

# **TORAH TABLE TALK – PIRKE AVOT**

## **Beyond Child's Play: Pondering the Plagues, Part 1**

*Parshat Vaera, Exodus 6:2 – 9:35*

**Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt**

**With love to their grandchildren**

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One of the dramatic moments at the Passover Seder takes place when we dip our finger into our cup and remove a small amount of wine as we recite the ten plagues. The recitation of the plagues evokes both terror and delight. Unfortunately, we infantilize this part of the Passover ceremony by commemorating it with 'bags of plagues' and songs about how 'Pharaoh awoke in bed with frogs on his head.' The plagues demand a more serious discussion. They raise theological and moral questions that are not lost on children. What does it mean to speak of a God who causes such suffering and terror? What about the innocents and the children who were affected by the plagues in Egypt? Why was it necessary for there to be so many plagues in Egypt when God could have redeemed the people of Israel without causing the Egyptians to suffer?

The fifth chapter of *Pirke Avot* begins with a series of statements which are built around numbers. We are told that the world was created with ten utterances, that there were ten things which were created before creation and that there were ten generations from Adam to Noah and then from Noah to Abraham. Was it really necessary for the sages to also tell us that there were ten plagues in Egypt? This statement should be self-evident to anyone who is at all familiar with the story of the Exodus and who has celebrated Passover. And ten plagues at the sea are more mystifying: what were they? Where do they come from? How does our understanding of the plagues affect our notion of theodicy, of human suffering at the hands of God? How can we speak of God causing suffering to others and ignore the issue of suffering in our own lives?

**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**

#### **Psalms 78:43-51**

He turned the river into blood; He made their waters undrinkable. He inflicted upon them swarms of insects to devour them, frogs to destroy them. He gave their crops over to grubs; their produce to locust. He killed their vine with hail; their sycamores with frost. He gave their beasts over to hail; their cattle to lightning-bolts. He inflicted His burning anger upon them; wrath, indignation, trouble, a band of deadly messengers. He cleared a path for his anger; He did not stop short of slaying them but gave them over to pestilence. He struck every first born in Egypt; the first fruits of their vigor in the tents of Ham.

#### **Psalms 105:27-36**

They (Moses and Aaron) performed His signs among them; His wonders against the Land of Ham. He sent darkness; it was very dark; did not they defy His word? He turned the water into blood and killed their fish. Their land teemed with frogs, even the room of their king. Swarms of insects came at his command; lice throughout their country. He gave them hail for rain and flaming fire in their land. He struck their vines and fig trees; broke down the trees of their country. Locust came at His command; grasshoppers without number. They devoured every green thing in the land; they consumed the produce of the soil. He struck down every first born in the land; the first born of their vigor.

#### **Exodus Rabbah 9:9**

Why were the waters first smitten and with blood? Because Pharaoh and the Egyptians worshipped the Nile and God said: "I will smite their god first and then his people."

#### **Babylonian Talmud Berachot 10a**

In the neighborhood of R. Meir there lived hooligans, who annoyed him so much that he prayed for them to die. His wife Beruriah said to him: Why do you suppose [your prayer should be heard]? Is it because of the verse "Let the sinners be consumed" (Psalms 104:35)? But in fact, not "sinners" is written, but "sins." Moreover, look

at the end of the verse: "And let the wicked be no more," which implies that once sins cease, the wicked will be no more. Rather, beseech mercy for them, that they may turn in penitence, so they will be wicked no more. He besought mercy for them, and they turned in penitence.

### **Commentary**

As readers of the Bible we are troubled by the miraculous nature of the plagues. Of course, some apologists argue that the plagues can all be explained on the basis of science, but that does not solve the problem of timing (that the plagues occurred just when they did) or why so much suffering was inflicted upon the Egyptians. This is made even more complicated by the fact that God repeatedly hardens Pharaoh's heart so that he is incapable of allowing the Israelites to leave Egypt. The author of the *Etz Hayim* commentary calls a *makah* a 'disaster' instead of a 'plague.' But this translation has troubling implications for moderns. Is every disaster really a plague? Are epidemics, tsunamis, earthquakes and fires 'acts of God?' Does it matter who the disaster affects? Where do we draw the line between an unfortunate occurrence and an act of divine wrath? And if we are not willing to presume God's actions in these contemporary catastrophes, then how can we understand the plagues in this way?

We soften the plagues by removing a bit of wine from our cup as we recite the ten plagues. But when we do this we also acknowledge God's presence in the plagues. We are left to ponder the problem of human suffering. According to *Pirke Avot*, what was a catastrophe for the Egyptians was a miracle for the Israelites. One person's suffering is another person's redemption. It would seem that the hand of God is measured by who writes history! So how can we celebrate the suffering of another even if it seems like an appropriate punishment for one who has caused us pain? In the story of Rabbi Meir and Beruriah, Meir's wife chastises her husband for praying for a misfortune for another. The few drops of wine we remove from our cup are meant to temper our bitterness and anger. We do not celebrate misfortune; it is a mystery even if it appears to be an appropriate comeuppance for someone who has caused suffering to others.

So why was this statement included in *Pirke Avot*? Numbers are helpful memory devices. But there it is also striking that there is symmetry in the number ten. Moses Maimonides points out that the ten plagues can be grouped into three groups of three plagues with the tenth and final plague as the culmination. In each group Moses warns Pharaoh twice before inflicting the third plague in the series without any warning. Maimonides understands this pattern as giving Pharaoh the opportunity to repent and free the Israelites. It is a little like a parent who warns his child once, twice and the third time the child is the object of some punitive action without any warning. But this is not satisfying either: at what point does punitive action become abusive?

### **Questions to Ponder**

1. The ten plagues are recorded in Exodus and also appear in the book of Psalms (see above). How are the lists of plagues in Psalms different from the better known version of the Psalms in Exodus? Do the different lists of plagues express different underlying ideas?
2. We often think of the plagues as punitive; that is, they are meant to be an attempt to punish Pharaoh and the Egyptians for causing the Israelites such suffering. How does the statement from Exodus Rabbah differ? What do you think the purpose of the plagues was?
3. Have you ever prayed for misfortune for another person? How does Beruriah explain to her husband why he should not pray for misfortune?
4. How should we explain the ten plagues to children? Is it possible to explain this part of the story of the Exodus without sounding either terribly frightening or extremely childish and ridiculous?
5. Pretend you are an Israelite in Egypt. How would you react to the plagues? Would you be ambivalent about witnessing so much suffering or happy to finally get even with the Egyptians?

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