

A Seventeen-Year-Old Jewish Feminist's Ten Plagues

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Blood: Young girls tuck tampons quickly into backpacks, secret them in purses, hide them in Ugg boots. It's not blue dye that the river is running with, and periods are more trouble than the pamphlet in that goody bag from middle-school health class would leave one to believe. "It's beautiful to be female," we're told, but nobody accounts for cramps and cramps and cramps and bloodied sheets and cramps. We are under no obligation to love our bodies, to delight in the "privilege" of femaleness, not when we are compelled to hide it.

Frogs: They hear our voices blurred into the high-pitched hum of a summer night, *ribbet ribbet*, like, *ribbet*. We are alive, vibrant, excited, communicating. We speak fast, sentences overlapping, as the men across the Shabbat table snicker at our pace and our tone. If they listened, they would hear us speak of politics. If they listened to our chirping, they would hear us planning our way into every crevice of their world. We will fill it with our voices.

Lice: Squirming, fidgeting, wanting to crawl out of our skin. A teacher detains us in the hall to talk about our thighs – it's supposed to be about the skirt, but the fabric that's there isn't the problem. The heels we wore to that interview hurt our nervous, trembling feet as we talk about our favorite books, our biggest challenges. We feel it, all over, all the time, itching in our souls as we adjust the tight-but-not-too-tight skirt.

Wild Animals: We clutch keys in our hand on the walk home, never feeling safe alone at night. Alone with a trusted male friend, the thought still occurs; after all, so many rapes are committed by those who are close. Who says we'll be the one to avoid it? The numbers mean we're never safe, always wondering, fearing we'll be pounced on.

Cattle Pestilence: Herded into classrooms, desks in straight rows, filling out bubble after bubble with that pencil. We lose our humanity in ID numbers and testing tricks, cattle in high schools on Sunday morning. Do we need an extra calculator? How long is this section? Am I about to ruin my future? Phone rings, scores will be canceled. Don't open the book until we're told. d c a b a b b b b b b. Crap, that can't be right.

Boils: Flawed, flawed skin. Primer, concealer, foundation, powder, contour, highlight. Remove with alcohol and oil. Exfoliate. Face wash. Moisturizer. How much does this cost? How much of this is toxic? We work to unlearn the idealization of perfect faces on glossy pages, and still cringe at the dark circles, the and that one zit near our nose. We fill landfills and souls with the garbage from our "beauty" routines, but we're never satisfied, always something more we need to fix our "tainted" skin.

Hail: Fire and ice. Smart or likable. Hot or serious. Sexual or respectable. Mature or

excited. Intellectual or fun. Strong or elegant. Choose.

Locusts: They descend on us, pick us bare, for the future of the Jewish people. We don't align with denominations. We don't look good in demographic surveys. We don't care about continuity. We care about meaning, and that scares them. We do not exist to feed the future. We are not here to raise Jewish children. We are here to be Jews in our own right. Consume us, envelop us into your structure. There'll be nothing left.

Darkness: We girls are still not welcomed into the halls of study, into the mazes of letters. We fight for the Talmud, and look blindly at the reading notation over and under the Torah text. We are left in the dark about how to sing those words, in the dark about the culture of Jews interpreting and creating our texts for thousands of years. We bring our flashlights, weaving our way through forms frozen, stagnated by the dark they themselves have created.

Death of the Firstborn: This is not our plague. We are not the firstborn. We are secondary, taken for granted, always in the ensemble but never given a starring role. We have been here for centuries, mothers and sisters and wives of the firstborn. We are the bat mitzvah girls given jewelry where our male friends got books. We are the teenagers given strange looks when we walk into the *beit midrash* and slide a volume of Talmud from the shelf. We are the stranger, higher voices singing the words of the Torah from the bima. We are reading it. It will be ours.