

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI SIR JONATHAN SACKS

### Covenant & Conversation

**T**he ninth plague-darkness-comes shrouded in a darkness of its own.

What is this plague doing here? It seems out of sequence. Thus far there have been eight plagues, and they have become steadily, inexorably, more serious. The first two, the Nile turned blood-red and the infestation of frogs, seemed more like omens than anything else. The third and fourth, gnats and flies, caused discomfort, not crisis. The fifth, the plague that killed livestock, affected animals, not human beings.

The sixth, boils, was again a discomfort, but a serious one, no longer an external nuisance but a bodily affliction. (Remember that Job lost everything he had, but did not start cursing his fate until his body was covered with sores: Job 2). The seventh and eighth, hail and locusts, destroyed the Egyptian grain. Now there was no food. Still to come was the tenth plague, the death of the firstborn, in retribution for Pharaoh's murder of Israelite children. It would be this that eventually broke Pharaoh's resolve.

So we would expect the ninth plague to be very serious indeed, something that threatened, even if it did not immediately take, human life. Instead we read what seems like an anticlimax:

"Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand toward the sky so that darkness will spread over Egypt-darkness that can be felt.' So Moses stretched out his hand toward the sky, and total darkness covered all Egypt for three days. No one could see anyone else or leave his place for three days. Yet all the Israelites had light in the places where they lived." (10:21-22)

Darkness is a nuisance, but no more. The phrase "darkness that can be felt" suggests what happened: a khamsin, a sandstorm of a kind not unfamiliar in Egypt, which can last for several days, producing sand-and dust-filled air that obliterates the light of the sun. A khamsin is usually produced by a southern wind that blows into Egypt from the Sahara desert. The worst sandstorm is usually the first of the season, in March. This fits the dating of the plague which happened shortly before the death of the firstborn, on Pesach.

The ninth plague was a miracle, but not an event wholly unknown to the Egyptians, then or now.

Why then does it figure in the narrative, immediately prior to its climax?

The answer lies in a line from Dayenu, the song we sing as part of the Haggadah: "If G-d had executed judgment against them [the Egyptians] but had not done so against their G-ds, it would have been sufficient." Twice the Torah itself refers to this dimension of the plagues: "I will pass through Egypt on that night, and I will kill every firstborn in Egypt, man and animal. I will perform acts of judgment against all the G-ds of Egypt: I (alone) am G-d." (Exodus 12:12)

"The Egyptians were burying all their firstborn, struck down by the Lord; and against their G-ds, the Lord had executed judgment." (Numbers 33:4)

Not all the plagues were directed, in the first instance, against the Egyptians. Some were directed against things they worshipped as G-ds. That is the case in the first two plagues. The Nile was personified in ancient Egypt as the G-d Hapi. Offerings were made to it at times of inundation. The inundations themselves were attributed to one of the major Egyptian deities, Osiris. The plague of frogs would have been associated by the Egyptians with Heket, the G-ddess who was believed to attend births as a midwife, and who was depicted as a woman with the head of a frog.

These symbolism, often lost on us, would have been immediately apparent to the Egyptians. Two things now become clear. The first is why the Egyptian magicians declared "This is the finger of G-d" (Ex. 8: 15) only after the third plague, lice. The first two plagues would not have surprised them at all. They would have understood them as the work of Egyptian deities who, they believed, were sometimes angry with the people and took their revenge.

The second is the quite different symbolism the first two plagues were meant to have for the Israelites, and for us. As with the tenth plague, these were no mere miracles intended-as it were-to demonstrate the power of the G-d of Israel, as if religion were a gladiatorial arena in which the strongest G-d wins.

Their meaning was moral. They represented the most fundamental of all ethical principles, stated in the Noahide covenant in the words "He who sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed". This is the rule of retributive justice, measure for measure: As you do, so shall you be done to.

By first ordering the midwives to kill all male Israelite babies, and then, when that failed, by commanding "Every boy who is born must be cast into

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the Nile" (Ex. 1: 22), Pharaoh had turned what should have been symbols of life (the Nile, which fed Egyptian agriculture, and midwives) into agents of death. The river that turned to blood, and the Heket-like frogs that infested the land, were not afflictions as such, but rather coded communications, as if to say to the Egyptians: see what it feels like when the G-ds you turned against the Israelites turn on you.

Hence the tenth plague, to which all the others were a mere prelude. Unlike all the other plagues, its significance was disclosed to Moses even before he set out on his mission, while he was still living with Jethro in Midian: "You shall say to Pharaoh: This is what the Lord says. 'Israel is My son, My firstborn. I have told you to let My son go, that he may worship Me. If you refuse to let him go, I will kill your own firstborn son.'" (Ex. 4: 22-23)

Whereas the first two plagues were symbolic representations of the Egyptian murder of Israelite children, the tenth plague was the enactment of retributive justice, as if heaven was saying to the Egyptians: You committed, or supported, or passively accepted the murder of innocent children. There is only one way you will ever realize the wrong you did, namely, if the same thing happens to you.

This too helps explain the difference between the two words the Torah regularly uses to describe what G-d did in Egypt: *otot u-mofetim*, "signs and wonders". These two words are not two ways of describing the same thing-miracles. They describe quite different things. A *ot*, a wonder, is indeed a miracle. An *ot*, a sign, is something else: a symbol (like *tefillin* or *circumcision*, both of which are called *ot*), that is to say, a coded communication, a message.

The significance of the ninth plague is now obvious. The greatest G-d in the Egyptian pantheon was Ra or Re, the sun G-d. The name of the Pharaoh often associated with the exodus, Ramses II, means *meses*, "son of" (as in the name Moses) Ra, the G-d of the sun. Egypt-so its people believed-was ruled by the sun. Its human ruler or Pharaoh was semi-divine, the child of the sun-G-d.

In the beginning of time, according to Egyptian myth, the sun-G-d ruled together with Nun, the primeval waters. Eventually there were many deities. Ra then created human beings from his tears. Seeing, however,

that they were deceitful, he sent the G-dess Hathor to destroy them; only a few survived.

The plague of darkness was not a *mofet* but an *ot*, a sign. The obliteration of the sun signaled that there is a power greater than Ra. Yet what the plague represented was less the power of G-d over the sun, but the rejection by G-d of a civilization that turned one man, Pharaoh, into an absolute ruler with the ability to enslave other human beings-and of a culture that could tolerate the murder of children because that is what Ra himself did.

When G-d told Moses to say to Pharaoh, "My son, my firstborn, Israel" He was saying: I am the G-d who cares for His children, not one who kills His children. The ninth plague was a Divine act of communication, that said: there is not only physical darkness but also moral darkness. The best test of a civilization is: see how it treats children, its own and others'. In an age of suicide bombing and the use of children as instruments of war, it still is. © 2010 Rabbi Sir J. Sacks and torah.org

**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

## Taking a Closer Look

**A**lthough there were ten plagues sent by G-d against the oppressive Egyptians, the Torah only describes Moshe's warning to Pharaoh before seven of them. "Why by all of them were warning said, [but] by lice, boils and darkness no warning was said? Because when G-d warns a person one time and a second time, He doesn't need to give a third warning." This statement (Mishnas Rebbe Eliezer 19 and Midrash Hagadol 8:14) is echoed in Midrash Lekach Tov (8:15) and by most of the Tosafists (as well as other early commentators). The obvious question is, if only two warnings are necessary (or can possibly be effective, see Chizkuni on 8:15), why was there a warning by the fourth, fifth, seventh, eighth and tenth plagues? The same reason there was no warning before the third plague (lice) should apply to all the subsequent plagues!

Many of the Tosafists simply say that each set of three plagues constituted a new "beginning," thereby starting the process again. Therefore, a warning preceded the fourth and fifth plagues but not the sixth plague, a warning was again given prior to the seventh and eighth plagues but not before the ninth, and a warning was again given before the tenth. Although most offer no explanation as to why each set of plagues is considered a "new beginning" or a separate category, the Rosh (at the beginning of Parashas Vu'aira) and the Pa'anayach Razah (8:12) give several possibilities.

The first approach presented by the Rosh is that additional warnings were needed after the first two because once there was no warning for the third, Pharaoh thought that Moshe wouldn't come back anymore. However, once the fourth also came without warning, wouldn't he have realized that things will keep

getting worse and worse if he doesn't let the nation go serve G-d? Pharaoh's calling Moshe back to remove the fourth plague was not caused by the warning before it; he would have had to call Moshe in order to remove the wild animals (8:20-21) even had there been no warning. The same is true after the seventh (9:27-28) and eighth (10:16-17) plagues. There was no warning before the ninth plague, yet Pharaoh still called Moshe (10:24) to tell him that they can go (without their animals).

Another approach presented is based on who brought each of the plagues onto the Egyptians (see Shemos Rabbah 12:4). Aharon, holding the staff, "stretched his hand over the waters of Egypt" (7:19) turning them into blood, did so again to bring frogs (8:1-2), and "hit the dirt of the land" to bring the lice (8:12-13). Similarly, Moshe brought three plagues (see 9:22, 10:12-13 and 10:21-22), and three plagues were brought by G-d without any "action" being done by either Moshe or Aharon (see 8:20, 9:3-6 and 11:4/12:29). The plague of boils was brought by all three, with both Moshe and Aharon taking handfuls of ashes (9:8/10), Moshe throwing it towards the heaven (ibid), and G-d causing it to spread over all of Egypt and become boils upon contact with skin (9:9). If each set of plagues were considered a different category of plagues, each category would need to have two plagues with warnings before the third was sent without a warning.

This approach works for the first set of three, which were all brought by Aharon, but there was no issue with the first three plagues anyway. It works for the seventh, eighth and ninth as well, since Moshe brought all three. The fourth and fifth were brought without Moshe or Aharon, but the sixth was brought by all three; according to this breakdown, a warning should have been necessary for this new "category," and none should have been necessary for the tenth.

Another approach presented is based on where each of the plagues originated (the land and water, from on top of the land, or from the heavens). This also works well with the first set of three, but falls apart with subsequent plagues. If the locusts are considered as coming from the heavens because of the wind that brought them (see Ibn Ezra on 8:12), why isn't the spread of boils considered the same since the ashes were thrown towards the heavens and spread from there? How can disease (pestilence) be categorized? From where does "darkness" originate? Why would there need to be a new warning before the first-born were killed?

A similar categorization is present by Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch (7:15), who suggests that the first set of plagues taught Pharaoh that G-d has dominion over the land, the second set that His dominion includes its inhabitants, and the third set that He rules over the atmosphere. Aside from needing to explain why a warning was needed for the tenth plague, ultimately all the plagues affected the land's inhabitants;

why is sending wild animals in the same category as disease and boils if the latter two didn't originate from its inhabitants? If the category of "inhabitants" is based on who or what was directly affected, is there any greater affect on inhabitants than having at least one member of each household die?

Rabbeinu Bachye and the Malbim also categorize the three sets of plagues based on what they taught Pharaoh and the Egyptians about G-d. The Malbim (7:14) says that the final plague is a totally separate category, as it was designed to convince them to let the nation go. This still wouldn't explain the need for a warning prior to it, if the lessons from the first nine plagues weren't taken to heart. It wasn't until after the tenth plague had done its damage that Pharaoh finally gave in; the warning was irrelevant to his doing so.

The three categories the Malbim (ibid) and Rabbeinu Bachye (9:14) present are (1) that G-d exists, (2) that He is still involved in the world He created, and (3) that He is all-powerful. If we were to apply these categories to explain why there was no warning before the third, sixth and ninth plagues, it would work like this: The first two plagues should have taught the Egyptians about His existence (see 8:6); since they didn't, there was no need for a warning before the third plague that taught the same lesson. The fourth and fifth plagues should have taught them that G-d is still active (see 8:18), making a warning before the sixth, which taught the same thing, unnecessary. The seventh and eighth plagues should have taught them that G-d is more powerful than any other deity (see 9:14), making a warning before the ninth plague superfluous. However, these lessons wouldn't be learned until after the first plague in each set. If the criteria for a warning being superfluous, as indicated by the wording of most of the sources (based on Sanhedrin 81b, see Rabbeinu Bachye on 10:1) is that once the criminal is punished twice, a warning is no longer needed before punishing him a third time, it would be the warning before the first plague of each set that was superfluous. Only after that first plague teaches them about G-d should the countdown start; if they ignore the first two warnings after learning this lesson, then another warning would be unnecessary - but that would take us past the third plague of the set (the first plague teaches the lesson, warning #1 now that they know about G-d, second plague, warning #2, third plague, then no more warnings needed), not before it!

I would like to present another possibility. Originally, Pharaoh, as well as his inner circle, was convinced that the "miracles" Moshe was performing wasn't from G-d, but was black magic, or some other form of trickery. This changed after the third plague, when his magicians couldn't duplicate what Moshe and Aharon had done (8:14), leading them to acknowledge that it was, in fact G-d's doing (8:15). Once this occurred, Pharaoh should have given in, but refused. There were no additional warnings necessary as long

as Pharaoh's magicians could do whatever Moshe was claiming G-d could do, but once they couldn't (making it harder to deny G-d's existence), the clock was reset.

Would Pharaoh give in after his magicians admitted it wasn't "magic?" He was warned again, and then a second time, that he better let the nation go serve G-d, and when after two more plagues he still didn't listen, a third warning became unnecessary. The resulting sixth plague caused the magicians to leave Pharaoh's palace (9:11), never to return (they aren't even mentioned anymore after this). True, Pharaoh had to assemble a new inner circle, but they are called "his servants," not his "magicians." Having completely lost the support of his original inner circle after the sixth plague may have been enough to start the "warning" clock again, but there may be more.

Pharaoh hardened his own heart before and after the first five plagues (including before the sixth), but would have given in after the sixth had G-d not strengthened Pharaoh's will and enabled him to still say "no" (see Rabbeinu Bachye on 9:12). Not that Pharaoh lost his free will, but that G-d gave it back to him, giving him the ability to still refuse if that's what he really wanted to do. This is evidenced by Pharaoh deciding on his own even after the seventh plague not to send the nation out (9:34-35), yet G-d telling Moshe (10:1) that it was He that had strengthened Pharaoh's heart (and the heart of his servants). Both were true; G-d strengthened Pharaoh's heart, thus allowing him to either choose to let them leave or to continue refusing to let them go, and Pharaoh chose the latter. But this choice came after Pharaoh himself admitted that he was wrong for not giving in before the seventh plague (9:27), an admission he repeated after the eighth plague (10:16).

After the sixth plague, Pharaoh would have given in, and realized that he should give in. G-d having to "strengthen his heart" to allow him to do what he really wanted to do - even though he knew he shouldn't - restarted the "warning" clock again. Would Pharaoh ignore his knowing what he should do and still do what he really wanted to do instead? Moshe warned him of the consequences of ignoring what he knows is right, once before the second plague and then again before the eighth plague, before it became unnecessary to do so before the ninth plague.

The tenth plague included the death of humans, something that hadn't yet occurred (see Ramban on 8:15), so perhaps needed its own warning despite Pharaoh ignoring all the previous ones. Interestingly, the wording before the tenth plague (11:4-8) doesn't match the wording of the six previous warnings, as it does not say, "you better give in or else." Pharaoh had already kicked Moshe out of his palace (10:28), and Moshe had countered with "correct, you won't see me anymore" (10:29). The "warning" before the tenth plague may not have really been a warning, but a clarification of why Pharaoh won't see him anymore; not

because Moshe was banished, but because Pharaoh, the first born, would perish.

Either way, we can understand why, after the magicians acknowledged it was G-d, new warnings were given, and why after G-d strengthened Pharaoh's heart, warnings were given again. ©2010 Rabbi D. Kramer

#### RABBI AVI WEISS

## Shabbat Forshpeis

In this week's portion, the Torah begins to present commandments given to the Jewish people. One wonders why so many commandments are proscribed in such detail.

The Sefer Ha-Hinukh (13th century) offers a comment that reveals a basic message about the purpose of commandments. He writes, "Know that human beings are influenced by their actions and their intellectual and emotional life is conditioned by the things they do, good or bad." In other words, what we do very much influences what we feel.

Hundreds of years later, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler offers an understanding of love that reflects the Sefer Ha-Hinukh's sentiments. While all people walk a type of balance between giving of themselves to others, and taking from others, by and large, Rabbi Dessler argues, each person can be categorized as either a "giver" or a "taker." Rabbi Dessler insists that the cornerstone of love is the capacity to give to the loved one. And he adds, it's not necessarily the case that one first loves and from the loving comes the giving. The reverse is equally true, and even more powerful. One gives, and from the giving comes loving. The more one gives, the more one loves. In fact, the real test of love is not only what I feel towards you, but what I am prepared to do for you.

What is true in personal relationships involving love of others is also true about ritual commandments, religious observance, which connects us and expresses our love to G-d. Perform the ritual and, from the act, this feeling may come. Hence, Jews at Sinai first proclaimed, "we will do." Only then did they say, "we will listen."

A story illustrates this idea. My mother of blessed memory and father, may he be well, made aliyah in the late 70's. Whenever my parents flew to New York, it was my responsibility to meet them at the airport. One time, my father called me to inform me that at the last moment their arrival was moved up by 24 hours. Professing my deep love for my parents, I insisted that I couldn't change my schedule on such short notice. "You became a hot shot Rabbi," my father responded, "and don't have time for your parents?" "I love you deeply," I protested, "but it's difficult to alter plans at the last moment." I'll never forget my father's response. "Don't love me so much, just pick me up at the airport!"

Not coincidentally, the root of ahavah, love, is the two letter Aramaic word hav, to give. It reflects the point made by the Sefer Ha-Hinukh that "actions shape character." It is nothing more than what my Abba said: "don't love me so much, just pick me up at the airport."

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### RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

## Shabbat Shalom

**T**his day shall be for you a memorial; and you shall celebrate it as a Festival unto the Lord for your generations. As an eternal statute shall you celebrate it" (Exodus 12:14)

This week's Biblical reading describes the workings of the Hebrew calendar beginning with the celebration of the New Moon. It then tells us about the many laws of the festival of Passover, our festival of freedom. But there is one "mystery" festival which requires definition and explanation: "this day shall be for you a memorial..." (12:14). Which day is the Scripture speaking about? The classical commentator Rashi suggests that it refers to the first day of Passover - the fifteenth of Nissan. But Passover lasts for seven days, with the first and last days being called "holy convocations" on which no physical work is permitted (12:16). Why single out the first day?

On the tenth of Nissan, the Jews in Egypt were commanded to take a lamb and keep it until the fourteenth of the month when they slaughtered it and placed its blood on their doorposts. The lamb was then roasted on the fire, and we were commanded to eat the whole of this sacrifice including its head, legs and innards. Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra maintains that the special festival refers to this day, which was designated for the "slaughter of the paschal lamb by the entire witness-congregation of Israel after the sun begins to set" (12:6). Why were the instructions for this sacrifice so detailed and why did it warrant a special day on the eve of Passover to serve as an eternal memorial (zikaron)?

The astrological symbol of the month of Nissan, its "sign on the zodiac," is Aries the ram - linguistically linked to Ra, the sun-G-d of Egypt. Aries was particularly invoked during the month of Nissan, the first month of spring, when the days were getting longer and the sun was getting stronger. Ramses, or 'son of Ra,' was a popular Egyptian name, and the very term 'Pharaoh' may very well mean 'the house of Ra.' If indeed the ram (or lamb) symbolized the sun-G-d of Egypt, we can readily understand why the Hebrews had to leave Egypt for three days in order to carry out their sacrifice, as Moses explained to Pharaoh: "It would not be proper for us to do so [in Egypt] since it would be an abomination for Egypt that we slaughter in a way which would be an abomination to Egypt before their eyes and

not have them stone us?" (Exodus 8:22, see also Genesis 46:34).

Nevertheless, right before the exodus, the Almighty commands each Hebrew household to take a lamb (or ram) on the tenth day of Nissan, the month of Aries, or Ra, and then four days later to slaughter the symbol of the Egyptian G-d before the eyes of their masters. A midrash teaches that on that same day they had themselves circumcised, a symbol par excellence of blood commitment, before placing the blood of the ram on the doorposts of their homes, flaunting their sacrilegious act before the Egyptians. They then roasted the lamb on a fire, causing maximum fragrance to waft into the streets outside, while retaining all of the lambs' limbs "entire and intact," as the ultimate act of defiance.

I believe that G-d's message with this commandment was that the Hebrews had to earn their right to freedom - pay their exit or exodus tax, as it were, by slaughtering the symbol of the Egyptian G-d, patron of consummate evil who presided over hedonistic and totalitarian pharaohs. Slaughtering the ram must have been a capital offence in Egypt and by carrying out the Divine command in such a public manner, the Hebrews were placing their lives on the line for the G-d of freedom and morality.

This then is the memorial, the unique festival of the fourteenth day of Nissan, which certainly deserves to be an eternal statute as a reminder of Hebrew mesirut nefesh, our commitment to pay the ultimate price for the sake of freedom and redemption. It is also a reminder that without this total dedication, liberty and deliverance will remain illusory and unrealized goals. Thus from a Biblical perspective, there are two distinct and disparate festivals: first the one-day Festival of the Passover Sacrifice, on the fourteenth day of Nissan, followed by the seven day Festival of Matzot, from the fifteenth to the twenty-second of Nissan.

There remains one more set of symbols to explain: the matzah (unleavened bread) and the hametz (leavened, fermented, risen bread). Matzah represents the poor bread eaten by the Hebrew slaves, who would return home hungry and exhausted after a difficult day of slave labor, so desperate for sleep that they hadn't the energy to wait for their dough to rise before eating their one meager meal of the day. Matzah was also the bread which the Hebrews took out of Egypt with them, and so it became the symbol of freedom - freedom of movement, freedom of choice, and freedom of worship. At the Seder, the matzah is eaten together with the paschal sacrifice, and after the destruction of the Temple, it took on the symbolism of the paschal sacrifice in the form of the Afikoman, which substitutes for the final taste of the paschal sacrifice that was eaten in Temple times.

On the other hand, yeast and leavening, hametz, symbolizes the hedonistic materialistic pharaohs, who represented Ra the sun-G-d, and who

utilized Hebrew slave labor for their own puffed-up self-aggrandizement. Hence we are Biblically commanded, "But, on the first day [of the Festival of the Paschal Sacrifice, the fourteenth day of Nissan] you must cause leavening to cease to be in your homes..." (Exodus 12:15). And the Hebrew word *tashbitu* ('cease to be') can mean either to physically destroy or to spiritually transform.

The Jewish people, the children of Abraham, were put in this world to imbue it with compassionate righteousness and morality, to fight against and ultimately destroy the unbridled greed which fuels totalitarian despots who take advantage of and even enslave their weaker subjects. This "leavening" cannot be tolerated. If we can bloodlessly change regimes, if Amalek can be inspired to repent, as the Talmud records that the grandchildren of Amalek taught Torah in Bnei Brak (B.T. Sanhedrin 98), that would be optimal; but if such spiritual transformations are impossible, then Pharaoh and his cohorts must be drowned in the Reed Sea. Ultimately, freedom and morality must prevail if humanity is to endure. © 2010 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### **Wein Online**

**T**he entire story of the Torah regarding the redemption of the Jewish slaves from Egypt descends into a contest of wills. Pharaoh reaches the limit of his patience in this week's parsha. He warns Moshe not to dare come and see him again. He assesses that Moshe's demands are not serious since he remains inflexible and not open to any compromise regarding them. He also apparently believes that Moshe has run out of plagues to visit on Egypt.

The troubles that Moshe has visited on Egypt have not dented the spirit of Pharaoh. Only when finally his own life is threatened and when all of Egypt is mourning its deaths does Pharaoh waver in his determination to refuse Moshe's requests. And even then he will soon regret his decision to free the Jews from Egyptian slavery. What is the reason for Pharaoh's behavior?

His advisers have long ago declared to him that Egypt is lost if he continues on his present course of recalcitrant behavior. Yet Pharaoh is unwilling to concede to Moshe. Their discussions and differences have now turned personal and no logic can any longer rule the day. His angry outburst to Moshe and his banishing him from his palace marks the breaking point in his behavior.

There will be no reasoning with him from now forward. Only the blows of the deaths of the first born Egyptians will affect him and, as mentioned above, only weakly and temporarily. His stubbornness will eventually lead to great tragedy and loss for his people.

But that is always the way of tyrants. Blinded by one's own ego, uncaring as to the fate of others, deluded by one's own alleged infallibility, stubbornness and illogic rule the day. Pharaoh cannot be wrong. He seems himself as never having been wrong. Lord Acton's famous phrase that "absolute power corrupts absolutely" is always borne out to be accurate.

The struggle for Pharaoh's mind and soul is what the Torah is teaching us here. The kings of Israel always had prophets that pricked the bubble of their ego. Moshe may be banished from the Pharaoh's palace but his message cannot be so contained. Ideas and spirit are the stuff of human existence. Eventually they penetrate the most closed of palaces and societies. That is what Moshe is trying to convey to Pharaoh. The prophet stated that Pharaoh though himself to be a G-d-the G-d of the Nile no less.

All dictators think themselves to be G-ds. Their pictures of themselves are to be regarded as talismans and no criticism of themselves is allowed. Judaism spares no one from criticism, even our greatest leaders. There are no perfect people and there is no human that in any way can be deemed as a G-d. Moshe's visits and conversations with Pharaoh were meant to have him realize that he is only human and therefore prone to error and mistakes.

Pharaoh is unwilling to hear that message from Moshe and therefore he will be forced to hear it from plagues and death itself. This type of confrontation is a lesson to all of us as to dangers of power and ego. It is the contest between Moshe's humility and Pharaoh's arrogance. And we all know who won out in that contest. © 2010 *Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)*

#### **RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER**

### **Weekly Dvar**

**P**arshat Bo continues with the plagues inflicted on the Egyptians, and the exodus that followed. We find one interesting event that happened when Paroh called in Moshe and Aaron to bargain with them, right after being warned of the upcoming locust plague. After offering to allow only the men to go, and being rejected, Paroh kicked Moshe and Aaron out of the palace. The "Riva" wonders why they waited until they were kicked out of the palace, when they could have left before it got to that point. The Riva answers that had Moshe and Aaron left before being told to leave, they would have shown a lack of respect for Paroh, thereby embarrassing him. Since it was Paroh that had originally invited them, and since he was the ruler of the land they were in, they showed him respect by not leaving until he told them to, despite their embarrassment.

This amazing lesson in humility is even backed up by the events surrounding it. Locust, the plague directly following the story, was started by Moshe stretching his hands on the ground, symbolizing humility. Each and every single one of us has a common, ongoing struggle throughout our lives- our ego. If we simply stopped, thought, and realized about EVERY time we felt cheated or angry, we'd realize that it's our own ego that's letting us get angry or feel cheated, and if we learned to set that ego aside, we would accomplish SO much more, comparable to the accomplishments of Moshe and Aaron! Our ego will control our action and reactions, unless we learn to control it! © 2010 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

**RABBI DOVID SIEGEL**

## Haftorah

**T**his week's haftorah reflects the painful reality that people do not learn from the past and history will undoubtedly be repeated. The setting is the Babylonian destruction of the Egyptian Empire. The prophet Yirmiyahu states in the name of Hashem, "I will direct my attention to the multitudes of Alexandria and to Pharaoh and all of Egypt...I will deliver them into the hands of their killer, Nebuchadnezar, the King of Babylonia." (46:25,26)

The Radak explains that these passages refer to a massive massacre predicted for Egypt and her Pharaoh. Radak reminds us that the Egyptian people have a long history of hostility towards the Jewish nation. After an extended period of calm following her devastation at the Sea of Reeds, Egypt resumed her hostility towards her Jewish neighbors. It resurfaced during the reign of the Egyptian premier, Shishak, who invaded the Land of Israel shortly after the demise of Shlomo Hamelech. During this vulnerable Jewish era, Shishak forced his way into Israel and cleared out the treasury of the king. Our Chazal (quoted in Rashi's commentary to M'lochim I, 14-6) cite that Shishak even had the audacity of stealing the glorious throne of Shlomo Hamelech. Egypt continued her hostility towards Israel, and after receiving heavy sums from Israel in exchange for military protection, betrayed her Jewish "ally" and abandoned her. But Egypt's final crime came when Pharaoh N'cho executed the pious King Yoshiyahu because he refused to allow Pharaoh's army to enter Israel enroute to Assyria.

Because of this full record, Hashem decided that the time had arrived to repay Egypt for all her cruelty. Although, in truth, she had previously received forty years of exile, apparently this was not sufficient treatment for her. This time, a massive massacre was being planned and an appropriate execution was awaiting her Pharaoh. With this, Hashem would remind Egypt of the very special relationship He maintained with the Jewish people. Hashem's historic lesson to the earlier Pharaoh was characterized in His opening

statement that the Jews are "My son, My first-born" (Shmos 4:24). Through these words Hashem warned Egypt at the outset that her hostility toward His chosen nation would be repaid in full. And now, nearly a thousand years later, the time had come for Egypt to review this lesson. Egypt would soon be massacred in response to her cruelty and hostility towards Hashem's first born, the Jewish people.

It is interesting to note the particular analogy Yirmiyahu uses when predicting the Babylonian army's invasion. He says "They cut down her forest, for the enemy could not be counted; they exceeded the locusts, beyond any imaginable limit." (46:25,26) Yirmiyahu compares the Babylonians to locusts invading the land in unimaginable proportions. In fact, he describes the totality of this massacre as even greater than the work of the locusts. This analogy seems to bring us back to the historic plague of locusts in this week's parsha. It suggests a corollary between the Egyptian plague in earlier times and the invasion of Egypt by the king Nebuchadnezar in later times.

The explanation of this may be gleaned from the insightful words of the Kli Yakar in this week's sedra. He notes the Torah's introduction to the plague of locusts and explains it through a shocking Egyptian phenomenon. The Torah introduces the plague and states, "I have hardened the hearts of Pharaoh and his servants in order to place My signs in his midst. And for you to tell your children and grandchildren how I played with Egypt." (Shmos 10:1,2) "Why," asks the Kli Yakar, "was this introduction chosen for the plague of locusts and not for any other plague?" He responds by citing the testimony of Rabbeinu Chananel regarding an indisputable fact about the land of Egypt. Rabbeinu Chananel testifies that there has never been a locust invasion in Egypt since the massive plague of locusts sent to her by Hashem. Nowadays, even when all surrounding countries are infested with locusts these devouring insects will not penetrate the Egyptian borders. And if they remotely filter into Egypt they never destroy the existing crop.

He explains that this miraculous phenomenon was meant to serve as an everlasting testimony about the plague of locusts. In response to Moshe Rabbeinu's plea for the removal of locusts the Torah states, "There did not remain one locust throughout the entire Egyptian border." (Shmos 10:19) Apparently, this passage became an everlasting statement and from that point and on locusts would never remain in the land of Egypt. This indisputable testimony reminds the world of Hashem's harsh response to Egypt for all the cruelty she showed His chosen people. The plague of locusts therefore deserves a special introduction stating the purpose for all the plagues, to tell of their occurrence to our children. Because, in fact, the plague of locusts and its everlasting testimony were to serve as the perfect vehicle through which to remember Hashem's revelations in Egypt.

We now appreciate the perfect analogy of Yirmiyahu regarding the Babylonian invasion. The prophet was hinting to the fact that Egypt's attitude towards the Jewish people could not be condoned. They, more than anyone, should have anticipated the consequences of their cruel actions. The total absence of locusts from Egypt should have been a constant reminder to them of their past experiences for mistreating the Jewish people. Obviously no one could claim that Egypt hadn't been fairly warned. However, typically, people do not learn their lesson and history must undoubtedly be repeated. If the historic plague of locusts was not a sufficient reminder for them, then the present Babylonian "locusts" would do the trick. Hashem therefore ordered a full scale massacre for Egypt to repeat their earlier experience. They would once again realize that the Jewish people are very dear to Hashem and hostility towards them is certainly not a welcomed policy. Eventually Hashem will protect His people and respond to all hostility in a most befitting fashion. © 2010 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

#### **HAKHEL COMMUNITY AWARENESS BULLETIN**

### **Shortness of Breath**

**T**he Pasuk records that initially even the Bnei Yisroel did not listen to Moshe Rabbeinu "Because of shortness of breath and hard work" (Shemos, 6:9). Hashem then tells Moshe to go to speak to Paroh himself to send Bnei Yisroel from his land. Moshe responds that "...Bnei Yisroel have not listened to me, so how will Paroh listen to me?..." Rashi, quoting the Medrash (Bereishis Raba 92:7) writes that this is one of the ten Kal V'Chomer (ipso facto or a priori) arguments in the Torah.

HaRav Eliyahu Lopian, Z"tl, wonders "Why is this a Kal V'Chomer?"-i.e., why is it so that if Bnei Yisroel would not listen to Bnei Yisroel, then, ipso facto, neither would Paroh. After all, the Pasuk explicitly expresses the reason that Bnei Yisroel would not listen to Moshe-because of shortness of breath and hard work. Paroh certainly did not suffer from these, as he sat comfortably on the throne with everything being performed for him and on his behalf. While Bnei Yisroel may be unable to listen or accept what Moshe Rabbeinu was saying because of their true predicament, Paroh certainly had the wherewithal, the ability and the understanding to appreciate Moshe Rabbeinu's message!

We may suggest that the Kal V'Chomer, the ipso facto argument, does in fact work. The argument simply is as follows: If Bnei Yisroel-the slave people who were to be released wouldn't accept what I was saying, then why would Paroh-as their master?! Chazal, by teaching us that this really is and remains a Kal V'Chomer, are teaching us that the reason Bnei Yisroel did not listen (albeit a good one) was simply not important. For, despite the fact that we can

commiserate with their unbelievably difficult plight, they should, in fact, have listened to Hashem and to Moshe Rabbeinu. So too, Paroh, despite his grand position and erstwhile iron-clad rulership, should have recognized and understood Moshe Rabbeinu's message to him, as well. Any excuses would simply be unacceptable and downright wrong, as they would more than pale in significance to following the mandate and directive of the Master of the Universe, Hashem and his messenger, Moshe Rabbeinu.

There is a tremendous lesson for us to be learned here. If we are true believers-i.e., if we truly believe that all of the events and occurrences that surround us, everything that happens to us in life, all of the big and small events, the pain we may suffer and the pleasures and simchas we experience-are personally directed and "micromanaged" by Hashem-then there are certain attitudes and certain phrases which should not have room in our thought process or our vocabulary. If Hashem has put you in the situation, no matter how stressful or troubling, then he wants you to act responsibly in that situation in accordance with the Torah and the Poskim, which in some instances may require further elucidation by your Rav or your Posek.

Thus, a feeling or a statement of "I cannot do it", "It is too hard", "It is beyond my capability", "I can't handle this", "This situation is impossible for me", which may come sincerely out of real pain, extreme stress and great frustration, should really in truth be avoided, or overcome. If one cannot control himself, he must at least realize that his statement should not be taken literally, for his Creator and Maker has determined that this situation or event is needed and/or best for him at this time. Instead, one should "listen to Moshe Rabbeinu", despite the "shortness of breath", the adverse circumstances-even if they are extremely, extremely, adverse- and dig in and try to meet the challenge and rise to the occasion.

Bnei Yisroel, in their pain and misery, did not listen. Their failure to hear and accept was for naught. Ten Makkos and a Splitting of the Sea later, they received the Torah at Har Sinai, which made them an eternal people with an eternal life. Let us take the lesson from the Parsha, and with unfettered faith and complete belief rise up and through the difficult, event, position, circumstance or situation. In this zechus, in the merit of our pure faith and belief-each person in his own way will be zoche to his own beautiful part and portion in that very unique and special eternal life!

