



Which Lessons Does the Plague of Blood Teach us About Modern Civilization?

Plagues Come to Liberate us From Spiritual Enslavement

As devastating as the current pandemic is, with its victims and the fear it evokes, I truly believe it is here to heal us from our enslavement to exile. We may think that we already live in the free world, since slavery was abolished 150 years ago, but there are many forms of slavery. As a teenager, I yearned for freedom – true freedom to be able to act from within my authentic self, rather than from a need to conform. I wanted to express the essence of my soul in dress, speech and action, without being limited by the accepted norm. For example, in high school, I decided to sit on the floor on a sheepskin, rather than on a chair at the desk. I also danced with my friends in the street. My quest for freedom eventually led me to the Torah path, where I discovered a new outlook on true freedom, as it states, “There is no free person, except for the one who occupies himself with the study of Torah” (*Pirkei Avot* 6:2). The Torah taught me a new perspective on freedom. Freedom is not necessarily unbridled expression. If I play a piece on the piano with both precision and deep feeling, having learned the notes well, am I not expressing greater freedom, than just clacking randomly on the piano keys? While, today, we may not be slaves like in Egypt, we may still be in spiritual bondage. Just as the Jews during the Egyptian exile were sinking lower and lower into the unhealthy atmosphere of Egyptian civilization, so have many of us adopted the licentious lifestyle of “The Free World.” In that way, we resemble the slaves in Egypt, as “the essence of their bondage was not in their physical chains, or the difficulty of their labors, but the mortal danger of their soul near assimilation into Egyptian culture...” (Eliezer ben David, *Out of the Iron Furnace* p. 29). Nowadays, we may actually be included in the category of ‘the unknowing slave,’ who is deeply entrenched in the upper echelon of society, dedicating his energies to keep moving upwards in wealth and esteem. Just as the plagues in Egypt came to free the Jewish slaves of their spiritual enslavement, by alerting them to the depravity of Egyptian society, so, too, does the current corona plague come to alert us to the decadence of Western society. It clearly teaches us that despite our advances in science and technology, only Hashem is in control.

The Lesson of the First Plague: The Idolatry of Science

Since the Egyptians worshipped the Nile as their source of all irrigation and prosperity, it therefore made sense, that the first plague should specifically hit the Nile. Yet, 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 49th gate of impurity to the 49th Gate of Understanding. Simultaneously, it atoned 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. The first one, the Plague of Blood is called “wonders” (*Devarim* 26:8), as it states וּבְמוֹפְתֵי־הַדָּם זֶה/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 was the first, but because it is completely beyond nature. The rest of the plagues reflect an extended natural phenomenon. On a smaller scale, frogs, vermin, and locusts sometimes do infringe upon humans. However, water never turns 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 which was the science of their time. It 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.

Awakening to the Depravity of Nile River-God Worship

The Nile represented Egypt's cultural, scientific and technological achievements. In this way, the first plague established G-d's transcendence over nature and showed His ability to structure a new world with new laws, according to the Divine will.

ספר שמות פרק ז פסוק יז

כֹּה אָמַר הָשֵׁם בְּזֹאת תֵּדַע כִּי אֲנִי הָשֵׁם הִנֵּה אֲנִי מִכָּה בַמַּטֵּה אֲשֶׁר בְּיָדִי עַל הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר בַּיָּר וַיִּהְיֶה לְדָם:
 "So said Hashem, 'With this you will know that I am Hashem.' Behold, I will smite with the staff that is in my hand upon the water that is in the Nile, and it will turn to blood" (*Shemot 7:17*).

The plague of blood completely demoralized the Egyptians, by making them question the sacred nature of their Nile river-god. They began to understand that no amount of technology, advanced culture and scientific achievements can stand in the way of the G-d of the Israelites – Hashem. As the Nile became putrid, the Jews also began to awaken to the depravity of the Egyptian faith and lifestyle.

"And the fish that are in the Nile will die..." (*Shemot 7:18*)

וַהֲדָגָה אֲשֶׁר בַּיָּר תָּמוּת...

Fish may symbolize those nourished most directly by the Egyptian culture, such as Pharaoh's magicians, ministers and advisors. They are the harbingers of the decadence and immorality of Egyptian society.

"...and the Nile will become putrid" (*ibid.*)

וַיִּבְאֹשׁ הַיָּר...

Through the sense of smell, Egyptians and Israelites alike were repulsed, by the fetid decay of the Nile. How could such a putrid, disgusting, stinking river be divine?

Trying to Control the Uncontrollable

וְנָלְאוּ מִצְרַיִם לְשִׁתּוֹת מַיִם מִן הַיָּר: "...the Egyptians will become weary to drink water from the Nile."

The Egyptians, bereft of their ordinary sources of drinking water, tried to dig wells beside the Nile, as it states, "All the Egyptians dug around the Nile for water to drink because they could not drink from the water of the Nile" (*ibid.* 24). Although, we would have expected that Hashem's first gigantic blow to the Egyptian lifestyle, would shake Pharaoh and his people into repentance for their wicked ways, including all the bloodshed, they committed against innocent Israelites, Pharaoh continued to harden his heart. Instead of recognizing G-d and repenting, the Egyptians kept trying to enforce their own power to defeat Hashem and His plagues, by digging for water around the Nile. In their obstinate arrogance, they refused to surrender to the King of Kings. Trying to draw a parallel from the prototype plagues in Egypt and our current pandemic, I'm wondering if we, too, are reacting to Hashem's revelation of His power by "digging around the Nile"? Just as the Egyptians tried in vain to control their reality and procure water through their own efforts, perhaps, we, too, are trying to control the uncontrollable- the minuscule Corona virus? This reminds me of the Talmudic story, about a tiny gnat that entered the nostril of the wicked Titus and picked at his brain for seven years. One day, when Titus passed by the gate of a blacksmith's shop, the gnat heard the sound of a hammer and became quiet. Then Titus ordered a blacksmith to hammer before him every day. Yet, after thirty days, the gnat became accustomed to the hammering, and once again it began to pick away at Titus's brain. Thus, the most powerful Roman Emperor was unable to control the tiniest creature (*Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 56b*).

The Main Healing from Plagues is Surrendering to Hashem

Is it possible that we, too, are blinded to the message of our current plague? The unpredictability of Covid 19 clearly teaches us that only Hashem is in control. With all our science and technology, we cannot control this tiny virus. No one is able to prove for certain, why is the virus fatal for some people (and not only the elders), while others are totally asymptomatic? The various measures to prevent spreading the virus are widely disputed, and proper treatment to prevent more fatalities has, also, not yet been discovered. Although, certain medical researchers claim that the new vaccine will be 95% effective, no one can know 100% for sure if this is indeed true, and whether the effectiveness of the vaccine also pertains to the new coronavirus strain. We are clearly at Hashem's mercy, and while I'm not saying we shouldn't take measures to protect ourselves, the main healing, which is required of us, is to surrender to Hashem and cry out to Him. Without changing our ways, strengthening our Torah observance and prayer, isn't taking protective measures from masks to vaccines just like 'digging around the Nile?'