

ALIVE TODAY!

by Rabbi Label Lam

And HASHEM brought us out from Egypt- not through an angel and not through a seraph and not through a messenger, but it was The Holy One Blessed Be He, Himself in all His glory, as it says, (Shemos 12:12) "And I will pass through the land of Egypt on this night and I will smite every first born in the land of Egypt, from man to beast, and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment, I, HASHEM!" (Pesach Haggadah)

We don't have to wait till Seder Night to ask the question of the Maharal, "Why is this plague different from all the other plagues?" In all the other plagues there was also a clear differentiation of impact between the Jewish People and the Egyptians. So why is this one singled out as the defining moment of the exodus? Is it only because it was the final blow to Pharaoh's empire? Why was there so much extra preparation required prior to executing this 10th plague? Each household had to bring a sheep and slaughter it according to specification and the entire memory of the day centers forever upon this activity! Why?

For some non-mystical reason, about 80% of the entering freshman class had their sights on medical school when I arrived on campus so many decades ago. I was not part of that pack but it seemed everyone around me was. Obviously not all were going to make it so they had these impossibly hard and competitive pre-med bio-chem classes to weed out the weak willed and under-qualified. People stayed up nights at a time and one by one, dreams were dashed as grades were posted.

Everyone was graded "on a curve". If everyone did poorly then even a low grade could still earn an "A". Nobody despaired when tests were handed back because as long as others had failed as miserably, they might still salvage a high mark. After a particularly tough test everyone looked madly to see where in the curve they lie. The great upset was when some genius of a fellow actually scored "99". Now everyone else's "40" automatically spelled failure and many a tense and teary phone call was made to disappointed parents.

At the risk of oversimplifying, the Maharal explains that the Jewish People, who had remained distinct in Egypt, were spared from the fury of the first nine plagues on a relative scale. The Jew who had retained even a part of his heritage stood out amongst the decrepit culture around him. Therefore the Jewish People dodged the waves of misfortune that fell upon Egypt.

The 10th plague, however, was different. This one was to be delivered by HASHEM and no other agency. To survive it wasn't enough to be a little better than the low society about them. It became

necessary not just to abandon everything Egyptian but to adopt everything HASHEM. The crucial test was to determine a willingness to approach the light of The Infinite and to bear forever the standard of The Absolute.

Rabbi Yaakov Emden noted almost three hundred years ago: "Many have tried to injure us or wipe us out. While all the great ancient civilizations have disappeared and been forgotten-The Nation of Israel who clings to HASHEM is alive today! What will the wise historian answer when he examines this phenomenon without prejudice? Was this all purely by chance? By my soul, when I contemplated these great wonders of our continued existence, they took on greater significance than all the miracles and wonders that HASHEM, Blessed Be He, performed for our fathers in Egypt, in the desert, and when they entered the Land of Israel. And the longer this exile extends, the miracle of Jewish existence becomes more obvious to make known G-d's mastery and supervision over nature and history.

The operative words in his compelling observation and the enduring lesson of that final night in exile are in the haunting phrase, "The Nation of Israel who clings to HASHEM is alive today!"

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