

# Parashat Va'eyra:

## The Ten Plagues: A Lesson in Faith

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The devastation that the ten plagues brought to Egypt was of epic proportions: The entire water supply of the country turning to blood, a plague of swarming lice, painful boils breaking out all over the body, total blackout and darkness. These ghastly acts brought daily life in Egypt to a standstill. Disease destroyed the livestock of the country and locusts destroyed the crops. By the time the plagues have run their course, we can almost visualise this land broken and beaten having suffered the most severe disaster situation ever experienced. It is not surprising that Pharaoh's aides say to him:

“How long will this be a trap for us? Let the men go to worship Hashem their God! Are you not yet aware that Egypt is lost?” (10:7)

Everyone in Egypt can see that “Egypt is lost”, the country has been brought to its knees. Apparently, the plagues have achieved their aim.

Traditionally, we assume that the plagues were enacted by God in order to gain Israel's freedom. But does God need to bring such damage, chaos and ruin to achieve this goal? If God is bringing miracles, then why not put the Egyptians to sleep for a week and let the Jews walk out unnoticed? Why not make one catastrophic plague that would tip the balance in one fell swoop? Why then does God design a system of plague after plague, an ongoing series of wreckage?

We can strengthen our question by turning to another aspect of the Plagues; that of God's psychological control over Pharaoh. Throughout this story (from the sixth plague and on) we see God “hardening the heart of Pharaoh”. God toughens Pharaoh's will to enable him to withstand the pressures of the plagues, to weather the storm:

“God hardened the heart of Pharaoh and he did not listen to them” (9:12)  
“For I have hardened his heart...” (10:1)  
“And God hardened Pharaoh's heart and he did not set the Israelites free”(10:20)

If God's true desire is to free the Children of Israel, then why does he harden Pharaoh? Let Pharaoh break under the pressure! Let his rule crumble! The means are not important. We should be working to extricate the Israelites from Egypt and slavery! Commentators suggest that God wants Pharaoh to remain balanced. He wants Pharaoh to make a decision based on rational argument, rooted in “free will”, rather than under duress. But what is the point? God wants the Jews out! Why make things more difficult?

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### Chavruta:

1. See the very beautiful Ramban at the end of Parshat Bo (13:16 "uletotafot") which enters into an entire philosophy about miracles in general, and the specifics of the Yetziat Mitzrayim example in particular.

#### 2. THE STRUCTURE OF THE PLAGUES

See the Sephorno 8:12, Rashbam 7:26, Chizkuni 8:15.  
What pattern are they identifying here?

#### 3. See 4:21-24

How does this relate to the plague of the firstborn? See Rashi, Sphorno.

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### Shiur:

#### EDUCATIONAL GOALS.

What is the purpose of the ten plagues? The text of the Torah suggests that the aim was educational:

“The Lord said to Moses, ‘Go to Pharaoh. For I have hardened his heart and the heart of his courtiers, in order that I may display my signs amongst them, and that you may recount and tell your children and your children's children how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I displayed my signs amongst them - in order that **you may know that I am the Lord.**’” (10:1-2)

What is the stated goal? It is so that we can tell future generations of the power of God. The ultimate purpose is that we should “know” God. Through the clearly miraculous events in Egypt, the Children of Israel witness a spectacle that will forge into their hearts the imprint of the Almighty. They understand that God can harness both natural and supernatural forces. A moment of realisation of this sort is a moment of “knowing God”.

#### MIRACLES AND FAITH

Nachmanides develops this idea further. He concludes his commentary on the plagues and the Exodus saga with a discussion of the role of miracles in the furtherance of faith. Why are there so many laws in our Jewish tradition, all explicitly aimed at preserving and perpetuating the Exodus: “*zecher li'yetziat mitrayim*”. The Ramban connects the two ideas (Commentary on Exodus 13:16):

“I will now state a general principle which lies at the foundation of several mitzvot (commandments).

Since the introduction of idolatry into the world... the attitudes of people, as regards matters of faith, have become confused and have diverged from the true

beliefs. Some people believe that the world has been in existence eternally with no creation ... others feel that God exists but that he does not know the ways of man.... and that there is neither reward nor punishment. They say, (Ez 8:20) "God has departed from the earth".

When God performs a miracle in the sight of a desirable collective or individual - a miracle that will affect a change in the laws of nature - these (false) attitudes of faith will be disproved in the clearest way. For the miracle demonstrates God's mastery over the world: his creation of it and his knowledge of, and involvement in its affairs. Additionally, when a particular miracle is preceded by a prophetic announcement, the existence of prophecy - that God speaks with man and tell him his secrets - will be proven and this in turn will prove the truth of the entire Torah."

According to the Ramban, a miracle manages to transform philosophical truths into living belief. The person who experiences the miracle will be convinced in the most powerful manner of the existence of God, God's involvement in the affairs of men and His ability to reward and punish. The Ramban feels that this was the purpose of the plagues.

Now if we may read this Ramban in a historical context, we should appreciate that the children of Israel are at a fundamental nexus in their development. They are at the birth of their nationhood. As they emerge, independent, as a nation in charge of their own affairs. God wants this nation to be born in an atmosphere of faith with the existence of God in the forefront of their minds.

The Ramban continues:

"... Seeing that God will not perform a sign or miracle in each and every generation, in the presence of any heretic or evil-doer, he commands us to continually create memorials and signs to that which we saw with our own eyes. Thus we reproduce these events to our children, and they to their children, until the last generation. The Torah was very particular about this matter.... and commanded us to write about this miracles "on our hand and between our eyes" (Tefillin. see 13:9,16), and that we write about it on our doorposts (mezuzah) and that we mention it at morning and at night (The Shema)... and that we build a Sukkah each year, and so on, for all the laws that we have "zecher l'yetziat mitzrayim" (to remember the exodus from Egypt)."

If a single miracle has the power to engender belief in God, then ten miracles of the magnitude of the plagues have a tenfold likelihood of establishing the basic tenets of faith. . The preservation of this episode in the Jewish consciousness, an event that teaches the most crucial of theological lessons, is of vital importance. We attempt to preserve the feeling and the memory of the exodus because they testify to the existence and providence of our God. We do this through our numerous religious acts which commemorate and preserve the memory of these events. Through all the practices in which we remember Egypt: kiddush, pesach, mezuzah, the shema, sukkot and many others, we recall and try to re-live these thoughts and experiences which lead us so directly to a full belief in God.

THE PATTERN OF THE PLAGUES.

This far, we have discussed the educational objective of the plagues as regards the Children of Israel (as found in 9:1-2).

But if we look at the verses which describe the drama of the plagues, we shall soon see that there is an entirely new dimension to the story with a very target group in mind

We read in the Passover Haggada how Rabbi Yehuda would divide the plagues into three groupings, identifying each of the plagues by initials. The division (DeTZaCh ADaSH BeACHaV) puts the plagues in this structure:

- 1. Blood                      Frogs                      Lice
- 2. Wild Animals      Pestilence              Boils
- 3. Hail                      Locusts                  Darkness                  The plague of the firstborn.

How and why did Rabbi Yehuda divide the plagues in this way? Why not two groupings of five or some other division? What is the unifying character of each group?

When looking closely into the text of the Torah, we can reveal a most deliberate pattern in the narrative of the plagues. It is a recursive structure. This table gives some indication of how the plagues are ordered in the text.

PLAGUE	WARNING	INSTRUCTION	SOURCE
1.Blood	Yes	"station yourself ... in the morning"	7:14-24
2.Frogs	Yes	"Go to Pharaoh"	7:25-8:11
3.Lice	None	-	8:12-15
4.Beasts	Yes	"station yourself ... in the morning"	8:16-28
5.Pestilence	Yes	"Go to Pharaoh"	9:1-7
6.Boils	None	-	9:8-12
7.Hail	Yes	"station yourself ... in the morning"	9:13-35
8.Locusts	Yes	"Go to Pharaoh"	10:1-20
9.Darkness	None	-	10:21-23
10. Firstborn			11:4-7

What we see here is a recurring pattern, with the plagues grouped in threes. (We will ignore the plague of the firstborn for now and come back to it later.) Each of these groups can be viewed as a "wave" of plagues. In each wave, the first two plagues are preceded by a divine forewarning while the third plague strikes suddenly, without a prior notice. We can also identify the cyclic rhythm in the language of the commands given to Moses. But what does it all mean? Why would three waves of plagues be necessary? Is there anything which differentiates one group from another?

SOME DISTINGUISHING FEATURES.

It is interesting to note some of the features of this structure from within the descriptions of the plagues. We will give some examples.

In the initial group of three, each plague mentions the magicians – the religious figures of Egypt. At first, they can replicate the plagues, but in the 3<sup>rd</sup> plague they fail to produce the plague. They reluctantly conclude that the plagues represent the "finger of God." The magicians are almost absent from all subsequent plagues.

In the second wave of three plagues, it would seem that there

is a further detail that is stressed repeatedly: that the plague will strike only Egyptians and not Israelites. In the warning of the plague of wild animals God states:

“ On that day I will set apart the region of Goshen, where my people dwell, so that no wild animals shall be there....And I will make a distinction between my people and your people. Tomorrow this sign will come to be” (8:18-19)

In the next plague of this wave - pestilence - we see a similar stress in the details:

“ ... the Lord will strike your livestock .... with a very severe pestilence. But the Lord will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of the Egyptians so that nothing will die that belongs to the Israelites. The Lord has fixed a time: tomorrow the Lord will do this thing in the land.” (9:3-5)

Pharaoh even does a spot check to ascertain whether God is keeping to his word:

“When Pharaoh investigated, he found that not one head of the livestock of Israel had died” (9:7)

The third plague - boils - also affects only Egyptians (see 9:11). We can see a clear theme here. In this second wave, the theme of differentiation between Egyptian and Israelite is highlighted. A clear divide is being drawn by God, between the two peoples. We will see why this is so in a minute.

### WAVE THREE - UNPRECEDENTED POWER

In the “Third Wave” a similar thematic constituent is apparent. This time the stress is upon the uniqueness of the plague, or more accurately, its unprecedented power. All the plagues here will be unparalleled. The plague of hail begins this “wave”. The warning to Pharaoh is expressed in the following way:

“I have spared you for this purpose: in order to show you my power and in order that my fame may resound throughout the world.... This time tomorrow, I will rain down a very heavy hail, such as has not been in Egypt from the day it was founded until now.” (9:17-19)

And when the hail arrives, it is true to this forewarning:

“God rained down the hail upon the land of Egypt. The hail - with fire flashing in the middle of the hailstones - an exceptionally heavy hail **such as had not befallen Egypt from the day it was founded until now**” (9:24)

The same is true about the locust plague. Both in the warning and then when it happens it is described as a swarm of locusts of such magnitude :

“**Something that neither your fathers nor your fathers’ fathers have seen from the day they appeared on earth to this day** ... never before had there been so many, nor will there ever be so many again.” (10:6,14)

And as for the plague of darkness where “for three days no-one could get up from where he was” (10:23), we clearly have a plague of unprecedented proportion. The linkage between

the three plagues of this group is the magnitude of their power; each plague is on a scale unexperienced previously. Each plague is an unparalleled phenomenon.

Another point worth mentioning is how the third plague in each group, or wave, attacks the human body itself whereas the preceding plagues attack property: houses, livestock and crops. Lice, boils and the darkness that you cannot move in (eating? going to the bathroom?) all represent very unpleasant bodily afflictions. It is as if in each wave, God gives certain chances, but by the time we reach the third plague of a group, we need no warning and the plagues are designed to really “hit home”.

But where is this all leading us? What are these three cycles of suffering?

### THREE WAVES - THREE THEOLOGICAL LESSONS.

We have seen that the “waves” or groups of plagues can have unifying themes. In truth, we can say that for each of these three groups there is a distinct objective which relates to that theme. This aim is expressed in the opening warning of each group or “wave” of plagues. Let us see.

In the introductory warning to each plague grouping, God gives his motive for that “wave”. The objectives relate to certain theological understandings that Pharaoh has to acquire through the process of the plagues. The motives read as follows:

For the first wave:

“Thus says the Lord “By this you shall know that I AM THE LORD’.” (7:17)

The second wave:

“..that you may know that I am the Lord IN THE MIDST OF THE LAND” (8:18)

The third wave:

“ in order that you may know that there is NONE LIKE ME in all the world.” (9:14)

God is teaching Pharaoh three theological lessons. It would seem that God wants to bring home to Pharaoh certain facts about God’s nature and his power. There are things that he has to “know”.

The first wave of plagues is aimed to demonstrate to Pharaoh the fact of God’s EXISTENCE - “I am the Lord”. The second group will teach of God’s involvement in the affairs of man, God has the ability to effect and control events “in the midst of the land”. This lesson teaches of God’s PROVIDENCE. The third wave is aimed at proving God’s OMNIPOTENCE - that God has ultimate power high above any other being.

### THEMES OF THE PLAGUES

This approach is borne out through the contents of each wave. In the first wave God begins to demonstrate his very existence. In the first two plagues, Pharaoh remains unimpressed as he watches his own magicians or holy men reproduce the plagues of blood and frogs. It is only when we get to the third plague that the magicians themselves acknowledge the existence of God. When they are confronted by dust turning into lice, a phenomenon that they cannot replicate, they exclaim:

“This is the finger of God” (8.15)

If the religious authorities recognise God, then Pharaoh's refusal to accept God must result from his stubborn-ness and nothing else. God has been given recognition.

The other “waves” express their themes rather elegantly. The second “wave” as we have noted, is animated by the notion of the distinction between Israel and Egypt. This is aimed at expressing God's INVOLVEMENT or PROVIDENCE. In these plagues, God demonstrates that he has precise control over His actions in the world. He can differentiate between groups and individuals. He can time his actions with precision - each of these plagues are to be performed “tomorrow” - he can work within a worldly time frame. In this group of plagues God shows his ability to be involved in the worldly arena.

The third group is designed to prove God's EXCLUSIVE POWER. To this end, God brings plagues which “never before had there been .... nor will there ever be” any like them. These plagues are unprecedented, unique in their style - ice and fire together in the hail - and in their force. God clearly shows that he is all-powerful.

#### PHARAOH'S MOCKERY

Why do we need all three lessons? Why are these three points so important? In fact, why is God bothering to “educate” Pharaoh at all?

When Moses makes his first approach to Pharaoh, he receives a sharp rebuff. Pharaoh rejects his request with a rejection of the Jewish God.

“Moses and Aaron went and said to Pharaoh, “Thus says the Lord, God of Israel: Let My people go that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness. But Pharaoh said, “Who is the Lord that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, nor will I let Israel go.” (5:1-2)

Pharaoh's rejection of the Israelite plea for freedom is an outgrowth of his denial of God. He does not accept the existence of God and certainly does not accept His ability to control him. As far as Pharaoh is concerned, the gods of Egypt are far more powerful than the God of Israel. The Israelite slavery testifies to that fact. If Egypt can enslave Israel then the Egyptian god must overpower the Israelite God.

There are, then, three stages to Pharaoh's education. First he has to admit the existence of this God. But he can still claim that this God is a transcendent God who has no involvement in human affairs and therefore can be effectively ignored. God comes to teach him of his ability to intervene in the most minor of details in this world. But still, Pharaoh might suggest that this God exists and is involved in human worldly events, but that the Egyptian gods are stronger, more influential and powerful. To this God responds with the third wave of plagues expressing God's exclusive and supreme power.

#### THE PLAGUE OF THE FIRSTBORN

Earlier, we discussed the possibility of God bringing a single plague, a decisive blow, which would activate the freedom of the Israelites. We comprehend now that God had a very different plan in mind. These plagues were educational more than they were punitive or operational.

But it would seem that the plague of the firstborn fits NOT into

the educational model but rather, to another category. The killing of the firstborn is designed to be the final blow, the last step to freedom.

This plague has been sitting in the sidelines exactly for this purpose from the very outset. Even before Moses entered Egypt to confront Pharaoh, God had told him:

“... say to Pharaoh ‘Thus says the Lord: Israel is My first-born son. I have said to you “Let my son go that he may worship me”, yet you refuse to let him go. Now I will slay your firstborn son.” (4:22-23)

The plague of the firstborn was always ready for this purpose. It was this blow that was designed to trigger the latch of freedom, to make a breach in the prison walls. But the other nine plagues have a very different motif. The nine plagues come to teach Pharaoh about God.

#### CONCLUSION

Through a very deliberate and systematic look at the structural organisation of the plague narrative, we have come up with a new textually-based understanding of the role of the Ten Plagues. They were designed to teach theological lessons for both the Jewish people and for the Egyptians.

Shabbat Shalom