screams.

However, this is reading a lot into a very rare word. That is, if the intent is barks, cries, or screams, why not say so explicitly instead of using a word that appears only **once** in the entire Torah!⁸ As such, Ibn Ezra (in his *peirush hakatzar*) provides the alternative translation of “determining judgment” based on the word’s use in Kings I (20:40): “... And the king of Israel said unto him: So shall thy judgment be; thyself hast determined it (*baratzta*).”⁹ This translation of the term, strange as it may seem, tips us off to an elegant interpretation of the text.

To understand this, reference to ancient Egyptian culture is in order. Ancient Egypt has been written about since Herodotus (c.484-420 BCE) and included in the writings of

⁴ A broad review of various solutions is provided by E. Greenstein, (“Lo Yeheratz Kelev Leshono”, HaMikra BeRe’ee Mefarshav, [Jer.: Magnes, 5754], pp.587-600), who then offers a solution based on what he calls the literary approach (see esp. p.597). While we agree with his approach, we will show that by including a sociological element, we may be able to provide a more comprehensive solution.

⁵ Many others follow this approach (see E. Greenstein, p.588, esp. n. 7).

⁶ Many others follow this approach (see E. Greenstein, p.591, esp. n. 19).

⁷ It should be noted that the usage in the book of Joshua cited by Rashi fits the context there (i.e., the enemy didn’t whet its tongue); and though such could certainly fit the text here in Exodus, we are still left with the difficulty that the great distinction that God made between Egypt and Israel in the plague of the firstborn is that dogs won’t whet their tongues. We would at least need to add the word, “even”, though adding a word to the text is not ideal. In this article, we propose a different interpretation for the expression, thus implying that the usage in Joshua is simply an echo of the expression coined here in Exodus, but with a clearly different meaning.

⁸ The word “harutz” is the only other form of the word used in Torah (Lev. 22:22), which appears once to describe a physical deformity. Now, given that the term bark (*noveial*) and scream (*tzoek*) are used in the Torah, if this was the whole intent, we ask why a different word was used.

⁹ Radak, Ralbag, Metzudat Tzion all translate *baratz* in Kings I (20:40) to mean: determine the judgment. Metzudat Tzion brings further support from the use in Isaiah (10:22).

Greeks and Romans.¹⁰ Among the writings, mention is made of the pantheon of Egyptian gods, one of which comes in the form of a dog.¹¹ Though not mentioned by our classical commentators, the non-Jewish commentator, Adam Clarke, made the following observation on Exodus (11:7):

We know that one of their principal deities was Osiris, whose son, worshipped under the form of a dog, or a man with a dog's head, was called *Anubis latrator*, the barking Anubis. May he not be represented as deploring a calamity which he had no power to prevent among his worshippers, nor influence to inflict punishment upon those who set his deity at naught? Hence while there was a great cry, *tseakah gedolah*, throughout all the land of Egypt, because of the mortality in every house, yet among the Israelites there was no death, consequently no dog moved his tongue to howl for their calamity; nor could the object of the Egyptians' worship inflict any similar punishment on the worshippers of Jehovah.

While Clarke's comments associate the dog of Exodus with the Egyptian god Anubis, they provide little substance to remove the notion from that of mere conjecture. Indeed, this is probably why the classic medieval commentators refrained from making such an association.¹² That being said, the later archeological discoveries of ancient Egypt that postdated all of our classical commentators¹³ do in fact provide strong support for the association.

That is, though mention is made of ancient Egyptian culture by the Greeks and Romans, the wealth of information afforded by the field of Egyptology did not become available until the beginning of the nineteenth century as a result of Napoleon's expedition of Egypt.¹⁴ For, included as part of Napoleon's entourage was a group of scholars, referred to as "savants", who performed great research and subsequently published their findings in the multi-volume work known as the "*Description de l'Egypte*" (1809-1829).

Among the finds documented is an Egyptian funerary text which has come to be known as "The Book of the Dead". The text describes the process that the newly deceased must go through in the next world. Spell 125 depicts how the newly arrived individual's

¹⁰ See note 11.

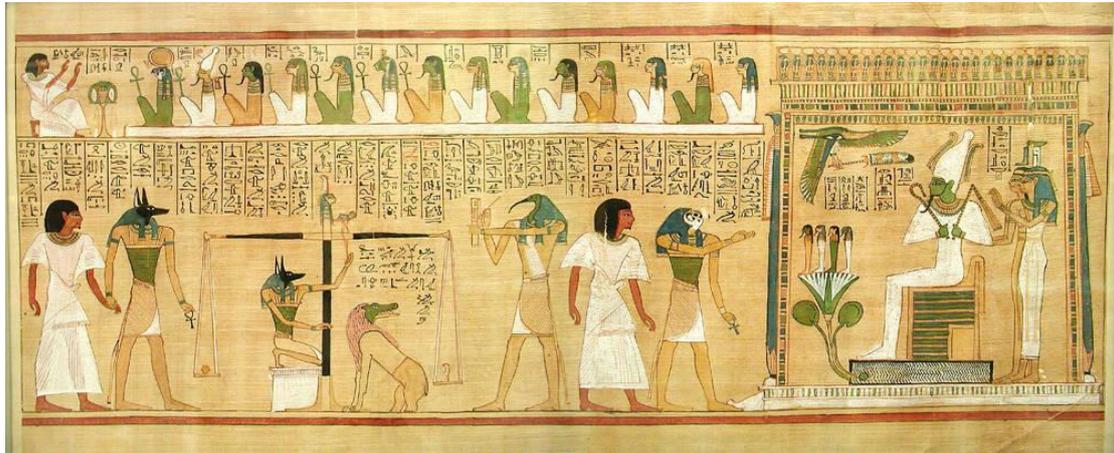
¹¹ Herodotus notes the veneration the Egyptians displayed toward the dog. Plato has Socrates swear, "by the dog, the god of the Egyptians" (*Gorgias*, 482b; *Republic* 399e, 592a). Anubis is mentioned by Virgil (*Aeneid* viii. 698) and Ovid (*Met.* ix. 692) as *Latrator Anubis*, and by Propertius (III. *Eleg.* xi. 41) and Prudentius (*Aphotheos*, 196) as *Latrans Anubis*.

¹² Classic commentators were very much aware that the Egyptians worshiped gods in animal form. This is evidenced, for example, in Rashi's comment to the fact that the plague of the firstborn was to affect all Egyptian firstborn animals, he writes, "because they [i.e., the Egyptians] worshipped them" (on Ex. 11:5).

¹³ The commentators mentioned herein date as follows: Rashi (1040-1105), Rashbam (1085-1158), Ibn Ezra (1089-1164), Chaim ben Atar (1696-1743). In all likelihood Clarke also did not have access to the later discoveries because his comments to Exodus (11:7) are made in his "Holy Bible", the earliest of which appears to have been published in 1811; whereas the details of Anubis were first published in the Book of the Dead in 1821. Apparently he was making use of the various references to the Anubis as a god in general in Greek and Roman texts, as he writes, "In honour of this dog-god there was a city called Anubis in Egypt, by the Greeks called Cynopolis, the city of the dog..."

¹⁴ Allison Stark Draper, *A Historical Atlas of Egypt* [NY: Rosen Publishing, 2004], p.35. See also: <http://egyptologyonline.com/history1.htm>.

heart would be weighed on a scale against the feather of truth (*maat*).¹⁵ This procedure served to determine if the individual was worthy of passage to eternal reward, or alternatively, that his iniquitous life earned him immediate extinction. The god in charge of determining the judgment was none other than the dog¹⁶ headed Anubis.¹⁷



Returning to the text in Exodus, by employing Ibn Ezra's translation of "*yeberatz*" as "determine judgment", we see a strong correlation to the Anubis scene. Furthermore, the actual phrase "*yeberatz leshono*" takes on deep significance, for the "*leshono*" or "tongue" of judgment is used throughout Judaic literature to refer to the central element of the scale by which the judgment of the scale is determined.¹⁸ Rashi (Hulin 137a, *ve'ha'amar*) explains that a scale is used such that the weight of one side "forces the tongue of the scale". R. A. Kaplan explains the usage in Sefer Yetzirah (2:1) as follows: "There is a pan of merit and a pan of liability.... In the center is the fulcrum and pointer, ... which is the 'tongue of decree'."¹⁹ That is, the pin in the middle, which serves as the fulcrum that provides the moment about which the scale takes on its function, also "points" to the lighter side, in effect, pronouncing, like a tongue, the verdict.

Given this understanding, the phrase "*lo yeberatz kelev leshono*" translates to "a dog will not determine/pronounce judgment", the word "tongue" thus serving the double meaning

¹⁵ Carol Andrews, Raymond Oliver Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead* [University of Texas Press, 1990], p.34.

¹⁶ There is a discussion as to whether the head of this god was a jackal or a dog – in either case they are both in the Canidae family and it is reasonable to assume that the Torah would refer to either with the general term "dog".

¹⁷ It is worthwhile to note that while in very early Egyptian culture Anubis is described as being the god of the underworld, he later took on other afterlife roles as described in the Book of the Dead. "The earliest texts of the Book of the Dead appear on mummy shrouds of members of the 17th Dynasty royal family (c.1650-1550 BC); they then appear on those of high officials of the early New Kingdom, after about 1550 BC" (http://www.egyptologyonline.com/book_of_the_dead.htm). Though there is some scholarly debate regarding the exact date of the Exodus, all estimates place the exodus at some time after this earliest Book of the Dead. As such, if the Biblical text is referring to Anubis as we contend, it refers to him in his role described in the Book of the Dead.

¹⁸ Pesikta Zutra (Kedoshim 55a); Ra"sh (Keilim 12:2, kaneh); Rashbam, Meiri, Ritva (Baba Batra 89a, nefesh); Rashi (Niddah 14a, metartin); Sefer Hashem (130, mi madad); Malbim (Dev. 25:13); Piskei Din Rabannim (Helek 11, p. 35).

¹⁹ *Sefer Yetzirah* (Maine: Weiser, 1990).

of both the tongue on the god's scale and the tongue in the god's mouth.²⁰ Indeed it was precisely these functions which Anubis is described as fulfilling – for he was both to read the scale and pronounce the outcome.

Thus we can now answer our question as to why the text, which sought to convey the great distinction made in the tenth plague, wherein the Egyptian firstborn were killed while the Jewish firstborn were not, employed the seemingly unrelated issue of the tongue of a dog. In fact, it is now clear that the text tells us exactly what we expected, that the great plague is to distinguish between Egypt and Israel. It simply does so in the coin of Egyptian culture, thus further discrediting their belief system.²¹ That is, instead of stating the obvious (i.e., the Jews will not die), Moses in effect said: The Jews will not come under the power of your god of the afterlife. The Jews will never enter that chamber of judgment of your dog-god. The “dog” will never determine the judgment shown on the tongue of the scale, nor will he pronounce judgment on a single Jew.

The dog's tongue is used idiomatically to say “no Jews will die.” And it precisely this devastating distinction between Egypt and Israel that brings home – to every Egyptian – the recognition of God's power. There is no need to introduce the phenomenon of “barking”, or lack thereof, to make known God's power. The reason that God's power was now known to all was simply, as the text itself explains, because this plague spared no family, “... and there was a great cry in Egypt; for there was not a house where there was not one dead” (Ex. 12:30).

In conclusion, we have demonstrated that by interpreting “*lo yeberatz kelev lesbono*” as “a dog will not determine/pronounce judgment” the anomalies originally noted neatly disappear. But more importantly, we have remained true to the text and shown that the tenth plague, which culminated the process of redemption, brought profound recognition that God is involved in the affairs of man. This point cannot be underestimated, as R. Eliezer Berkovits explains, “The foundation of religion is not the affirmation that God *is*, but that God is concerned with man and the world ...”²²

²⁰ Though Anubis is a specific dog and so we might have expected the verse to use the definite article, stating, “*the* dog will not pronounce judgment”, this is not necessarily so for two reasons. One, all dogs were worshipped as representative of Anubis, as evidenced by the vast dog cemeteries found in Egypt. “At Hardai, the sacred city of the god Anubis there are sprawling dog cemeteries. ... The Greeks called Hardai by the name Cynopolis “Dog City” revealing how they identified this god. ... Also the fact that Hardai was teeming with *dog cemeteries* makes it very clear that this deity was at least partly associated with the domestic canine” (P. K. Manansala, *Quests of the Dragon and Bird Clan*, p.468). As such, the indefinite article could be used to refer to this general worship of the dog-god. Two, this could be a backhanded attack on the Egyptian worship of the dog as a god, not even referring to it with the definite article would serve to further demean it for what it really was – a dog like any other.

²¹ Indeed, prophets in the Bible have used this paradigm – that is making reference to a foreign god only to show it powerless (see, for example: Kings I [18:27], Isaiah [46:1-2]).

²² *God Man and History*, (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2004), p. 15.