

Why Moses Sat Out the First Three Plagues

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Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom

As I was walking my dog Mazel the other day, I caught sight of someone who struck fear in my heart. Peeling around the corner from Ambleside onto Trailridge, I glimpsed her face and knew exactly who she was. We had seen each other before. She had been in my home. Look, it was a difficult time! I was desperate! I had to call her! And now I see her again on my street! I thought it was all over...

The truth is, it lasted too long to begin with...and I just wanted her to put an end to it. Of course I'm talking about **the Potomac Lice Lady**. The Potomac Lice lady is a lovely Jewish mother of three from right around here, who runs a gangbuster business delousing people's heads all over town. She has a state-of-the-art treatment area with TVs and Wi-Fi and she even makes house calls! She's very friendly...Lauren is her name. She drives around town in a hulking SUV; it's probably filled with crates of those popsicle sticks that lice ladies use. Seeing her on my street reminded me of our own household lice epidemic last year. In a panic we had her painstakingly comb through all five of our heads and all five of my hairs. 4/5 of us were affected—can you guess who wasn't?! I have terrifying childhood memories of the school nurse checking for lice as we stood in long, very public lines periodically through the year. If you had it, everyone found out, because you were immediately pulled out of line and hustled into some isolation chamber in the nurse's office until your parents came to pick you up. Then you missed school for days on end, while you got treated with special shampoos and were examined again before returning to school to be sure that no little larvae remained on your scalp. Lice is the plague that keeps on plaguing people 3,000 years after Pharaoh and company came down with a case of supernatural proportions. As Lauren the Lice Lady lumbered past me in her truck earlier this week I thought, too bad she wasn't around in ancient Egypt...she could have made a killing!

Lice is of course the plague that undid all of Pharaoh's magicians, wizards, and sorcerers. Somehow they managed to duplicate the blood and to make the frogs reproduce, but when it came to the lice, they threw down their magic wands and declared that the God of Israel had bested them. *Etzba Elohim hi*, 'this is no hocus pocus, this is the hand of God,' they declare. Besides the ubiquitous plague of lice both then and now, there is something else that is strange

about this particular plague...in fact about lice, frogs, and blood—the first three plagues brought upon Egypt...

Who was it who used that rod? Who held it out over the Nile as its waters turned to blood? Who lifted that rod over rivers, lakes, and ponds to make frogs swarm out from them and all over Egypt? Who tapped the dust of the earth bringing it to life as a frightening swarm of lice? It turns out that Moses is not the one who instigates these first three plagues...rather it is his brother Aaron: John Carradine, not Charleston Heston. I checked YouTube—Cecil B. DeMille got it right! The question is why Aaron? Moses threw soot into the sky out which boils became manifest; Moses held out his arm to make the hail rain down, and then again to make it stop; Moses brought on the locusts and the darkness...Why does *Aaron* initiate the first three, while Moses brings about the rest?

According to Prof. Nahum Sarna, who among other things edited the JPS volume on the Book of Exodus, Moses approaches Pharaoh as an equal. Just as Pharaoh has his magicians, Moses has Aaron who performs the miracles. For the first three plagues the duel is between the magicians and Pharaoh...but once the magicians wave the white flag, Moses steps in and it becomes a contest between himself and Pharaoh directly.

Rashi brings a radically different interpretation. Being that the R in Rashi stands for Rabbi, he not surprisingly brings a moral lesson to bear on this unusual detail of Aaron's dominant role in the first three plagues. Citing a Midrash, Rashi suggests that Moses intentionally sits out of the first three plagues, not because he needs to be co-equal with Pharaoh and needs a foil for the magicians. Rather because these particular plagues remind him of his own story...of his won past. You see the waterways of Egypt were particularly precious to Moses. Moses was rescued from those very waters; in fact his name means 'one who was taken out from the waters.' It was along those canals that Miriam hid to watch the teivah, the basket that held her baby brother as it floated away from his mother's protective care, and into the tributary where Pharaoh's daughter found him. Were it not for the waterways of Egypt, Moses would likely have been one of the countless victims of Pharaoh's brutality...another male Hebrew baby drowned for the crime of being born. Moses was not about to smite the waters that were his recue route, his salvation when he was just an infant. So too, the sands of Egypt, the dust if you will, was the very medium that covered up his crime when he killed the Egyptian task-master who was beating the

Hebrew slave. Remember what the Torah said back in Exodus Ch. 2 “*vayitmanei hu ba’chol*,” after he struck the Egyptian and realized he was dead, he his body in the sand. Moses didn’t flee Egypt because a dead body was found; he had to leave because his own people threatened to turn him in! Since the sand covered the evidence of the crime, Moses could not, according to Rashi, strike that very same sand transforming it to the predatory lice that attacked Egypt. He was too grateful, if you will, to those elements of nature, to smite them or pollute them in any way.

Now you may be thinking that Moses sounds more Native American than Jewish. The personification of nature and the reverence for natural resources is something we’d expect from Chief Seattle rather than Moshe Rabbeinu. The truth is that our tradition is filled with realizations that nature contains extraordinary sacred power...*Mah rabu ma’asecha Hashem*, how great is Your creation God, the Psalmist says, *mal’ah ha’aretz kinyanecha*, the earth is full of your creative power!¹ Jewish mysticism understood the natural world to be the very garment of the *Shechina*, of God’s presence; and Rav Kook, Israel’s first Chief Rabbi preached the embrace of nature, the attachment to the earth as critical to Jews reviving the modern State of Israel.

But what Moses did was not pantheism or nature worship. I believe that when reflecting on where he came from and how he became what and who he was, that Moses cultivated a profound sense of gratitude. He even honored the inanimate objects that were critical to his own journey. And it’s not such a far cry from what we do in our sophisticated 21st Century world. How many of us have license plate frames or stickers on our cars identifying the college or university we attended...even if it was many years ago?? How many of us, when in our home towns, drive past our childhood homes and neighborhood streets maintaining attachments with physical spaces that were the landscapes of our childhood and other precious memories? The Rambam wrote that the Sages would kiss the earth of the land of Israel when they entered its borders.² I remember when I was 16 years old on my first trip to Israel at the old Ben Gurion Airport ,where you had to walk down the steps of the plane rather than through a modern jet bridge. I had always thought about kissing the ground when I arrived. When I looked down at the greasy tarmac, I admit to having second thoughts. But the Talmud says that the sage Rabbi Chia bar

¹ Psalm 104:24

² Rambam, *Hilkhot Melakhim* 5:10

Abba literally rolled in the dust of the land of Israel, because it was so precious to him, and that great Rabbi Abba would literally kiss the stones of Acco. To be connected to, deferential to, and protective of the domains that are the foundations of our lives is a profound expression of love and appreciation for who and what we are as people. I believe Moses demonstrates that in his reverence for the rivers, ponds, and estuaries, even the grains of sand of the land of Egypt.

Now I'm going to give you a spoiler alert...In case anyone plans to read Yehuda Ha'Levi's 12th Century masterpiece the Kuzari, I'm about to tell you the ending...

The Rabbi in the book's dialogue ends up leaving the Eurasian land of the Khazars and makes aliyah to Eretz Yisrael. In one of the book's closing lines, the rabbi says, Jerusalem will only be rebuilt when the Jewish people "yearn for it to such an extent that we sympathize even with its stones and its dust."³ That is to say, redemption happens when people value where they came from...the people and places that have shaped us and made us. Our culture today is so very much about what's happening right now, and being on the cutting edge of what's about to happen tomorrow...Moses reminds us to treasure our past as well!

³ Heinemann, Isaak, ed. *Jehuda Halevi: Kuzari in Three Jewish Philosophers*. Atheneum, New York, 1969. Pages 128-129.