

TORAH TABLE TALK – PIRKE AVOT

Beyond Child's Play: Pondering the Plagues, Part 2

Parshat Bo, Exodus 10:1 – 13:16

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren ז"ל, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

Last week we discussed the tendency to trivialize the Ten Plagues at the Passover Seder. While the plagues provide a much needed break in the Seder, there is more going on here than meets the eye. The carefully structured chapters containing the story of the plagues present us with a duel to the death between the God of Israel and the gods of Egypt. They are an attempt to answer the question, with which Pharaoh initially challenges Moses: "Who is the God of the Hebrews that I should heed Him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord nor will I let Israel go!" (Ex. 5:2) In this week's Parshah, God offers another rationale for the plagues: "...that I may display my signs among them, and that you may recount in the hearing of your children and your children's children how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I displayed My signs among them – in order that you may know that I am the Lord." (Ex. 10:2)

But that does not make the plagues any easier to fathom or accept. Are the plagues a punishment or a vindication of Israel's faith? For whom do the plagues take place: to teach Egypt a lesson or to reveal a truth to the people of Israel? When we dip our finger in the cup of wine, or pour some wine from our cup we express some ambivalence about this part of the story of the Exodus. Like any war, the innocent sometimes suffer and are victims of random violence. Below are a selection of passages taken from traditional sources and the internet in which various people wrestle with the plagues with sophistication and subtlety.

Pirke Avot 5:5 - 6

Ten miracles were performed for our ancestors in Egypt. Ten occurred at the sea. Ten plagues did the Holy One of Blessing bring against the Egyptians in Egypt and ten more at the sea.

Sources

Shulchan Aruch, Rabbi Moses Isserles, the Glosses to the Shulchan Arch

Gloss: It is the custom to cast out a little of the wine in the cup with the finger (74) when one reaches the words *dam va'esh v'timrot ashan* "blood and fire and pillar of smoke," and likewise when one mentions the ten plagues *d'tzach adash ba'achav* (the abbreviations for the ten plagues) collectively and individually. Altogether, one should cast wine out of the cup sixteen times (75).

Rabbi Israel Meir Hakohen Kagan (1838-1933) Mishnah Berurah,

(74) **With the finger.** It is the custom to cast out /the wine/ with the forefinger, in allusion to /what is stated with respect to the plagues/, "it is the forefinger of God." This contradicts what is written by the *Hagahos Minhagim*, that one should tip out the wine with the little finger.

(75) **Sixteen times.** This corresponds with the combined numerical value of the letters, Yud and, Vav of the Divine Name of the Holy One, Blessed be He, who smote Pharaoh.

(Note: the Shulchan Aruch is one of the most important codes of Jewish practice. It was written in the sixteenth century by Rabbi Joseph Karo. Shortly after it was completed Rabbi Moses Isserles, an Ashkenazic scholar wrote gloss on the work reflecting Ashkenazic practices. The Mishnah Berurah is a commentary on this work composed in the nineteenth century.)

Rabbi Joshua Maroof <http://askrabbimaroof.blogspot.com/2006/04/seder-questions.html>

Question: What is the traditional Sephardic way to say the 10 plagues? In my tradition, a little wine from a glass and water from another, are poured together into a bowl at the mention of each plague emptying both with the 10th plague. Ashkenazim however, dip a finger in the wine and sprinkle it away. Over the years I've heard the following explanations: Sephardic style (2 cups): water represents

justice and water represents mercy. Justice should not be meted out without some mercy (from the kabbalah). Ashkenazi style (finger dipped in wine): diminishing our pleasure (wine) at the suffering of our enemies. Does the Talmud or hachamim say anything about this?

Answer: The prevalent Sephardic custom regarding the ten plagues is for the leader of the Seder to spill ten drops of wine from his cup into a bowl, or, in some cases, into a broken earthenware vessel. The wine in the bowl is subsequently discarded. We do this, rather than dipping our fingers into the cup, in order to avoid the problem of creating a "kos pagum", an unsavory cup. Placing our hands into the wine undoubtedly detracts from its appeal...

Many Jews may have experienced a sense of satisfaction as they watched their enemies drown in the sea (editor - and during the plagues)- a response we would expect from one who, after years of painful struggling, finally triumphs over his opponents. The Rabbis teach us that this attitude is not endorsed by our Creator. Instead of gloating in our victory over the Egyptians, we should temper our joy, mourning the fact that the struggle between Egyptian and Israelite had to end in the destruction of so much human life - life that was filled with unlimited, albeit un-actualized, potential for goodness. We should solemnly consider the thought that things could have worked out differently; that, had the Egyptians made wiser, more enlightened choices, acknowledging the Divine will and the demands of morality of their own accord, the tragic consequences that they suffered could have been averted. What you mentioned about water and wine - the relationship between the Divine Attributes of justice and mercy - is represented through the addition of a few drops of water to the Kiddush wine on Shabbat and Holidays year round. This practice is not limited to Passover in the Sephardic traditions with which I am familiar.

Reb Zalman Schachter-shalomi, Reb Zalman Legacy Project<http://www.rzlp.org/wordpress/?p=58>

What plagues do we escape by ignoring, by turning off? Are there any plagues we are experiencing here in America, (plagues, *takke*, not just incidents or accidents)? I am sure that in Egypt, too, there must have been people who were denying these ten were plagues, trying valiantly to maintain, e.g., "What should we do to restore the economy after this terrible mess of frogs," people who did not see it as a plague, a smiting by the Ruler of all Space-Time. It takes a certain kind of belief to recognize that the signs of the times are a true feedback from the Universe.

Here's an analogy: I have a headache. Why did I get one? Because my body wanted to send me a message. Then I turned off the message. I took the extra-strength pain reliever; I, in effect, cut off the communication. "Head: I don't want you to tell me that you hurt." What follows is I forget about the root cause because I have numbed the pain.

Although it's a pain and it's unpleasant, it's better to listen. Must it get to a point where the body has to scream through something more serious before the message gets through? So what plagues are out there that we have turned off? As we discuss these plagues, we can pour out some more wine from our cups, drops for each of our own plagues. May the drops be few, and may there be some wine left in our cups when we are done with this work.

Haggadah for Humanists, Congregation for Humanistic Judaism, Westport, Connecticut <http://www.humanisticjews.org/Passover.htm>

Reader: Today each drop of wine stands for the hope that we can wipe out the plagues of injustice, which cause pain and loss to people everywhere.

Together: (pouring a drop of wine for each Plague of Injustice)

We Pour Ten Drops For the Plagues of Our World:

Against the making of war,
and against the teaching of hate.

Against the despoiling of the earth,
and against the perverting of power.

Against the fomenting of crime,
and against the neglecting of human needs.

Against the oppressing of peoples,
and against the corrupting of culture,

Against the subjugation of learning
and against the erosions of freedom.

Rabbi Mark B Greenspan Counting Plagues

With red still dripping from my finger tip,
A sticky concoction of wine and tradition
I'm tempted to lick history clean
From my fingers, but I stop.
I look down at my plate
Stained with the blood red wine
That reminds me of my triumph
And someone else's suffering.
Three plus ten plus three
Dipping or pouring reminds me to slow down,
So that, even the plagues of others
Are not taken for granted.
Are my wonders, another's suffering?
Is God's signature present even in the darkest moments?

Questions to Ponder

1. In what ways are the plagues in Egypt connected to the splitting of the Red Sea? Why does Pirke Avot speak of ten plagues in Egypt and ten at the sea?
2. There are many explanations for why we dip our finger in the wine or pour wine from the cup when we recite the ten plagues. What is the purpose for doing so when we recite "Blood and Fire and pillar of smoke," as well as the abbreviation of the plagues, *d'tzach, adash ba'achab*?
3. Sephardic Jews have different customs for the recitation of the plagues. What is the purpose of mixing water and wine when pouring wine from one's cup during the recitation of the plagues? How does this practice ameliorate the harshness of the plagues?
4. Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi is the founder and the spiritual leader of the Jewish renewal movement. How does he understand the recitation of the plagues? In what ways is it healthy to recall unpleasant and disturbing memories?
5. The Jewish Humanist Movement has attempted to reclaim Judaism without God. How is this idea reflected in the reading above? Do you think the Humanist custom of remembering modern plagues affecting the world is an appropriate way of recalling the plagues? Does it work? Why or why not?
6. What do you think about while you are dipping your finger in the wine and removing a bit of the wine from your cup? In what ways is this actually a disturbing image? Are we celebrating the suffering of others when we recite the plagues?
7. Invent your own ritual or practice to recall the Ten Plagues.

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*"All it takes to study Torah is an open heart,
a curious mind and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."*

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