

AFFLICTED

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Starting with Parshas Vaeyra, the detailed story of the ten plagues is told. As explained in last weeks Rabbi's Notebook, Moshe had a two-fold mission. a) Teach the Jews that there is a G-d. b) Teach the Jews that G-d cares for them, and that they are completely dependent on Him. The first part of Moshe's mission was accomplished during the 10 plagues with Hashem's extraordinary display of mastery over the laws of nature. The second part would be accomplished during the 40 years in the desert, and continue with the unfolding course of our miraculous history.

This week's Parsha details the first 7 plagues, and next week's Parsha the final three. The ten plagues are a comprehensive presentation of G-d's mastery over all aspects of creation. Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch developed a framework that clearly explains the lesson of each plague and its relationship to the other plagues. The following is a review of that framework.

In the Hagadah, R' Yehudah, following the narrative of the story, arranged the plagues into three groups using a Hebrew mnemonic of the first letter of each of the plagues:

Daled-Tzadik-Chuf ; Ayin-Daled-Shin ; Bais-Alef-Ches-Bais Blood-Frogs-lice ; Wild animals-Pestilence-Boils ; Hail-Locust-Darkness-Death of the 1st Born

After closer analysis, it becomes obvious that this arrangement by R' Yehudah is far more than a mnemonic. The first two plagues in each group were preceded by Moshe's warning to Pharaoh. The third in each group struck without warning as a punishment for not listening to the first two plagues. The plagues were intended to teach the Jews, as well as the Egyptians, that there is a Creator who is directly concerned and involved in the affairs of humankind. The greatest evidence of the Creator's involvement is the presence of a system of justice. The essence of a systematic justice is "a measure for a measure;" meaning, "the punishment should fit the crime". At the same time, a system of justice that reflects the presence of a caring Creator should involve consequences that are rehabilitative and educational, rather than simply punitive. An analysis of the entire enslavement of the Jews by the Egyptians reveals three distinct stages that reflect R' Yehuda's three part classification of the plagues and the presence of a judicial system that punishes "a measure for a measure."

The enslavement of the Jews occurred in the following stages:

1. Geirut - alienhood
2. Avdut- slavery

3. Eenuy - affliction.

First the Jews were made to feel apart and different then the rest of the Egyptian society. Then they were systematically made in to second class citizens and enslaved. Then their lives were made miserable through afflictions imposed upon them by their Egyptian masters. The first plague in each of R' Yehuda's groupings reflects alienhood. The second plague in each group reflects slavery; and the third plague in each group reflects affliction.

Blood, Wild beasts, and Hail = alienhood. "A Ger - alien, is one whose continued sojourn is dependent upon the will and tolerance of another." -RSRH

In a land that was virtually a desert, the Egyptians were able to cultivate enormous wealth, power, and mastery because of the Nile. Mitzrayim's (Egypt's) sense of mastery and subsequent arrogance was a result of their wealth and sense of security which was a direct benefit of the Nile River. The Egyptian masters walked the streets of Egypt with security and confidence because the wild beasts avoided human habitation and stayed in the jungles and deserts. The Egyptian masters awoke every morning with the secure expectation that the climate of Egypt would be maintained, as they were accustomed. Considering the dry and arid climate of the region, precipitation, rain, and hail were virtually unknown. These three elements: the Nile river, the absence of wild beasts roaming freely through the cities and villages, and the constancy of Egypt's climate generated in the Egyptians a sense of mastery which in turn allowed them to make the Jews feel like aliens and strangers.

Hashem, in His display of justice and mastery, turned the Nile into blood; allowed wild animals to roam freely through the cities; and caused devastating hail to fall from heaven. Hashem proclaimed to the Egyptian masters, "How dare you strut as masters and lords over others! How dare you alienate my children! Your very sense of mastery is only because of my intervention and benevolence! With a "snap of a finger" you will feel what it's like to be strangers in your own land!"

Frogs, Pestilence, and Locust = slavery. "A master who feels that he is superior to his slaves is laboring under a dual delusion. First, that he belongs to a superior species. Second, that he is superior by virtue of his power and wealth." -RSRH

The Egyptians assumed a superiority in the beauty of their persons and the affluence of their homes. The Egyptians assumed a superiority by virtue of their horses, camels, and livestock. The Egyptians assumed superiority by virtue of their crops and produce that were acclaimed throughout the known civilized world.

Hashem, in His display of justice and mastery, invaded their exclusive residences and pampered persons with the most timid of creatures, the frog. He killed their horses and cattle in a plague that wiped out their prized herds. Finally, He sent swarms of locust to consume their famed crops and produce.

Hashem proclaimed to the Egyptian masters, "How dare you strut as a superior race that enslaved

my children! Your exclusive homes, prized horses, and renown produce are yours by virtue of my intervention and benevolence! With the wave of a staff you will share your bed with frogs and gaze out over devastated fields and empty stalls."

Lice, Boils, and Darkness = afflictions. "Now the Egyptians learned what it meant to lead a life filled with torment, pain, and want. This lesson took the form of physical pain and torment, the lice, the Boils, and the three days of hunger which the darkness brought upon Egypt. G-d does not need chains or cages to imprison men. He imprisons them in the darkness of night so that, not daring to move from wherever they happened to be when the darkness strikes, they remain rooted to the spot and go without food until He gives them light again." -RSRH

Hashem proclaims to the Egyptians, "How dare you persecute and afflict my children! With a handful of ashes and a prayer you will suffer the constant pain of small vermin, skin lesions, and dreaded hunger and immobility!"

The final plague, the Death of the First Born, was the final lesson to be taught to the Jew and the Egyptian. The greatest display of G-d's mastery over nature and humankind is His ability to give and take life. The awesomeness of this final display was magnified by Hashem's ability to separate between the Egyptian and the Jewish First Born. As the Medresh tells us, the Egyptians had their First Born sleep in the very same bed with the Jewish First Born, and yet Hashem took the Egyptian and not the Jew. This mastery over the very forces of life and death was a irrevocable and undeniable lesson to both Jew and Egyptian alike. This G-d was truly the Creator of Heaven and Earth.

Rav Hirsch's framework also reflects on another feature of R' Yehuda's three part classification of the ten plagues. Each grouping manifests G-d's mastery over another natural element. The first grouping showed His mastery over the water and land. The second grouping, proclaimed His mastery over the human and animal inhabitants of the land. The third grouping manifested His mastery over the atmosphere and the forces of life and death.

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