

The first seven of the Ten Plagues occur in this week's *parasha*. Presumably, God could have abbreviated the story by creating one big miracle to pull the Children of Israel out of Egypt. Since the Exodus didn't happen that way, our Rabbis sought to understand the Plagues. The following themes are used by our commentators:

- Of course, the Plagues were meant to teach the Egyptians and the Israelites to distinguish between the "alternative facts" of the Egyptian gods and the reality of the only God of the universe.
- The notion of *mida k'neged mida* – measure for measure – is often used by our commentators to explain events in the *Tanach*, and is extensively applied to the Plagues. The Midrash asks of each plague, why did God punish them with plague X, and offers an answer of the form, because of Y, where X holds a mirror up to Y, the latter being an evil perpetrated on Israel by Pharaoh and the Egyptians.
- Rabbi Jonathan Sacks finds humor in the mockery of Pharaoh, his magicians, and the idols of Egypt that the Plagues bring. He writes: "Satire is essential to understanding at least some of the plagues.... To Pharaoh's magicians, Moses and Aaron are people like themselves who practice secret arts. So they replicate them: they show that they too can turn water into blood and generate a horde of frogs. The irony here is very close to the surface. So intent are the Egyptian magicians on proving that they can do what Moses and Aaron have done, that they entirely fail to realise that far from making matters better for the Egyptians, they are making them worse: more blood, more frogs."¹

Let's consider what our commentators say concerning these themes and the plagues we read of in *parashat Va'era*.

1. Blood

Midrash: "Why did God punish them with blood? To pay them back in their own coin, for so He said to Abraham: 'And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge' (Gen. 15:14). They did not allow the daughters of Israel to have ritual immersion after their menstruation"² – here, I interrupt the Midrash. Why would Pharaoh care about the women of Israel using a *mikva*? Recall that traditional Jewish women follow their periods with a session at a *mikva* before resuming marital relations; recall what Pharaoh said at the beginning of *Exodus*: "Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase." (Ex. 1:10 – pp. 319-320 in *Etz Hayim*). Indeed, the Midrash continues, "so that they should not increase; on this account were they smitten with blood."

Midrash: "R. Abin the Levite, the son of Rabbi, said: The Israelites became wealthy from the plague of blood. How was that? If an Egyptian and an Israelite were in one house where there was a barrel full of water, and the Egyptian went to fill a pitcher therefrom, he would discover that it contained blood, but the Israelite would drink water from the same barrel. When the Egyptian said to him: 'Give me some water with thy own hand,' and he gave it to him, it still became blood. Even if he said to him: 'Let us both drink from one vessel,' the Israelite would drink water, but the Egyptian blood. It was only when he had bought it from the Israelite for money, that he was able to drink water, and this is how the Israelites became rich."³

2. Frogs

Midrash: "Our Rabbis of blessed memory said: The plagues which God brought upon the Egyptians were the means of establishing peace among them. How was this? There was a dispute between the Ethiopians and the Egyptians [about the border between their lands].... when the frogs came the dispute was settled, for the plague only visited the Egyptian borders and thus the Ethiopians knew which was not theirs. For it distinctly says ALL *THY* BORDERS ("YOUR whole country" – Ex. 7:27 - *Etz Hayim*, p. 360) , not those that belong to others."⁴

¹ [Sacks], p. 54

² [Midrash], p. 127

³ [Midrash], pp. 127-128

⁴ [Midrash], p. 132

Midrash: "BOTH UPON THEE, AND UPON THY PEOPLE (Ex. 7:28). Because Pharaoh transgressed first, as it says: *And he said unto his people*, the plague began with him; hence it says first 'Upon thee', then, 'and upon thy people'.... R. Aha says: From the words 'upon thee' is proved that as soon as the drop of water which he drank entered his body, it became a frog and was wedged therein."⁵ Ouch! Could this be the origin of the expression "a frog in the throat"?

Noting that the Hebrew at Ex. 8:2 (p. 361 in *Etz Hayim*) is in the singular – literally, "the frog came up" – some commentators see mockery of the Egyptians' inability to kill off one frog.

Midrash, Nachmanides, both quoting the Talmud: "R. Akiba said: It was only one frog, but this bred/swarmed so rapidly that it filled the land of Egypt."⁶

Rashi⁷, citing the Talmud (Sanhedrin 67): "There was one frog and they beat it and it divided into swarms and swarms; this is its Midrashic interpretation. But its plain meaning can be said: A swarm of frogs."

3. Gnats/lice/mosquitoes

Why gnats? Here are multiple explanations:

Midrash: "Because they made Israel scavengers of their streets."⁸

Nachmanides: "... the first two plagues - ... blood, and ... frogs ... did not involve the creation of some new phenomenon out of nothing or some act of new formation, [so] the magicians could do [as Aaron did].... In the plague of gnats, however, there was an act of creation, for it is not in the nature of dust to turn into gnats." Quoting [Midrash], Nachmanides continues: "... the magicians at once recognized that [Aaron's deed] was an act of God.... From that moment on... they were no longer anxious to liken themselves to Moses by bringing forth the plagues."⁹

R. Sacks: "Pharaohs ... demonstrated their godlike status by creating monumental architecture: the great temples, palaces and pyramids.... God mocks them by revealing His presence in the tiniest of creatures."¹⁰

4. Flies (in swarms)

Midrash: "Why did He bring swarms upon them? Because they used to say to the Israelites: 'Go, and bring unto us bears, lions, and leopards,' in order to vex them."¹¹ Note the modern editors of [Midrash] comment that this may reflect Roman persecution, when Jews were made to fight wild beasts in an arena for public amusement.

Rashi [R, p. 73] says this plague was "a mixture of noxious animals" including "all species of evil beasts and serpents and scorpions."

5. Cattle plague

Midrash: "Why did He bring a murrain upon them? Because they had made the Israelites shepherds of their herds and flocks, and had scattered their cattle over hills and desert places, in order to prevent Israel from multiplying"¹² due to enforced and prolonged absences from home.

6. Boils – שחין

Midrash: "Why did He bring boils upon them? Because they had appointed the Israelites to heat warm things for them and keep cool the things that were cold [objects of physical comfort]; on this account were they smitten with boils, so

⁵ [Midrash]

⁶ [Midrash], p. 134; [Ramban], p. 88

⁷ [Rashi], p. 67

⁸ [Midrash], p. 136

⁹ [Ramban], pp. 87-89

¹⁰ [Sacks], p. 56

¹¹ [Midrash], p. 140

¹² [Midrash], p. 140

that they should not be able to touch their bodies.”¹³ (Rashi: “שִׁי” denotes ‘warmth’”¹⁴) Radal (cited by the modern editors of [Midrash]) – “So that their bodies could not stand either hot or cold.”¹⁵

7. Hail

Midrash: “Why did He bring hail upon them? Because they had made Israel planters of their vineyards, gardens, orchards, and trees; on this account did He bring upon them hail which destroyed all these plantations.”¹⁶

The last 3 Plagues, which appear in next week’s reading, I leave for next week. Shabbat Shalom

References

[Midrash] *Midrash Rabbah*, v. 2 (*Exodus and Leviticus*), Soncino, New York, 1977

[Rashi] *The Pentateuch and Rashi’s Commentary – Exodus*, R. Abraham ben Isaiah and R. Benjamin Sharfman, eds., S.S.&R. Publishing, Brooklyn, 1949

[Ramban] *Ramban (Nachmanides) Commentary on the Torah: Exodus*, R. Dr. Charles B. Chavel, ed., Shilo Publishing, New York, 1973

[Sacks] R. Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation: Exodus*, Maggid Books, Jerusalem, 2010

¹³ [Midrash], p. 141

¹⁴ [Rashi], p. 77

¹⁵ [Midrash], p. 141

¹⁶ [Midrash], p. 146