

Rabbi Malchah Netanyahu

Parashot Va'era and Bo'

A Study of the Ten Plagues

Annually, at this time of year, the season of our freedom, Israelites read about the ten plagues that God brought upon the land of Egypt. We read about the plagues in awe and wonder, but how often do we take time to really consider the purpose of the plagues beyond the cursory answer of they forced Pharaoh to submit and allow our ancestors to go free? Why were there ten plagues? Why not one continuous plague? After all does not the necessity of ten plagues indicate nine failures?

In this Devrei Torah I will explore the purpose of the plagues for 1. Pharaoh and Egypt, 2. Moses, Aaron and the Israelites and 3. all of us blessed to be here today.

Lessons For Pharaoh and the Egyptians

A. Knowledge of HaShem

Shemot records that Pharaoh said:

מי יהוה אשר אשמע בקלו

Who is Hashem that I must obey him...?

Pharaoh did not recognize HaShem's existence and even less His authority to give commands to Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt and the god of the land. Throughout Sidra 'Va'era' and the first part of Bo' we read of the relentless attempts to soften Pharaoh's 'hardened' heart and teach him a lesson that he would not soon forget --'to know' HaShem.

For ten times it is stressed that they should 'know' Hashem. Knowledge of the Most High is a prerequisite for being in proper relationship with Him.

1. (7:5) וַיֵּדְעוּ מִצְרַיִם כִּי-אֲנִי יְהוָה

And Egypt shall know that I am the Lord

2. (7:17) יְהוָה בְּזֹאת תֵּדַע כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה

By this you shall know that I am the Lord

3. (8:6) לְמַעַן תֵּדַע כִּי-אֵין בַּיהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ

That you may know that there is none like the Lord

4. (8:18) לְמַעַן תֵּדַע כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ

That you may know that I am the Lord in the midst of the land

5. (9:14) בְּעִבּוֹר תִּדְעַ כִּי אֵין כָּמֹנִי בְּכָל-הָאָרֶץ

In order that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth

6. (9:29) לְמַעַן תִּדְעַ כִּי לַיהוָה הָאָרֶץ

So that you may know that the earth is the Lord's

7. (10:2) וִידַעְתֶּם כִּי-אֲנִי יְהוָה

That you may know that I am the Lord

8. (11:7) לְמַעַן תִּדְעוּ אֲשֶׁר יַפְלֶה יְהוָה בֵּין מִצְרַיִם וּבֵין יִשְׂרָאֵל

In order that you may know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel

9. (14:4) וַיִּדְעוּ מִצְרַיִם כִּי-אֲנִי יְהוָה

And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord

10.(14:18) וַיִּדְעוּ מִצְרַיִם כִּי-אֲנִי יְהוָה

Let the Egyptians know that I am the Lord

Isaac Abravanel, the Biblical commentator said:

"Pharaoh took issue with Moses on three principles.1. Pharaoh denied that HaShem was a necessary existent First Cause: 'I know not the Lord' 2. Pharaoh denied that HaShem guards over the ways of hu-

manity and gives rewards and punishments to humans according to their deeds: 'Who is the Lord?' The God of Israel is all powerful and able to change and obstruct nature according to his divine will: 'Who is the Lord that I must obey him?' In other words: what power does He possess that I must submit to His demands? It was for this that the plagues came-- to confirm these three principles. The first three plagues came to prove God's existence. The next three asserted the second principle -- the providence of God. The last three came to substantiate the third principle that God can change the nature of things at will"

According to Abravanel, the three sets of plagues were meant to embody three sets of acknowledgements of the absolute, solitary rule of God. The plagues were intended to teach the Egyptians: 1. HaShem- The Creator 2. Hashem - The Lord of all history and 3. Hashem - The Lord of nature.

As Moses, Aaron and the Israelites heard these ten admonitions 'to know' HaShem, it was surely reminiscent of the ten words or ten commandments enjoined upon Israel.

B. Knowledge of Hashem's Justice and Mercy

The plagues also came to teach lessons concerning Hashem's Justice and Mercy.¹ The following Midrash's comments on the first plague notice this:

1. This is the insight of Nehama Leibowitz- Studies in Shemot- page 172

Why did He bring upon them the plague of blood? Because they threw the children of the Israelites into the river, as it is written: Every male child that is born, shall ye cast into the river. therefore he punished them through the waters of the Nile. (Mishnat R. Eliezer 19)

The seventh plague (reminiscent of the seventh day and finality) demonstrates the Divine attribute of mercy--

כִּי בַפַּעַם הַזֹּאת אֲנִי שֹׁלֵחַ אֶת-כָּל-מַגֵּפְתֵי אֶל-לִבְנֶךָ וּבְעַבְדֶיךָ
וּבְעַמְּךָ בְּעִבּוֹר תִּדְעַה כִּי אֵין כָּמֹנִי בְּכָל-הָאָרֶץ: טו כִּי עָתָה שְׁלַחְתִּי
אֶת-יָדִי וְאֶךְ אוֹתְךָ וְאֶת-עַמְּךָ בַדְּבָר וּתִכָּחַד מִן-הָאָרֶץ: טז וְאוֹלָם
בְּעִבּוֹר זֹאת הָעֲמֻדָתֶיךָ בְּעִבּוֹר הָרֵאִתְךָ אֶת-כַּחֲסִי וְלִמְעַן סִפְרִי שְׁמִי
בְּכָל-הָאָרֶץ

(9:14-16)

For this time I will send all My plagues upon your person, and your courtiers, and your people in order that you may know that there is none like Me in all the world. I could have stretched forth my hand and stricken you and your people with pestilence and you would have been effaced from the earth. Nevertheless 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.

הִנְנִי מִמְטִיר כְּעַת מִחֹר בְּרֹד כְּבֹד מֵאֵד אֲשֶׁר לֹא-הָיָה כָמוֹהוּ
בְּמִצְרַיִם לְמוֹ-הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה וְעַד-עַתָּה: יט וְעָתָה שְׁלַח הָעַז

אֶת-מִקְנֶךָ וְאֵת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר לְךָ בַּשָּׂדֶה כָּל-הָאָדָם וְהַבְּהֵמָה
אֲשֶׁר-יִמְצָא בַּשָּׂדֶה וְלֹא יֵאָסֵף הַבַּיְתָה וְיָרַד עֲלֵהֶם הַבָּרָד וּמָתוּ
(9:18-19)

This time tomorrow I will rain down a very heavy hail, such as not been in Egypt from the day it was founded until now. Therefore , order your livestock and everything you have in the open brought under shelter; every man and beast that is found outside, not having been brought indoors, shall perish when the hail comes down upon them.

(9:18-19)

This attribute of Divine mercy of allowing the Egyptians to remove themselves and all the animals and their possessions to safer ground, finally moves Pharaoh to assert that he is wrong.

חָטָאתִי הַפְּעַם יְהוָה הַצְּדִיק וְאֲנִי וְעַמִּי הָרָשָׁעִים
(9:27)

I stand guilty this time. The Lord is right, as I and my people are in the wrong.

HaShem takes no pleasure in the death and suffering of His people and His creation. HaShem demonstrates his power to Pharaoh in order that the Egyptians repent. He allowed Pharaoh every opportunity to repent but even though Pharaoh temporally

'softened' his heart, in the end it was of no avail, for shortly thereafter we read:

וַיִּחְזַק לֵב פַּרְעֹה וְלֹא שָׁלַח אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

(9:35)

So Pharaoh's heart stiffened and he would not let the Israelites go...

Lessons For Moses and the Israelites

Pharaoh and his country were not the only ones to be instructed about the nature of our All Powerful God, but even Moses, the friend of God and Aaron, the High Priest and the Israelites would have to learn some difficult lessons.

As we examine the table below we learn that the very structure and presentations of the plagues reveal many important lessons for Moses and the Israelites.

Plague	Confrontation Between:	Reaction of Pharaoh/ Egypt	Moses' reaction
1. Blood	Aaron and the magicians	Pharaoh's heart stiffened and the magicians match Aaron's feat	Not mentioned
2. Frogs	Aaron and the magicians	Pharaoh asked Moses to plead for him with the Lord. The magicians could produce frogs but not remove them	Moses cried out

3.Lice	Aaron and the magicians	This is the finger of God. They could not produce lice	Not mentioned
4. Insects		Pharaoh is willing to let Israel sacrifice in Egypt. 2. Do not go far	Insist on going into the dessert. Pleads with God
5. Pestilence	Not mentioned	Pharaoh remains stubborn	Not mentioned
6. Inflammation	Moses vs. Pharaoh	God stiffens Pharaoh's heart. The magicians themselves are afflicted	Not mentioned

7. Hail	Moses vs. Pharaoh	Some Egyptians heed God's warning and protect their slaves and livestock	"I shall spread out my hand's (9:29)
8. Locust	Moses vs. Pharaoh	Who are the ones to go? (only men) 2. Clearly you are bent on mischief (10:7-11)	We will all go, young and old, sons daughters, flocks, herds (10:9)
9. Darkness	Moses vs. Pharaoh	I stand guilty. Only your flocks and herds shall be left behind	Not a hoof shall remain behind

10. The death of the first born	God vs. Pharaoh	Pharaoh's heart stiffened. The Egyptians try to hurry the Israelites to leave	Not mentioned
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In the first set of plagues, Moses was not yet confident of his power and authority to confront Pharaoh. Moses has Aaron do his bidding and then it is only to confront the magicians but not Pharaoh. As Aaron's power increases to the point that the magicians can not remove the frogs and then could not even produce lice, only then in plague four, Moses has enough resolve to talk back to Pharaoh. Moses does not even have to 'cry out' to HaShem, as he did in the second plague. Throughout the remaining plagues, Moses fully asserts himself so that by plague nine he states- Not a hoof shall remain! This is a far cry from the Mose of the early plagues!

By the end of the third plague the magicians are smart enough to be cognizant that HaShem's "finger" is involved. They will all

soon learn that what they have seen so far is only a foretaste or 'finger' for not only Hashem's finger but his entire arm is involved.

אֲנִי יְהוָה וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מִתַּחַת סִבְלַת מִצְרַיִם וְהִצַּלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם
מֵעֲבֹדָתָם וְגֹאֲלִתִּי אֶתְכֶם בְּזֵרוּעַ נְטוּיָה וּבְשִׁפְטִים גְּדוּלִים

I am the Lord, I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements. (6:6)

In plague six Moses finally directly confronts Pharaoh and even though the magicians recognize God's finger in the previous plague, they are now so powerless that they themselves are afflicted with the inflammation. In plague six Pharaoh is so recalcitrant that God Himself 'stiffens' Pharaoh's heart.

In plague seven, as previously mentioned, Pharaoh recognizes that he is guilty, though he is too recalcitrant to let the Israelites go free. Even many of the Egyptians are now aware of the tremendous power of HaShem and are able to heed the warning. At this point Pharaoh has deep enough insight to realize that he and his people are wrong.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים חָטָאתִי הַפְּעַם יְהוָה הַצַּדִּיק וְאֲנִי וְעַמִּי
הַרְשָׁעִים:

He said to them, I stand guilty this time. The Lord is in the right and I and my people are in the wrong.

By the seventh plague Moses is confident enough in his God given power to not plead or cry out to Hashem, but rather he asserts that he would spread out his hand.

In the eighth plague the Egyptian magicians confront not Aaron, but their god, the Pharaoh. They plead with Pharaoh to recognize that it is a lost cause and that indeed Egypt is lost. The courtiers seemed to have lost all confidence in his ability as a god but they still do not recognize HaShem as their God.

וַיֹּאמְרוּ עֲבָדֵי פַרְעֹה אֵלָיו עַד-מַתִּי יִהְיֶה זֶה לָנוּ לְמוֹקֵשׁ
שְׁלַח אֶת-הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיהֶם הַטֶּרֶם תִּדְעַ
כִּי אֲבֵדָה מִצְרַיִם

Pharaoh's courtiers said to him, "How long shall this one be a snare to us? Let the men go to worship the Lord their God! Are you not aware that Egypt is lost?"

In the final showdown of Plague ten, Moses does not confront Pharaoh. It is now HaShem vs Pharaoh. Moses and Israel learn that there are some things that only belong to the realm of Divinity. Some things are just too marvelous and awe inspiring for man to perform! God tells Pharaoh

that indeed you shall learn that He makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel

לְמַעַן תִּדְעוּן אֲשֶׁר יַפְלֶה יְהוָה בֵּין מִצְרַיִם וּבֵין יִשְׂרָאֵל

..in order that you may know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel.

The entire nation of Egypt will suffer dire consequences for tolerating the injustices and inhumane actions of their Pharaoh and leaders.

Contemporary Lessons

Through our analysis of the plagues, what lessons can we glean for our contemporary personal, corporate and world situations?

1. We cannot assign to others that which HaShem intends for us to accomplish. God intended Moses and not Aaron to confront and deal with Pharaoh and the situation at hand. You can not delegate God given tasks and authority.
2. When HaShem gives you an assignment be confident that He also gives you the tools and the where-with-all to accomplish the task. Throughout the progression of the plagues Moses learns this valuable lesson.

3. Even when we are in positions of authority, subordinates often have valuable insights that can save us from wrongdoing and even disastrous consequences. After all, the courtiers and magicians recognized that Egypt was lost and tried to convince Pharaoh. Do you listen to the valuable insights of your offspring, your subordinates, and your employees or are you so caught up in your authority and your position as an elder and supervisor that you can not glean valuable information from others?

4. Don't find yourself in a position in which you are accustomed and acclimated to doing wrong. Are you so entrenched in your wrong-doing, that you can not or will not repent? Pharaoh initially hardened his own heart, but because he became so recalcitrant, God 'stiffened' Pharaoh's heart. When God stiffened Pharaoh's heart, Pharaoh could no longer repent! There are some things that you do that God will make very sure that you pay for your deeds.

5. When you recognize injustice in your midst do something and say something. All the Egyptians paid the severe price of the lost of their first born because of their inaction in striking down injustice and their fear of Pharaoh. When necessary, don't be afraid to confront authority.

6. דעו לפני מי אתם עמדים Know before whom you stand² and before whom you must ultimately give an account. Pharaoh did not recognize Hashem, the Creator, Hashem, the Lord of all nature or Hashem, the Lord of all history. In your lives which powerless gods do you give credence and authority? Who or what do you allow to have authority over you: cigarette smoking, poor eating habits, drugs, not cleaving only to your spouse, alcohol, gambling, sexual lust and misbehavior, not honoring your parents, your credit card debt, greed, avarice, jealous, etc.?

7. Heed the warnings early. Do you need ten plagues in your life or can you discern and hear the voice of God speaking to you and respond early? How often do you wish that you had listened to that 'still, small voice' earlier on? Learn to divert disaster early.

8. Don't leave anyone or anything of value behind. When we make it to the top or when we are on our road to the top, do we forget friends and family and those who have helped us along the way? Even though Pharaoh told Moses that the Israelite men could go free, Moses insisted that not even a hoof would be left behind.

2. Berakhot 28b

9. Always remember that in some matters God does indeed make a distinction between Israel and the nations (the tenth plague). We are a kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation. As our siddur states- the Sabbath was not given to the heathens of the earth, but to Israel, God's special treasure - **Segullah!** At all times conduct yourself as such. Do you remember the Sabbath to keep it Holy?

10. Don't try to do the work of HaShem. Some things are best left to HaShem. The tenth plague was a confrontation and final showdown between HaShem and Pharaoh. There are some things that are too marvelous, wondrous, awe-inspiring, magnificent majestic, and holy for humanity. After all, as the Psalm states -"Who is man..? God does indeed have the last word.

Finally, I hope that you recognized that there were ten plagues and that this Devrei Torah enumerated ten lessons in remembrance of the Ten Words that HaShem spoke to us.

שבת שלום ומברך

Rabbi Malchah Netanyahu

