

Torah Talk – מאמרי תורה



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Parashat Bo
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פרשת בא
ד' בשבט תשע"ח

Torah Reading: *Shmot* (Exodus) 10:1-13:16

This week's *parasha* tells the story of the last three plagues, the preparations that the *Bnei Yisrael* needed to make in order to leave *Mitzrayim*, and the actual exodus itself.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (19th Century Germany) has an interesting take on the order of the plagues. The original prophecy about Egyptian bondage was given to Avraham during *Brit Bein Ha'betarim*, the Covenant between the Pieces. The Torah there says (*Bereshit* 15:13-14): “ וַיֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָם, יָדַע תְּדַע כִּי-גֵר יִהְיֶה זְרַעְךָ בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא לָהֶם, וְעַבְדִּים יַעֲבֹדוּם וְעַנּוּ אֹתָם--אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת, שָׁנָה. וְגַם אֶת-הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲבֹדוּ, דָּן אֲנִי. וְאַחֲרֵי-כֵן יֵצְאוּ, בְּרֶכֶשׁ גָּדוֹל. Hashem said to Avram: 'Know for certain that your seed shall be a **stranger** in a land that is not theirs, and shall **serve them**; and they shall **afflict them** four hundred years; and also that nation, whom they shall serve, I will judge; and afterward they shall come out with great substance.'”

Rabbi Hirsch maintains that the bondage was characterized by:

- גירות – *Geirut* (alienage): we were dispossessed strangers, stateless, owning nothing and without rights.
- עבדות – *Avdut* (enslavement): we were powerless to utilize our energy and capabilities as we saw fit.
- עוני – *Oni* (affliction): our bodies were physically afflicted and we were deprived of the joy of living.

Below are the ten plagues, schematically grouped according to Rabbi Hirsch's interpretation:

Alienage – גירות	Enslavement – עבדות	Affliction – עינוי
1. Blood – דם	2. Frogs – צפרדע	3. Vermin – כינים
4. Wild Beasts – ערוב	5. Pestilence – דבר	6. Boils – שחין
7. Hail – ברד	8. Locusts – ארבה	9. Darkness – חושך

10. Slaying of the Firstborn – מכת בכורות

Rabbi Hirsch explains further: “The nature of the three groups of plagues bears a close relationship to the *galut*, exilic suffering which the Egyptians inflicted upon the Children of Yisrael and from which God finally delivered them, namely, alienage, enslavement, and affliction. The Egyptians were made to suffer parallel afflictions in order to strip them of their sense of superiority and to let them feel for themselves the misery they had brought upon others.”

Upon examining the three groupings, we notice that the plagues in the first group – Blood, Wild Beasts, and Hail – impressed upon the Egyptians that they themselves were no more than aliens in their own land. In turn, they had no right to treat the *Bnei Yisrael* as strangers, depriving them of their rights. The second group of plagues – Frogs, Pestilence, and Locusts – showed the Egyptians the foolishness of their undue pride and haughtiness. It was this feeling of superiority which caused them to think they were entitled to be masters over slaves. Finally, the last of the three groups of plagues – Vermin, Boils, and Darkness – exercised upon the Egyptians’ own bodies a torment similar to that which they had caused the innocent *Bnei Yisrael*. Finally, the Slaying of the Firstborns brought the whole series of plagues to a climax and accomplished the redemption.

Many explanations have been offered for the order of the plagues. This one in particular is intriguing in that it relates each plague to God’s initial pledge to Avraham, and offers a measure-for-measure retribution for what the Egyptians wrought upon the *Bnei Yisrael*.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Describe how each plague relates to one of Rabbi Hirsch’s three categories and how it is a measure-for-measure punishment for the Egyptians.
- Can you think of any other reasons for the order of the plagues?
- How might you have felt if you were an Israelite witnessing the plagues?
How might you have felt if you were an Egyptian experiencing the plagues?