

# THE REST OF THE STORY

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

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## **Author's Note:**

Dear Readers,

This week's Rabbi's Notebook is an imagined narrative of an Egyptian who survived the first nine plagues. I have attempted to describe the reality of the plagues from the perspective of the Egyptians, the victims of G-d's wrath and awesome greatness. The description is somewhat graphic so please read it before sharing it at the Shabbos table. It is a piece that reflects the Medresh's statement, "My creations are drowning in the sea and you wish to sing praise?" The uniqueness of being G-d's chosen nation is the ability to accept and revel in the absolutes of good and evil and the inevitable consequences that all evil must suffer, yet, at the very same time never lose our humanity, our compassion and our ability to love.

May it be the will of G-d that we see the coming of redemption and the demise of all evil, quickly and in our days! Good Shabbos!

Rav Aron

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The darkness had lifted. Three days and nights of abject horror and fear ended as quickly as it had begun. For a moment, a very brief moment, we were awash with relief and gratitude. To be alive, to be able to move, to be able to see, to embrace loved ones, to know that the worse had happened. Somehow we had survived. I stupidly thought we were the lucky ones.

First the disgusting blood. The mighty Nile, the canals, irrigation ditches, cisterns, and water barrels - all filled with blood. For seven days and nights the putrid smell of blood filled the air. There was no escape! Worse of all was the thirst. So many of the little ones and the elderly died that week from thirst and dehydration. Only the healthy survived that first plague.

Then came the frogs. Their ugly bloated bodies trailing pond scum and excrement behind. Whatever they touched smelled for days. And that incessant croaking drove us crazy! There was no escaping them or their sound. Not in the home or out of the home. Not in the outhouses or in the bathhouses. Nothing doing! They seemed fearless. They even jumped into fiery furnaces, boiling water, and cooking fires. They were everywhere! And the size of some of them! I saw some that

were bigger than field rats or house cats. What revolting little creatures! We couldn't sleep and no one wanted to eat. Can you imagine Pharaoh's chief necromancer prophesizing that some barbaric people called "The French" would one day cook their slimy legs and call it a delicacy? What sort of people would eat such disgusting creatures?

And don't forget the cleanup. It took even longer to collect their dead carcasses and burn them than the week of the curse itself. There were so many of them! Piles and piles of rotting bodies filled every street. I was told that frogs overran even the small landlocked desert communities. Where did they come from? How did they get there? The stench of decay and rot was worse than the putrid blood! At least the smell from the desert side was a relief from the bloody river. This time the stink of the frogs was from everywhere!

Believe it or not, the lice were even worse! One or two in my hair and few in the seams of my garment I can live with, but there were billions of them! The ground seemed to be moving all the time. Not a silent carpet of black sand. That would have been bad enough. It was worse because of the persistent scraping sound. Did you even know that lice make noise? I don't think I'll ever forget that sound. It was the sound of my worse nightmare! My poor kids! They scraped their skin raw trying to get rid of them - and to no avail! As soon as they fell down from sheer exhaustion their bodies would again be covered. Their very scratches would fill up with those tiny black monsters sucking and eating their blood.

Then came the real monsters, the fourth affliction! Tigers, bears, lions, hyenas, scorpions, leopards and serpents! They were everywhere! Most of us managed to stay indoors, but the animals and pets were sitting targets! It was as if the jungle and desert had emptied into the streets of Pesome and Ramsais. I'll never forget Achman, the fellow who lived down at the corner in the big house. They had no more food and his family was starving but Achman always prided himself on being such a great hunter. You know that he was among the most decorated commanders of the Imperial Guard, and was considered the finest archer in the entire army. I am told that he armed himself with his finest weapons and stepped outside. No sooner did he open the front door than an asp dropped onto the back of his neck and he was dead before he hit the ground! They say that before his wife could pull him out of the door to shut it she was dragged out by a massive leopard and eaten right there in the street! If not for all the animals fighting each other for a piece of that poor woman the children wouldn't have been able to shut the door! They say that the youngest one still hasn't spoken a word since the attack.

The fifth plague was a different kind of disaster. How many centuries of careful research and experimentation went into breeding our famed cattle and horses? Throughout the civilized and uncivilized world we are known to produce the strongest, swiftest, most responsive, and yes, tastiest livestock. Even those cursed Ivrim had a part in it. When their patriarch Yakov arrived in Egypt he showed our top people techniques that allowed them to even breed a desired color! Our leather is considered the best in the world because its color and texture are natural rather than manufactured!

Imagine, after suffering through the blood, frogs, lice, and wild animals to awaken one morning and find whole herds of livestock dying from some yet to be identified disease. Downtown Sukosah was in an uproar as prices plummeted in every single market! Forget the tourist trade that has been non-existent since the very first plague. I am now talking about the entire economic structure of our mighty nation. It was a collapse! The domino effect couldn't be stopped! Fortunes were lost in mere minutes with the collapse of the cattle industry. I don't know if we will ever recover from it!

For many it was the straw that broke the camels back, or as we now say, the straw that first began to break Pharaoh's back! If only he had taken Moshe up on his first offer. What would have been so bad? Three days is all he asked for! A few days of vacation for those wretched slaves. Let them go and worship their G-d! Was all this worth it just to keep them from worshiping a G-d powerful enough to change nature itself! And to top it off Pharaoh had to add insult to injury! He ignored Moshe's request to let them pray in the desert and then also stopped supplying them with straw as well! Boy did he blow it that time.

So many of my "rich friends" gave up. Watching their fortunes go up in burning pyres of diseased flesh was too much. One idiot wouldn't let go of his prized steed. The best in his stable. You know, the stallion that won the triple crown four years running and was getting some outrageously disgusting fee for breeding services? Well, there he was. The dead animal stiff as a board being dragged toward the massive flames with that idiot Lehabim hanging onto the dead animal's neck. As hard as the soldiers tried they couldn't pull him off. His sons were begging him to let go, but he wouldn't. Too bad, they picked up the dead horse and its owner and threw them both into the flames! So many just gave up after they lost their fortunes. Who knows, maybe they were the lucky ones after all.

Then came the boils. On some level, as bad as the economic collapse was, at least the curse didn't attack us bodily. Also, there was still major wealth in the agricultural markets that kept us going. Not well mind you. You try running a farm without oxen and donkeys to pull the heavy equipment. We were back in the Stone Age harnessing slaves to plows and wagons. But we still had some hope. In time we would rebuild our herds and be back in the saddle; however, the boils, blisters, and rashes were just too much. As bad as the lice had been the boils were far worse. They covered us everywhere! I myself couldn't even walk because there were open sores on the bottoms of my feet! It's one thing trying to take care of a sick and hurting family when you are at least nothing worse than exhausted. Try being a father and husband when you are hurting as bad as or worse than everyone else! It was unbearable! We tried river mud from Mesopotamia, Yang polis from Kush, and a truly vile salve of crushed bone dust, centipede shell, and stripped- howler-tiger monkey gland - but to no avail. Ceaseless pain, discomfort, and physical and emotional exhaustion made us pray for death. Nothing else mattered. Not money, not glory, not even those ill-begotten Jews. All we wanted was for the hurting to cease.

But then the pain stopped. Seemingly miraculously, the skin began to heal and the sun once again

began to shine. We were able to return to some semblance of normalcy. Pharaoh stood his ground and did not let the Jews go on their three-day holiday. That proved to be another truly sad moment. How foolish he was and how foolish we were.

Moshe called it this time. He told Pharaoh how and he told him when. He forewarned him that it would truly be the beginning of the end. His G-d seemed to have lost patience with us. The hail that descended defies description. The size, the intensity, and the explosive nature of the ice. It didn't just strike, it exploded! Fires were burning everywhere. It was a scene from Hell. The howling winds, the crashing ice smashing through weaker structures. The cries of help from those unfortunate souls caught up in the conflagration of the hailstorm. The cries of dying animals and people who had not heeded Moshe's warning were horrible. Had we wanted to help we could have done nothing.

The fear inside our home was more than palatable. I built our home and I built it well. The roof was reinforced with Lebanese cedar and stone columns. Yet, I began to fear that the weight of the ice would force a collapse. All we could do was cry out to god, any god, even the G-d of the Jews. It seemed like it went on forever.

When it finally stopped, the silence was almost as bad. No one knew what we would find outside our doors. As we emerged from our homes it was worse than the ancient legend of Noah emerging from his ark. Noah at least emerged into a clean and pure world wiped clean of the past. Our world was still there but never to be the same. Blinking in the sunshine we looked out upon a destroyed world. The famed gardens were no longer. Trees that had been lovingly nurtured for hundreds of years were splintered beyond recognition. Fires were burning everywhere and body parts were strewn across open fields. The hail didn't just kill, it decimated! Fruit orchards that were the acclaim of royalty everywhere our boats and caravans could reach were no more than splinters of firewood. The economic blow was complete. Only the soft crops remained. Yet, with hard work and time that would have been enough to restart and rebuild. Why didn't we listen?

Two curses yet remained. I wish I could tell you that I had been smarter than the rest. I wish I could tell you that I was gifted by the gods because my house still stood, my spring wheat had just begun to grow, and my family had miraculously escaped death and injury. Unfortunately, I was not, and my turn was soon to come.

I did not believe that it could be any worse. Yet, Egypt, although badly beaten and battered still stood. Our army was still the greatest the world had ever seen and our culture of over 500 years had survived. Our king was still strong and brave, and even if he could have made better past decisions, now we needed his stubborn courage to face the future. More so than ever before the Ivrim were necessary. As you know, he did not let the Jews go.

The plague of the locust changed all that. In a moment the morning sky turned dark. We all thought that a fluke late winter storm was headed our way, until we heard the dreaded clicking of their wings. Locust were coming, locust were coming! This was not the first time this had happened. Us

farmers knew of the dreaded locust and also knew how to fight it.

Because so many people had nothing else to do the battle against the locust became a national effort. Everyone grabbed a torch and headed for the fields. If we did not save the soft crops we were doomed financially. Not only as a family but as a nation! Let me tell you. It may have been our finest moment. All of us arrayed with our fire brands and determination. A ragged and beaten army of millions ready to fight till the end. How valiant we all felt, how ready we all were to die! Until the locust hit.

What can I say? To tell you that our readiness and determination was noticed would be to suggest that the ocean cares if a dog licks from its waters. It was as if we did not exist. The impossible quantity of locust that descended, the absolutely deafening volume of their clicking wings, the sheer weight of their numbers extinguished all the fires and swamped our lines. No one could stand in their presence! So we fled! Some managed to get inside shelter while others were literally buried alive. The locust did not bite us or eat us. They simply buried us. Hundreds if not thousands died that day.

Then they were gone. In a single moment, they lifted and took flight driven as if by a wind toward the Sea of Reeds. What they left behind was nothing. Not a blade of grass or a stalk of wheat. Anything that could have been eaten was consumed in its entirety! I was ruined and Egypt was ruined. Yet, that idiot Pharaoh still did not give in. I tell you he must have been possessed by a demon. But what did I care. I had nothing left to live for anyway. Let their G-d do what He wanted. I had nothing left for Him to take. Or so I thought.

The nature of terror is that it cares little for possessions. Terror can strike even the poorest of people with the same intensity that it attacks the richest of the rich. The last three days were just that. Simple unadulterated terror. The darkness was more than dark, it was palatable. I could feel it on my skin. I could feel it entering my pores. I could hear it taking possession of my children. Their cries and terror seemed only as real as my own. I knew beyond certainty that we had all died and descended into the deepest darkest recesses of Hades. Truly, I never thought I or we would emerge from the clutches of that primal darkness. Demons wandered my home opening my drawers and finding my hidden gold and silver. I could hear them but could do nothing. Besides, why do anything, I was already dead and what did I care if some demon tried on my finest linen robe or my wife's gems and jewelry. First came the terror then the thirst then the hunger then the terror. Always the terror. At first I prayed that my children would continue to call out. At least I knew they were still with me. Then I begged the gods that be to quiet their terrified voices and let me remain in blessed silence.

When the darkness lifted and the terror was no longer, I knew we were beaten. Just let them go. My wealth was gone; my two youngest had not survived the days of darkness. My wife was nothing more than a shell of her former self, and my beloved oldest had the haunted look of death itself. What more could G-d take? We had nothing. Or so I thought....

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