

Bo Sermon 5783 2023

6 AM, the alarm goes off. Beep, beep, beep!

Imagine you wake up one day, rub your eyes, get out of bed, put on your slippers, plod into the bathroom, turn on the water, and– what? The stuff coming out of the faucet is bright red and smells metallic. Huh?

You sleepily shake your head and go downstairs to the kitchen. Looking out of the window over the sink you are shocked to see that there are masses of frogs hopping all over the yard. Now, frogs are cute and all, but this is like, a LOT of them. You look more closely and see that the grass looks like it's moving– no, it's swarming with lice and locusts and looking progressively less green by the minute.

To be fair, the frogs look pretty happy because they have a smorgasbord of lice and locusts, who in turn are gorging themselves on the foliage. But inside of your house, you're beginning to worry. This isn't normal.

You turn on the TV to reports of people showing up in the ER en masse with odd skin lesions, and farmers reporting that their livestock had dropped dead in the fields.

As you watch, the TV is slowly drowned out by the increasingly loud pounding of hail on the roof.

OK, by now you might just want to go back to bed. Especially because you can't make your morning cup of coffee if the only water you have access to has now turned to blood.

How would any of us in this room respond if our morning were to actually play out this way? What if we opened our Facebook feeds and saw that similar phenomena were sweeping the state, the nation, the whole world?

Would we react differently if we were, say, a weather forecaster? Or a rabbi? What if we were members of Congress, tasked with making laws? Or police, supposed to keep people safe?

Or, what if that house we had woken up in was actually the White House. What if, for the sake of this thought experiment, you– yes, YOU– are the President of these United States. What if you can't personally see the fields outside being swarmed with locusts, because you live in the Capitol, and you don't actually see frogs hopping around because your residence is behind a fence and guard dogs and Secret Service details and alarms and bulletproof windows– what if you don't actually watch the news but rely on your advisors to tell you what's happening– and so you're hearing about all of this second-hand– and today, one of your advisors– perhaps your most annoying advisor, lately– this advisor named Moses comes up and says "Excuse me, President, but I have been trying to talk to you all week and you keep on coming up with excuses not to listen to me and my God. If you do as I say, all of these calamities will stop. The skies will clear, the water will be ready to become coffee again, the skin diseases will clear up, and the frogs will hop off to wherever they came from in the first place! All you have to do, President, is agree to the requests of my God."

What would you do? Would you take him seriously?

Perhaps you don't believe in your advisor's religion—

Perhaps you don't believe that the reality you're hearing about
is actually as bad as it seems—

So when would you really start to pay attention?

What about when the second day without coffee begins?

What about when it gets to be lunchtime and all of the salad
greens have been devoured by locusts?

What if your State dinner is canceled because all of the cattle
abruptly died and now there is no filet mignon to serve?

What if the Pentagon is lit only by flashlights in the midst of
pitch black darkness?

Would you be moved to act?

Or would you retreat into your inner sanctum

Perhaps into an Oval Office of sorts

Would you sip a secret stash of cold brew that the
commonfolk don't have access to

And defrost some Beyond burgers from the freezer

And tell yourself that this, too, shall pass,
And that your advisor is crazy,
And that YOU are the President, not him,
And that you will not negotiate under these terms and under
this duress!

You might crawl into your bed,
Secret service posted outside,
Shut your eyes,
And hope that everything would be better in the morning.

Except we all know what happens next. You wake up, but it
isn't morning. You wake up in the middle of the night to a
great wail, a scream of anguish, gaining strength, raised by
multitudes of voices. You rush out of the room into
pandemonium: your staffers are sobbing on their cell phones,
the news stations are reporting mass casualties across the
globe from a mysterious cause.

In a panic, with a sinking feeling in your gut, you try to find
your children, but you can't.

Suddenly, the crisis is real for you. Very, very real.

You try to call that advisor, to tell him that yes, you will do what his God wants, yes, you will give in to his requests, but his cell phone goes to voicemail. You leave him a message saying, do whatever you have to do, just make all of this stop. Make it stop. It's too much. It has gone too far.

It feels like the screaming will never stop.

Now, my modern-day dramatization of the plagues which are described in this week's parashah is, perhaps, a bit over-the-top, and wishy-washy on the details. But it's worth asking ourselves– why in the world did it take Pharaoh so long to actually listen to Moses, so long to take the plagues seriously, so long to make the decision that might spare the lives and livelihoods of his own people? Why did Pharaoh persist in saying no to Moses even as his entire country was ravaged by hail and pestilence and blood?

Commentators have historically had a field day analyzing the Torah's insistence that God strengthened, or hardened, the heart of Pharaoh. One might think, then, that it is God's fault, and not Pharaoh's, that such awful things befall the Egyptian populace. But a common explanation among our sages is that without Pharaoh's own evil intentions and tendency to harden his own heart, God would not have interfered. Indeed, the hardening that God provided was only an encouragement of the direction that Pharaoh had already chosen to go in, a deepening of the hateful acts that Pharaoh had already demonstrated towards the Israelites countless times. The Pharaoh who mistreated the Israelites, who held them as slaves, already had an incredibly hardened heart.

As we see, though, this hardened heart was harmful not only to the Israelites, but also to Pharaoh's own subjects, the Egyptians themselves. Hundreds of thousands of everyday Egyptians, Egyptians without access to the Pharaoh or the palace or servants or secret stashes of food, were the primary victims of the plagues. It was Pharaoh who refused to let our people go, but it was Pharaoh's subjects who suffered. It was

everyday people whose flocks died, whose fields were stripped bare, who starved, who were scared.

And Pharoah, ensconced in his palace, separated by a deeply hierarchical and classist society, rich beyond measure, far away from the commoners, did not suffer as acutely– at least, not until his own son died.

Sefar HaYashar, a Midrash on the book of Exodus, offers us a tantalizing and humanizing addendum to the chaotic scene of plagues I described at the beginning of this drash.

In the Midrash, following the cry of anguish that went up in the night following the discovery of the death of all of the firstborn, quote,

”.... Batya, Pharaoh’s daughter, went forth with Pharoah in search of Moses, and they found him eating and drinking and rejoicing with all the Israelites, and Batya [who had raised Moses as a child, remember] said unto Moses: Shall this be the reward for my kindness towards you, for raising and elevating you, that

you bring now upon me and upon the house of my father this evil, [that so many should die]? And Moses answered her, answered her: Behold, the Lord has brought ten plagues over Egypt, and have any of them truly annoyed you? Have any of them truly affected you? And she said: No.”

All of the plagues that had destroyed everyday life for everyday Egyptians, and had any of them actually impacted the royal family?

No. They hadn’t.

Batya’s admission in this Midrash– that prior to the deaths of the firstborn, none of the royal family had truly experienced or understood the pain and destruction wrought by the other plagues– speaks volumes about the cost of distance, the cost of separation, the cost of living in a society that is deeply divided, with daily realities that differ extremely from one another.

Imagine the lives that could have been saved– human and animal alike– if there hadn't been such a wall, such a divide, between those in power and those without. Imagine if the experiences of the everyday citizens had been truly real to those in power; if Pharaoh and his household had not been so blinded by their own sense of everyday entitlement and privilege, their own power, that they had been able to comprehend the suffering that those living outside of the palace walls were experiencing.

What about in our own country, and in our own lives? Is the suffering of others real to us, or is it just a blurb of words on a screen? When wildfires and hurricanes destroy homes, when mass shootings numb us with their horrific constancy, when millions of kids in this country do not have enough to eat each day– how do we feel? Do we feel... anything?

Is this real to us?

We know that idolatry and worshiping other gods is a big no-no in Judaism. But what if the idol we are worshiping is our

own way of life, our own privilege? What if, like Pharoah, we are becoming so caught up in our day-to-day patterns and comforts, that we are missing the reality of those who are suffering around us– until it is too late?

What if the idol we are worshiping is the luxury of being able to roll up our car windows and look away when someone asks for spare change?

Or what if our idol is not prioritizing voting in elections or giving tzedakah, because it's not OUR apartments that are going to be demolished for rezoning, or OUR schools whose funding is being cut, or OUR relatives fleeing war in search of asylum, or OUR neighborhood being threatened by flooding?

Are our eyes, and the eyes of our hearts, open to seeing how all of these things are connected–how all of our destinies, rich or poor, Jew or not, are bound together– or will we only act, like Pharoah, when it hits so close to home that we can't deny it any more?

No. We should not have to wait until someone we know personally dies, or gets hurt, before we say– this isn't OK. We have to speak up. We have to live our values.

Our bodies may not be in Jerusalem today, but our hearts had better well be.

Our bodies may not be in Memphis today, but our hearts had better well be.

Pharoah's people suffered, but it wasn't until he himself suffered that he was finally able to act.

My friends, please don't be like Pharoah.

Don't divide the world into "us" and "them". Don't push away the pain of others.

We are all in this together. Shabbat shalom.