



## A CLOSE LOOK AT TORAH

Focus on a question in the weekly portion

January 17, 2026



**"Fostering diverse modes of attention to textual details cultivates correlative forms of attention to the world and divine reality"**

Michael Fishbane (1943- ), *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology*

ברוך אתה ייִהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
אָשֶׁר קָדְשָׁנוּ בְמִצְוֹתָיו, וַצְנָנוּ לַעֲסֹק בְדִבָרֵי תּוֹרָה :

### "Tachometer Torah"



...read down to the red line

### Parashat-haShavu'a Stats

Weekly Portion: vaEira

Consists of: Exodus 6:2-9:35

Sequence—

in annual Torah cycle: 14<sup>th</sup> of 54

in Exodus: 2<sup>nd</sup> of 11



### A Salient Selection from the Portion -

Exodus 8:1-7

Context: Exodus, second of the Five Books of the Torah, is an account of how God liberated the Israelites from Egypt and entered into a Covenant with us at Mount Sinai, and a record of the legislations we undertook for the conduct of the society we were to establish in the Promised Land.

Content: The great "wizards' duel" is underway, in which Pharaoh pits the agents of the gods of Egypt to confront Moses and Aaron representing The Eternal One.

8:1] - Then The Eternal One said to Moses, "Tell Aaron 'Hold out **your hand with your staff** over the streams, canals, and ponds, and **bring up** frog-swarms upon the land of Egypt'." [8:2] - So Aaron stretched out his hand over all the water sources of Egypt, at which the frogs **came up** and covered the land of Egypt.

8:3] - Then the **magician-priests did the same**, by means of **their spells**; **they brought up** frog-swarms upon the land of Egypt.

8:4] - Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "Plead with The Eternal One that **He remove the frogs** from me and my people— then I will release the people to sacrifice to The Eternal One."

ויאמר יהוה אל משה אמר אל אחיו נטה את ידך במתוך על מינחת על הילאים ועל האגמים ועל את הCEFDEIM על ארץ מצרים ויט אחיו את ידו על מימי מצרים ותעל הCEFDEU ותכס את ארץ מצרים

**ויעשו כן החרטמים בלבתייהם ויעלו** את הCEFDEIM על ארץ מצרים

ויקרא פרעה למשה ולאחיו ויאמר העתירו אל יהוה ויסיר הCEFDEIM ממי ימי ומעמי ואשלחה את העם ויזבחו ליהוה

- more over

8:5] - And Moses said to Pharaoh, “I will give you the honor of deciding: **for what time** shall I plead, on behalf of you and your courtiers and your people, that the frogs be removed from you houses, remaining only in **the River**?”

8:6a] - He replied: “**For tomorrow.**”

8:6b] - [Moses] declared: “**Let it be as you say**, in order that you may know that there is none like The Eternal One, our God. [8:7] - [On the morrow] the frog-swarms shall retreat from you and your courtiers and your people; they shall remain only in **the River**.”

ויאמר משה ל פרעה התפאר עלי  
ל מתי עתיר לך ולביך ולבך  
להכricht הצרדים מפה ו מביך  
רק ביאר תשאRNA

ויאמר למחר

ויאמר דברך למן תדע כי אין  
ביהוה אלהינו וstorו הצרדים  
מפה ו מביך ולביך ולבך רק  
ביאר תשאRNA



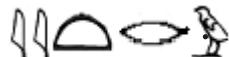
## תוראה Snippet as a warm-up

8:5 / 8:6 - they shall remain only in **the River**.

רַק בִּיאָר תְּשַׁאֲרָנָה

↖ ≠  
↗ “river” = נָהָר

proper noun **נהר** “the Canal/Stream/Watercourse” 40x in TaNaCH, all **definite**

a loan-word from Egyptian  ‘itrw’ “river; watercourse”

A) Toby Wilkinson (1969- ), *The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt* - The nation of Egypt was known affectionately as “The Twin Banks,” underlying the fact that **the country was synonymous with the River Valley**. An alternative, and more familiar, designation was *Kemet*, “the Black Land,” referring to the dark alluvial soil that gave the country its fertility—this in contrast to *Deshret*, “the red land” of the barren and sterile desert. As for the Nile itself, the Egyptians had no need of a special name: **it was simply *Iteru*, “the River.” In their world, there was no other.**



- continued

 <b>A Quick Take</b>	<u>8:5-6</u> - <b>לִמְתִּי אַעֲתֵיר לְךָ לְהַכְּרִית הַצְּפְרַדְעִים</b> <b>For what time</b> shall I plead on your behalf that the frog-swarms be removed? <b>וַיֹּאמֶר לִמְחרָ</b> [To which Pharaoh] replied: " <b>For tomorrow.</b> " 
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וַיֹּאמֶר לִמְחרָ – יְדֻעָה כִּי מִנְהָג כָּל הָאָדָם לְבַקֵּשׁ שְׁתִּסְוָר רְעַתּוּ מִידָּה

B) RaMBaN (Bonastruc da Porta, 1194-1270) – “He replied: ‘for tomorrow’” – certainly everyone knows that **it is human nature to wish that afflictions should be removed immediately**....



8:3 - **the magician-priests did the same**  
 by means of their **spells**  
**וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כֵּן מִרְטָפִים**  
**בְּלֹטִים**  
**וַיַּעֲלֻ אֶת הַצְּפְרַדְעִים**

WHO/WHAT THEY ARE -

plural noun **מִרְטָפִים** from verb **חָרַט** “engrave; incise; carve on a lathe”

11x in TaNaCH, 8 of them in the Ten Plagues narrative

Saadya-Tafsir RaSaG (c. 930 CE) Hirsch-T'rumat Tz'vi (1874) Aryeh Kaplan (1981) Targum YoNatan (7 <sup>th</sup> century?) Robert Alter (2004)	scholars hieroglyphists master symbolists astrologers soothsayers	<b>אַלְעַלְמָא</b> (العلماء) <i>hieroglyphenschreiber</i> <b>אִיסְטָגְנִין</b> <b>אִיסְטָגְנִין</b>
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Martin Luther (1534), Geneva (1560), Douay-Rheims (1589), King James (1611), Jean-Frédéric Osterwald (1744), Jewish Publication Society (1917), Everett Fox (1995), Jewish Publication Society (1999)

magicians

Septuagint (c. 225 BCE) Biblia Reina-Valera (1569) Targum Onkelos (c. 110 CE) William Tyndale (1525)	enchanters enchanters sorcerers sorcerers	<b>επαοιδει</b> (“repeaters”) <i>los encantadores</i> <b>חַרְשִׁיא</b> <i>et malefici</i>
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Jerome-Vulgate (382) John Wycliffe (1383) Mesorah (1993)	evil-doers witchis necromancers
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- more over

**THE MEDIUM THEY WORK IN -**

plural noun **לְטִיחָה** from verb **לְטִיחַ** “wrap up closely”  
 noun **לְטִיחָה** “secrecy; mystery; magic arts”

4x in TaNaCH, all of them in the Ten Plagues narrative

Saadya-Tafsir RaSaG (c. 930 CE), Jewish Publication Society (1917), Aryeh Kaplan (1981), Martin Luther (1534), Everett Fox (1995)

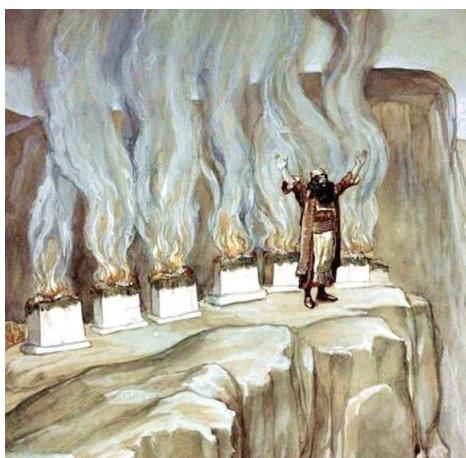
mysteries; secret<sup>hidden</sup>/occult / mystical arts

William Tyndale (1525), Geneva (1560)  
 sorceries

Jerome-Vulgate (382), John Wycliffe (1383), Biblia Reina-Valera (1569), Douay-Rheims (1589), King James (1611), Jean-Frédéric Osterwald (1744)  
 enchantments

Mesorah (1993), Jewish Publication Society (1999), Robert Alter (2004)  
 spells

Septuagint (c. 225 BCE) potion-making φαρμακειαῖς  
 Targum Onkelos (c. 110 CE), and Targum YoNatan (7<sup>th</sup> century?)  
 burnings **לְחַשִּׁיחָה**



Bil'am prophesies at his seven altars  
 by James Tissot, c. 1895



The Oracle at Delphi  
 by Heinrich Leutemann, c. 1870

8:3 - [the Egyptian sorcerers] **did** **the same** **כֹּו**

verb **עָשׂוּ** “they did” + adverb **כֹּו** { “likewise; the same”  
 “thusly; in this/that manner”

<p><b>כֹּו</b> = “likewise” (having the same <b>outcome</b>)</p> <p><u>Exodus 7:11</u> - the sorcerers, <b>כֹּו too</b>, turned their staves into crocodiles.</p> <p><u>Exodus 7:22</u> - the sorcerers, <b>כֹּו too</b>, turned river water into blood.</p> <p><u>Exodus 8:3</u> - the sorcerers, <b>כֹּו too</b>, produced frog-swarms.</p> <p><u>Exodus 8:14</u> – the sorcerers <b>כֹּו</b> failed to drive away the lice.</p>	<p><b>כֹּו</b> = “in this manner” (using the same <b>method</b>)</p> <p>→ <u>RaMBaN on Exodus 8:14</u> - <b>אמר ויעשו כֹּו</b> – שהכו בעפר הארץ “They did <b>thusly</b>” - they struck the ground [as Aaron had done—] <b>ואמרו השבעת השדים</b> [in addition to which] they pronounced invocations of demonic forces <b>ועשו לטיהם</b> and performed their magical gestures, <b>באשר עשו בשאר פעמים</b> <b>just as they had done all the other times</b> [viz. in 7:11, 7:22, and 8:3].</p>
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**Egyptian Execration Texts**

c. 2340 BCE - **O Geb**, decree that any who speaks evil against the name of Pharaoh Wenos shall be impoverished and homeless.

c. 2250 BCE - **O Ra**, wring the neck (like that of a chicken) of any who would defile this, my tomb, by removing its stones or bricks for their own use.

1279 BCE - To any who disregards this decree: **Osiris**, pursue him; **Isis**, pursue his wife; **Horus**, pursue his children; and[, once he is dead,] may the **42 guardians of the underworld** pass sentence upon him!

**וישלח אליו אלישע מלך לאמור הלו ורחצת שבע פעמים בירדן וינשב בשרך לך ויטהר**

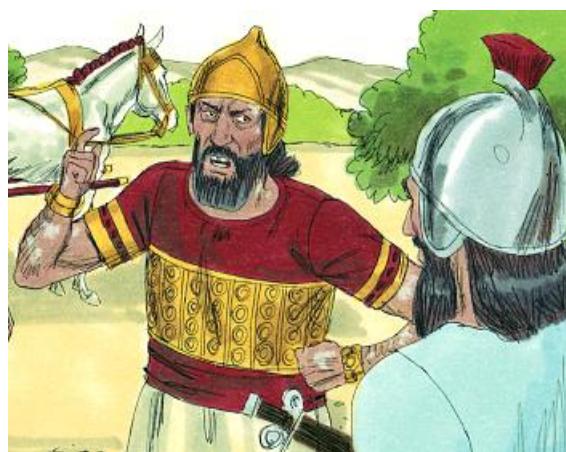
C) II Kings 5:10-12 - [The prophet] Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying: “Go bathe seven times in the Jordan; your skin shall be restored and healed.”

**ויקצת נעמו וילך ויאמר הנה אמרתי אליו יצא יצא**

Na'aman became furious, and stormed about declaring: “I intended for him to come out to me in person,

**עמדו וקרא בשם יהוה אלהי**  
“and stand before me while calling on the name of his god Yahu,

**ויתניף ידו אל המקום ואסף המצרע**  
“and waving his hand at the place to make the affliction go away!”



**- more over**



Moses uses his staff  
to produce serpents  
(spin on Exodus 7:9-10)

Santa Sabina Church, Rome  
432 CE



contemporary inspirational art  
depicting Moses (or is it Aaron?)  
wielding God's staff of power

8:3 - the magician-priests **did the same**  
**they brought up** frog-swarms

**וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כֵן** הַמְּרֹטָפִים  
**וַיַּעֲלִוּ** אֶת הַצְּפְרַדְעִים

D) Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), *T'rumat Tz'vi* - On consideration, the role of the hieroglyphists in this narrative seems strange. If indeed they were such masters of their magical arts, **they should have used their power to free the land from the plagues, not to increase them.** Surely, they could not have believed there were too few frogs about, so that they needed to produce and “**bring up**” yet more?



As a matter of fact, it appears that (contrary to the conventional interpretation), their efforts in the case of each plague were directed towards the elimination of that plague. That becomes clear in verse 14, where the words **וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כֵן** לְהֹצִיא אֶת **הַכְּנִים** וְלֹא יָכְלֻוּ clearly means “**they did thusly to make the vermin go away**—but were unable to do so.”

This statement **וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כֵן** has traditionally been interpreted (erroneously, it would seem to us) as “**they did the same thing**,” referring in each case to **the results achieved** by Moses and Aaron. It seems to us that, **to the contrary, it describes only the means**—that is, **the motions of hands and staff which Aaron is commanded to make before the plague struck.**

It was **these motions** that the hieroglyphists mimicked, because they believed that by doing so they would immediately counteract the plague. That the word **כֵן** “**the same**” refers to **these motions** is quite clear from verse 14, which, while describing what it was that Aaron did, also makes explicit that—**in spite of emulating his gesture (“doing the same”)**—**the hieroglyphists could not replicate the outcome.**

- continued

<p>E) Numbers 13:30-32 – c. 1240 BCE</p> <p>וְאֵם בְּרִיאָה יִבְרָא יְהֹוָה וּפְצַתָּה הָאָדָמָה אֶת פִּיהָ וּבְלָעָה אַתָּם וַיַּרְדוּ חִימָם שָׁאָלָה וַיַּדְעָתֶם כִּי נָאֹצֶ הָאָנָשִׁים הָאֱלָה אֶת יְהֹוָה</p> <p>“But if The Eternal One creates something unprecedented— so that the earth opens her mouth and swallows them up, and they descend alive to the netherworld— then you will know that these men have rebelled against The Eternal One.”</p> <p>וַיָּהִי בְּכָלְלָתוֹ לְדֹבֶר אֶת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֱלָה וַתִּתְבַּקֵּעַ הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר פִּתְחָתִים וַתִּפְתַּח הָאָרֶץ אֶת פִּיהָ וַתִּבְלַע אַתָּם</p> <p>And no sooner had he spoken these words, than the earth beneath them split, opening its mouth and swallowing them up.</p>	<p>F) I Samuel 12:17-18 – 1020 BCE</p> <p>הַלֹּא קָצֵיר חַפְטִים הַיּוֹם אָקְרָא אֶל יְהֹוָה וַיִּתְנוּ קְלֹתָה וּמְטָר וַיַּדְעָו וַיָּרָא כִּי רַעַתְכֶם רַבָּה אֲשֶׁר עֲשִׂיתֶם בְּעִינֵי יְהֹוָה לְשֹׁאָל לְכָס מֶלֶךְ</p> <p>“Now at present it is [the warm dry] wheat-harvest season. I will call on The Eternal One to create lightning and rain, that you may witness and understand the scope of the ingratitude which you have shown to the Eternal One by asking for a king over you.”</p> <p>וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹאֵל אֶל יְהֹוָה וַיִּתְנוּ יְהֹוָה קְלֹת וּמְטָר בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא וַיַּיָּרָא כָּל הָעָם מִאָד אֶת יְהֹוָה וְאֶת שְׁמוֹאֵל</p> <p>Whereupon Samuel called on The Eternal One, and The Eternal One sent lightning and rain that day— so that all the people were in great awe of The Eternal One and of Samuel.</p>	<p>G) I Kings 18:37-39 – c. 865 BCE</p> <p>עֲנָנִי יְהֹוָה עֲנָנִי וַיַּדְעַ הָעָם הָזֶה כִּי אַתָּה יְהֹוָה הָאֱלֹהִים וְאַתָּה הַסְּבָט אֶת לְבָם אֲחֶרְנִית</p> <p>“Answer me, O Eternal One, so that this people may know that You— The Eternal One— are God, and thereby You turn their hearts around.”</p> <p>וַתִּפְלֶל אֶשׁ יְהֹוָה וַתִּאֶכְלֶל אֶת הָעָלה וְאֶת הַעֲצִים וְאֶת הַאֲבָנִים וְאֶת הַעֲפָר וְאֶת הַמְּפִימָה אֲשֶׁר בַּתְּעֵלָה לְחַקָּה וַיַּרְא כָּל הָעָם וַיַּפְלֹג עַל פְּנֵיכֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ יְהֹוָה הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים</p> <p>At that the fire of The Eternal One fell from Above to consume not only the offering and the wood, but also the stones of the altar; the dust of the earth beneath; and the water in the trench around it. Seeing which, the people fell face-down and cried aloud: “The Eternal One, Alone, is God!!”</p>   
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H) Gary Rendsburg (1954- ), “Moses the Magician” in *Jewish Studies at Rutgers*, 2015 -  
Consider Exodus 3:13-15, the scene at Mount Horev.

Moses told God: “Look, I am going to the Israelites, and telling them ‘the god of our forebears has sent me to you.’ **When they say to me ‘what is his name,’ what am I to tell them?**” God replied to Moses: “**I** will be whatever I will be. **Thus shall you tell the Israelites: ‘The One Who Will Always Be, sent me to you’.**”

- אֲחִיךְ “I will be”
- אֲתָּה יְהֹוָה “he will be”
- יְהֹוָה יְהֹוָה “He will **always** be”

Ancient Egyptian mythology similarly deals with the concept of “the unknown name” of Ra. As narrated in Papyrus Turin #1993 (c. 1300 BCE), when Isis seeks to learn the secret name of Ra, the great god refuses, with the comment:

*my father and mother told me my name. I have hidden it in my body since birth, so as to prevent a magician having power over me [133:10-12].*

The parallel between the two stories is clear: in both cases the great god has a secret name. But the key differences are illuminating.

In the Biblical account, God is not fearful of disclosing His Name— Moses asks, and God divulges— because **in the Biblical conception of the single Deity, The Eternal One has no fear of falling under the influence of magical praxes**. Moreover, in the Biblical story, not only does God reveal “the unknown Name” to Moses, but the reader of the story learns the Name at the same time— again, because **there can be no concern with magical abuse or misuse of this appellation**.

The presentation of the Egyptian sorcerers [in chapters 7 and 8 of Exodus] accords with the narratives cited earlier in this treatise, in which

Weba-oner	“read out	his magical words,”
Djadja-em-ankh	“said his say	of magic,”
Na-nefer-ka-ptah	“pronounced	a spell,”

and so on. Magical praxes in ancient Egypt were almost always accomplished through the recitation of magical spells, a point clearly recognized by the Biblical author.

By contrast, when Moses (and/or Aaron) engage in such acts, **the Biblical text is mindful never to ascribe the results to the magical arts. The leaders of the Israelites are able to accomplish such tasks because God empowered them to do so**, pure and simple. In the words of Nahum Sarna,

*Moses knows no techniques, recites no spells, utters no incantations or magical formulae.*

Let us recall here the famous passage in Numbers 23:23, uttered by Balaam:

לֹא נָחַש בַּיַּעֲקֹב  
וְלֹא קָסַם בַּיִשְׂרָאֵל  
*for there is no magic in Jacob;  
no sorcery in Israel—*

a point which holds throughout the Bible, including, as we have seen, the Book of Exodus. In short, **while the ends may sometimes be the same, the means are profoundly different.**