

לדרוש בשבת

Parashat Bo 5781

January 22 - 23 2021

"One of the purposes of the plagues in general, and of the request to serve God in particular, is to engender in the people a sense of community."

- Rabbi David Silber, *Becoming a People*

Source: Shemot 10:5-7

Chapter 10 of Shemot, which opens Parashat Bo, begins by introducing the plague of locusts (ארבה). This plague is described as the continuation of hail (ברד) - the preeminent plague.

How does the Torah describe the plague of locusts in relation to the plague of hail?

Moshe warns Pharaoh that the locusts will be a most dire plague -- something so awful that has never been witnessed before. Pharaoh's servants then turn to him out of their fear and annoyance at his rigidity and tell him what to do!

There is a division between Pharaoh on one hand, and the servants of Pharaoh on the other. But this is not the first time that we see the seeds of division between Pharaoh and the Egyptian people.

Source: Shemot 9:19-20

In the plague of hail, we begin to see the breakdown of the broader Egyptian community, between those who obey God's word and those who don't.

This is one of the purposes of the plagues. While the Egyptians are splintering off into disjunct factions, the Israelites are developing a sense of unity.

Source: Shemot 10: 8-11

This contrast is clear during the introduction of the plague of hail. Whereas Pharaoh's servants are turning against him, Moshe and Aharon are adamant that the entire Israelite community must go serve God. Pharaoh's reaction to this request is incredulity: he accuses them of looking for trouble, and essentially tells Moshe and Aharon, "Just take the men, because those are the ones you want to have serve God. The others are unnecessary." But Moshe's point is crystal-clear. חג להי לנו means that the entire community has to participate. This suggests to us, the readers, that one of the purposes of the plagues in general, and of the request to serve God in particular, is to engender in the people a sense of community.

At the same time that we see that the Egyptian community has its cracks and fissures, and that there's resentment towards Pharaoh himself, Moshe's insistence on creating a community is paramount.

Source: Shemot 1:1

We can understand this well because in the beginning of the Book of Exodus the Torah describes how the Israelite people became slaves -- they came down with their households - איש וביתו באו -- but through the experience of enslavement came division.

Source: Shemot 2: 13-14

When Moshe attempts to break up a fight between two Israelites, one says to him, "who made you prince and judge over us?" indicating that there's a sense that the people turn on each other when one wants to assist, help, bring about peace, and stop the quarreling. What therefore has to happen in Egypt is that these quarreling slaves must become a people.

What we read about in the pesukim is that over time, when the people see that the Egyptians are becoming disunited and broken down, this has a counter effect on the Israelites. But more importantly, we see that Moshe demands of Pharaoh that ALL of the community has to serve God.

Source: Shemot 10: 21-23

During the ninth plague (חושך), which comes without warning, is a darkness that can be felt. None of the Egyptians can see each other, but amongst the Israelites there is light in their dwellings. Here we see further the breakdown of Egyptian society. It's not just that the servants and the people have turned against Pharaoh -- now they can't actually see each other. That suggests a deep sense of aloneness and lack of community.

The contrary is described of the Israelites -- they had light in their dwellings. What's happening over the course of these plagues is that the Jewish people are becoming a people. The slaves are seeing each other and connecting to each other.

שבת שלום!