

PORTION	DATE	HEB DATE	TORAH	NEVIIM	RENEWED
Va'era	25 Jan. 2020	28 Tevet 5780	Exo. 6:2-9:35	Eze. 28:25-29:21	Luke 11:14-22

The plagues that were visited upon Mitzrayim begin in our Torah portion this week, and they feature prominently. In fact, the first seven plagues are featured in Va'era: Blood – Aharon strikes the river with his staff and all the water in Mitzrayim turns to human blood. The fish die, every drop of water in Mitzrayim, even the minute amounts in the sticks and stones, turns to blood. But simultaneously, for the Yisraelites the very same waters remain water.

Frogs: Aharon stretches out his staff over the waters of Mitzrayim and the frogs rise up out of the waters and converge upon the Mitzrim, in their clothes, in their homes, in their beds and ovens. Pharaoh presses Moshe and Aharon to pray to Hashem to stop the plague. The frogs cease, but he continues to harden his heart, as Hashem had spoken.

Lice: Aharon strikes the dust of the land and lice teems from the dust, in man and beast, causing Mitzrim's magicians to declare 'it is the finger of YHWH!' Through their manipulation, their magic, they were able to 'replicate,' actually imitate, the first two plagues of blood and frogs. But that was simply a matter of transforming a pre-existing substance. They were professional conjurers. They were really good at mirroring reality but they were not capable of creating it. Thus they failed in their attempts to replicate the plague of lice.

Hashem empowered Moshe and Aharon to change the water into blood, and draw frogs from the water. But only Hashem, the true Creator of the world, can create something new. It was the magicians' inability to replicate the plague of lice that persuaded Pharaoh and his people that the plagues were a true manifestation of the power of Hashem of Yisrael.

But Pharaoh's heart was strong and he did not heed them, as Hashem had spoken. Next came wild beasts – a mixture of wild beasts rises up and destroys Mitzrayim, of course with the exception of the land of Goshen. Pharaoh suggests to Moshe to let the people bring offerings to Hashem within the land of Mitzrayim, but Moshe refuses the offer and then Pharaoh offers to let them go if the plague will stop, Moshe prays and the animals disappear, not one remained, but Pharaoh breaks his word once again.

Animal epidemic: all the Mitzrim's flocks that were in the fields perished in this epidemic. Pharaoh checked, behold, not one of the livestock belonging to Yisrael had died. All the plagues emphasized the distinction between Yisraelites and Mitzrim, between Mitzrim and the land of Goshen. The plagues were targeted and distinguished between the Mitzrim and the Yisraelites. Yet Pharaoh's heart became stubborn, and he did not send out the people.

Boils: Moshe and Aharon take handfuls of soot from the furnace and throw it heavenward; the dust becomes blistering boils on man and beast. The magicians can't even stand before Pharaoh on account of the boils.

Flaming hail: Hashem rains down a very heavy hail, ice with a core of burning fire, the union of two opposing natural powers to do Hashem's will, as the verse states, 'such as never had been in the land of Mitzrayim from the time it became a nation.' All people and animals that were outside were killed. The grass of the fields were destroyed and the trees broken. This time Pharaoh seems to get the message, and to get religion, declaring 'This time I have sinned. Hashem is the righteous one and I and my people are the

wicked ones.” Moshe accedes to Pharaoh’s request and prays to Hashem for the hail to cease, but again he reneges and does not send the people out.

There’s so much to learn from, and about each one of these plagues. A world of detail and lessons for us. But what were they really all about? Our parashah opens with the issue of Hashem’s identity: “Hashem spoke to Moshe and said to him, ‘I am YHWH. I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Ya’akov as El Shaddai, but with My Name YHWH I did not make myself known to them.’”

Hashem is informing Moshe that He is revealing Himself to him, and relating to him, in a new way, with a new presentation of reality in which His holiest and most profound Name that we reverentially hold, that Name will be manifest. Hashem is One, and His Name is One. He is the endless Creator. But how could we relate to Him?

The Torah teaches us that we can relate to Him through His names. He makes Himself known to creation, and relatable, through various attributes, and the Torah employs various names of Hashem which convey these attributes, such as kindness, or judgment. El Shaddai is the name, and therefore, that aspect of Himself, that Hashem revealed to the patriarchs. Look carefully, recall and see that this is the name the patriarchs related to in Genesis 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; and 48:3. The name El Shaddai reflects Hashem’s aspect of creating and controlling the world within limitations, within the natural order of things...the idea of reality existing within specific parameters, the anticipated and expected laws of nature. This is the way that Hashem manifested Himself to the forefathers, to whom He made the promise of Yisrael’s redemption.

But now He is about to deliver on that promise, and Yisrael’s redemption will be orchestrated on a whole other level, on a level above nature, breaking all borders of the physical and mundane and expected, beyond all perceived limitations. So what Hashem is really telling Moshe is that He is now introducing this side of Himself into the world; that all of creation is about to experience something new. And really, this concept of who Hashem is, and how He runs the world, His world, and our awareness and recognition of Him, this is the main theme of our Torah portion.

People have the impression that the plagues were visited upon Pharaoh and Mitzrayim as punishment for mistreating or not freeing Yisrael. But preceding the first plague, that of blood, Hashem Himself declared (7:17, “Through this shall you know that I am Hashem.”) The plagues were not about Pharaoh’s refusal to free Yisrael, but rather, about his rejection and dismissal of Hashem. The primary goal of the plagues was to demonstrate Hashem’s unparalleled power. Not for punishment, not for convincing...but for knowledge.

As the Midrash observes, why was the first plague the turning of the waters to blood? Because Pharaoh and the Mitzrim worshipped the Nile, so Hashem said, “I will strike their idols first and then his people.” Abarbanel has a unique approach to understanding the order of the plagues. He writes that Pharaoh disagreed with Moshe regarding three foundational principles.

Firstly, Moshe stressed that Hashem is the primary cause who Himself, intrinsically, is the reason for existence. Pharaoh denied His existence altogether, as we read in last week’s Torah portion, where he said, “I do not know Hashem.”

Secondly, Moshe said that Hashem exercises His providence over all the ways of men and repays to each person accordingly to their actions, and Pharaoh denied this by saying, “Who is Hashem?”

And thirdly, Moshe emphasized that this Elohim who supervises over everything is the Elohim of Yisrael, all powerful, who can change nature and renew and change every detail according to His will. Pharaoh denied this as well, as indicated by his words, "Who is Hashem that I should heed his voice?" Meaning, what power does He hold over me, that I should submit before Him, and heed His voice?"

On this account, Abarbanel teaches, the plagues came in this order, as substantiation of these points...the first three served to prove the existence of Hashem; the second three, to demonstrate that this is Hashem who supervises and controls all of reality; and the third three, to show that Hashem could change anything according to His will.

The Mitzrayim experience, bondage and exodus, is of such paramount importance, that it is actually a mitzvah, a positive commandment, to remember it every single day. There are "six remembrances," six things that the Torah commands us to remember each day. This is preferably fulfilled by actually reciting the Torah verses which relate to these topics aloud each day. These are mitzvot that are fulfilled without action, but simply by remembering.

The first on this list of remembrance is the Exodus from Mitzrayim, as it is written, "Remember the day when you left Mitzrayim all the days of your life." (Deut. 16:3) Hashem's redemption of Yisrael from Mitzrayim bondage – both physical and spiritual – was the pivotal moment in Yisrael's history. The other remembrances are receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai, Amalek's attack, the sin of the Golden Calf, Miriam's punishment, and the commandment of Shabbat.

The whole experience in Mitzrayim is about recognizing Hashem and believing Him. Belief in Hashem is everything. The sages teach that in the merit of their belief, Yisrael was redeemed from Mitzrayim, as it is written (4:31), "And the people believed and they heard that Hashem had remembered the children of Yisrael" ...and in the merit of belief, Yisrael is destined to be redeemed in the future.

The Torah's message of exile and redemption from Mitzrayim is for all time, applicable to each and every one of us, for all the exiles that we go through. It's all about our acknowledging that it's Hashem who runs the world. And the sages teach that the miracles of the future, ultimate redemption will outshine those of the Exodus from Mitzrayim as said in Micah (7:15), "As in the days of your exodus from the land of Mitzrayim, I will show him wonders."

As explained in ADB, the verses (Shemot 6:3-4) continues admonishment against Moshe. It is written (6:3), "And I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Ya'akov, as El Shaddai. And by My Name, YHWH, I

was not known to them.” The word, “El Shaddai” is an expression of love that Hashem had for them by revealing His Shechinah to them. “And by My Name, YHWH, I was not known to them,” meaning, despite all the love Hashem had for the Patriarchs, He still did not make known to them the full extent of the Attribute of Mercy, expressed by the Four-letter Name of Hashem. Because He has yet to bring the fulfillment of all the promises to Avraham (Gen. 15:13-14) that He would take Yisrael out of Mitzrayim (bondage), and that they would leave with great riches (wealth), and inherit the Eretz Yisrael. Now I wish to make known to them my Attribute of Mercy, for they deserve that I do this for them. Hashem intended with this to inform Moshe how greatly beloved the Patriarchs are to Him, and by extension, their children.

It is written (6:4), “And I also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Kena’an, the land of their sojournings, in which they have sojourned.” Hashem is letting Moshe know that there is a great gap between him and his Patriarchs. Even though your ancestors have not reached the point to know “My Name, as you Moshe, did reach that point.” Meaning, Hashem bestowed upon Moshe more than He did upon the Patriarchs. Therefore he should have greater reverence when speaking to Hashem. “I also established My covenant,” that a covenant means that there is an obligation of an oath to fulfill the covenant for there is no covenant without oath. Thus Hashem must fulfill His oath, that is to bring Yisrael out of bondage, with great possessions, and the Eretz Yisrael. Hashem is telling Moshe that the events of the Exodus are obligatory upon Him.

“The land of their sojourning” – We need to understand why the verse simply mention the name of the land. By describing the land which the Patriarchs sojourned, the verse is teaching us that the exile decreed upon Yisrael already have begun in the days of the Patriarchs. What difference does it make when the exile is considered to have begun? The difference is so that one should know to start the count of the 400 years of the exile from the time of the Patriarchs themselves, not only from the time of the enslavement in Mitzrayim. The count of 400 years began at the birth of Yitzchak, 30 years after Hashem promised Avraham of his son, that they were aliens in a foreign land.

It is written (6:5), “And I have also heard the groaning of the Children of Yisrael whom the Mitzrites are enslaving, and I have remembered My covenant.” What does it mean, “I have also heard”? Who else heard these “groans” that Hashem said, “I have also heard”? Or HaChaim explains that aside from the people prayed to the Attribute of Mercy, and aside from the covenant Hashem made to Avraham, there is a third element that hastened the redemption due to their cries alone, He directly heard the distress of their groan without the angels telling Him.

It is written (6:8), “And I shall bring you into the land which I swore to give to...” This verse indicates that Hashem will bring the Yisraelites to Eretz Yisrael. However, due to the sin of the people in the incident of the Spies, the people that left Mitzrayim did not enter Eretz Yisrael, but died in the Wilderness (Bemidbar Chs. 13-14).

Plague	Warning	Event
Blood	15 th Sivan 2447 (7:14)	8 th Tamuz (7:19)
Frogs	15 th Tamuz (8:1)	8 th Av (8:5)
Lice	15 th Av (8:15)	8 th Elul (8:16)
Flies	15 th Elul (8:21)	8 th Tishrei (8:24)
Pestilence	15 th Tishrei (9:3)	8 th Cheshvan (9:6)
Boils	15 th Cheshvan (9:8)	8 th Kislev (9:10)
Hail	15 th Kislev (9:12)	8 th Tevet (9:22)

Locusts	15 th Tevet 2448 (10:1)	8 th Shevat (10:12)
Darkness	15 th Shevat (10:21)	8 th Adar (10:22)
Firstborn	13 th Adar (10:24)	15 th Nisan (11:4)