

D'var Torah, Va'era

Prepared for the Aleph Student Shabbaton, Jan.12. 2013

By Rain Zohav

Today we will be reading from Va'era, a parsha that contains a new revelation of God's name and many promises by God of how the Israelites will be redeemed. The Torah readers will bring out these themes from the first two aliyot that they will be reading. But I was drawn to other parts of this parsha that I believe also hold redemptive teachings. These surprisingly, are the verses that describe the first seven plagues. These passages cannot be read literally in my view, especially the verses that declare that God will harden Pharaoh's heart in order that God can impress both Egyptians and Israelites with His power. I believe that those verses were problematic already in Biblical times. Certainly by the time of the Talmud these passages were seen as problematic. Midrash Rabbah, verses 13:3 and 11:1 even pose the question, "Does this not afford an opening to heretics".

One of the questions that these passages raise is if we should ever wish for plagues upon our enemies. And, I believe the answer is "no". And yet- plagues surely exist now as they did in ancient times. So for me, first of all this is a *descriptive*, rather than *prescriptive* teaching that asks, "Is this REALLY what it takes to get us to stop oppressing ourselves and others?". Plagues exist – and it does seem as if we need them to shake us up out of our complacency. Rabbi Harold Kushner writes, "The situation for both the Egyptians and the Israelites must become unbearable to overcome the tendency of both sides to maintain the status quo. (*Etz Hayim*). As Frederick Douglass teaches, "Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, want crops without plowing up the ground- they want rain without thunder and lightning- they want the ocean without the awful roar of its waters".

For this d'var, I want to look at the text metaphorically. I want us to think about our "inner pharaoh" and how we respond to and how we bring forth metaphoric and symbolic "plagues" in our lives and in our world. If we think of the liberation of our souls, how do these texts read?

First is the plague of the river Nile turning to blood. In our own time, we have the expression of “rivers running with blood”. We in the U.S. recently have had the experience of the halls of a school “running with blood”. And do we react like Pharaoh’s magicians- taking our turn to prove that we too can produce blood? Do we advocate violence for violence – pistol packing principals? Or do we react like Pharaoh, “turning and going into our palaces, paying no regard, even to this”? Do we harden our own hearts and in the words of Rabbi Shefa Gold, “...get used to the world in its imbalance ...accomplished by denying any feelings that might threaten the status quo”? Looking at our world, the truth of this text that it is hard to get people to change fairly shouts out at us.

I look at the plague of frogs as symbolic of our reptilian brain. The reptilian brain is a necessary part of our makeup. It warns us of danger and leads us to “fight, flight or freeze”. However, it takes great discernment to know when the correct time is to take a stand and fight, to leave a disastrous situation, or to simply sit still and listen. Rashi teaches that “Because the river protected Moshe when he was cast into it, therefore it was not smitten by his hand, neither at the plague of the blood nor the plague of the frogs”. Moshe was able to honor the life-giving water. As we honor what brings life to our souls, we may find that we are bringing forth less violent blood and less frogs of fear.

Lice are the next plague. As anyone who has had children in a public school knows, lice are very contagious and very hard to get rid of. For me, this can symbolize the contagion of prejudices and how very hard it is to eradicate these attitudes. Even in this holy chevre, even with our “aging and saging program” I have heard less than respectful things said about elders, for instance. The journey is long to true liberation.

Next we have stinging insects – symbolizing stinging remarks. These we sometimes address to others and sometimes to ourselves. Rabbi Plaut writes that “The progression of the tales may be seen as a rising tide, designed both to punish and to instruct”. This reminds me of the superego, which can indeed be either punishing or instructive. Once again discernment is needed. We need to allow our conscience to be active and instructive, but not punishing.

The next plague, that of a cattle disease may symbolize when we do not take care of our bodies. Judaism does not despise the body – the home of our souls while on this earth. In fact there are many mitzvot we cannot do without having our bodies well and functioning. And perhaps the next plague that comes so quickly on the heels of this one – without warning, affecting both humans and beasts reinforces this integration of body and soul. What is this plague of “hot” inflammation that comes from the soot of an oven? I would suggest that it is the plague of anger. Reb Shaya says that anger also has its purpose – to protect us in times of actual physical danger. But how many times is that the situation when we find ourselves angry? We harden our hearts and do not see another person’s point of view.

The last plague described in this parsha is that of hail accompanied by thunder and fire. At last Pharaoh admits his guilt. How hard it is for us to admit *our* guilt! And we can see clearly that there is still the possibility of making a redemptive choice when confronted by this storm of life. We can cower under our covers **or** as Heschel suggests stand in “...awe before the mystery and meaning of the totality of life beyond our rational discerning”. He goes on to say that “Faith is the response to the mystery”. This choice, then, to have faith, even though we know there is still a dark night of the soul to come and maybe the death of our first-born dreams, and wandering in the desert; this choice to have faith is our journey.

Shabbat shalom