

THE PLAGUES AND CREATION
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Saturday, January 25, 2025

How Should the Plagues Be Understood?

1. From less severe---just annoying---to more severe and destructive. Thus the first plagues, blood, frogs, and lice, do not threaten life or property. They make the basics of life disgusting but they do not pose an ultimate threat. Whereas the latter plagues---hail, locusts, darkness, and the death of the firstborn are not only terrifying but also pose a threat to natural and human life.
2. Some see the plagues being organized into three groups of three, with the tenth plague outside of this structure. There is a formal structure to the first nine. In the 1st, 4th, and 7th plagues, God tells Moses to approach Pharaoh in the morning and to warn him of the impending plague. In the 2nd, 5th, and 8th plagues, Moses warns Pharaoh of the impending plague, but time of day is not mentioned. And in the 3rd, 6th, and 9th plagues, Moses and/or Aaron produce the plague without any warning.
3. Another indication of the seriousness of the plague is whether Pharaoh's magicians can replicate the plague or not. They can do so in the first and second plagues but fail to do so in the third. In the sixth, the magicians are humiliated because they too are afflicted with boils.
4. Another indication of the pattern of threes is that in plagues 4-5, the Torah emphasizes how the plague does not afflict the Israelites in Goshen. An energy barrier encircles Goshen warding off the destructive plague. (8:18, 9:4, 9:26). Another theme is how the Torah teaches the purpose of the plagues. In the fourth plague (8:18), "So that you will know that I am the Lord in the midst of the earth." In the seventh plague (9:29), "So that you will know that the earth is the Lord's." In 10:3, "That you will know that I am the Lord."
5. In the seventh and eighth plagues, the Torah emphasizes the uniqueness of the destructiveness. Nothing like this has been seen before. See 9:18, 9:24 (hail), 10:6, 10:14 (locusts).
6. Who produces the plagues? God is mentioned as the author in 7:3, yet Moses and Aaron are mentioned exclusively in 11:10 at the very end of the sequence. In between, God is explicitly active in plagues, 1, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10. Moses and Aaron are involved jointly in plagues 1, 7, & 8. But only of them is the agent in plagues, 2, 3, 6, and 9. The plagues are a joint project between man and God! Man could not operate without God's power. But God would be helpless without the assistance of man to convey His power into the world. So the plagues are another example of how God works in partnership with man.

The Plagues and the God of Creation

1. There is a relationship between the moral and natural order. Undermining the moral order of society would also undermine the natural order of creation. There is a symbiotic relationship between the ethical order and the cosmic order.
2. In this reading, Egypt is the embodiment of chaos threatening to undermine God's creation and returning it to its primordial state.
3. The Torah calls the plagues signs and wonders (Otot and Moftim). The precise meaning is that the sign points to a more disastrous future. The sign is a disaster and punishment, but it also points to a future judgment. The plagues are ecological signs of historical disaster.

4. Paradoxically, God destroys to save all of creation. The earth is the Lord's (9:29). The whole earth needs to know that God is not saving only the people of Israel. The redemption of Israel will be a way in which the entire world will be saved.
5. The plagues are hypernatural in timing, scope, and intensity. It is a picture of creation gone berserk. The world is reverting to a state of chaos. It is a kind of flood story in one corner of the earth.
6. God's judgment of Pharaoh and Egypt correlates with Pharaoh's oppression of the Israelites. Pharaoh oppressed the Israelites over an extended period, God in turn oppressed Egypt over an extended period. Israel lost property and life, so Egypt will lose property and life. Pharaoh cruelly oppressed and enslaved the Israelites against their will; God will harden Pharaoh's heart, making him experience enslavement. Israel cannot listen to Moses because of Kotzer Ruach; Pharaoh refuses to listen to the word of God because of a hardened heart. The death of the Israelite male children correlates with the death of the male firstborn. At the end of chapter two, God hears the cries of the Israelites, which correlates with the cry of the Egyptians when the tenth plague strikes.
7. God gives Pharaoh up to reap the natural consequences of his anticipation behaviors. Thus, hardening the heart is a natural consequence of Pharaoh's assault on the moral order. The plagues are not arbitrarily chosen. The consequences are cosmic because the sins are creational.

Modern Lessons

1. The Torah has a moral vision. In this moral vision, the morality of society is inextricably linked to the order of nature. Injustice, oppression, and the shedding of innocent blood will provoke a response in nature, because the earth is the Lord's. Is the converse true? Is an attack on nature also an act of injustice?
2. If the earth is the Lord's, then we cannot wield absolute power over it. Only God has absolute power over the earth. Clearly, God as the creator wants to see His creations flourish. He does not want to see the elimination of His creations willy-nilly. Often people will think the preservation of a species at great cost is a waste of resources. But if the earth is the Lord's, then we have an obligation to protect and nurture different species.
3. If the earth is the Lord's, then we have an obligation not to sully God's creation through different kinds of pollutants. Moreover, we demonstrate an arrogance similar to Pharaoh's when we assert that whatever we do to the earth will make no difference in the long run. Ultimately, the story of Pharaoh and the plagues is about arrogance: Pharaoh believing that he is responsible only to himself and that the Egyptians are responsible only to him.
4. We live in a time when many ignore the signs and wonders in our midst. These signs and wonders are the shrinking of the Arctic ice cap, the befouling of our waters leading to the poisoning of whole communities, the extinction of species at record rates, the destruction of rain forests, and the deadly destruction caused by hurricanes and fires. Will we be like Pharaoh and harden our hearts so that we will not understand? Or will we be able to see and listen and thereby act accordingly?
5. The plague narrative centers around Pharaoh hardening his heart. How often have we seen our leaders become enslaved to their arrogant views of the world? When we were young, we saw how President Johnson and Secretary McNamara were humbled because they could only interpret the Vietnam War in one way. They hardened their hearts and we suffered the deaths of 50,000 Americans and hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese. And so it was with President Bush and Vice-President Cheney. And so it is with Prime Minister Netanyahu. Their hard-heartedness was

and is a product of their arrogance. Their arrogance led them to become more and more defensive and hostile to those who questioned the morality and political wisdom of their actions.

6. But what about our hearts? Does the plague narrative have something to teach us? Do we harden our hearts when a family member acts out in a disrespectful or even violent way? Do we become more and more defensive and arrogant when people we love question our decisions and actions? Do we fail to seriously engage with our “domestic” critics, thereby turning away from them? Thereby signaling that we may not love them in the way we once did. On a deeper level, the plague narrative challenges us to look at whether we sometimes act like a Pharaoh with our loved ones, our friends, and colleagues.
7. Yes, the plague narrative has lots to teach us. Perhaps you can come up with other lessons as well. Shabbat Shalom.