

The Tenth Plague: A Source of Punishment or Catalyst for Change?

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The Ten Plagues: a dramatic focal point in the narrative of the Israelites' journey from slavery to freedom. We recall the plagues' devastating destruction through the ritual of removing wine from our glasses at the Passover seder; children learn the plagues' names in Hebrew and English through song (peculiarly silly songs, given the grim subject matter;) in all aspects of our tradition, they are perceived as a singular unit, a moment, a tableau. And yet, the plagues are split up between two parashot-the first seven in last week's Parshat Va'era, the remaining three in this week's Bo.

As a youth educator, this two-parsha story throws a wide range of theological

questions my way. Elementary-age students, dealing with a profound sense of “fair” and “unfair” respond passionately to the myriad of problems in this text. “If God had to harden Pharaoh’s heart, does that mean Pharaoh was planning on letting them go, but God wouldn’t let him? That’s not fair!” pipes up an indignant 3rd grader. “If God is all powerful, why wouldn’t God just free the Israelites from the beginning? Why send all these plagues?” chimes in a pensive sixth grader. “If God killed all the firstborns, wouldn’t that include the good ones? That’s not fair!” That’s not fair, that’s not fair, that’s not fair...my students are crystal clear in their interpretation of this text: there is tremendous injustice in the Ten Plagues, and it appears that the perpetrator is God. Or Moses. Or whoever wrote the Torah. Wait...did a person write the Torah? Is the Torah true? If it’s not, should we believe it? Do you? Do you believe in God?

And down the rabbit hole we go.

Indeed, why were the Ten Plagues necessary? The Torah answers this question clearly:

“...that you may recount in the hearing of your children and of your children’s children how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I displayed my signs among them-in order that you may know that I am the Eternal.”
(Exodus 10:2)

God had to prove God’s magnificent power in order for the exodus to take place. But why through such horrific punishment of the entire Egyptian community? And why did these catastrophic events, each worse than the next, culminate in the death of each and every firstborn? Rabbinic literature offers us a few explanations.

1. *The Death of the Firstborn was the only true plague the other nine existed only to prove God's power.*

When God at first sought to bring the plagues upon Egypt, He intended to commence with the plague of the firstborn, for it says: "Behold, I will slay your son, even your firstborn" (Exodus 4:23). Pharaoh then retorted, "Who is the Lord that I should hearken unto His voice?" (5:2). Then God said, "If I bring the plague of firstborn upon him at the outset, he will send them out at once; no, I will bring other plagues upon him first, by this means will I bring them all" (Exodus Rabbah 18:5).

2. *The Death of the Firstborn was not ultimately carried out by God, but by Egyptian society.*

When God sent the plague of the firstborn ... all the firstborn Egyptians went to speak to their fathers and said, "Everything which Moses has said has come true; don't you want us to live? Let us get the Hebrew slaves out of our homes now. Otherwise we are dead." The fathers answered, "Even if all of Egypt dies they are not leaving." All the firstborn gathered in front of Pharaoh and screamed, "Please remove the Hebrews, because of them evil will befall us and you." Pharaoh said to his servants, "Remove the protesters and break their knees." What did the young Egyptians do? Each took a sword and killed his father (Midrash Tehillim 136:6; Tanchuma, Parshat Bo 18).

While my instinct is to grapple with and view all Torah characters with a critical eye, including God, I would imagine that perhaps the rabbis of the 6th Century were not inclined to interpret scripture with an unfair and unreasonable God in mind; in the above midrashim, our sages attempt to explain away the troubling severity of the plagues by creating new circumstances, shifting the agency from God onto Pharaoh/the Egyptians themselves.

But I want to pose another question: Why did it take Pharaoh until this final plague to set the Israelites free? Through complete darkness, undrinkable water, disease ravaging all livestock...why did Pharaoh endure such horrors? Why

were the Egyptians willing to endure such horrors? The Torah is very clear; some Egyptians (specifically, Pharaoh's magicians) wanted Pharaoh to set the Israelites free, preferring that to plague after plague after plague. Why did it take so long for Pharaoh to make this move?

In the past three years since the terrible Sandy Hook shooting that took the lives of 20 children and 6 teachers, America has lived through mass shooting after mass shooting; [65 shootings, 300 lives lost](#). Our nation has continued to endure this unthinkable plague, despite the fact that there is an obvious solution: common-sense gun regulations. And yet, it took three full years until any action was taken, with last week's executive order. Our nation grieved as men, women, and children died each and every day, and yet our legislators were unable and/or unwilling to take the steps necessary to make meaningful change, until now, when President Obama decided that enough was enough.

Pharaoh's tenth plague, the death of the first born, pushed him to make a decision that freed his community from further plagues. Maybe the tenth plague for the American people wasn't a single incident, but rather, a collective culmination of pain, unrest and devastation, after which we could endure no more. How much blood and locusts, hail and darkness, gun violence and bloodshed can one community bear before meaningful change can take place?

Indeed, a comparison between Pharaoh and the US legislative system is a bizarre and imperfect parallel; in recent years we've seen no shortage of similarly flawed juxtapositions: Trump and Mussolini, Obama and Haman, and Hitler and virtually every person anyone ever wanted to vilify. And yet, we must recognize that even the heart of the congressional body of the leading nation in the free world can be hardened, and remain hard, in the face of an epidemic.

May we continue the work needed to stop the violence and bloodshed plaguing our Mitzrayim, and may we no longer be held captive by that which we have the ability to change.

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