



The Ten Pranks

RABBI DOVID GOLDMAN
Parsha Bo, Exodus 10:1 - 13:16

This week's parsha continues the Torah's presentation of the Ten Plagues with numbers eight, nine and 10: Locusts, Darkness and the Striking of the First Born. Before they begin, however, God finally lets on about why this whole ordeal of the plagues is necessary.

Until now, we've heard two explanations for these wild events, neither of which seems to call for the curious plagues. The first is the need for miracles in order to establish God's dominion over all things. Second is the need to punish the Egyptians. They've been bad boys for a couple of centuries, and the time has come to suffer the consequences.

So why the plagues? Who came up with blood, frogs, grasshoppers and darkness, among others, as the perfect solution? This all sounds like a great evening of pranks a couple of 10-year-old boys might launch against their older sisters. Can't you imagine it? Replacing their drinks with fake blood? Letting frogs and grasshoppers loose in the living room? Suddenly shutting off the electricity to the whole house? These seem a lot more like the Ten Pranks than the Ten Plagues. Why this wacky collection of miraculous punishments?

The surprise is that, in God's own words, pranks are pretty much what the plagues are all about. After commenting in the first verse of the parsha about the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, God continues in the second verse by explaining to Moses the reason for "all these signs":

"So that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I fooled with the Egyptians and about all my signs that I expressed through them and you will know that I am God (that I exist)." (Exodus 10:2)

"How I fooled with the Egyptians" - there you have it. They are the Ten Pranks after all.

So what is the explanation for this? God is certainly not a prankster - He is the True and Righteous Judge who does no wrong. What did the Egyptians do to deserve a series of punishments designed primarily to make fools out of them?

A careful review of the Book of Exodus reflects the accuracy of historian Paul Johnson's characterization of the Egypt rejected by the Israelites, in his best-selling book "History of the Jews": "(To the Egyptians,) any sort of change was aberrant and evil ... heaven and earth were static ... ideas of progress were preferable (to the Israelites rather than) the dead hand of Egypt and ... the resignation or fatalism which (the Egyptians) so strikingly exemplified."

The Ten Plagues' job was to break open centuries of heavy repression and unleash the awesome creative energy of pure freedom. The slavery and oppression of Egypt was so evil - and so opposite freedom - because it was so oppressively and overwhelmingly dull. Egypt was a world where nothing new could ever happen - a dreary civilization of eternal, enforced boredom. One brick, another brick, another brick ...

To bestow freedom on the world, God needed to turn that dullness on its head. Attack of the frogs was precisely the kind of hilarious punishment those stick-in-the-mud Egyptians deserved for relentlessly smothering the creative spirit of Israel.

These plagues capture our imaginations and those of our children ("So that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I fooled with the Egyptians") with an anything-is-possible, not-a-dull-moment message of a wide-open life. And they teach us that God wants nothing more than to see us, in our own little way, be as expressive and creative with our existence as He is with His. (How, you might ask? Stay tuned for the giving of the Torah in the parsha after next.)

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