



The Hand of God

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Of all the anthropomorphic images used to describe God in the Torah, one of the most richly developed is “the hand of God.” The image appears for the first time in the Book of Exodus, and then is reworked and nuanced in various ways throughout the rest of that book.¹ Here in the Book of Deuteronomy, in Parashat Eikev, Moshe will draw on several of those earlier images in order to frame a new religious message for the people about to cross over into the Land.

Moshe employs the image of God’s hand early on in our *parashah*, as he attempts to rouse the courage of those heading over to do battle against the Canaanites:

דברים ז:יח-יט

לֹא תִירָא מֵהֶם זָכֹר תִּזְכֹּר אֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְפָרְעֹה וּלְכָל מִצְרַיִם. הַמִּסֹּת הַגְדֹּלֶת אֲשֶׁר רָאוּ עֵינֶיךָ
וְהָאֵתֹת וְהַמִּפְתִּיּוֹת וְהַיָּד הַחֲזָקָה וְהַזֶּרַע הַנָּטוּיָה אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ.

¹ See for example, “the great hand” (Exodus 14:31), “your right hand” (Exodus 15:6), “my palm” (Exodus 33:22).



Deuteronomy 7:18-19

Do not fear them! Remember, you must remember, what the Eternal, your God did to Pharaoh and to all of Egypt. The wondrous acts that you saw with your own eyes, the signs and the wonders, **the mighty hand and the outstretched arm** with which the Eternal your God liberated you.

The language and context here echo the Torah's very first reference to God's hand, which appeared in God's message to Moshe at the burning bush:

שמות ג:יט-כ

וְאֲנִי יָדַעְתִּי כִּי לֹא יִתֵּן אֶתְכֶם מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לְהֵלֶךְ וְלֹא בִיד חֲזָקָה. וְשִׁלַּחְתִּי אֶת יָדִי וְהִכֵּיתִי אֶת מִצְרַיִם בְּכָל נִפְלְאוֹתַי אֲשֶׁר אֶעֱשֶׂה בְּקִרְבּוֹ וְאַחֲרַי כֵּן יִשְׁלַח אֶתְכֶם.

Exodus 3:19-20

I know that the King of Egypt will not let you go without a **mighty hand**.² So I will send forth **My hand** and strike Egypt with all the wonders I will perform there, and after this, he will send you out.

The primary association with God's hand, then, is the awesome power of God in the deliverance of the Children of Israel from Egypt, especially as demonstrated in the form of miraculous wonders. And the primary adjective that will describe the work of that hand is “חזקה - mighty.”

Here in Deuteronomy, decades later, Moshe combines that mighty hand with another image taken from Exodus: “the outstretched arm” (זרוע נטויה) with which God promised to redeem

² This translation is consistent with Rashi's understanding of the phrase, ולא ביד חזקה. Onkelos, however, translates it to mean, “and not because he [i.e., Pharaoh] has a mighty hand [will he refuse to let you go].” It is unclear whether the “mighty hand” is always meant as God's sole property, or if God comes to reclaim the term as a response to the “mighty hand” that represents human power. See also Exodus 6:1 for another example of this ambiguity in the usage of ביד חזקה.



the Children of Israel.³ The combination of the two gives us the full classic phrase—“a mighty hand and an outstretched arm”—that will form the beginning of the story of the Exodus told in the Pesah Haggadah.⁴ Taken together, the two phrases represent both power and reach, the magnitude of God’s capability and the extent of God’s concern.

Later in our *parashah*, however, Moshe recalls another image of the divine hand, but one that suggests a much smaller scale of activity. When Moshe describes going up on Mount Sinai to receive the Tablets, engraved with the Ten Commandments, he says:

דברים ט:י

וַיִּתֵּן ה' אֵלַי אֶת שְׁנֵי לוחֹת הָאֲבָנִים כְּתוּבִים בְּאֶצְבַּע אֱלֹקִים.

Deuteronomy 9:10

The Eternal gave me the two tablets of stone, inscribed by the **finger of God**.

This phrase is also drawn from Exodus, from the account of the giving of the first tablets of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai (Exodus 31:18). But the meaning of this image is not as clearly articulated. Why zoom in on the “finger of God” when it comes to the tablets? Why not use the more standard term and say they were “inscribed with the hand of God” (כתב ידו)? We write with our whole hand, after all, not just one finger. If God’s hand represents might, what does God’s finger represent?

We can gain some insight by turning to the one other place in the Torah where this image is used. It appears also in the Book of Exodus, but long before the tablets are given. It comes in

³ The “outstretched arm” phrase first appears in Exodus 6:6: “וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶתְכֶם בְּזְרוּעַ נְטוּיָהּ וּבְשִׁפְטֵימָהּ גְּדֹלִים.” It is then combined with the “mighty hand” phrase five times in Deuteronomy 4:34, 5:13, 7:19, 11:2 and 26:8.

⁴ In Avadim Hayyinu: “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Eternal our God took us out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.”



the wake of the third of the ten plagues: lice. In response to the infestation, Pharaoh's magicians declare: "אֶצְבַּע אֱלֹקִים הוּא" - It is the **finger of God!**" (Exodus 8:15).

Why do Pharaoh's magician's use this image? The context here is important. After the first two plagues (blood and frogs), as soon as Moshe and Aharon unleash the plague, Pharaoh's magicians respond by producing the same phenomenon with their own sorcery—in order to demonstrate that there is nothing special about the power of the God of Israel. But when it comes to the third plague (lice), the magicians are suddenly unable to replicate it. Rashi, borrowing from the Talmud (in Sanhedrin 67b), gives an explanation for this unique feature of the plague of lice:

רש"י שמות ח:יד

"ולא יכלו" שאין השד שולט על בריה פחותה מכשעורה

Rashi on Exodus 8:14

"They could not" because dark forces have no power over something smaller than a barleycorn.⁵

Pharaoh's magicians were unable to recreate lice, not because of the magnitude of power demonstrated by this plague, but rather precisely because these creatures were so small, they fell beyond the clumsy reach of magicians' powers. "Smaller than a barleycorn" is like an ancient way of saying "quantum."

⁵ R. Yehudah Loew, the Maharal of Prague, in his supercommentary on Rashi, Gur Aryeh, reflects on the underlying metaphysics of this principle: "There is a wondrous reason for this. For something which is the size of a barleycorn at least has some substance which the dark forces can latch onto. But something which is smaller than a barleycorn is nullified into the whole of the world... That is why it is called 'barley' (שעורה - *se'orah*), from the same language for 'measurement' (שעור - *shi'ur*)—for this size is measurable, but less than this becomes unmeasurable. And since it has no measurement, it simply merges into the world (בטל הוא אצל כלל) (העולם)."



The reference to “the finger of God,” then, indicates that this plague demonstrated intricate, precise creation - the work of dexterous fingers, rather than the big stroke of an arm or a hand. The plague of lice took place on a microscopic scale, and therefore demonstrated that God’s power operates not only at the cosmic level, but also at the atomic.

When that image is applied to the inscribing of the commandments, it suggests that there is something intricate and precise about the mechanics of God’s law as well.⁶ Anyone who has studied *halakhah*, the Jewish legal system, knows this to be true. The Torah itself contains hundreds of commandments that cover every area of life: from prayer to property, from going to war to going to the bathroom. The Rabbinic project of carefully mapping those laws onto every aspect of human life are recorded in the famously hair-splitting discussions that make up the Talmud. The subsequent work of the *poskim*, the legal scholars in every generation, to continuously reapply the law in light of new circumstances and technologies, has left a record of detailed reflections on the Law that could fill many libraries.⁷ The study and practice of Jewish Law, in all its particulars, represents a proposition that the divine encounter can be had not just in the breathtaking handiwork of God’s creation, or in the mighty arm of God’s salvation, but also in the granular details of every action: in the minutiae, in the mundane, in the miniscule tasks of everyday life—there, too, we might detect God’s fingerprints.

Why then, here in Parashat Eikev, does Moshe summon both of these images—the “mighty hand and outstretched arm” and the “finger of God”—as he looks out across the Jordan and speaks to those who will soon cross it? He is speaking to two phases of the journey ahead, and two different relationships to God that each will call forth.

⁶ No wonder that the only other references to “fingers” in the Torah are found in the description of priestly rituals, some of the most intricate and precise Jewish laws of all.

⁷ For a regular exploration of exactly these sorts of issues, check out [Responsa Radio](#), a podcast with my colleagues R. Avi Killip and R. Ethan Tucker, “Where you ask and we answer question of Jewish Law in modern times.”



In the near future, they will be at war, they will be in unfamiliar territory, and their lives will be at great risk. They are, understandably, very afraid. To prepare them for this challenge, Moshe wants to remind them of the God Whose wonders he witnessed in Egypt: the all-powerful God Who hears the cries of the suffering, Who performs miracles and brings salvation in the face of seemingly insurmountable forces of destruction—the God with the mighty hand.

One day, however, when all the fighting is over, the real mission of these people is to build a peaceful, thriving society, governed by principles of justice and order. But when that day comes, they will need to discover a different relationship to God. For there will not always be fire streaming down from the heavens and seas splitting in two. God will not always come down into the world so thunderously and intervene, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. The Children of Israel will one day need to know how to look for God in the quotidian reality of everyday life.

For that they have the commandments, which are meant to infuse their lives with holiness. Yet it can be easy to miss the presence of God in the performance of the commandments, especially in the routine of daily practice. One can get lost in all the details of *halakhah*, and lose sight of the covenant that lies behind it—and the God that is on the other end of that covenant.

So Moshe offers the people another image to contemplate: the finger of God that worked nimbly to carve out the letters of the law. This finger belongs to a God who cares about—and gives attention to—not only the terrible trials and the majestic triumphs of our lives, but also



the quieter, less conspicuous moments in our existence. There, too, Moshe tells the people, speaking to their future selves—there, too, our God will be found.⁸

May we, too, feel ourselves protected by God’s mighty hand and outstretched arm as we face the terrible dangers ahead. And may we, one day soon, once again know quieter days, and discover in them a gentler, more regular contact with God. May we merit the peace it takes to be able to attend to the tiny concerns of our little lives, and to find God there, hidden in the details.

⁸ These twin themes of God’s power and our obligation course throughout Parashat Eikev. Moshe speaks of signs and wonders: not just the plagues of Egypt, but the splitting of the sea and the splitting of the ground, the manna they ate from heaven, and the water they drank from the rock. He reminds them that God has protected them through a long and difficult journey, and encourages them to believe that God will protect them again. But Moshe also speaks, again and again, of the importance of the Law. Parashat Eikev, opens with a charge to “observe these laws (*mishpatim*),” and then various other warnings to keep “all the commandments,” to “walk in God’s ways,” and, finally, to keep God’s words on their hearts, to write them on their doorposts, and to teach them to their children.

