

RABBI SACKS

Rabbi Sacks

Vaera (5773) – Of Lice and Men

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Throughout all Egypt the dust turned into lice. But when the magicians tried to produce lice by their secret arts, they could not. The lice attacked men and animals alike. The magicians said to Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of G-d.' But Pharaoh's heart was hard and he would not listen.

Too little attention has been paid to the use of humour in the Torah. Its most important form is the use of satire to mock the pretensions of human beings who think they can emulate G-d. One thing makes G-d laugh – the sight of humanity attempting to defy heaven:

The kings of the earth take their stand,

And the rulers gather together against the Lord and His anointed one.

"Let us break our chains," they say,

"and throw off their fetters."

He who sits in heaven laughs,

G-d scoffs at them. (Psalm 2: 2-4)

There is a marvellous example in the story of the Tower of Babel. The people in the plain of Shinar decide to build a city with a tower that “will reach heaven.” This is an act of defiance against the divinely given order of nature (“The heavens are the heavens of G-d: the earth He has given to the children of men”). The Torah then says, “But G-d came down to see the city and the tower . . .” Down on earth, the builders thought their tower would reach heaven. From the vantage point of heaven, however, it was so miniscule that G-d had to “come down” to see it.

Satire is essential to understanding at least some of the plagues. The Egyptians worshipped a multiplicity of gods, most of whom represented forces of nature. By their “secret arts” the magicians believed that they could control these forces. Magic is the equivalent in an era of myth to technology in an age of science. A civilization that believes it can manipulate the gods, believes likewise that it can exercise coercion over human beings. In such a culture, the concept of freedom is unknown.

The plagues were not merely intended to punish Pharaoh and his people for their mistreatment of the Israelites, but also to show them the powerlessness of the gods in which they believed (“I will perform acts of judgement against all the gods of Egypt: I am G-d”, Ex. 12:12). This explains the first and last of the nine plagues prior to the killing of the firstborn. The first involved the Nile. The ninth was the plague of darkness. The Nile was worshipped as the source of fertility in an otherwise desert region. The sun was seen as the greatest of the gods, Re, whose child Pharaoh was considered to be. Darkness meant the eclipse of the sun, showing that even the greatest of the Egyptian gods could do nothing in the face of the true G-d.

What is at stake in this confrontation is the difference between myth – in which the gods are mere powers, to be tamed, propitiated or manipulated – and biblical monotheism in which ethics (justice, compassion, human dignity) constitute the meeting-point of G-d and mankind. That is the key to the first two plagues, both of which refer back to the beginning of Egyptian persecution of the Israelites: the killing of male children at birth, first through the midwives (though, thanks to Shifra and Puah’s moral sense, this was foiled) then by throwing them into the Nile to drown. That is why, in the first plague, the river waters turn to blood. The significance of the second, frogs, would have been immediately apparent to the Egyptians. Heqt, the frog-goddess, represented the midwife who assisted women in labour. Both plagues are coded messages meaning: “If you use the river and midwives – both normally associated with life – to bring about death, those same forces will turn against you.” An immensely significant message is taking shape: Reality has an ethical structure. If used for evil ends, the powers of nature will turn against man, so that what he does will be done to him in turn. There is justice in history.

The response of the Egyptians to these first two plagues is to see them within their own frame of reference. Plagues, for them, are forms of magic, not miracles. To Pharaoh’s “magicians”, Moses and Aaron are people like themselves who practice “secret arts”. So they replicate them: they show that they too can turn water into blood and generate a horde of frogs. The irony here is very close to the surface. So intent are the Egyptian magicians on proving that they can do what Moses and Aaron have done, that they entirely fail to realise that far from making matters better for the Egyptians, they are making them worse: more blood, more frogs.

This brings us to the third plague, lice. One of the purposes of this plague is to produce an effect which the magicians cannot replicate. They try. They fail. Immediately they conclude, "This is the finger of G-d".

This is the first appearance in the Torah of an idea, surprisingly persistent in religious thinking even today, called "the god of the gaps". This holds that a miracle is something for which we cannot yet find a scientific explanation. Science is natural; religion is supernatural. An "act of G-d" is something we cannot account for rationally. What magicians (or technocrats) cannot reproduce must be the result of Divine intervention. This leads inevitably to the conclusion that religion and science are opposed. The more we can explain scientifically or control technologically, the less need we have for faith. As the scope of science expands, the place of G-d progressively diminishes to vanishing point.

What the Torah is intimating is that this is a pagan mode of thought, not a Jewish one. The Egyptians admitted that Moses and Aaron were genuine prophets when they performed wonders beyond the scope of their own magic. But this is not why we believe in Moses and Aaron. On this, Maimonides is unequivocal:

Israel did not believe in Moses our teacher because of the signs he performed. When faith is predicated on signs, a lurking doubt always remains that these signs may have been performed with the aid of occult arts and witchcraft. All the signs Moses performed in the wilderness, he did because they were necessary, not to authenticate his status as a prophet . . . When we needed food, he brought down manna. When the people were thirsty, he cleaved the rock. When Korach's supporters denied his authority, the earth swallowed them up. So too with all the other signs. What then were our grounds for believing in him? The revelation at Sinai, in which we saw with our own eyes and heard with our own ears . . . (Hilkhotei Yesodei haTorah 8:1).

The primary way in which we encounter G-d is not through miracles but through His word – the revelation – Torah – which is the Jewish people's constitution as a nation under the sovereignty of G-d. To be sure, G-d is in the events which, seeming to defy nature, we call miracles. But He is also in nature itself. Science does not displace G-d: it reveals, in ever more intricate and wondrous ways, the design within nature itself. Far from diminishing our religious sense, science (rightly understood) should enlarge it, teaching us to see "How great are Your works, O G-d; You have made them all with wisdom." Above all, G-d is to be found in the voice heard at Sinai, teaching us how to construct a society that will be the opposite of Egypt: in which the few do not enslave the many, nor are strangers mistreated.

The best argument against the world of ancient Egypt was Divine humour. The cultic priests and magicians who thought they could control the sun and the Nile discovered that they could not even produce a louse. Pharaohs like Ramses II demonstrated their godlike status by creating monumental architecture: the great temples, palaces and pyramids whose immensity seemed to betoken divine grandeur (the Gemara explains that Egyptian magic could not function on very small things). G-d mocks them by revealing His presence in the tiniest of creatures (T. S. Eliot: "I will show you fear in a handful of dust").

What the Egyptian magicians (and their latter-day successors) did not understand is that power over nature is not an end in itself but solely the means to ethical ends. The lice were G-d's joke at the expense of the magicians who believed that because they controlled the forces of nature, they

were the masters of human destiny. They were wrong. Faith is not merely belief in the supernatural. It is the ability to hear the call of the Author of Being, to be free in such a way as to respect the freedom and dignity of others.



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Parashat Vaera

The Stick that Exacerbates the Plagues

Like the Egyptians devastated by the arrival of the plagues, we become concerned only when environmental degradation reaches our back door.

By Evan Wolkenstein

Provided by American Jewish World Service, pursuing global justice through grassroots change.

"Bay Area fishermen are rejoicing," said one friend, sitting back in his chair after our Shabbat meal of salmon and side dishes. "The ban on certain fish is being lifted."



Pursuing Global Justice
Through Grassroots Change

"I don't see how that's possible. Have you been down to the bay? A month after the spill and it still stinks."

I had been following the articles in the paper. Early last November, the container ship Cosco Busan had gouged its hull against a tower of the Bay Bridge, dumping 58,000 gallons of toxic bunker fuel into the water. This week's parashah also describes something awful emerging from the waters--the plague of frogs.

One Big Frog

The Midrash, seizing on a grammatical irregularity, suggests that a single, enormous frog emerged from the Nile and, only when the Egyptians attacked it, did it split and split again, replicating into more and more teeming amphibians (Exodus Rabbah 10:4). By attacking the frog, the Egyptians unwittingly made the situation worse for themselves and were thus active agents in their own misery. What is the Midrash trying to teach us with this fanciful construction?

The Midrash suggests a deadly myopia, an inability to see beyond the symptom to the cause. Like the fabled rescuer of drowning victims too busy to look upstream to see what's pushing hordes of people into the water, the Egyptians were too occupied with the existence of the enormous frog to ask what it was doing there in the first place.

We readers are lucky, for the text spells out for us no fewer than ten times the cause of the plagues--to teach us that "the earth belongs to God (Exodus 9:29)." Pharaoh and his people persisted in attacking the symptom, the challenge to his ultimate power. His misguided philosophy, mirrored by his people's actions, is expressed in the imagination of the Midrash: when you find things you don't like, hit them with a stick and they'll go away.

But they don't. The Egyptian people soon found themselves overrun, their mixing bowls, their beds, heaped with frogs. Today, months after the oil spill, the San Francisco bay continues to stink, reminding us of the 58,000 gallons of bunker fuel washed onto shore and out to sea.

The frogs are still with us.

Environmental Degradation

The oil spill is the symptom, and it has received plenty of attention. Journalists, environmentalists, and teams of volunteers have attacked the spill. Looking at it one way, we've fared luckier than the Egyptians: the bay is being cleaned up. But from another perspective, from further upstream, come difficult questions: What are the root causes of such environmental disasters? Is the spill the fault of the oil company alone? Who consumes the oil? Who creates the demand for supply?

It is in these questions that we uncover the nexus of the two messages of the Midrash. The narrowness of the Egyptians' vision is what enables their complicity in the plague. In the same way, we focus on cleaning up the oil in the bay because it helps us feel like we're making things better, even as it distracts us from the difficult truth of our own complicity in ecological degradation.

We may be concerned and conscientious people. Some of us recycle, some contribute to environmental causes, some of us reduce our carbon footprint. Yet the Midrash pushes all of us to acknowledge that we, too, are responsible. Our limited vision, like that of the Egyptians, is the stick that exacerbates the plague. Indeed, who in this fossil fuel-based society is not complicit in the stink? Who does not add more frogs to the pile?

Like the Egyptians devastated by the arrival of the plagues, we become concerned only when the plague, the spill, reaches our back door. But the frogs, the environmental damage which we've inadvertently created, are a shared plague, and all of us are implicated. Anything short of a change in fundamental perspective, a humanity-wide recognition that we share a single fragile ecosystem, constitutes another futile attempt to beat the creature back into the river.

If we look upstream, however, to find the source of the plague, we will find there not some supernatural curse, but ourselves, sheepishly putting the enormous frog in the water. If we choose to, we could spare ourselves the Egyptian's slow process of learning through suffering. We could demonstrate our understanding that we do not own the world. If we learn that lesson, perhaps our descendants will be able to enjoy the Bay as the Creator meant it to be.

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