

10 ways to destroy your life

Contributed by [Jonathan Bennett](#)

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A traveler once was stopped by a highway robber who demanded his moneybag at gunpoint. "I'll give you my money!" said the traveler. "But please, if I come home emptyhanded, my wife will never believe that I was robbed, and will accuse me of having squandered the money on gambling or liquor, and she will beat me mercilessly. Please, do me the favor of firing several bullets through my hat, so I can prove to her that I was held up."

The robber saw no reason not to comply, and shot several times through the man's hat.

"Thank you so much," the traveler said. "But you don't know my wife. She will say I punctured the hat, and that these were not bullet holes at all. Here, take my coat and shoot several bullets through it at close range, leaving powder marks. That will convince her for sure."

When the traveler saw that the last pull of the trigger hit an empty chamber, he pounced on the robber, knocking him to the ground, retrieved his moneybag and fled.

The Inner Thief

This story, told by chassidic master Rabbi Nachman of Breslov,² conveys the tragic pattern of many a person's life. We each have a thief, or a negative inclination, lingering within us. The thief continuously wishes to rob us of our inner goodness and spirituality. Yet many of us discover the willingness and the power to battle our thief only after he has fired all his bullets against us. Only after allowing our unhealthy addictions and impulses to consume our lives do we realize that they are hollow and empty, and finally find the courage to subdue the thief and embark on the path of recovery.

The Ten Plagues

The ten famous plagues that are recorded in the Torah are not to be viewed as merely a set of supernatural occurrences that wrecked the Egyptian empire around 3300 years ago. The Torah is not only a book recording ancient tales, but a blueprint for life, a manual for the development of the human race. Therefore, the episodes recorded in the Torah represent timeless, spiritual tales occurring continuously in the heart of each man.

How are we to apply the story of the Ten Plagues to our personal lives in the 21st century?

Anatomy of the Soul

The Kabbalah teaches that every human soul is comprised of ten points of energy, ten characteristics that make up its inner personality. The first three form the subconscious identity of the soul and its cognitive powers. The final seven constitute the emotional persona of the soul. These ten characteristics, also known as the ten *sefirot* ("lights"), are enumerated in Kabbalah in the following manner:

Hebrew Name English Translation Plague

Keter ----- Supra-conscious -----Death of Firstborn

Chochmah ----- Conception -----Darkness

Binah----- Intelligence -----Locusts

Chessed----- Love -----Hail

Gevurah ----- Rejection-----Boils

Tif'eret ----- Compassion -----Epidemic

Netzach----- Ambition -----Devouring Beasts

Hod----- Submission -----Lice

Yesod----- Bonding -----Frogs

Malchut----- Confidence----- Blood

Each of us was given a choice in life. We may either refine and repair these ten attributes so that they express our inner divine light, or we may pervert and corrupt these very attributes, by using them in unhealthy and immoral ways.

Ancient Egypt, with its demonic program of systematically eliminating an entire people, the Hebrews, from the face of the earth, chose to embark on the latter path. The original Egyptian nation perverted all ten attributes of its soul. The negative energy engendered by the perversion of so many human spirits returned back to Egypt in the form of ten plagues that befell the country.

In our personal lives, Egypt reflects a state of psychological dysfunction, in which one or many of the soul's attributes become distorted and dysfunctional, hindering a human being's ability for true self-actualization and fulfillment. This is indicated in the Hebrew name for "Egypt," *Mitzrayim*, which may be translated as "inhibitions" or "constraints."⁴ When we fail to confront our own demons, our perverted attributes can return to us too in the form of psychological plagues.

The Ten Plague thus correspond to the Ten Sefirot (from the bottom up, as in the table above):

1) Blood—Destructive Confidence

The first plague, in which the Nile River turned into blood, was a physical symbol of the destructive confidence that became the hallmark of Egypt, the geographical as well as the psychological Egypt. Instead of a constructive confidence that builds one's spiritual character and fosters sensitivity to others, "Egyptian" confidence breeds dominance and exploitation of other people.⁵ When one's perception of confidence becomes truly corrupt, it can lead that person to generate rivers of blood, as the Egyptians indeed did.

The Nile River embodied the source of Egyptian confidence and security. Since little rain falls in Egypt, the country's agriculture and sustenance are completely dependent on the Nile; therefore the ancient Egyptians actually deified the Nile.⁶ The waters of the Nile turning into blood reflected the perverse state of a nation which turns its confidence into blood, using its position of strength and power to slaughter and butcher countless innocent human beings.

2) Frogs—Cold Intimacy

The second plague, in which swarms of frogs inundated Egypt, symbolized the cold and dispassionate intimacy characterizing a person who lives in a psychological Egypt.

Frogs are cold-blooded amphibious creatures, and they hatch in cold climates.⁷ Female frogs usually deposit their eggs into water, where they hatch into tadpoles. Also land-dwelling frogs deposit their eggs in cold and moist holes.⁸ Due to this, and to the fact that eggs deposited in this fashion receive no parental protection, frogs came to reflect in the Kabbalah an emotional state of apathy, detachment and coldness.⁹

This condition robs a human being of the ability to experience genuine emotional intimacy with any other

person—a spouse, a child or a friend. The “frog” personality is the person who when asked, “What’s the difference between ignorance and apathy?” replied, “I don’t know and I don’t care.”

3) Lice—Unhealthy Submission

The third plague, in which the dust of Egypt turned into lice, reflected the symptoms of unhealthy submission.

The attribute of “submission,” like all attributes of the soul, can be productive or destructive. To forever remain a humble student of life’s lessons is one of the noblest character traits an individual can possess. The ability to surrender one’s ego to a higher truth is the foundation for all spiritual growth, as is the capacity to confess an error or a wrongdoing. “May my soul be like dust” is a daily Jewish prayer,¹⁰ expressing our wish that we remain humble in the presence of life’s mysteries. That is healthy humility and submission.

Destructive “Egyptian” submission is a humility that crushes one’s spirit and dulls its zest for life. In this type of submission, where one thinks of himself as a worthless creature who doesn’t matter, the perception of the self as useless dust develops into lice that demoralize and debase one’s life. Like the dust-turned-to-lice of Egypt, this type of humility sucks out a person’s blood, depriving him of his vitality and energy flow.

The holy Rabbi Aaron of Karlin put it in these words: “Depression is not a sin; yet what depression does, no sin can do.”

4) Devouring Beasts—Wild Ambition

The fourth plague, in which a swarm of devouring beasts attacked Egypt, is the physical symbol of unhealthy ambition.

Ambition is one of the greatest gifts in life. Ambition is the engine that drives a person to achieve greatness and make a difference in the world. Yet, if we do not refine this character trait, our ambitions can turn us into “devouring beasts” that crush and destroy the people we perceive to be standing in the way of the fulfillment of our goals.

5) Epidemic—Sly Compassion

The fifth plague, in which an epidemic annihilated the Egyptians’ cattle, served as the physical embodiment of the attribute of sly compassion, which like an epidemic, harms people silently and inconspicuously.

What is compassion? The Kabbalah teaches states that compassion is more powerful and more enduring than love. Love usually overlooks the flaws of a beloved one; therefore, when flaws do emerge, they may weaken the love, if not destroy it totally. Compassion, on the other hand, takes into consideration all the flaws of the individual in need of compassion, and extends a helping heart and hand regardless.¹¹ This is holy compassion—the ability of a soul to experience the pain and the needs of its fellow human being.¹²

“Egyptian” compassion is sly, shrewd and deceitful. This well-finessed and seductive compassion is employed in order to exploit other people’s weaknesses for selfish purposes and destructive goals. When one uses compassion in this manner, it inflicts damage on a person in the silent and deadly way of an epidemic.¹³

6) Boils—Brutal Rejection

The sixth plague, in which embers from a hot furnace hurled over the land developed into boils on the skin of the Egyptian population, was the physical symbol of cruel rejection.

In Kabbalah, fire¹⁴ embodies the emotion of rejection, the soul’s capacity to refuse a person or a thing.¹⁵ Like fire, an act or a word of rejection may scorch or even demolish the one who is rejected. An additional

connection between fire and rejection lies in the fact that fire surges upwards, moving away from earth. Rejection, too, constitutes an act of traveling inward and upward into one's own world, removing one's self from the people and the events in one's environment.

Yet a healthy soul needs to know how to reject as much as it must know how to embrace. One is often called upon to refuse a destructive urge, to sever an unhealthy relationship, to say no to a spoiled child or an unethical business offer. That is healthy fire. It is a fire that destroys the negative in order to build the positive.

However, when our inner capacity for rejection turns into hate, bitterness and cruelty, the embers of our soul become a destructive force. Like boils, they infect our lives and the lives of people around us.

7) Hail—Frozen Love

The seventh plague, in which produce-destroying hail descended upon Egypt, was symbolic of selfish love.

If fire symbolizes rejection, it is water—naturally descending from a higher plane to a lower plane—that embodies the qualities of generosity and lovingkindness. In Kabbalah, the flow of love is compared to a flow of water, irrigating and nourishing a human soul with its refreshing vibrancy.¹⁶

Yet a person who finds himself in “Egyptian” bondage knows only an icy love—a love that is based entirely on self-seeking motives and self-centered considerations. This person's rain-like flow of love becomes cold and frozen like hail, harming his loved ones instead of nurturing them.¹⁷

Va'eira and Bo: From Heart to Mind

It is not a coincidence that the Ten Plagues are recorded in two different sections of the Bible—the first seven in the Parshah of Va'eira (Exodus 7:19–9:35), and the final three in the Parshah of Bo (Exodus 10:1–12:33).

The first seven plagues—blood, frogs, lice, devouring beasts, epidemic, boils and hail—reflected the Egyptian perversion of the seven **emotions**: confidence, bonding, submission, ambition, compassion, rejection and love. The last three plagues—locust, darkness and the death of the first-born—represented the more severe corruption of the **intellectual** faculties and **supra-conscious** dimensions of the Egyptian soul.

When one's emotions and instincts are impaired, the sane and objective mind offers hope for healing. But when a person's mind starts playing ugly games with him, the path toward recovery becomes that much more painstakingly challenging.

8) Locust—Perverted Intelligence

The eighth plague, in which invading locusts left nothing green throughout Egypt, served as a symbol of the destructive consequences of a corrupted mind.

The ability of intellectual inquiry and scrutiny remains the singular most precious gift of the human race. It allows us to explore the universe, improve our lives and discover the higher moral calling of the human family. Yet the very same power may serve as a tool to rationalize every evil practiced under the face of the sun, and to justify every destructive lifestyle or habit.

Like the locust swarm that consumed all the existing plants of Egypt, leaving in its wake a barren soil, the corrupt mind can uproot every existing moral structure and every established sacred foundation, leaving in its wake a desolate society bereft of spiritual values or absolute principles. This is the tragedy of Egypt-like intellectualism, where one becomes so open-minded that his brains fall out.¹⁸

9) Darkness—A Locked Mind

The ninth plague, in which a thick darkness pervaded Egypt, reflected the inability of the inhibited “Egyptian” soul to actualize its faculty of conception.

The power of conception is the ability of one’s mind to conceive a new and original idea that was previously inaccessible. How? By the mind keenly realizing its limitations and borders, suspending its intellectual ego and opening itself up to a higher light, the previously inaccessible truth can emerge and illuminate the mind’s newly created empty space.¹⁹

When a person is arrogant and smug, he denies his mind the ability to experience illumination. He forces himself to remain in darkness, constricted forever to his own narrow vision of life.

10) Death of Firstborn—Death of Identity

The tenth and final plague, during which the firstborn of Egypt died, was the most devastating of all. It reflected the fact that the Egyptian abuse of the soul did not only affect its conscious faculties, but went on to distort and destroy its supra-conscious forces as well.

In the Kabbalah, the firstborn member of a family is symbolic of the first-formed instincts and motives of a soul, which lie beneath the surface of the conscious self. That dimension of the personality is usually more difficult to violate, because it is hidden and inaccessible. But a lifestyle of ongoing addiction and abuse will ultimately bring about the death of the firstborn, or the death of the supra-conscious element of one’s soul.²⁰

This was the final “bullet” that put an end to the vicious cycle of Egyptian addiction and abuse. The Jewish people were set free, and they were well on their way to receive the Ten Commandments.

What are the Ten Commandments? They correspond to the Ten Plagues.²¹ Just as the plagues reflected the perversion of the ten faculties of the soul, the Ten Commandments represent the path of spiritual healing in each of these ten faculties, allowing all ten of them to express the harmony and splendor of man’s divine essence.²²