



## What Can I Learn from My Personal Plague?

### My Personal Garden Struggle

One of the wars I wage is with the mole crickets in my garden. A mole cricket is one of the ugliest, most disgusting creatures I've ever seen. It kind of reminds me of an enlarged, monstrous cockroach. An adult mole cricket is about 3–5 cm (1.2–2.0 in) long, with small eyes and shovel-like [fore limbs](#), highly developed for burrowing. Most mole crickets live in tunnels – that they dig underground – and use to eat the roots of plants. Sometimes, they also somehow manage to eat the tender seedlings above ground. Needless to say, they are the most devastating and aggravating garden pests I've ever encountered. I really don't know why the mole crickets like my garden so much. Their persistence is also unbearable. I've suffered from their presence for almost 20 years, in spite of trying everything possible to get rid of them. When my son was in kindergarten, I recruited him and some of his friends to help. They were equipped with rubber boots and two sticks each to catch the mole crickets, and throw them in the buckets I provided. I promised to pay 1 shekel for each mole cricket they caught. In hindsight, that was quite generous! I had heard that if you pour soap water on the mole crickets' suspected locations, they will surface from under the ground. That's exactly what happened, to the boys' great glee! They earned many a shekel and the chickens got fed good protein that day. Too bad, that was not the end of them. Also, in my eagerness to rid myself of the detested pests, I forgot to think about the effect of the immense amount of soap water on the soil.

### Giving Up or Trying to Grow?

Over the years, we have dug up tons of soil and replaced it with balanced garden mix. We have destroyed mole-cricket tunnels and caught dozens of them. We have starved them during *shemita* (sabbatical) year. I have cried and prayed in my garden for them to disappear. One year, I even succumbed to applying regular non-organic poison, but the mole-crickets are still here. The week that I finally gave up and decided to extend my small patch of synthetic grass to cover the vegetable garden, the gardener, finally delivered the sand and peat-moss which I had ordered two years previously, to make my garden less attractive to mole crickets. The encouraging gardener insisted that keeping my vegetable garden was an important mitzvah to settle the land. So, my gardening struggle was still not over. With all of its problems, my vegetable garden served as a teaching garden for children in the Yishuv and B'erot students alike, who were also earning a small salary for their work in my garden. Despite the mole crickets, and the death of countless plants as a result thereof, we somehow managed to grow a little celery, Swiss chard, beet leaves, arugula and some unknown Chinese mustardy greens. Still, we were a far cry from growing numerous, healthy, lush garden greens. So I was thinking, what is the lesson Hashem is sending me through this mole cricket plague? How can I learn and grow from my struggle with the garden pest?

### The Ten Plagues Embody Lessons for the Jews

My personal garden struggle certainly feels like a plague. Perhaps by learning about the Ten Plagues, I may gain insights to help me deal with my personal plague. The plagues in Egypt stand as the centerpiece of *Parashat Vaera*. In contrast to the traditional understanding, that the plagues were primarily a punishment for the wicked Egyptians who enslaved and afflicted the Jewish people, Rabbi Eliezer ben David explains that the main purpose of the plagues was to teach the assimilated Israelites vital lessons. "All the miracles done on behalf of the Jews were brought by G-d to awaken them to the peril of their moral condition and to illuminate the decadence and ugliness of the Egyptian way of life. Thus, each plague accentuated a different aspect of Egyptian

depravity” (*Out of the Iron Furnace* p. 36). Through the lessons of the Ten Plagues, the Israelites rose from the 49<sup>th</sup> gate of impurity to the 49 Gates of Understanding, while simultaneously atoning for the wrongdoings of prior generations. In this way, the Ten Plagues are guides for how to avoid the pitfalls of history. Each plague held its own lesson to the Israelites. For example, the first one, the Plague of Blood is called “wonders” (*Devarim* 26:8), as it states וְגִבּוֹרֹתַי וְאֵימֹתַי וְאֵלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתַי/uv'moftim zeh hadam – “with ‘wonders’ this refers to the [plague of] blood (*Hagaddah* of Pesach). The Plague of Blood is a greater wonder than the rest of the plagues, not only because it is the first, but because it is completely beyond nature; whereas, the rest of the plagues reflect an extended natural phenomenon. On a smaller scale, frogs, vermin or locusts etc. do sometimes infringe upon humans. However, water never turn into blood, even on a smaller scale. Thus, the first plague, “Blood,” established Hashem’s transcendence over nature. The Plague of Blood which was beyond nature came to atone for worshipping nature or science which can be traced all the way back to the sin of the Generation of the Tower, who misused their great knowledge and tried to compete with G-d.

### Gaining Life lessons Through Personal Plagues

I’ve been meditating and thinking about what I can learn from my personal plague of mole crickets. I have always been an organizer. I guess I have it in my blood from generations of Yekkim (German Jews) on the side of my mother’s mother. While “cleanliness is a way to godliness,” keeping everything neat in its’ particular place and file is also a way of feeling in control. The first lesson of my garden struggle is that I’m totally out of control. It’s an important lesson and a constant reminder that everything – really everything – is in G-d’s hand, even when it seems that our choice and actions can change reality. When we experience how we can have an effect on others and on our environment, we mustn’t forget that our only power is because Hashem empowers us. The fact that mole crickets live under the ground may be coming to teach me to check into what’s going on down deep in the recesses of my psyche, in those places where repressed emotions may reside. Perhaps being busy saving the world, could be an escape from digging deep into the tunnels of our soul. Finally, the fact that mole crickets kill plants by eating their roots, reminds me of the importance of my roots. No matter how ‘new – agey’ we become, by embracing cutting edge spirituality and connecting it to Kabbalistic concepts, being rooted in traditional mainstream Judaism and tracing ourselves back to Torah from Sinai must always take precedence. In conclusion, who says we have to win every struggle? Can I learn to accept that, whether I finally prevail over the mole crickets or not is completely up to Hashem? If He decides that they belong in my garden, then, that too, is for the good. Even if our crop may be diminished, gaining life lessons through our personal plagues and struggles is the greatest growing process.