



ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

“The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

Session 14 VaEra—Water and Blood; Life and Death

Text

שמות ז

י' וי' אמר יהוה אל-מ'שה כבד לב פרעה מאן לשלח העם. טו לך אל-פרעה בבקר הנה יצא המזמה ונצבת לקראתו על-שפת היאר והמטה אשר-נהפך לנחש תקח בידך. טז ואמרת אליו יהוה אל הי העברים שלחני אליך לאמר שלח את-עמי ונעבדני במדבר והנה לא-שמעת עד-כ'ה. יז כ'ה אמר יהוה בזאת תדע כי אני יהוה הנה אנכי מכה במטה אשר-בידי על-המים אשר בואר ונהפכו לדם. יח והדגה אשר-בואר תמות ובאש היאר ונלאו מצרים לשתות מים מן-היאר. יט וי' אמר יהוה אל-מ'שה אמר אל-אהרן קח מטף ונטה-ידך על-מימי מצרים על-נהרותם על-יאריהם ועל-אגמיהם ועל כל-מקנה מימיהם ויהיו-דם והיה דם בכל-ארץ מצרים ובעצים ובאבנים. כ ויעשו-כן מ'שה ואהרן כ'ה פאשר צוה יהוה וי' במטה ובג את-המים אשר בואר לעיני פרעה ולעיני עבדיו ונהפכו כל-המים אשר-בואר לדם. כא והדגה אשר-בואר מתה ויבאש היאר ול'א-יכלו מצרים לשתות מים מן-היאר ויהיו הדם בכל-ארץ מצרים. כב ויעשו-כן חרטי מצרים בלטיהם ויחזק לב-פרעה ול'א-שמע אליהם פאשר דבר יהוה. כג ויפן פרעה ויב'א אל-ביתו ול'א-ש'ת לבו גם-לזאת. כד ויחפרו כל-מצרים סביב'ת היאר מים לשתות כי לא יכלו לשתות ממימי היאר. כה וימלא שבעת ימים אהרי הכות-יהנה את-היאר

כו וי' אמר יהוה אל-מ'שה ב'א אל-פרעה ואמרת אליו כ'ה אמר יהוה שלח את-עמי ונעבדני. כז ואם-מאן אתה לשלח הנה אנכי נ'גף את-כל-גבולך בצפרדעים. כח ושרץ היאר צפרדעים ועלו ובאו בביתך ובחדר משכבך ועל-משתך ובבית עבדיך ובעמך ובתנויך ובמשארותיך. כט ובכה ובעמך ובכל-עבדיך יעלו הצפרדעים

Exodus 7

¹⁴ And the Lord said to Moses, "Pharaoh is stubborn; he refuses to let the people go. ¹⁵ Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is coming out to the water, and station yourself before him at the edge of the Nile, taking with you the rod that turned into a snake. ¹⁶ And say to him, "The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, "Let My people go that they may worship Me in the wilderness." But you have paid no heed until now. ¹⁷ Thus says the Lord, "By this you shall know that I am the Lord. See, I shall strike the water in the Nile with the rod that is in my hand, and it will be turned into blood; ¹⁸ and the fish in the Nile will die. The Nile will stink so that the Egyptians will find it impossible to drink the water of the Nile." ¹⁹ And the Lord said to Moses, "Say to Aaron: Take your rod and hold out your arm over the waters of Egypt — its rivers, its canals, its ponds, all its bodies of water — that they may turn to blood; there shall be blood throughout the land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and stone." ²⁰ Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord commanded: he lifted up the rod and struck the water in the Nile in the sight of Pharaoh and his courtiers, and all the water in the Nile was turned into blood ²¹ and the fish in the Nile died. The Nile stank so that the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile; and there was blood throughout the land of Egypt. ²² But when the Egyptian magicians did the same with their spells, Pharaoh's heart stiffened and he did not heed them — as the Lord had spoken. ²³ Pharaoh turned and went into his palace, paying no regard even to this. ²⁴ And all the Egyptians had to dig round about the Nile for drinking water, because they could not drink the water of the Nile. ²⁵ When seven days had passed after the Lord struck the Nile, ²⁶ the Lord said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh and say to him, 'Thus says the Lord: Let My people go that they may worship Me.' ²⁷ If you refuse to let them go, then I will plague your whole country with frogs. ²⁸ The Nile shall swarm with frogs, and they shall come up and enter your palace, your bedchamber and your bed, the houses of your courtiers and your people, and your ovens and your kneading bowls. ²⁹ The frogs shall come up on you and on your people and on all your courtiers.'"



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Context

Our parasha details the confrontations between the Israelite leaders and the Egyptian king and court. Moshe hesitates and expresses his inadequacy to face off against Pharaoh. By way of encouragement, God reveals the sacred tetragramaton name, offers support and forecasts miracles. Moshe will be like God to Pharaoh and Aharon will be like his prophet. Ultimately, the target is to lead the Israelites out of slavery and into the promised land.

At the first encounter, Pharaoh's courtiers resist the challenge of Aharon's magic rod. God responds with the first plague, turning the Nile river—source of Egyptian water and life, into blood (plague 1). When Pharaoh does not heed the threat, God sends frogs (plague 2) up from the river. Lice (plague 3), swarming insects/ wild beasts (plague 4), pestilence (plague 5), boils (plague 6), firey hail (plague 7) ensue. With the suffering that each plague brings, Pharaoh appears to relent, and Moshe asks God to stop the plague. Feeling the relief, however, Pharaoh returns to his former stubbornness and refuses to release the Israelites to worship their God. God demonstrates divine power as much by ending the plagues as by bringing them on. Against the evidence of divine power that his own people recognize, Pharaoh stiffens his resistance.

Explorations

Seven of the ten plagues that God inflicts on Egypt occur in our parasha, VaEra. The first plague, blood, strikes the life-source of Egypt—the Nile river. Every Egyptian draws her and his sustenance from the Nile. According to the Torah, the Nile rises on a regular annual cycle, supplying water for the irrigation of fields and gardens (Devarim 11:10). The Nile is also a life-source of the narrative and more specifically, of the relationship between the Israelites and Egyptians. In the first direct interaction between a Hebrew and a Pharaoh, Yosef interprets a dream about cows rising up from the Nile (Ber. 41:1-4). Two different groups of cows, one nourished, the other scrawny, represent bounty and the hunger that leads to servitude for Egyptians and, eventually, Israelites. All of this comes symbolically from the Nile. A later Pharaoh enacts an edict of death against the Israelites to be performed by drowning babies in the Nile (Shmot 1:22). Moshe's mother and sister succeed to save him by hiding him in a basket that floats on the Nile. From the waters which were meant to drown him, Pharaoh's own daughter draws Moshe out of the Nile and into his destiny as a ruler of his people (Shmot 2:3; 5-10).

Not only the Nile, but water itself is the material from which life comes forth; water is the most basic requirement for life. Read with the flow of the river through the text, the plague of blood is particularly poignant. Clear neutral fluid transforms to opaque blood, a sign of both life and death. Given the universal need for water, and reliance on the Nile, this plague affects every single Egyptian, bar none. It is an equalizer, for everyone is vulnerable.

All Egyptian people suffer the devastation of each and every plague, though it is Pharaoh who decrees the enslavement of the Israelites, and who refuses to be moved by the divine



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signs. The affliction of all of the Egyptian people raises questions about the extent of their responsibility for the slavery and suffering of the Israelites and the justification for the punishment. Without a doubt, Pharaoh's oppression depends upon the complicity of the majority of the Egyptian people—a leader cannot implement his or her own decrees without the active participation of taskmasters and the acquiescence of the vast majority of people.

The text gives evidence that some Egyptian people incline to accept the power and authority of God as it is revealed through the plagues. During the plague of lice, the Egyptian magicians behold the “finger of God” (Shmot 8:14). The [Ramban](#) points out that the Egyptians not only perceive that God is the source of the plague, but that the plague is relatively a small expression of the divine power—only a finger on the whole hand (on Shmot 8:15). The text passes over the insights of these more enlightened Egyptians, and focuses on Pharaoh's response. Pharaoh's personal resistance and hard heartedness justify the plagues. From the outset, the text is explicit that one of the reasons for the plagues is to demonstrate divine power: “[But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, that I may multiply My signs and marvels in the land of Egypt](#)” (Shmot 7:3). Interpreting the initial verse about God's prior intention to harden Pharaoh's heart, Rashi points to the fact that God does this only after Pharaoh hardens his own heart during the first five plagues (on Shmot 7:3). Even if God is only continuing Pharaoh's inclination, God's intervention does punish Pharaoh and all of the Egyptians for actions they did not choose fully and freely.

Perhaps the suffering of the Egyptians indicates the collective responsibility of people for the policies of their leaders and their society. Active or acquiescent, everyone participates in actualizing those policies. Yet, there might have been Egyptian conscientious objectors who suffered “collateral damage” during the plagues. Perhaps Egyptian midwives, for example, who had participated in the insurgence against Pharaoh also suffered.

The plagues, brought by God, effect a liberation process without embroiling the Israelites in acts of violence and war. [Midrash Tanchuma](#) understands the plagues as measure for measure punishment for the actions of the Egyptian people during the enslavement of the Israelites. The midrash explains how each plague corresponds to a specific Egyptian action. Although many interpret the plague of blood as punishment for Pharaoh's decree to throw baby boys into the Nile, this midrash understands the plague of blood in the following way, “Because they did not allow the Israelite women to immerse from their impurity in order that they not be able to reproduce.”

Because the Egyptians prohibited the Israelite women from using the river for *mikveh*—to observe the Jewish menstrual-blood ritual of the life-giving cycle, the Egyptians are punished with blood-contaminated water. Water and blood are associated in the Torah with the sacred rituals of women's bodies and the Tabernacle, both flowing with the blood of life and loss of life. Here, the concept of measure for measure explains the punishment of the Egyptians differently; the Tanchuma's interpretation sets the plague of blood in the context of biblical guidelines for intimate sexual relationships. The midrash re-conceives the plague in relation to a ritual system of Jewish community life about which we will learn more in the book of Vayikra.



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Questions for Discussion

How do you relate to the sources of water that sustain your life? Familiarize yourself with the cycle and process of water in your locale. Are there any traditions or folklore affiliated with your water supply? From where does your water come, and how do you protect its purity? What further steps can you take to safeguard or improve water quality—in your area and in the world (see link below)?

How can people with power improve their understanding and connection with those who are oppressed by power? To what extent is identifying with or being part of an oppressed group of people necessary for compassion and effective activism to relieve oppression?

In recent decades, the Palestinian people have adopted the liberation narrative, casting themselves in the role of oppressed, and assigned to Israel the role of oppressor. This version of the story gains wide acceptance in the global community among many who criticize Israel. There is controversy in Israel and throughout the world about the policy, role, and responsibility of Israelis for administering the territories occupied during the 1967 Six-Day War with their large and resistant Palestinian population. There are too many views about this matter and materials that express them to cite a representative assortment here. Each advocate makes assumptions, has agendas, holds beliefs, and performs analysis. How we apply the liberation narrative, and the activism that stems from it is our responsibility: to evaluate and make sense of a deluge of ideologically-based and rhetorical claims and counter-claims. Consider the meaning of the liberation metaphor in the various layers of the Israeli-Palestinian, Israel-Arab, Middle East conflict. With care and respect for all members of your learning group and your possibly different views, analyse historical, social, political, and personal meanings.

How do you interpret the gender themes in the narrative about the river and the plague of blood—a carrier of life and death?

Study Links

On a topic related to the responsibility and participation of ordinary Egyptians in the enslavement of the Israelites, many have probed the role of civilians in nationally-sanctioned oppression. One historian, Daniel Goldhagen, published [Hitler's Willing Executioners in 1996](#) in which he argues that the Holocaust was committed by “ordinary Germans”. The book prompted considerable controversy, some embracing, others dismissing. [Here](#) is one of the very critical reviews by Ruth Bettina Birn that attempts to undermine the main thesis. Reactions among scholars following that review may be accessed [here](#).



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Struggles and wars have long been causing damage to natural resources such as water that affect civilian populations. War indirectly leads to contamination of water supplies, often affecting the most vulnerable populations, children, pregnant and nursing women, and the elderly. See [this](#) assessment of Iraq in the aftermath of the Gulf War and the US invasion,

A major threat to the Iraqi people is the accumulation of physical damage to the country's environmental infrastructure. In particular, the destruction of, and lack of investment in, water and sanitation systems has led to higher levels of pollution and health risks. □ □ On top of this, continuous electricity cuts have often stopped the pumps that remove sewage and circulate freshwater. Power outages have also affected the pumps that remove saline water from irrigated lands in the southern floodplain, leading to widespread water logging and salinization. □ □ The destruction of military and industrial infrastructure during Iraq's various conflicts has released heavy metals and other hazardous substances into the air, soil, and freshwater supplies.

[Here](#) is a page that will help you check your personal water use, conserve water, and reduce your water footprint.

Check out the [The Gender and Water Alliance](#).

Summary of Issues

God inflicts plagues on the Egyptian people as punishment for the enslavement of the Israelites, and to reveal His/Her greatness to all witnesses.

Methods & Observations

The meaning of the plagues is subject to interpretation in terms of people's and nations' experiences on all sides of oppressive relationships, and as symbols in a drama of redemption. We have the possibility to interpret the text in all of these domains. In the case of the plague of blood, it is a punishment, a divine sign, an indicator of Israelite social practice, and a symbol pointing to the interactions and inversions of life and death.

Contact

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