

# Vaera

## Feet on the Ground

*The sorcerers said, “It is the finger of G-d!” but Pharaoh’s heart was strong and he did not hear them, as Hashem had spoken.*

Shemos 8:15

The sorcerers of Pharaoh were incredibly talented. They were capable of creating things, seemingly from nothing. Moshe turned a stick into a snake, and they were able to do that, too. He turned water into blood, then later made a frog appear, and they replicated those acts, as well. It is something to stop and think about – they really could do these things! But when it came to the plague of Lice, they were stumped. They simply could not create lice on their own,<sup>1</sup> and thus they exclaimed, “This is the finger of G-d.”<sup>2</sup> Rashi explains that they were using a form of sorcery involving spirits (*shedim*), where they could influence those spirits to create<sup>3</sup> (or possibly bring) things for them. But spirits have no power over anything as small as a louse, and therefore, they could not create the lice.

*Chizkuni*<sup>4</sup> and *Daas Zekenim*<sup>5</sup> offer another suggestion as to why the lice could not be created by the sorcerers. They understand that the sorcerers were doing something called *kishuf*.<sup>6</sup> *Kishuf* is a form of creating an illusion that appears very real. If one created a frog through *kishuf*, it is not a real frog, but an imitation. It looks real, but it is really a fake.<sup>7</sup>

There was once a wicked Jewish tax collector (who was bad to other Jews), and one day, he died. On that same day, a great man in the city died, and the entire town gathered to attend his funeral. The relatives of the tax collector also brought out the coffin of their relative, and at that time, the city was suddenly attacked, and the mourners abandoned the coffins and fled. There was one great scholar who remained behind with the coffin of his Rabbi. After some

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1 Rashi to Shemos 8:14

2 Shemos 8:15

3 It appears that way from Rashi 8:14, where he says that they could not “create” the lice via the *shedim*. There are those who have an alternative version of Rashi. See *Chumash Rashi Hashalem* (Ariel Institute).

4 Ibid., in one interpretation.

5 Ibid.

6 Whether or not the sorcerers were trying to bring about the lice through *kishuf* or *maaseh shedim* is, in fact, a discussion of the Talmud in Sanhedrin 67b. According to Rashi, ad loc., they were doing *maaseh shedim*, and this is the simple reading of the Gemara. But *Maharsha*, ad loc., quotes the Aruch, whose text reads just the opposite. According to this opinion, the sorcerers were, in fact, trying to use *kishuf*. This may be the opinion of *Chizkuni* and *Daas Zekenim*. However, even Rashi, who calls it *maaseh shedim*, which seems in line with the Gemara, makes the interesting statement in the following Rashi that “this is the finger of Elokim, and not the work of *kishuf*!” *Tosafos Hashalem* [6] explains that initially, they tried through *shedim*. When that did not work, then they tried *kishuf*. This is more likely the interpretation of *Chizkuni* and *Daas Zekenim*.

7 See *Beis Halevi* to Dvarim 25:17. In other editions, this is found at the end of Beshalach.

time, the people of the city came back to bury the great man, but confused his coffin with that of the tax collector! The student who had remained behind cried out to them that they had the wrong coffin, but in the confusion that reigned, they paid no attention to him. The relatives of the tax collector wound up burying the Sage, thinking that he was their relative, and this bothered the student very deeply. “What sin could he have done to deserve such a disgrace – and what great merit did this scoundrel have to merit such honor at his funeral?”

His Rabbi appeared to him in a dream and told him, “Don’t worry. Come with me and I will show you the incredible honor I receive in Gan Eden, and then I will show you the man sitting at the entrance to *Gebinom* with the hinge to *Gebinom*’s door piercing his head through his ears. Here is why I was punished. Once, I heard a disgraceful statement about a Torah Scholar, and I did not protest. This wicked fellow, however, once prepared a feast for a dignitary in his city, and when that nobleman did not show up, he distributed the food to the poor. This honor at his funeral was his reward.”

The student asked, “How long must this man suffer such terrible judgment?” The Rabbi replied, “He will remain there until Shimon ben Shetach dies, and then Shimon ben Shetach will take this tax collector’s place in the hinges of *Gebinom*; for, there are Jewish women in Ashkelon who are witches, and he does not administer punishment to them. The following day, this fellow recounted these things to Shimon ben Shetach. Shimon ben Shetach gathered eighty powerful young men. It was a rainy day. He gave each one an enormous jug with a clean cloak inside, and he said to them, “Be careful of the witches, for there are eighty of them. When we go in, we will lift them off of the ground and they will have no control over you, for they have no power to do *kishuf* when they are not standing on the ground.

He left the young men outside, and entered the witches’ den. They asked him, “Who are you?” He said, I am a sorcerer, and have come to test your powers of *kishuf*. They asked him, “And what *kishuf* can *you* do?” He replied, “I can bring you eighty young men in fresh clean cloaks despite the rain!” They said, “Let’s see.” He stepped outside and motioned to them. Each one took out his cloak from his jug and wrapped himself in it. They were impressed, for it seemed that he had made these young men appear from nowhere. Each one of them then took one of the witches by surprise and lifted her up. They managed to defeat them, and they hung them.<sup>8</sup>

We discover that *kishuf* is only effective when one is standing on the ground.

Thus, since the ground was covered with lice, and the sorcerers’ feet were not touching the ground, they could not perform *kishuf*, and could not make lice appear.

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8 This story is told by Rashi on Sanhedrin 44b. It is found in the Talmud Yerushalmi, Sanhedrin 6:6, as well as Chagiga 2:2, but there are some differences between the versions found there and that of Rashi. R. Yaakov Ettlinger (in his *Aruch Laner* to Sanhedrin 45b) explains that the reason that they hung these women, despite the fact that hanging is not one of the ways that a Beis Din is permitted to kill a criminal, is because there was great danger in letting these women touch the ground. In fact, *Chizkuni* to Shemos 22:17 explains the passuk “A witch shall not live” to mean that you must kill her in any way that you can, because if you tarry, she will discover a way to survive by means of *kishuf*. However, *Yad Ramah* (R. Meir ben Todros Abulafia) on Sanhedrin (ibid.) writes that they hung these women in order to publicize the sin, and so that others would fear repeating it.

But we are left with a striking question. If the ability to create lice was only eluding the sorcerers because of the state of the ground, then why did they exclaim that the plague of lice was the “finger of G-d”? After all, had Moshe simply been a sorcerer, as they had assumed until then, he would have been able to make the lice appear, for when he made the lice appear, he was standing on the ground! What was it that impressed them so greatly?

The answer is this: Since the products of *kishuf* are merely illusions, explains Rabbi Moshe Aaron Friedman<sup>9</sup>, then the lice created by *kishuf* would not come between a man and the ground, for they are not real. But since Moshe’s lice did separate them from the ground, they were clearly not *kishuf*, but “the finger of G-d.”

This idea – that when not touching the ground, a sorcerer cannot perform his *kishuf* – is one that is found in several other places as well.<sup>10</sup> Zeresh, the wife of Haman, suggested hanging Mordechai from a tall tree<sup>11</sup> rather than killing him in a fiery furnace, like Chananiah, Mishael and Azariah, or a lion’s den like Daniel, for they were all saved, and yet, “we have not seen a person of their nation saved from hanging.” The Midrash<sup>12</sup> lauds her as “far better at giving advice than any other adviser of Haman” because of her suggestion. What is so brilliant about this idea? *Anaf Yosef*<sup>13</sup> explains that they assumed that all of the times that Jews had been saved from death were the result of *kishuf* rather than divine miracles. Thus, she suggested trying to hang Mordechai, far above the ground, so that his *kishuf* would be impotent. Her knowledge of the inner workings of *kishuf* was a manifestation of her brilliance.

What is this all about? Why is it that *kishuf* can only be effective when one is touching the ground? Man is a temporary being. Life is fragile as a dream, and can fly away as quickly. As long as we feel secure, like we are in control, we cannot experience the temporal nature of our lives. After all, true meaning in life can only be created by one who sees this world as nothing more than a waiting room,<sup>14</sup> futility of futilities.<sup>15</sup>

The fellow who does *kishuf* creates and destroys things with incredible power. This ability is that of a fellow who relies on his own abilities rather than on G-d. The fellow who is living with Hashem never knows what will come next, but nothing can upset him because he knows that whatever happens, he is being taken care of by his Creator. The fellow with his feet on the ground, in a figurative sense, can feel in charge. But the fellow whose life is always in a state of limbo can not perform *kishuf*. *Kishuf* can only exist where there is a false feeling of security and control. Pharaoh called himself a god. He had all the power in his own

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<sup>9</sup> I subsequently found this very answer offered by the *Pelaos Edosecha* cited in R. Yechiel Michel Stern’s *Otzar Yedios Hashalem* Vol. 2 p. 545.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, *Sefer Chasidim* 474.

<sup>11</sup> Esther 5:14

<sup>12</sup> Esther Rabbah 9:2

<sup>13</sup> Ad loc.

<sup>14</sup> Avos 4:16

<sup>15</sup> Koheles 1:2

imagination. Those around him felt that way about him as well, and they felt that way about themselves. Ultimately, we need to recognize that we do not have our feet on the ground. We are not secure because of our own abilities. It is Hashem Who cares for us, manages our world and controls our footsteps.<sup>16</sup> When we truly know how insignificant we are, we can begin to become quite significant. But we must never forget that our feet are not on the ground. We are not in control – that is what Hashem does, and He does it so well.<sup>17</sup>

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16 Tehillim 37:23

17 See *Pirush Kadmon to Sefer Chasidim*, ibid. (found in ed. *Otzar Haposkim*) for an alternative suggestion as to why *kishuf* can only be performed directly on the ground.