

Torah Table Talk

Showing Gratitude

Parshat Va-era

Exodus 6:2- 9:35



At the end of last week's Parshah Moshe is discouraged by his failed attempt to convince Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to take a brief holiday to worship the Lord. Not only does Pharaoh reject Moses' request, but he increases the work load which the Israelites must bear. Faced with Moshe's demands, Pharaoh asks, "Who is the Lord that I should heed him and let Israel go?" As this week's Parshah opens, God brings a message of hope to Moshe and an answer to Pharaoh's question.

As the Parshah continues we learn of the devastating plagues that God inflicts upon the Egyptians. Scholars have long analyzed the list of ten plagues to uncover hidden patterns and messages in their order. Maimonides and others point out that the plagues follow a definite pattern. There are three series of three plagues followed by the tenth and final plague, the death of the first born. In each series Pharaoh is warned of the plagues twice followed by the third plague which occurs without warning. This pattern suggests Pharaoh's free will as well as his accountability. Pharaoh refuses to heed God's warning during the first two plagues and is punished without warning during the third. As we read the plagues in synagogue what other patterns do you notice?

Exodus 7:19

And the Lord said to Moses, "Say to Aaron: Take your rod and hold out your arm over the waters of Egypt – its rivers, its canals, its ponds, all its bodies of water – that they may turn to blood; there shall be blood throughout the land of Egypt, even in its vessels of wood and stone.

1. **Shemot Rabbah 9:10** - And the Lord said to Moses, "Say to Aaron: (Exodus 7:19) R. Tanchum taught: Why didn't Moses smite the waters? Because God said: 'It is not proper that the waters which protected you when you were placed in the river should now be smitten by you. No, they shall be smitten by none but Aaron.'
2. **Shemot Rabbah 9: 10** - Why did God begin by bringing the plague of blood upon the Egyptians? Because Pharaoh and the Egyptians worshiped the Nile. Therefore the Holy One said to Moses, "Go, and in their very presence smite their gods," in accord with the saying "When idols are smashed, their priests are abashed." God will not punish a people until He first punishes its gods. "Over their rivers" (Exodus 7:19): wherever there was water, it turned into blood. "And over all its bodies of water" (ibid.): even water that was in a kettle turned into blood. Even what an Egyptian spit out of his mouth turned into blood, as is said, "And there shall be blood throughout all of Egypt" (ibid.).
3. **Abraham Joshua Heschel** - Mankind will not perish for want of information, but only for want of appreciation.

Questions for Discussion

1. Some of the plagues were carried out by Aaron, some by Moses, and some by God. According to the Midrash, why did Aaron and not Moses inflict the first plague upon the Egyptians? A similar comment to the Midrash above is made about the third plague, *Kinnim* or Lice. Moses causes lice by throwing a handful of "the dust of the earth" into the sky. How did the dust of the earth protect Moses earlier in his

life? (Hint – See Exodus 2:12) Review all of the plagues and see which plagues were carried out by Aaron, which by Moses and which were a joint effort. Is there a pattern to the plagues?

2. What other reason may explain why God singled out the Nile River as the object of the first plague. What did the Nile symbolize to the people of Egypt and how did this fit with the overall purpose of the plagues?
3. The second Midrash above suggests that the first plague affected not only the Nile but every body of water in Egypt. What is it about the verse that led the sages to suggest this particular interpretation of the Biblical verse?
4. How does Judaism institutionalize the expression of gratitude? Look at the list of blessings called Birchot Hashachar with which we begin the daily service (Sim Shalom, Page 10). What type of things are we supposed to be grateful for? How do you express gratitude in your daily life?
5. Make a list of things for which you are grateful. Which of them already has a traditional Berachah? Make up a blessing for those for which there is no blessing.

Glossary

Shemot Rabbah – The second part of a ten volume collection of Midrashic homilies collected in the fifth and sixth centuries covering the five books of Moses and the five Megillot (scrolls).

Birchot Hashachar – An opening passage made up of fifteen blessings which recite as part of the daily Shacharit Service. Originally these blessing were recited at home as part of the daily regiment (waking up, getting out of bed, stretching, putting on clothes, etc.)

How to use Torah Table Talk

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

***“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”***

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