

BEASTS OR BUGS?

SOLVING THE PROBLEM OF THE FOURTH PLAGUE

GARY A. RENDSBURG

Blood, frogs, lice, cattle disease, boils ... Every spring at the Jewish holiday of Passover, the ten nasties that plagued Egypt are described in the Haggadah, the midrashic retelling of the Exodus from Egypt that is read aloud during the Passover Seder meal.

It is thus appropriate, in this April issue of BR, to raise a question that may spark some discussion among Jews (and some Christians)¹ at the Seder ceremony this year: Just what is the fourth plague?

The identities of the other nine are clear: The first three (already mentioned) are blood, frogs and lice; and numbers five through ten are cattle disease, boils, hail, locusts, darkness and the death of the firstborn at midnight.² But the precise nature of the fourth plague, described in Exodus 8:16-20

(verses 20-24 in many English Bibles), has been debated in Jewish sources for nearly 2,000 years.

The New Jewish Publication Society's translation of the Hebrew Bible identifies the fourth plague as "swarms of insects," which invade Pharaoh's palace and ruin the land, but the phrase is set off with a footnote where we read, "Others 'wild beasts'"—an indication that other translations provide a very different interpretation of this passage. "Wild animals" is the preferred translation of the biblical passage when quoted in English editions of the Passover Haggadah (plural Haggadot).

This is driven home by the artwork that typically adorns the pages of the Haggadah, whether modern or medieval, Hebrew or English: The fourth plague is frequently illustrated with lions and other beasts of prey (see photo, opposite).



PHOTOS PRECEDING PAGES AND BELOW: Pharaoh (at left on p. 18) is attacked by a lion, a wolf, a bear, a wildcat—even an angry red squirrel—while Moses (right) looks on, in this illumination from the Golden Haggadah, created in Spain in the 14th century. The scene depicts the fourth of the ten plagues visited on Egypt in Exodus 8.

The plagues are an important part of the Haggadah, the midrashic retelling of the Exodus that is read aloud every year during the Passover Seder. And many illustrated Haggadot are enlivened by graphic depictions of the punishments God inflicted on Egypt. Most (but not all) depict the fourth plague as vicious beasts.

The Hebrew name for the fourth plague—*arov*—is not so precise, however; it simply means “mixture.” Rabbis as early as the second century C.E. debated what this meant. One interpretation that strongly influenced Haggadah illustrations is a “mixture” of wild things—especially beasts of prey. But another possibility, more popular in Christian tradition and depicted in the illustration (below) from a printed 15th-century Old Testament, is swarms of insects. (Also depicted is the fifth plague, cattle or livestock disease.) In the accompanying article, Gary A. Rendsburg explains why he thinks that bugs, not beasts, are what the ancient author of Exodus had in mind.

The original Hebrew offers little help in identifying the true nature of the beast (or bug). The Hebrew term used for the fourth plague is *arov*, a noun based on the root meaning “to mix”—thus yielding a word that means something like “mixture.” The question, of course, is: A mixture of what?

It is a question that already divided the rabbis in ancient times. The great midrashic collection known as Exodus Rabba, dated to the ninth or tenth century C.E.,

records a disagreement between two second-century C.E. rabbis over the identification of *arov*. Rabbi Judah opined that the word refers to different types of wild animals, while Rabbi Nehemiah claimed that the term refers to different types of insects.*

Among the great medieval Jewish commentators, the former opinion became the standard view. Thus we find Saadia Gaon in tenth-century Babylonia identifying *arov* as “animals of prey”; in France in the 11th century, the famous biblical commentator known as Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki) calls them “evil animals, snakes and

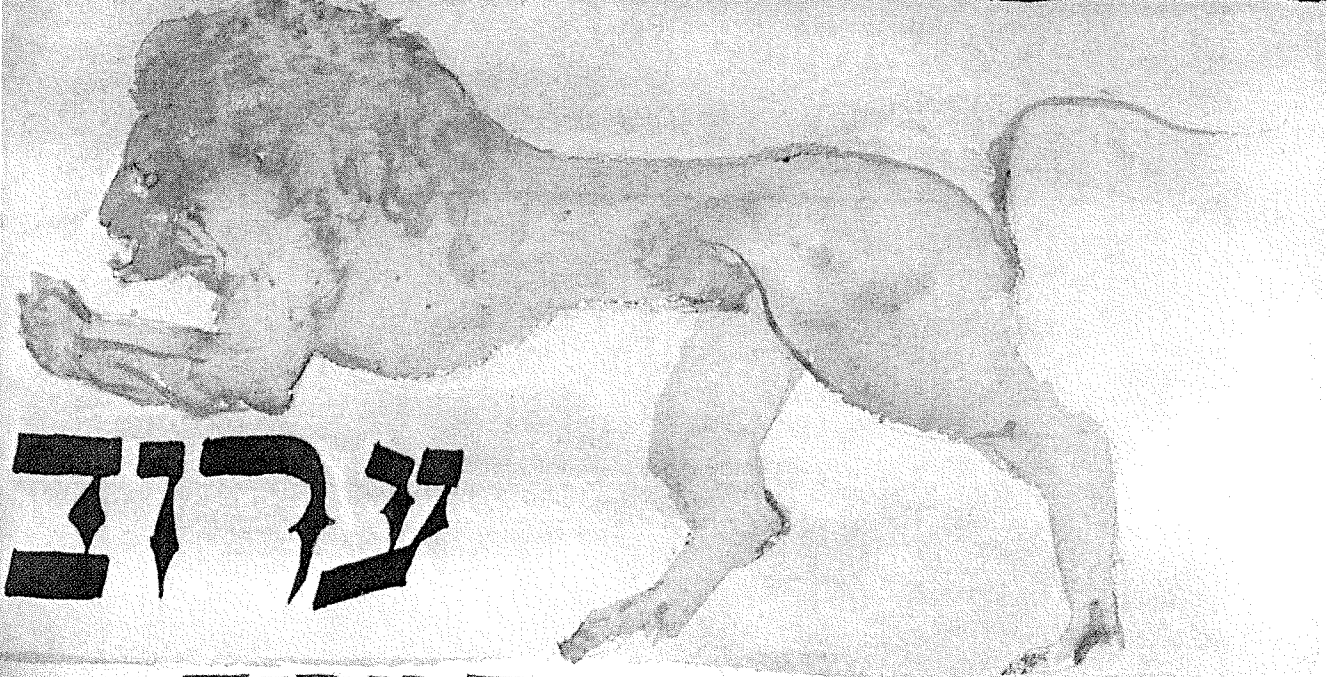
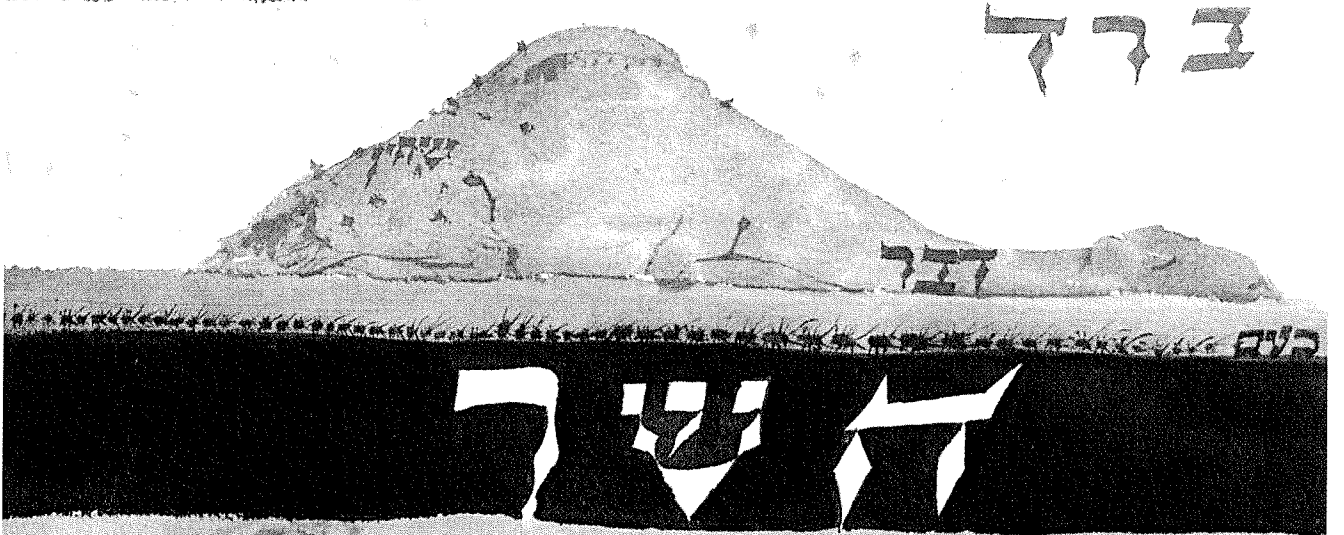
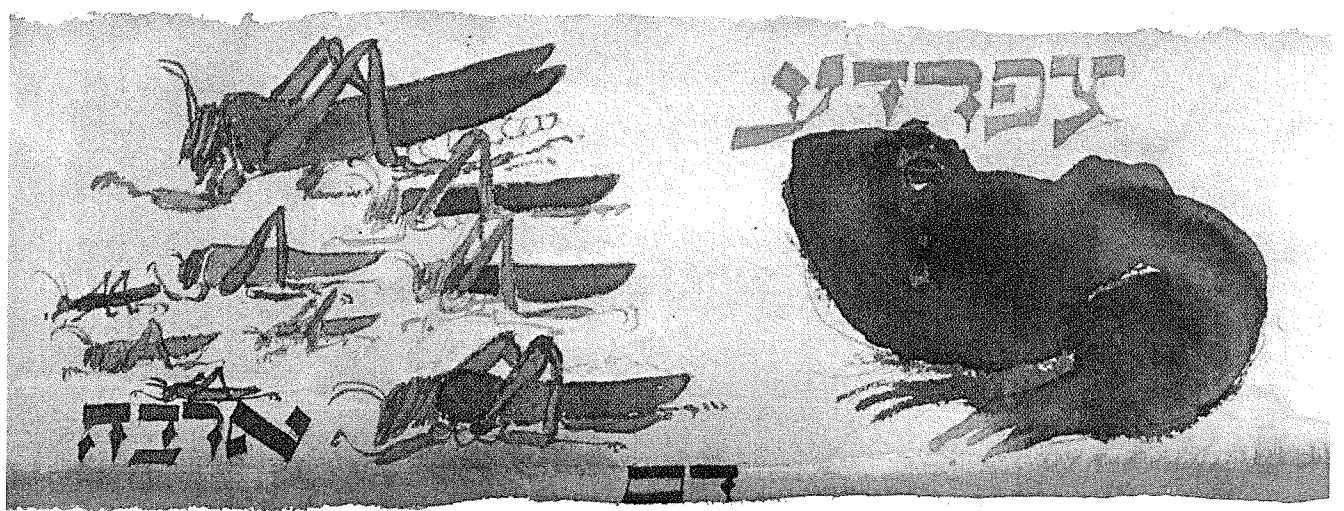
**Midrash* (plural *midrashim*, from the Hebrew for “search, investigate”) is a genre of rabbinic literature that seeks to interpret the biblical text. The direction of midrash often results in elaborate—and sometimes fantastic—expansions of the biblical story. In the present instance, however, it is simply a matter of two rabbis attempting to elucidate the plain meaning of a difficult word in the text.

THE TEN PLAGUES are depicted sequentially in this illustration (right) from a lavish 1957 Haggadah by the American artist and political caricaturist Arthur Szyk, a Polish-born Jewish refugee from Nazism. One main argument for interpreting *arov* as swarms of insects is that the ten plagues seem to occur in five sets of thematically related pairs: The Nile turning to blood and frogs swarming out of the river (plagues one and two) both pertain to the Nile; the third plague is lice, so it makes sense that the mysterious *arov* would be insects rather than the wild beasts shown here; five and six—cattle disease and boils—are both diseases; hailstorms and locusts (seven and eight) come from the sky and destroy crops; and the three days of darkness and the death of the firstborn at midnight (nine and ten) share darkness as a theme.



THE TEN PLAGUES





scorpions"; two generations later, his grandson, Rashbam (Rabbi Shmuel son of Meir), describes them as "wolves"; and Abraham ibn Ezra, in Spain in the 12th century, identifies them as "lions, wolves, bears and leopards."

Notwithstanding this venerable Jewish tradition and its popularity among producers of Haggadot, it is almost undoubtedly wrong. Far preferable is the alternative view offered by Rabbi Nehemiah: *arov* refers not to lions and leopards and other animals of prey, but to insects.

Rabbi Nehemiah was not the only scholar in antiquity who held this view. In fact, two Jewish sources from Egypt itself present the same opinion. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible produced by the Jews of Alexandria in the third century B.C.E., renders Hebrew *arov* with a Greek word for a specific type of dogfly native to Egypt and known for its painful bite. The Jewish philosopher Philo, who lived in Alexandria in the first century C.E. and wrote in Greek, uses the standard Greek word for "flies."

Another ancient source that connects *arov* with insects is the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Bible produced around 400 C.E. by St. Jerome. This great scholar rendered the Hebrew word *arov* with the Latin expression *omne genus muscarum*, "all kinds of flies." The great authority of Jerome undoubtedly influenced the later Christian translations of the Bible into modern European languages. Thus, for example, a check of a dozen English translations reveals that "swarms of flies" is the rendering of choice—starting with the King James Version of 1611 and continuing in today's most recent versions.

Three additional points lend support to the view that *arov* means "flies."

First is the behavior of *arov*, as revealed in Exodus 8: "For if you do not send forth My people," the Lord commands Moses to say, "I will send forth *arov* against you and your servants and your people and your houses; the houses of the Egyptians, and the very ground they stand on, shall be filled with *arov*" (Exodus 8:17). Three verses later the warning is fulfilled: "And the Lord did so. Heavy *arov* came into the house of Pharaoh and the houses of his servants" (Exodus 8:20). It is difficult to

A ROARING LION illustrates the fourth plague in American artist Leonard Baskin's compressed illustration of the ten plagues for his 1974 *A Passover Haggadah*. Baskin's ten plagues are presented out of their customary order: The second, frogs, is at upper right; the eighth, locusts, at upper left; the river of blood (plague number one) is directly beneath them. Below the river of blood, a camel lies dead of plague number five, livestock disease, and also has boils (plague number six)—and that's hail (plague seven) falling around the carcass. Below the camel marches a column of lice (plague three). A band of darkness (plague nine) separates the lice from plague four—here again, as in Szyk's version, interpreted as wild beasts. The silhouette at bottom is the body of the firstborn, stricken dead at midnight—the tenth and final plague.

imagine wolves, lions and leopards taking up residence *en masse* in people's houses. It seems much more likely that insects (flies, mosquitoes and so forth) would infest a dwelling.

Second, in Isaiah 7:18 the prophet uses the Hebrew word *zevuv*, "fly," to refer metaphorically to Egypt, probably because there are so many flies in Egypt. (Using animals to stand metaphorically for groups of people is a common practice in all cultures; note our use of the word "snowbirds" for northerners who winter in Florida). If Israel saw Egypt as being fly-infested, it seems only natural that the pesky critters would appear in the story of the ten plagues.

But the best argument for translating *arov* as "flies" is the one put forward by Umberto Cassuto, one of the greatest Bible commentators of the 20th century. It was Cassuto who noted that the ten plagues are paired according to their nature: Plagues 1-2, blood and frogs, relate to the Nile; plagues 5-6, cattle disease and boils, are diseases; plagues 7-8, hail and locusts, come from the sky and destroy the crops; and plagues 9-10, darkness and death of the firstborn at midnight, share the feature of darkness (both literal darkness and the darkness of death, the latter at midnight, no less).³ In this scheme, the fourth plague should have something in common with the third plague—*kinnim*, "lice." That is, the fourth plague *arov* should also refer to insects.⁴ Probably we cannot choose between flies, mosquitoes and so forth. Rather, as the word itself indicates, *arov* is a *mixture* of various species of swarming insects.

For those readers of BR who will enjoy a Seder this spring, I encourage you to have a close look at both the text and the pictures of the Haggadah, to see how the English translation renders the Hebrew word *arov* and to see what kind of animal is portrayed in the artwork. If your version of the Haggadah has flies or other flying insects, it shows the influence of the ancient Greek and Latin translations (the Septuagint and the Vulgate, respectively) as well as the opinion of Rabbi Nehemiah. If it has lions and leopards and other wild animals, you will understand how that far more improbable interpretation got started with Rabbi Judah in the second century C.E. BR

¹ More and more Christians also have become familiar with the Passover celebration in recent years, due partly to an increased awareness that the Last Supper may have been a Passover meal. On this question, see Baruch M. Bokser, "Was the Last Supper a Passover Seder?" BR, Summer 1987, and Jonathan Klawans, "Was Jesus' Last Supper a Seder?" BR, October 2001.

² For more on the plagues, see Ziony Zevit, "Three Ways to Look at the Ten Plagues," BR, June 1990.

³ Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967), p. 93.

⁴ Note also the pairing of *arov*, "swarms of insects," and *kinnim*, "lice," in Psalm 105:31—a poetic rehearsal of the plagues. However, one should be careful not to push this evidence too far, since in another poetic account, Psalm 78:45, *arov* is paired with "frogs."



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