

PORTION	DATE	HEB DATE	TORAH	NEVIIM	KETUVIM
Va'era	5 Jan 2019	28 Tevet 5779	Exo. 6:2-9:35	Eze. 28:25-29:21	Luke 11:14-22

In this week's Torah portion Va'era, we will focus on the plagues Hashem brought against the Mitzrim (Egyptians). Last week, we ended the Torah portion Shemot with anguished Moshe and Hashem declaring, "And now you shall see." As we studied previously, the Torah is not a history book. Rather, it is educating us on how we should live, and each portion contains subjects appropriate for the week to study, expound, and enhance our life by living according to His teachings.

As we read this week's portion, have you ever wondered why Hashem brought the plagues instead of killing the firstborn of Egyptians from the beginning? What were the reasons for the Ten Plagues? In literal sense, it appears Hashem was very wrought with the Egyptians for putting His children to a very harsh slavery. Does His wrath justify such punishment to the Mitzrim? Is Torah justifying the use of physical violence to resolve our differences? Hashem forbid. Then, why such violence and destruction?

Abarbanel (1437-1508) said that the plagues can be divided into three groups:

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| 1. Blood (7:17) | 4. Flies (8:22) | 7. Hails/Thunder (9:13) |
| 2. Frogs (8:2) | 5. Pestilence (9:4) | 8. Locusts (10:12) |
| 3. Gnats (8:16) | 6. Boils (9:9) | 9. Darkness (10:21) |
| 10. Death of Firstborn | | |

The reasoning for this is as follows: Before Hashem brought the plagues, He says the three things that are interesting. In Shemot 7:17, "Thus said YHWH, "By this you know that I am YHWH." Moshe already knew Hashem, so what is the reason behind this? Hashem is letting Moshe know that He is the Elohim of the world above. In 8:22, "So that you know that I am YHWH in the midst of the land." Hashem is saying that He is not only the Elohim of the World Above, He is also the Elohim of the World Below. In 9:16, "And in order to declare My Name in all the earth." Hashem is showing everyone that He is the Elohim who created everything that we see and don't see. Therefore, He can do anything that He desires in this world for Him. He is telling the world that there is an Elohim and He is this Elohim, not just in Heaven but here on earth, and anything in between and beyond. He just does not sit on the Throne of Glory and watch faltering steps we take. He does not stroll around His creation in bemusement on this earth as if everything is okay. No, He is actively participating His Will and desires that we walk the path He has chosen for us. To ensure that we do His will, He had to punish us. But, is it really punishment when He is trying to make us to turn toward Him.

A comparison can be made between a father and a son. If the son does something wrong, wouldn't his father correct the mistake by pointing the mistake so that his son would not make the same mistake in the future? Would you call this punishment or education? The majority would say 'punishment'. The punishment is "the infliction or imposition of a penalty as retribution for an offense."¹ Whereas education is "the process of receiving or giving systematic instruction."² So, in punishment, there is nothing to be learned as the offender received penalty for his offense. But, in education, we are allowed to make mistakes, learn from

¹ www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/punishment

² *ibid*, education

it, and correct it so it does not happen again. This is what Hashem is teaching us. He wants to “educate” us so we can correct our behaviors for the ultimate redemption that is to come.

Now, the Pharaoh took certain steps that the sons of Yisrael would not increase. First, he took a census (Shemot 1:7-9) and discovered that they were more than the Mitzrim. He said, “The children of Yisrael are more and stronger than we ... they shall join our enemies and fight against us.” (ibid, vs 9, 10) So, he had them into slavery. However, the children of Yisrael grew more despite slavery. Second, after a second census, he realized the children of Yisrael were more than the first census and called the midwives, Puah and Shiphrah. He told them, “You shall put him (baby) to death.” (ibid, v 16) Third, after a third census, he realized the midwives were not following his decree. And now, he gives a new order by saying, “Throw every son who is born into the river.” (ibid, v 22)

The Torah counters Pharaoh’s action by bringing three spiritual leaders who were born during that period. First is Miriam whose name means “bitter” for she was born when the slavery began after the first census by the Pharaoh. Three years later, Aharon (אהרן) was born to counter Pharaoh’s decree as he is now attacking the pregnancy after his first failure. His name has similar spelling as “pregnancy” (הריון, ha.ro.vin). Again, three years later, Moshe was born to counter Pharaoh by having Pharaoh’s daughter, Batiya to adopt Moshe as her child. Moshe’s name is derived from ‘me.shi.ti.hoo’ (משיתהו) “Drew out”. We can conclude that these spiritual leader’s name gives us a hint of hardship by examining their names closely.

In Mattiyahu (Matthew) 7:2 Yeshua said, “For with what judgment you judge, you shall be judged. And with the same measure you use, it shall be measured to you.” Hashem said in Shemot 21:24-25, “Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot ... lash for lash.” This is called in Hebrew, “*midot ki midot*.” (מדה כי מדה) which means “measure for measure.” Such examples can be found in the Scriptures: Here are two examples: As Miriam followed baby Moshe for seven days when she was 6 years old, the nation of Yisrael waited for her to recover from her leprosy in the desert (Bemidbar/Numbers 12:15-16) for speaking against Moshe. Shimshon (Samson) saw Delilah of Phillistine and wanted to marry her. In the end, he lost his eyes (Shophetim/Judges 16:21) because “she was pleasing to his eyes” (Bedmidbar 14:5). He saw her through his eyes (ibid, 14:1). Hashem is not looking to punish us, rather He is educating us using the method known as “measure for measure” so that we can return to Him.

So, we can imagine that a lot of thoughts and plans went into the plagues by Hashem, and He is showing His *midot ki midot* through the plagues. The first plague is the blood. The Midrashim says that the Pharaoh was leprous. His advisors told him that the cure was to kill 150 babies from the children of Yisrael and bathe in their blood twice a day, once in the morning and the other in the evening. The sages explain in Shemot Rabbah (Shemot/Exodus 1:23-24) for the Yisraelites’ sigh and cry for deliverance. The “sigh” was not only for harsh slavery, but as well as the Pharaoh’s decree of killing Yisraelites’ babies and using their blood to cure his illness. The Midrash continues that the Pharaoh did not die and “arose a new sovereign”. Rather that he was old and had leprosy for such condition was considered “as good as dead.” For this reason, Moshe said to Hashem, “Please do not let her [Miriam] be as one dead...with [her] flesh half consumed.” The sages said that it was for this reason that the first plague was the blood.

The second plague was brought upon the Mitzrim for harsher treatment after the Yisraelites returned home to their masters. The Mitzrim would send their slaves out to gather small insects or animals to make meal for them. Since, frog’s legs were considered as delicacy for the Mitzrim, it was given to them in abundance as we read elsewhere Hashem gave quails until “it comes out of your nostrils” (Bemidbar/Numbers 11:21). So, at first the Mitzrim were happy to eat frogs, but they got so sick of it they couldn’t eat anymore. But

more frogs came and covered the land. Pharaoh finally says, “Pray to YHWH to take away the frogs from me and from my people.” (Shemot 8:7)

The third plague was upon the Mitzrim for unreasonableness. The masters would tell their slaves to clean the floor. Unlike today where we have smooth floors, during that period their floor was sand. How do you clean a floor that was sand? Since the sand has lice/gnats, Hashem brought them out from the sand.

According to the Talmud, the first plague started on Rosh Chodesh of Av (5th month). On the month of Adar (12th month), the plague of locusts started. On Rosh Chodesh of Nisan, the plague of darkness and the 15th of Nisan, all the firstborn of Mitzrim including animals were killed. There are other opinions that the plagues started on Rosh Hashanah or on Tammuz. The key point we need to understand is that the plagues did occur and it lasted for a year including three months Moshe was missing.

We studied from the last week’s Torah portion Shemot that Moshe fled from Mitzrayim for three months as well as discussing time period. So, today we will focus on Shemot 5:12 which says “And the people were scattered in all the land of Mitzayim – to gather stubble for straw” to make bricks in the beginning of summer. The sages teach that a hidden message here is that they went to look for Moshe all over in Mitzrayim, who since his confrontation with Pharaoh had resulted, in his thought, a disaster.

R’ Yehudah said that there is a cycle to the plagues given to Mitzrayim by Hashem. The plague 1, 4, 7 listed above came with warnings in the morning (7:15; 8:20; 9:13). The plague 2, 5, 8 came with warning during daytime (8:1; 9:1; 10:1). The plague 3, 6, 9 had no warnings (8:16; 9:8; 10:21). Finally, the 10th plague gave warnings to the children of Yisrael for night time. However, according to Shemot 11:8, Moshe warned the Mitzrim as well.