

The 10 Plagues from My Jewish Learning

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Source:



PASSOVER

The Ten Plagues

Of blood, frogs, hail and more.

BY RABBI JACOBS

One of the most dramatic moments of the Passover seder comes with the recitation of the 10 plagues that, the Bible says, God brought on the Egyptians to persuade Pharaoh to free the Israelites from slavery. As we recite each plague, we spill a drop of wine in recognition, according to many interpretations, that the process of our liberation caused suffering to the Egyptian people.

Though it's one of the best known details of the Exodus story, the plague narrative raises a number of complicated questions. Given the biblical assumption of God's omnipotence, one might expect God to be able to whisk the Israelites out of Egypt without such dramatic measures. The biblical story also does not explain the significance of the specific set of plagues that God imposes on the Egyptians. And many contemporary Jews are bothered by what seems to be excessive and perhaps needless suffering on the part of the Egyptian population for the sins of its leader.

The Plagues

1. Blood
2. Frogs
3. Lice
4. Flies
5. Pestilence
6. Boils
7. Hail
8. Locusts
9. Darkness
10. Killing of the firstborn

Traditional Interpretations

A number of rabbinic sources describe the plagues as retribution for Pharaoh's rejection of God and for the Egyptians' idol worshipping practices. In explaining the first plague, one midrash comments, "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.'" (*Shemot Rabbah* 9:9). Likewise, Ramban, a 12th-century Jewish commentator, suggests that God punishes Pharaoh not primarily for enslaving the Israelite people, but rather for dismissing God and ignoring a divine command (see his comment to Exodus 7:16). The final plague, the killing of the firstborn, targets both the people and their most visible god—Pharaoh—who also loses his oldest son and thus the successor to the throne.

The primary goal of the plagues, according to most rabbinic sources, is the demonstration of God's unparalleled power. Pharaoh's magicians succeed in replicating the first two plagues — blood and frogs — but stumble in their attempts to produce lice. Several commentators explain this failure by noting the use of the word "*hotzi*," "to bring out," in the description of the plague of lice. Producing the plagues of blood or frogs requires only the transformation of an existing substance: God, through Moses and Aaron, changes the water to blood and draws (presumably pre-existing) frogs out of the water. In contrast, God *creates* the lice. Only the creator of the universe, according to the rabbis, can create something new. These unreplicable plagues persuade Pharaoh and his people of God's power and build faith in God among the people of Israel.

As further evidence of the miraculous nature of the plagues, one midrash notes the biblical description of the plague of hail as a mixture of fire and ice, commenting:

Imagine two fierce legions who were always at war with one another, but when the king needed their services for his own battle, he made peace with them, so that both should carry out the orders of the king. In like manner, fire and hail are hostile to each other, but when the time came to make war with Egypt, God made peace between them and both smote the Egyptians. (*Shemot Rabbah* 12:4)

The midrash further understands the hail to prefigure the punishment that, according to the Book of Ezekiel, God will bring on Gog and Magog in the war that will precede the coming of the messianic age. In linking the redemption of the Israelites from slavery with the ultimate redemption of the world, the midrash implicitly justifies any violence as a necessary means of reaching an unambiguously-positive end. Beyond being a punishment to the Egyptians, the plagues are a step in the process of redeeming the world.

Contemporary Interpretations

Many contemporary explanations of the ten plagues attempt to reconcile the presumed suffering of the Egyptians with modern-day conceptions of ethics and treatment of the other. Rabbi David Teutsch, a former president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, for example, suggests that God is not, in fact, the author of the harshest plague — that of the murder of the firstborn of Egypt. Rather, he says, it is human beings who interpret this event as divine:

How can we understand God's role in the death of the firstborn? One explanation suggests that all who did not defend the Israelite slaves in Egypt are responsible for what Pharaoh imposed. Thus, God's punishment of the Egyptians was justified. Another explanation holds that only in hindsight did the Israelites see the hand of God in the death of the Egyptians. God does not intervene in human history this way... By this reckoning, what is important is not whether the firstborn died, but whether we can see the power of human redemption in our lives as flowing from the divine." (Rabbi Joy Levitt and Rabbi Michael Strassfeld, ed., *A Night of Questions*, 61).

Rather than justify the plagues, some modern-day commentators instead try to sharpen our awareness of the suffering caused by these plagues in order to help us empathize with others who are oppressed. *The Journey Continues: The Ma'yan Haggadah*, produced by the women's program of the Jewish Community Center of the Upper West Side of Manhattan, offers the following meditation on the plagues:

As we ate our Pascal lambs that last night in Egypt the darkness was pierced with screams. Our door posts were protected by a sign of blood. But from the windows of the Egyptians rose an anguished cry: the death of the first-born.

Yah Sh'chinah [an appeal to God using a term associated with God's feminine side] soften our hearts and the hearts of our enemies. Help us to dream new paths to freedom.

So that the next sea-opening is not also a drowning; so that our singing is never again their wailing. So that our freedom leaves no one orphaned, childless, gasping for air." (Tamara Cohen, ed., *The Journey Continues*, 70)

Many Jews update the seder by supplementing the recitation of the biblical plagues with the mention of contemporary "plagues" such as war, hatred, and disease. The Jewish Council on Urban Affairs' *Immigrant Justice Haggadah* counts as plagues "the detention of immigrants, unwarranted deportations, hate crimes, the denial of drivers' licenses and other services to undocumented immigrants, hopelessness, apathy, and fear of speaking out." The *Love and Justice Haggadah* includes in a tongue-in-cheek list of the plagues of contemporary life — "reality TV, muzak, and SUVs." Feminist Haggadahs add plagues such as sexism and violence against women; environmental Haggadahs mention the destruction of natural resources; and Haggadahs focused on inter-group relations speak of the plagues of prejudice and distrust.

Every modern application of the story of slavery and liberation necessitates the creation of a new list of "plagues" to be eradicated.

The plague narrative is both an integral part of the Exodus story and one of the most difficult parts of this story to understand. Contemporary readings of the Exodus therefore struggle to reinterpret the plagues to reflect our current consciousness and/or to expand the list of plagues in order to draw attention to all of the parts of the world that remain in need of liberation.

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Before launching into your seder, make sure you have everything you'll need.

HANUKKAH

Hanukkah 2019

In 2019, the first night of Hanukkah is Sunday, Dec. 22.

TU BISHVAT

Tu Bishvat 2020

In 2020, the "birthday of the trees" begins at sundown on Sunday Feb. 9 and ends at sundown on Monday Feb. 10.

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