

Making the Invisible Visible

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The Divine Plagues that afflicted Egypt were intended to achieve several outcomes. God Tells Moshe that by Bringing the most powerful contemporary nation to its knees, He Wishes thereby to Make a deep impression upon the Egyptians, as well as any other nations in the area regarding His Omnipotence.¹ A second dimension of the Plagues was their serving as a punishment for Egyptian iniquities, a fulfillment of the prediction in *Beraishit* 15:14 "...And also the nation that they will serve (as slaves) I will Judge..."² A modern essayist posits that the Plagues were a repudiation of the various objects of devotion of Egyptian religion, and the bracketing of the plagues by attacks upon the Nile (Blood) and the sun (Darkness), the two most important Egyptian deities, was certainly not a coincidence.³

Another intriguing approach by which to consider the plagues are the ethical, moral and spiritual lessons inherent within each of them.⁴ A particularly powerful moral teaching emerging from one of the plagues focuses upon one of the key elements listed in the Bible with respect to the plague of darkness.

Shemot 10:21-3

¹See *Shemot* 7:3; 9:16; 10:1; 15:14-6. Ibn Ezra's view (*Shemot* 7:24) that any Plague unaccompanied by an indication that a differentiation was made between Egyptians and Jews, must be understood as equally having effected the Jewish population living in Egypt. Since there were many skeptical Jews, they too needed impressing re God's Power.

² Should one question why the Egyptians are subject to punishment if it had been predetermined that they would enslave the Jews in accordance with God's Master Plan—*Beraishit* 15:13 "And He Said to Avraham: You shall surely know that your offspring will be sojourners in a land not theirs and they will enslave them and afflict them four hundred years"—*RaMBaN* (*Ibid.* 15:14) explains that the Egyptians were crueler than circumstances and plans dictated, and it was for their additional and unnecessary cruelty that they in turn were made to suffer.

³ See R. Michael Hattin's essay on behalf of *Yeshivat Har Etzion's* Virtual *Beit Midrash* at <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/intparsha/shemot/14-60vaeranew.doc> Furthermore, such an approach would lead to the interpretation of *Shemot* 12:12 as not as a new aspect of the Exodus, but rather a continuation of the theme of the Plagues in their entirety.

⁴ Examples of such ideas are 1) understanding of why the plagues of blood and lice had to be initiated by Aharon rather than Moshe (see *RaShI* on *Shemot* 7:19; 8:12); 2) viewing the self-sacrifice of the frogs as a paradigm for how human beings are meant to serve God (see *Pesachim* 53a); 3) the lesson of the "Fearful of the Word of God" during the plague of hail (see *Shemot* 9:20-21, along with comments such as the following:

Shemot Rabba 11:3

And the matter is one of reasoning from a lesser case to a greater one: If an individual who only temporarily fears God is saved from destruction, one who fears God all the days of his life all the more so that destruction will not affect him.

And God Said to Moshe: Extend your hand over the Heavens and there will be darkness over the land of Egypt, darkness that can be felt.⁵

And Moshe Extended his hand over the Heavens and there was “*Choshech Afeila*” (thick darkness) throughout the entire land of Egypt for three days.

And a man could not see his brother and no person could rise up from beneath it for three days.⁶ And for all of the Children of Israel there was light in their habitations.

With respect to the plague of darkness, the two most well-known rationales for God Deciding to Inflict this particular difficulty upon the Egyptians are: 1) to cover up the demise of all of the Jews who, due to the comfort level of their assimilated existence in Egypt, were disinterested in leaving Egypt,⁷ and 2) to prepare for the Jews fulfilling the Divine Directive⁸

⁵Avraham Ibn Ezra, whose world travels are often reflected in his commentary on the Bible (see for e.g., *Shemot* 8:22,) offers a very personal explanation for the tangibility of the plague of darkness:

Ibn Ezra on *Shemot* 10:22

...And behold on the Atlantic Ocean a thick darkness comes (fog) to the point where an individual is unable to distinguish between day and night, and this sometimes can last five days, and I was there a number of times.

⁶ *RaShI* cites the Rabbinic interpretation (*Shemot Rabba* 14:3) that contends that in fact the darkness lasted at least six days:

RaShI on *Shemot* 22

A darkness that was thick, whereby one person could not see the next, and then another three days of darkness that was 100% thicker than the first three days to the point where no one could rise up in its presence, i.e., one who was sitting could not stand, and one who was standing could not sit...

⁷ *RaShI* on *Shemot* 10:22

...And why did He Bring upon them darkness? Because the (majority of the) Jews during that generation were evil and did not wish to leave. And they died during the three days of thick darkness in order that the Egyptians should not witness their fall and be led to conclude, “They are struck with plague just as we are”...

A particular interpretation of a verse in *Shemot* 13:18 “...And ‘*Chamushim*’ the Children of Israel went up from the land of Egypt” leads to a shocking understanding of the death of Jews during the plague of darkness—

Pesikta D’Rav Kahana, #11

...Another interpretation: This word teaches that only 1 out of 5 left. Others say: one 1 out of 50.

Others say: 1 out of 500...

In light of the census of the men above the age of 20 that is stated in *BaMidbar* 1:46; 2:32, i.e., 603,550, and when women and children are included in the calculation, it could be reasonably assumed that @2,000,000 Jews left Egypt, leading to the conclusion that minimally @8,000,000, if not 80,000,000, or 800,000,000(!!!) people were lost during the plague of darkness. While such fantastical numbers—the Exodus resulted in worse destruction for the Jews than the *Shoah*??—are hard to imagine in light of the relatively short time of 210 years from the descent of @70 Jews into Egypt until the Exodus (see *Breishit Rabba* 91:2), perhaps accounting for why commentators like *RaShI* omit this entire line of thinking from their interpretation of *Shemot* 13:18, it is still a concept worth considering since the idea of “*Chamushim*” representing some type of fraction that includes the number of 5 in its formulation, is so widely-known. Of course another possible explanation for the rejection of this interpretation is that regardless of how assimilated these Egyptian Jews may have become, to accept that God would have Willed them to be destroyed en masse, begs credulity.

to “borrow” Egyptian property prior to departing Egypt.⁹ A third deeply evocative concept associated with the language describing this *Makka* is suggested by R. Elazar Brody:¹⁰

(Regarding the addition of the word “*Afeila*” in *Shemot* 10:22 to the description of the darkness) “*Afeila*” is a word connoting depression or sadness. Consequently “*Choshech Afeila*” reflects a condition of deep darkness that affects the depths of the soul. And how was this (psychological) condition brought about? ...Due to (*Ibid.* 10:23) “And a man could not see his brother...”

...”Seeing” represents sensing the presence (and the existential reality) of the next person, recognizing his physical and spiritual needs. This is the basis of relationships between one person and another, because one who “sees” his fellow will extend kindness to him; the converse is when one person does not see his fellow, with every individual concerned only with his own personal needs—this is a condition of darkness and depression...

A slave¹¹ is “invisible” to his master as well as to the other free members of the society.¹² If freemen were empathic towards their slaves, placing themselves mentally in the place of their servants,¹³ would they easily be able to allow these individuals to continue to suffer the indignities of their servitude? Jews are not only Commanded not to avert their eyes from another’s lost object and/or animals that need to be either loaded or unloaded,¹⁴ but also they are enjoined to save others from danger, as in

⁸ *Shemot* 11:2.

⁹ *Shemot Rabba* 14:3

During the three days of darkness, the Holy One, Blessed Be He, Placed the favor of the Jewish people in the eyes of the Egyptians and Caused them (the Egyptians) to lend to them (the Jews). The Jews entered the homes of the Egyptians and would see within them vessels of gold and silver as well as clothing. And if they would say, “We have nothing to lend to you,” the Jews would say, “Behold it is in such-and-such a place.” At that moment the Egyptians said, “If they wanted to deal with us deceitfully (i.e., have no intention to eventually return the “borrowed” objects) they would have already taken the property during the plague of darkness and we would not have been the wiser, since they have already seen the locations in which it was hidden. If they did not take these things without our knowledge, they will surely not keep them.” And they lent them the articles to fulfill (*Beraishit* 15:14) “...And afterwards they will go out with great property”...

¹⁰ *Min HaBe'er Al HaTora*, Ashdod, 5761, p. 139.

¹¹ I continue to be confounded by the institution of non-Jewish slavery (*Eved Kena'ani*; *Shifcha Kena'anit*—*VaYikra* 25:44-6) that is legitimized by the Tora. If Jews are told any number of times in *Devarim* that they must remember what it was like to be a slave in Egypt (5:14; 15:15; 16:12; 24:18, 22), how can they then be allowed to own slaves themselves? *Teiku!*

¹² Ralph Ellison, author of the eloquent novel describing the condition of blacks in America, *The Invisible Man*, (Random House, 1952) would probably take great heart from recent events in American politics that has led to an African-American becoming far more visible than any other citizen of the United States..

¹³ The spirit of Hillel’s comment in *Avot* 2:4.

¹⁴ *Devarim* 22:1,4.

(*VaYikra* 19:16) “...And do not stand idly by while your brother’s blood is being spilled.”. Furthermore an escaped non-Jewish slave is not to be returned to his master.¹⁵ In fact, R. Brody points out¹⁶ that the numerical value of “*Choshech VeAfeila*”¹⁷ is equivalent to (*Beraishit* 4:10) “...*Demai Achicha Tzoakim Eilai...*” (the blood of your brother is crying out to me) !¹⁸ Just as Kayin acted as if Hevel¹⁹ never existed,²⁰ suggesting that he never took his brother seriously even when he was alive, a fitting state in which to place the Egyptian slave owners was to deprive them of visual awareness of their fellow man, since this type of attitude is what had allowed them to so coldly oppress their Jewish fellow citizens. An interpretation appearing in the Jerusalem Talmud even accuses Jewish Egyptians of the same insensitivity displayed by their non-Jewish neighbors:

Yerushalmi Rosh HaShana 3:5

(On the verse *Shemot* 6:13 “And God Spoke to Moshe and Aharon and He Commanded them concerning the Children of Israel and Pharoah king of Egypt to take the Jewish people out of the land of Egypt.” (Since usually when a Command is Given by God to an individual, there is specification of what is being Commanded, in this case, where nothing explicit has been stated, the Rabbis attempt to “fill in the blanks.”)

Said R. Shmuel *bar* R. Yitzchak: Concerning what did He Command them? Regarding the topic of sending forth slaves (a reference to the requirement to allow Jewish slaves [essentially indentured servants who are paying back monetary debts via years of manual labor] to go free either at the end of a six year period [*Shemot* 21:2] or with the advent of *Yovel* [*VaYikra* 25:10].) And this follows the teaching of R. Hilla who said that the reason why Israel was punished was because of (their not) freeing slaves, as it is stated (*Yirmiyahu* 34:13-4) “This is what God, the Lord of Israel Said: I Entered into a covenant with your ancestors on the day that I Took them out from the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, Saying, “At the end of seven years each of you will send his Jewish brother that was sold to

¹⁵ *Devarim* 23:16-7.

¹⁶ *Min HaBe'er*, p. 139.

¹⁷ “*Chet*” = 8; “*Shin*” = 300; “*Chaf*” = 20; “*Vav*” = 6; “*Alef*” = 1; “*Peh*” = 80; “*Lamed*” = 30; “*Heh*” = 5 ==450.

¹⁸ “*Daled*” = 4; “*Mem*” = 40; “*Yud*” = 10; “*Alef*” = 1; “*Chet*” = 8; “*Yud*” = 10; “*Chaf*” = 20; “*Tzadi*” = 90; “*Vav*” = 6; “*Ayin*” = 70; “*Kuf*” = 100; “*Yud*” = 10; “*Mem*” = 40; “*Alef*” = 1; “*Lamed*” = 30; “*Yud*” = 10 == 450.

¹⁹ Even the name “Hevel” (steam, nothingness) given to him by his mother, suggests that he was essentially unsubstantial and even invisible.

²⁰ *Beraishit* 4:9.

you and who worked for you six years, and you will send him away free from you.” But your ancestors did not listen to Me and they did not turn their ears.”²¹

The implication of the *Yerushalmi*'s interpretation is that some Jews had assimilated into Egyptian society to such an extent, that they even adopted the practice of enslaving their fellow-Jews,²² perhaps in this way passing for indigenous Egyptians! This group of individuals was probably not interested in preserving their cultural identity in the manner described in the Midrash:

VaYikra Rabba 32:5

R. Huna said in the name of *Bar Kappara*: Due to four things the Jewish people were redeemed from Egypt: 1) They did not change their names; 2) their language; 3) they did not gossip about one another; 4) there were none among them engaged in illicit sexual activity.

Apparently, not only were actual Egyptians blind to the plight of their Jewish slaves, Jewish slave masters acted similarly. However, an individual, who markedly acted in a quite different manner, although he could very well have been as blind to the situation of the Jews as were the Egyptians in the royal palace in which he was raised, for he must have looked like an Egyptian rather than a Jew,²³ was Moshe.

Shemot 2:11

...And Moshe matured and he went out to his brethren and he saw their burden and he saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man from among his brothers.

RaShI “and he saw their burden”—

He deliberately concentrated his eyes and heart to share in their distress.

Moshe's empathy for those who are being persecuted by others is clearly demonstrated not only when he saves the Jew's life by killing the Egyptian taskmaster, but also the Jew being beaten by a coreligionist (*Shemot* 2:13) as well as Yitro's daughters from the shepherds giving them a difficult time (*Ibid.*, 17.)

²¹ Since the verse in *Yirmiyahu* states that this agreement was made on the day of the Exodus, the Rabbis connected it to the verse in *Shemot* 6 which could otherwise not be explained. Furthermore it would certainly be appropriate that in order for the Jews to be redeemed, they first had to undergo a “self-redemption,” i.e., release their own slaves!

²² Should we assume that this was the criteria by which those who died during the plague of darkness were judged? See fn. 7.

²³ When Yitro asks his daughters what had happened, they told him that they were saved by an Egyptian man (*Shemot* 2:19).

The necessity for each of us to try to make sure that we “see” our fellow man in the spirit of Moshe’s example, particularly when he is encountering difficulty and we might be of help, has become acutely important during this period of economic downturn. The Tora’s manner by which to define such a responsibility is to the point and should be given our full consideration:²⁴

VaYikra 25:35

And if your brother becomes impoverished and extends his hand towards you, and you will grab onto it...

RaShI “And you will grab onto it”—

Do not allow him to descend and fall, and then it will be truly difficult to raise him up, but rather grab/support him from the time that he reaches out his hand. What is this like? Like a burden that is upon a donkey. While it is still on the donkey, even a single individual can grab the burden and reposition it; once it falls to the ground, even five people will be insufficient to get the animal to stand up (with its full load.)

But truly seeing and noticing one’s fellow is not only important for pragmatic and economic reasons; developing the ability to do so has profound spiritual value as well. In the 6th chapter of *Pirkei Avot*, in a listing of the 48 things that are necessary for an individual to successfully study Tora, one finds the category, “*Noseh BeOhl Im Chaveiro*” (he bears a burden along with his friend.) While we can understand why such a quality is valuable with respect to interpersonal relationships, why should it be a prerequisite for successful Tora study? R. Simcha Ziesel of Kelm, one of R. Yisrael Salanter’s²⁵ five key students, presents the following explanation in his work, *Sefer Chachma U’Mussar*:²⁶ Essentially when an individual cares about another, he is demonstrating that spiritual things matter more to him than monetary and physical matters. If my priority is my wealth and my comfort, then I will not be interested in sharing anything or being deprived of my possessions for another’s sake. But when I am spiritual, then I care about all of our collective souls, regardless of their class, condition, status or material standing.²⁷ And if my empathy for another, my ability to “see” him, is high, then it will be that much more meaningful for me to study Tora since this is

²⁴ *Chafetz Chaim*, in his work *Ahavat Chesed (Da’at U’Tevuna, Yerushalayim, 5764)*, devotes several chapters not only to the obligation of giving charity, but also the importance of making loans and establishing *GeMaCh*’s (an acronym consisting of the letters for *Gemilut Chassadim* [kind acts] that provide money, clothing, furniture, etc. for those in need.

²⁵ Founder of the *Mussar* Movement. See

²⁶ Aber Press, New York, 1957, pp. 1-3.

²⁷ See R. Moshe Kordevero’s classic *Tomer Devora*, with respect to the Divine Attribute “*Am Kerovo*” for the articulation of a parallel idea.

also essentially a spiritual exercise and therefore more accessible to those whose emphasis is upon the spirit.

Ultimately, while we anxiously await the future Redemption, to some extent we have to try to redeem ourselves, and extracting ourselves from the metaphoric darkness of each of our individual *Makot Choshech*, whereby we do not “see” our spouses, family members, community members, as well as the needs of our communal institutions and general society, is a great first step in that direction. .