



## Moses' Monotheistic Absolute Truth vs. Polytheistic Relativity

What was Pharaoh thinking? Although we are told that it was God who "hardened Pharaoh's heart," so that we can think of Pharaoh having been pushed far beyond rationality, even the insane usually has some rational foundation. And the story itself can be difficult to understand unless we understand how God intended to affect Pharaoh's underlying mindset.

Aaron's casting of the staff and turning it into a lizard, a staff which swallowed up the staffs of Pharaoh's sorcerers, is confusing. Did Aaron perform this and the other miracles with his own staff or did he borrow Moses' staff? Moses was originally shown how to do these feats with his own staff, but in his reticence to assume leadership, the more public roles were shifted to Aaron, so it was Aaron who ended up performing miracles, first in front of the Israelites, and later in front of Pharaoh. The text says that Aaron cast his staff, but was this Moses' staff which was then adopted by Aaron, or were there really two wonder-working staffs, one which was Aaron's, and one which was Moses'? The lack of clarity in this reflects a general lack of clarity and conflation of the prophetic and priestly roles of Moses and Aaron. Other questions also remain: Moses and Aaron are told, for example, that Aaron should perform this lizard-staff miracle in response to Pharaoh's asking for a sign, but our text doesn't actually say that Pharaoh asked for such a sign! So what was the actual occasion for the performance of this wondrous feat, and for Pharaoh's calling in sorcerers to imitate it, and for the further swallowing up of the other staffs (ostensibly all the staffs were lizards when the swallowing took place, although the text literally says that Aaron's staff ate the other staffs)? This feat doesn't count as one of the plagues, since it didn't affect all of Egypt. It was just performed privately in front of Pharaoh and his advisors, the only such feat performed privately. For rather than spilling just a little water on the ground and turning it to blood, all over Egypt all the water in the Nile was turned to blood. Similarly, later there is no "leprous hand" feat, but rather all of Egypt is afflicted with leprosy. The way this actually played out was at variance with earlier expectations.

Why did Pharaoh ignore the staff-lizard feat? Clearly Aaron was far more powerful than Pharaoh's sorcerers! But the fact that other sorcerers could do similar feats probably convinced Pharaoh that all he needed was to look for a more powerful prophet-sorcerer. It had to do with general polytheistic views of diviners, prophets, and advisors of all types: They assumed that they all could be influenced and none had an absolute claim to superiority and truth. You just had to get a better one, which somewhere was out there to be found, for the right price. This Aaron was clearly talented, but the fact that others could do similar feats meant that it was just a matter of finding a more talented sorcerer, something someone with the resources of a Pharaoh could expect to find! This same was true for the Plague of Blood, which Pharaoh's sorcerers imitate. Of course, I always wondered, if all the waterways in Egypt had already turned to blood, where did the sorcerers get water for them to duplicate the feat? But it's clear that the Egyptians had some drinking water left, most probably from springs and wells: It was the waterways, lakes, and canals linked to the Nile which had turned to blood.

The sorcerers don't seem to have imitated the Plague of Frogs; they make one last attempt to imitate Aaron in the next Plague, the Plague of Lice, and there they completely fail. They admit to Pharaoh that this Plague clearly shows the "Finger of God" at work behind it. Perhaps Pharaoh is comforted in the very fact that they can diagnose the problem: In polytheism, just as prophets are relative in power and influence, so are gods! Pharaoh would just have to find himself a more powerful god! And meanwhile, he would enter into negotiation as a delay tactic, to buy himself time. The fact that a respite was even offered and delivered immediately was partial proof to him that this God of the Hebrews wasn't all that much to be feared. Each Plague wasn't permanent: each went away in its time, then there was a respite, and then a different plague came! Must be that each Plague was different, brought about coincidentally by different powers and forces! And during each respite and reprieve, Pharaoh could look and hope for a "better deal" in which he could cut his losses.

Pharaoh's pride and vanity, his insistence upon his invincibility doubtless also played a role. But our Parasha for me highlights this distinction between Moses' view, that there is just One God and One Truth, conveyed by True Prophecy, the True Word of God, which is Absolute and not relative, and Pharaoh's that there are many gods and many truths, and that all are relative and up for bargaining and deal making.

## Shabbat Vaera

January 12-13, 2024 | 3 Shebat, 5784

### SCHEDULE

Kaplan: p. 281 | Haftarah: p. 1096

Hertz: p. 232 | Haftarah: p. 244

**Evening Services** | 4:30 pm

**Candle Lighting** | 4:32 pm

**Friday Night Lights will return next week.**

**Zemirot** | 8:15 am

**Shahrit** | 9:00 am | Main Sanctuary

**Morning Talk** | At Morning Services | Baruch-Lev Kelman

**Tot Shabbat** | 10:00 am | Fidanque Youth Room

**Youth Groups** | 10:00 am | Elias Room

**Jr. Congregation** | 10:30 am | Little Synagogue

**Kiddush** | following services | *Sponsored by Mitch Julis, in memory of his brother, Richie Julis (Raphael Avraham b. Moshe)*

**Shabbat Afternoon Class** | 3:45 pm | Baruch-Lev Kelman

**Teen Class will return next week.**

**Evening Services** | 4:30 pm

**Habdala** | 5:18 pm

**Parent-Child Learning** | 6:15 pm | Baruch-Lev Kelman

### Weekday Service Times

Sunday & Monday (MLK Day) Morning: 8:05 am

Tuesday-Friday Mornings: 7:05 am

Sunday-Thursday Evenings (Arbit Only): 6:30 pm

*Our office will be **closed** on Monday for the legal holiday.*

## THIS SATURDAY NIGHT

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*Grandparents, parents, and kids are invited to bond at*

### Parent-Child Learning

Next session with Baruch-Lev Kelman:

**THIS Motzei Shabbat, January 13 | 6:15 pm**

Building the Tabernacle:

Sacred Braces & Special Places

A night of learning and crafts! Learn about the Tabernacle and the basics of architectural drafting.

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## COMING UP

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### Tu B'Shebat Seder

**Wednesday, Jan. 24 | 7:00 pm | Baruch-Lev Kelman, Rabbinic Intern**

**All ages welcome!**

*Light refreshments will be served*

Our rabbinic intern and newest CSI gourmand, Baruch-Lev, will lead this tasty banquet of fruity delights native to the land of Israel. Join Baruch-Lev for this night of flavors, mysteries, and histories!

Registration and sponsorships available at  
[shearithisrael.org/events/tu-bshebat-seder](https://shearithisrael.org/events/tu-bshebat-seder).

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### Volunteer for a Shearith Israel CSS (Community Security Service) Team

**Entry Point training on Zoom | Virtual one-hour training session**

**Tuesday evening, February 6 | 8:30 pm**

*Refer to our emails for the link and signup details.*

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## SAVE THE DATE - Registration coming soon!

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*A Shabbat Adar Community Dinner*

**From Singapore to Savile Row to Bespoke in Brooklyn:**

**A Hasidic London-Trained Tailor In Conversation With**

**Rabbi Meir Soloveichik**

**Friday Evening, March 8 | after Evening Services & Friday Night Lights**

## DEADLINE ALERT

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### Membership Pre-Payment Offer

*Through THIS Monday, January 15*

**Members**, remember that you can pre-pay your July 2024-June 2025 dues now at this membership year's rates. **Note: You must be logged into your Shulcloud account in order to pay your dues.**

Refer to our emails for the link.

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**Early Bird Deadline:** THIS Monday, January 15

COMMUNITY SHABBAT DINNER

*featuring* **Rabbi Soloveichik**

**in Conversation with Author Liel Leibovitz**

**Friday Evening, Feb. 2 | after Evening Services & Friday Night Lights**

Join Rabbi Soloveichik and Liel Leibovitz for a spirited discussion of Leibovitz's inspiring book, *How the Talmud Can Change Your Life: Surprisingly Modern Advice from a Very Old Book*.

Register at [shearithisrael.org/events/leibovitz](https://shearithisrael.org/events/leibovitz).

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## COMING UP

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*The Shearith Israel League is a proud co-sponsor of*

**Bendichas Manos: The 7th Annual New York Ladino Day**

**Sunday, January 21 | 2:00-4:30 pm**

**15 W 16th St | Hosted by the American Sephardi Federation**

*Featuring:* **Rabbi Marc Angel, Rachel Amado Bortnick**, teacher and founder of the renowned online group, Ladinokomunita, **Elizabeth Graver**, author of the 2023 Sephardic novel *Kantika*, **Sarah Aroeste**, singer/songwriter, and **Susan Barocas**, foodwriter

Register at [tinyurl.com/nycladino](https://tinyurl.com/nycladino).