

THE PLAGUES: PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL

by Rabbi Berel Wein

In this week's parsha the narrative of the Exodus from Egypt reaches one of its most climactic moments. Pharaoh finally succumbs to the pressures of the plagues and to the demands of Moshe and of the God of Israel. The last three plagues that are discussed in detail in this week's parsha are those of the locusts, darkness and the slaying of the firstborn.

These plagues represent not only physical damages inflicted on the Egyptians but also, just as importantly, different psychological pressures that were exerted on Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

The plague of locusts destroyed the Egyptian economy, or whatever was left of it after the previous seven plagues. Economic disaster always has far-reaching consequences. Sometimes those results can be very positive, such as the recovery of the United States from the Great Depression. Sometimes they are very negative, as the rise of Nazism in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s could not have occurred if it were not for the economic crisis that enveloped the Weimar Republic.

Here the economic crisis engendered by the plague of locusts brings Egypt to its knees, so that it is only the unreasoning stubbornness of Pharaoh that keeps the drama going. The next plague of darkness is one that affects the individual. Cooped up in one's home, unable to move about, blinded by darkness unmatched in human experience, the individual Egyptian is forced to come to terms with his or her participation in the enslavement of the Jewish people.

For many people, being alone with one's self is itself a type of plague. It causes one to realize one's mortality and to reassess one's behavior in life. This is not always a pleasant experience. Most of the time it is a very wrenching and painful one.

The final plague of the death of the firstborn Egyptians, aside from the personal pain and tragedy involved, spoke to the future of Egyptian society. Without children no society can endure - and especially children such as the firstborn, who are always meant to replace and carry on the work of their elders and previous generations. We all want to live in eternity and since we cannot do so physically we at least wish it to happen spiritually, emotionally and psychologically.

The plague that destroyed the Egyptian firstborn destroyed the hopes of eternity that were so central to Egyptian society. The tombs of the leaders of Egypt were always equipped with food and material goods to help these dead survive to the future. Even though this was a primitive expression of the hope for eternity it nevertheless powerfully represents to us the Egyptian mindset regarding such eternity.

By destroying the firstborn Egyptians, the Lord sounded the death knell for all of Egyptian society for the foreseeable future. It was this psychological pressure - which is one of the interpretations of the phrase that there was no house in Egypt that did not suffer from this terrible plague - that forced Pharaoh and his people to come to terms with their unjust enslavement of Israel and to finally succumb to the demands of Moshe and the God of Israel.

We should remember that all of these psychological pressures, even though they do not appear in our society as physical plagues, are still present and influential. The trauma of life is never ending.

Shabat shalom Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com