

TZEFARDE'A: FROGS OR CROCODILES?

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The second plague to befall Egypt was that of *tzefarde'a*. It is widely believed that the term *tzefarde'a* refers to frogs, but Ibn Ezra notes that there are actually two views on this matter:

The commentators differed in their understanding of the word *tzefarde'im*. Many said it referred to a sort of fish found in Egypt, called *al-timsah* in Arabic, which comes out of the river and seizes human beings. Others say they are the creatures found in most of the rivers and that they make a sound. This explanation, which is well known, seems correct in my view (Ibn Ezra to Ex. 7:27).

The former explanation relates to a crocodile. It is regarded as a fish, even though it is a reptile, because the Torah concept of fish also includes other aquatic creatures. Support for this identification is advanced from the description of how this plague ceased. The Midrash ha-Gadol comments on the statement that the *tzefarde'im* will remain in the river:

The tzefarde'im shall retreat from you and your courtiers and your people; they shall remain only in the Nile (Ex. 8:7) – Rabbi Yitzhak said, 'There are still deadly beasts in it that emerge and kill people every year Moses did not pray for the *tzefarde'im* to be wiped out, only that they should not harm Pharaoh, as it says, *And Moshe cried out to the Lord in the matter of the tzefarde'im which He had inflicted upon Pharaoh* (Ex. 8:8).'¹

Rabbenu Bahya (Ex. 10:19) elaborates at greater length:

Moses' words in his prayer remained true for that time and for all generations. In accordance with his words, *they shall remain only in the Nile*, to this very day the creeping water creature known as the *al-*

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timsah remains there. There it lives, and it is said that sometimes it comes out of the Nile where it lives, rising onto the river's edge and swallowing whatever it finds, even two or three humans at a time. Neither spear nor arrow can overcome its body, unless aimed for its belly. Physicians say it is venomous and that touching its body, even after its death, is harmful to man. It is of the *tzefarde'a* type, and from the power of Moses' words this creature remains there This is also how Rabbenu Hananel explained it, and regarding this it states, 'Speak of all His wonders' (Ps. 105:2).

According to the second identification, which is preferred by Ibn Ezra, the *tzefarde'a* is the commonly found animal that makes a [croaking] sound – the frog. This is also the explanation preferred by others:

Some say it looks like a fish, that it is the *timsah*, which moves its upper jaw, unlike all other lowly creatures, and that it seizes humans and animals passing by the river's edge. But the correct explanation is that they are the well-known creatures of rivers and pools (*Sefer ha-Mivhar*).²

We find the following evaluation in *Sefer ha-Toda'ah*, 23:

This type of destructive *tzefarde'a* did not previously exist in the Nile. Since it was created, it remains in the Egyptian river forever. It grows in the Nile to a great size and damages and swallows creatures large and small. It is the *tamsah*, which is found in the Nile until today, as a memorial to that plague. And there are some commentaries which say that the *tzefarde'a* referred to here is the small croaking creature, and so it appears from the words of our rabbis in the Midrash.

The midrashim to which he refers describe the frog as a small and weak animal, preyed on by snakes and aquatic creatures, that is extremely vocal. This description can only match the frog and does not fit the crocodile at all.

What of the etymology of the name *tzefarde'a*? Does that give an indication either way? Some claim it to be derived from an unknown foreign source.³ It may be a combination of *tzafar*, "to chirp" (as frogs do), and the Arabic root *rada*, "muddy marsh," which is the frog's favored habitat.⁴

The linguist Gesenius indicates that the term denotes "leaping in the marsh" as in the term *tzefir izzim* [billy goat]. Others declare that *tzefarde'a* is a combination of two words, *tzippor de'ah* [the bird of knowledge]. Some take this

to refer to the frog, which chirps like a bird and knows when to stop: "*Tzefarde'a* – a creeping creature that emits cries all night, until morning, and it is *tzippor da*, 'the knowing bird,' since it knows the time of morning, to cease from its cries" (*Hatzi Menasheh*).⁵

There is another explanation of "the knowing bird" that is more difficult to ascribe to either animal:

Ba-tzefarde'im - what is this word, *tzefarde'a*? There was a bird [*tzippor*] in the Nile that had intelligence [*de'ah*], and when this bird called to them they came, and so they were named after this bird with intelligence: *tzefar-de'a* (Midrash *Lekah Tov* to Exodus 7:28; cf. *Yalkut Shimoni* 7:182).

Neither frogs nor crocodiles are known to respond to the calls of birds. But there is a suggestion based on this midrash that there are similar reasons for positing that *tzefarde'a* refers to the crocodile.⁶ There is an account by Herodotus, who visited Egypt in 459 BCE, of a small bird picking food from the teeth of a gaping crocodile. It has been suggested that this refers to the Egyptian plover [*pluvianus aegyptius*], which has since also earned the name of "crocodile plover." It is said that while the crocodile rests with its mouth open, these intelligent birds peck at the crocodile's teeth in search of parasites. The crocodile makes no attempt to eat the bird and is apparently aware of its benefits. The bird is extremely cautious and gives a call when fleeing from danger, thus also warning the crocodile. Perhaps the *tzefarde'a* is the crocodile, named after its symbiotic partner, the intelligent bird that cleans its teeth and warns it of danger.

The problem with this explanation is that the phenomenon described may not actually be true. Whether such a mutual relationship exists is hard to determine; in the zoological literature, few apart from Herodotus are actually recorded as having seen it.⁷ One ornithologist says that "No reliable observer since then has seen [the bird] acting as a crocodile toothpick The myth has been perpetuated in literature and needs finally to be laid to rest, unless contrary proof can be found."⁸ On the other hand, Israel's legendary crocodile hunter Ofer Kobi, who spent decades hunting and farming crocodiles in Africa, informed me that he has observed it.⁹ If it does exist, it is rare, and seems more likely to be opportunistic rather than symbiotic.

In conclusion, while there are those who have taken the *tzefarde'a* of Egypt to refer to the crocodile, its usage in midrashic sources and its etymology indicate that the frog is the more likely contender, as several of the commentaries conclude. Some suggest that the term *tzefarde'a* refers to amphibious reptiles in general, and could thereby include both frogs and crocodiles. This is the explanation given by the Netziv, who states that whereas most of Egypt was plagued only by frogs, Pharaoh and his entourage were attacked by crocodiles.¹⁰

There are, however, factors militating against the *tzefarde'a* being seen as a crocodile: the Torah clearly indicates that the *tzefarde'a* was quite troublesome to the Egyptians but never posed a threat to their lives. Crocodiles would not be able to *enter . . . your ovens and kneading bowls* (Ex. 7:28); and, according to Gesenius, the term *tzefarde'a* denotes "leaping in the marsh" which is unquestionably a frog.

NOTES

1. Margaliyot edition, pp. 121-122; originally from Mishnat R. Eliezer, p. 354.
2. Cited in *Torah Shelema*, Shemot 8:16.
3. Rabbi Ya'akov Kamenetsky, *Emet le-Ya'akov*, Shemot 7:27.
4. Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible with Commentary and Critical Notes* (London: J. Haddon, 1836) vol. 1, p. 337, quoting Samuel Bochart who explains that "rada" in Arabic means "mud".
5. A collection of manuscripts cited in *Torah Shelema* 7:108. This explanation is also given by Mahariil, cited in *Bi-Shemi ve-li-khevodi Berativ*, "tzefarde'a".
6. Daniel Sperber, "The Frog was a Crocodile," Bar-Ilan University's Parashat Hashavu'a Study Center, *Parashat Va-Era* 5759/1999.
7. "Despite being corroborated by two eminent German ornithologists in the 19th and 20th centuries, this alleged behavior has never been properly authenticated." Andrew F. Richford and Christopher J. Mead, "Pratincoles and Coursers," in Christopher Perrins (ed.), *Firefly Encyclopedia of Birds* (Firefly Books 2003) pp. 252-253.
8. G. L. Maclean, "Family Glareolidae (Coursers and Pratincoles)" in J. del Hoyo, J., A. Elliott and J. Sargatal, eds., *Handbook of the Birds of the World* (Barcelona: Lynx Edicions 1996) vol. 3, pp. 364-383.
9. Personal conversation at the Crocoloco ranch, September 2008. For further information about Ofer Kobi, whose ranches I have visited in Kenya and Israel, see: <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/954376.html>.
10. See *Ha-Emek Davar*, Shemot 7:28-29 for his ingenious method of deriving this from the verses.

(An extract from The Torah Encyclopedia of the Animal Kingdom by Rabbi Natan Slifkin, currently in preparation. For the pictures that accompany this essay, see www.zootorah.blogspot.com)

