

Pesach 1/2 5779 The Power of 10

The rituals of the Seder create evocative memories that reverberate through the generations. Arguably, intoning the plagues accompanied by spilling wine is the evening's most dramatic moment. But why 10 plagues? Surely there is an element of overkill; the last plague would have propelled the Israelites out of Egypt without the need for others. Each plague does provide Pharaoh and Egypt with opportunity to change their minds but although there may be a case for more than one plague, on a night when the symbolic number seems to be 4 why, not have just 4 plagues?

The plagues occur over the space of a year and are part of a process of G-d broadcasting a message to various audiences:

1. The Egyptians, G-d is teaching them a lesson – don't mess with My children!
2. Bnei Yisrael – as the prophet Isaiah says (Isaiah 19:22) Hashem will smite Egypt וְגַגְרֵי וְרָפְאוּ smiting and healing at the same time. Smiting the Egyptians and healing Israel. Enslaved over 200 years, they are institutionalised so cannot immediately acclimatise to freedom. They need a decompression period which occurs during this year as they witness the weakening and eventual decimation of their oppressors.
3. As we sit and recite the plagues, we are also an audience listening to Hashem's message – but what is that message?

The Maharal (Gevurot Hashem chap 57) explains that the plagues start from a low point and increase in magnitude – also literally – they rise through levels from low to high: sea, earth, heavens. G-d is displaying His power in every element, a message much needed in Egypt, a polytheistic society, believing in different gods of limited powers. It is G-d that controls the world, not separate deities for each sphere.

He then offers a different explanation for why we need 10 plagues. We learn in Masechet Avot (5:1) בעשרה מאמרות נברא העולם G-d created the world in 10 utterances. In Bereishit (chapt 1) it states וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים “And G-d said” 9 times. Each of these utterances created another level of life; inorganic to organic...The tenth utterance is בְּרֵאשִׁית

Prior to creation there was only Hashem but with each level of creation Hashem becomes more veiled, more hidden behind the marvels of His work. People soon forgot Hashem and believed in other gods. Hashem now reveals Himself as the creator of the world and the Supreme Being. With each plague G-d removes one of those veils of creation until we are left with only Hashem in all His glory. The plagues are the process by which the people are reacquainted with God. When the Nile turns to blood it is the

reverse of (Genesis 1:29) כֹּסֵם וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים הִנֵּה נֹתְתִי לְכֶם אֶת-כָּל-עֵשֶׂב זֶרַע זֶרַע אֲשֶׁר עַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָאָרֶץ וְאֶת-כָּל-הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר-בּוֹ פְרִי-עֵץ זֶרַע זֶרַע לְכֶם יְהִיגָה לְאֹכְלָהּ *And God said: 'Behold, I have given you every herb yielding seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed--to you it shall be for food;*

Egypt relied on the flooding of the Nile for irrigation, now there will be no trees or fruits to feed them. There are parallels for each utterance e.g. the plague of boils is the reverse of (Ibid 1:26) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ - And G-d said: 'Let us make man in our image'. Man is no longer in G-d's image; suffering from lesions, his body is deformed. בְּרֵאשִׁית (first) corresponds to the slaying of the firstborn.

R. Yehuda groups the plagues into 3 sets, forming not just a simple acronym but a key to understanding the plagues on many levels. According to the Ramban one of these, is to refute beliefs that denied the existence of Hashem; or if He exists His authority is only in heaven; or that Hashem is not unique and there are other deities.

Each of the groups of plagues is heralded in a different way:

“By this you will know that I am G-d” בְּזֹאת תֵּדַע כִּי אֲנִי ה' (Exodus 7:17) introduces the first three plagues which demonstrate the existence of G-d. Pharaoh is master of the Nile but he sees it turn to blood, living creatures act against their basic instincts - frogs entering houses and the magicians admit they cannot replicate the plague of lice (Ibid 8:15).

The second group prove that G-d oversees both lower and upper spheres (Ibid 8:18) וְלִמְעַן תֵּדַע כִּי אֲנִי ה' הַקָּרֵב הָאָרֶץ. Hashem wields total control; this is not the wild unleashing of power. He distinguishes between Israelite and Egyptian - only the Egyptians suffer.

The last group prove that G-d is unique בְּעִבּוֹר תֵּדַע כִּי אֵין כְּמוֹנֵי בְּכָל-הָאָרֶץ (Ibid 9:14) Their belief that the sun is a god is disproved as it becomes powerless to warm with the hail, to shine through the locust swarms and the darkness. The final plague proves that Pharaoh is powerless.

Through these plagues, G-d reveals Himself to Egypt and Bnei Yisrael. Hashem does not do these miracles in every generation which is why so many of our mitzvot refer to remembering Egypt reminding us of this fundamental belief.

What would happen if Hashem would reveal Himself today? Would we rationalise it the way the Egyptians did? We wouldn't blame idols; we have scientific theories to rationalise miracles, natural occurrences; global warming... When we look at our world-is it G-d that we see?