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Pesach

Rav Yehuda's Puzzling Mnemonic Device

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A mnemonic device typically is used to help us remember many facts or long lists. An example of a mnemonic is the use of acronyms: an abbreviation that is made up of the first letters of a series of words which results in a pronounceable word. We encounter Rav Yehuda's famous acronym in the Passover Haggadah. Soon after we recite each plague separately, we read:

רַבִּי יְהוּדָה הֵיךָ נוֹתֵן בְּהֵם סְמִימִים: דְּצַ"ךְ עַד"שׁ בְּאַח"ב

Rav Yehuda grouped these under acronyms: Detzakh (The Hebrew initials of the first three plagues), Adash (the Hebrew initials of the second three plagues), B'ahav (the Hebrew initials of the last four plagues).

At first glance, this three-word mnemonic is not creative or informative in any way, as it merely puts the first letters of each plague together. As such, is this acronym a device to be used to simply remember the plagues? The plagues are not hard to remember, which brings into question its use as a memory device. Certainly its placement after the plagues are each called out encourages us to consider other reasons for its utility, for otherwise it is merely redundant.

Perhaps Rabbi Yehuda's mnemonic was intended to focus our attention on the order of the plagues. The importance of the sequence of the plagues is born out in a midrash describing Moshe's staff. In this midrash, Rabbi Yehuda describes Moses' staff as made of sapphire, with the ten plagues carved on it with the acronym "Dezach Adash B'ahav." The Mishna in Pirkei Avot lists this very staff as having been created at the twilight of the sixth day before the first Shabbat, thus indicating that this sequence of plagues was a divine prediction from the very beginning of time.

Other commentaries find patterns in the acronyms, trying to make sense of the three triads. Rabbi Yehudah Loew, the Maharal of Prague, observes that each set goes from the remote to the most intimate. For example, the plague of blood was an "inert plague" that had to be encountered to inflict suffering, while the frogs sought out individuals in their homes. The final plague in this grouping, lice, was the most intimate, since the lice came into contact with the bodies of the Egyptians. This pattern is found with each of the subsequent groupings.

Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch offers many explanations for the three groupings in the mnemonic. In one explanation he writes that the Dezach (the first grouping) demonstrated God's power over water and land; Adash, the second grouping, demonstrated God's power over the inhabitants who lived on the land; and B'ach (the third grouping, excluding the plague of the first born) demonstrated God's power over the atmosphere that surrounded the land and its inhabitants.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes in his commentary to the Haggadah that the first nine plagues occurred in a threefold pattern: the first three were performed by Aaron, the second three by Moses,

and the last three by Moses stretching out his hand. Rabbi Sacks then separates out the plagues by placement in the mnemonic -- the first plague in each group was preceded by a warning given “in the morning,” the second by a warning whose time is unspecified, and the third was delivered to the Egyptians without a warning. These explanations encourage the reader to pay close attention to the Torah text, adding context to the plagues, with specific lessons to be garnered from each grouping.

Rabbi Yitzhak ben Asher Halevi of Speyer, the Riba, lines up the plagues as if in a word search puzzle. The Riba explains that Rav Yehuda wanted to specifically emphasize that the third plague in each set (lice, boils, and darkness) were all intertwined with each other and when one of these specific plagues was brought, all three would be incorporated with it. How does he prove this? By creating a table and looking for hidden words.

ם	נ	כ
י	ח	ש
ך	ש	ח

If you read each horizontal line in the table from right to left and each vertical column from bottom to top (disregarding the special form of certain letters at the end of the word) you find that the third plague in each grouping is spelled out twice. Though this reading appears forced, it is still fascinating to see the lengths the commentaries will go to make sense of Rav Yehuda’s acronym, treating it more like a puzzle to be solved than a mnemonic device. In doing so, the Riba also asks us to consider what it would be like to experience these three plagues at the same time, adding a new dimension to our experience at the seder.

Rav Yehuda’s acronym challenges us to take another look at the plagues, from a perspective of groupings or clusters. How does each impact the other? What lessons can be drawn? The acronym encourages a close read of the text to mine for similarities and differences found amongst the plagues. We will also symbolically spill a drop of wine for the Detzakh, Adash and B’Ahav (as we do at the mention of each individual plague). By doing so we not only remember the loss of life and suffering that occurred with each plague, but also are called upon to ponder the relationships between the plagues, as suggested by Rav Yehuda’s acronym.



Rabba Dr. Carmella Abraham feels blessed to have the privilege of living her two callings as both a doctor and a member of the Orthodox clergy. Rabba Carmella has interned at the Hillels of Westchester, Columbia Presbyterian Hospital Chaplaincy Program and served as a Fellow at the Shalom Hartman Created Equal Seminar Fellowship. Rabba Carmella earned her bachelor’s degree from Barnard College and her medical degree from Mount Sinai School of Medicine. She practiced at the Women’s Health Program, where she held a dual appointment in Internal Medicine and Obstetrics and Gynecology. She currently works in Oncology Medical Affairs for pharma. Rabba Carmella is married to physician Dr. Steven Kubersky and has three children.