



Shabbat Bo
Rabbi Tirzah Ben David
Sermon: January 2011

A darkness that can be felt

This week's Parashah is one of those that presents us with an embarrassment of riches – not a single boring sentence! But I chose this morning's reading (a) because we haven't read it before, and (b) because I have always been fascinated by the phrase, usually translated into English, as '**a darkness that can be felt**'. It has an eerie resonance. And the more I looked at this particular penultimate plague, the stranger it seemed. The plagues altogether present moral and intellectual difficulties, for modern readers in general and Progressive Jews in particular, who clearly perceive the problems, but have a vested interest, so to speak, in the outcome of the story. The moral difficulty is clear, if God is constantly 'hardening Pharaoh's heart', then who is really responsible for these terrible catastrophes that are devastating the Egyptian kingdom?

Because this is collective punishment on a massive scale.

The other difficulty of course is with the nature of the plagues themselves, and miracles in general. It has been intellectually fashionable, for the last century or so, to 'explain' miracles in naturalistic terms: Mt. Sinai was a volcano, the crossing of the 'Red Sea' was due to freak tides, winds, etc and anyway it was only a bit of glorified marshland, and so on. Now undoubtedly many of these miraculous legends were rooted in distorted memories of natural phenomena, but there is now the realisation that we also have to read these narratives with the authors' purposes in mind, one of which was certainly to present these miracles as just that – a direct intervention by the Deity in the normal processes of nature.

Nevertheless, if we look at the Ten Plagues as they are presented in the Exodus narrative, we do see a clear progression in the 'supernatural' index. The first two, the blood and the frogs, are even replicated by Pharaoh's own magicians – we're still in the realms of magic rather than miracle. And most of the Plagues are in fact an intensification of otherwise natural disasters, even if the Israelites are exempted from most of them. But when we get to the Plague of Darkness something seems to shift: there is a primitive, existential horror in the idea of total, engulfing darkness. The Egyptians are literally paralysed, one imagines, by sheer superstitious terror. It's the claustrophobia of the tomb, of Edgar Allen Poe's 'Premature Burial'. And it lasts for three days. Which has echoes elsewhere in the Bible.

There's Abraham and Isaac's three-day journey to Mt. Moriah, with death as their silent companion, and an uncertain redemption awaiting them there. And when Yonah, on the run from God, is tossed into the sea and swallowed by the great fish, he spends three days in its belly. The desperate prayer that he addresses to God makes it clear that this is some form of death experience. Although he's actually 'safe' inside the fish, what he describes is the awful process of drowning. He speaks of Sheol, of the Pit. When the fish finally spits him out, it's some sort of rebirth, of deep transformation.

So is this Plague in fact a foretaste of death, a harbinger of the deadliest plague of all – the destruction of every firstborn male? I found myself thinking of the First World War, when almost an entire generation of young men was wiped out in Western Europe. But then I realised that we're not talking about one generation here: when we read the story we tend somehow to think of children, maybe of young men, but of course that isn't so. There are, by definition, firstborn sons in every generation, so the old would have perished with the young.



Shir Hatzafon

Progressiv jødedom i Danmark

It is the status of the victims that's significant: they are the favoured, the chosen ones, the carriers of the inheritance. Among the cattle they are the sacrifice that is ultimately a substitute for the firstborn sons themselves: God gets the first-fruits. But the weird thing is that all this applies to the Israelites, NOT to the Egyptians. They didn't sacrifice animals, they venerated many of them as gods. And the preoccupation, one might almost say the obsession, about the role of the firstborn son as the bearer of the Covenant, of God's special promise to Abraham, is exclusively an Israelite concern – most of Genesis is taken up with telling us about it. So we seem to have here a projection of Israelite anxieties onto the Egyptians. This is the worst thing that they could think of to wish upon their enemies.

Darkness and death: it's worth remembering, I think, that this was the cost of Israel's freedom, as it so often is in any conflict, however justified it may be. We celebrate the Exodus from Egypt as our great myth of liberation, but how well have we learned that lesson? Have we proved ourselves worthy of all that death and destruction that was wrought on our behalf? I don't know, but until very recently Jews certainly felt that they could still identify with those ancient Hebrew slaves, with the oppressed and persecuted of the world. For many, the Holocaust was our second Egypt. But with the creation of the State of Israel we have suddenly realised, to our dismay, how easy it is to become Pharaoh. So we now have to ask ourselves, as all civilized peoples have to ask themselves: are we bearers of darkness, or bearers of light? And who stands in our shadow?