

Exodus from Egypt: Literal and Metaphorical Interpretations

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Abstract: "The Exodus experience revolutionized Jewish ethics. Having truly experienced discrimination, persecution, and enslavement, the Hebrews became the champions of the enslaved, the persecuted, and the discriminated against. The Torah demands -- no less than 36 times -- that one must never oppress or wrong the stranger in one's midst, because we know what it's like to be a stranger in a strange land."

The Torah reading for this Shabbat overlaps the famous narrative of Pharaoh, the ten plagues, and the Exodus from Egypt. In this parashah, we read about the last three of the ten plagues and the climax of the entire story: the liberation of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt.

This narrative can be interpreted both literally and metaphorically. On a literal level, the Exodus experience transformed the psyche of the Hebrew people. In a good sense, the Hebrew people were never quite the same. Indeed, the Exodus forged the 12 disparate Hebrew tribes into one people, one nation. As a result of their revelatory experience, the Hebrews fell in love with the God who had cared so much to liberate them. The Exodus experience revolutionized Jewish ethics. Having truly experienced discrimination, persecution, and enslavement, the Hebrews became the champions of the enslaved, the persecuted, and the discriminated against. The Torah demands, no less than 36 times, that one must never oppress the stranger in one's midst, because we know what it's like to be a stranger in a strange land.

The Exodus experience has also played a seminal role in the history of western civilization. It was the first historical struggle for national liberation. It has been a source of great inspiration to many other peoples struggling for freedom. The core values of Western civilization – the sanctity of life, freedom, of justice and equality – are all the legacy of the Exodus.

On a metaphoric level, the story of the Pharaoh, the ten plagues, and the Exodus also bear much fruit. For example, let's think about the ten plagues: blood, frogs, lice, insects, disease, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, death of the first born. How would you characterize them? The plagues increase in severity. They move from being mere nuisances to terrible afflictions. They bring out how scary these plagues truly were.

Our Torah portion describes the last three. Let's learn something deeper about them:

- Locusts (Exodus 10:12-15)
- Darkness (Exodus 10:21-23)
- Death of the first-born (Exodus 12:29-32).

The last three plagues bring out something different in the ten plagues. The story of the ten plagues is a reversal, a ten-step reversal, of creation. The final three plagues are descriptions of cataclysmic ecological, environmental disasters.

For me, the metaphoric interpretation of the ten plagues directly leads to reflection upon the reality of climate change on earth. And whether or not we ascribe that climate change to global warming or natural cosmic occurrences, there is no doubt that the earth is getting warmer. And this will lead to heat waves and drought that will cause deaths. This will lead to more wars, because water is going to become more scarce. Climate change will lead to the melting of polar ice shelves causing sea levels to rise and causing highly-populated coastal cities around the world to be under water.

At our Third Friday Night guest lecture just last week, Professor Stuart Gaffin of Columbia University said that the key question is not how to stop climate change. Climate change is inevitable, he said. The only question is to what degree will the climate change.

In other words, the ten plagues are coming, and this planet will be far less hospitable to human beings in the late 21st and early 22nd century. And of course this brings us to the Pharaoh. Pharaoh is a historical figure. He is also much more than that. The Pharaoh can be interpreted as a metaphor of the negative characteristics of human nature. Please describe the Pharaoh for me. How does the Pharaoh behave? The Pharaoh is arrogant, ruthless, fearful, dishonest, inflexible, stubborn.

How does Pharaoh respond to the final three plagues? He refuses to believe they are coming. Pharaoh has hardened his heart. This can mean that he refuses to concede what is obvious, what is common sense. Unlike his magicians and his people, Pharaoh lives in a state of utter denial. His people know the plagues are real. His magicians know that the Pharaoh is contending with supernatural forces that he cannot even comprehend, much less control.

Climatologists are shocked at the rate of climate change, the intensity and speed of how negatively the earth is responding to the volume of pollution we put in it and above it. But just like the Pharaoh, we refuse to believe that the ten plagues are really coming. In a state of denial, we don't take the necessary sacrificial steps to insure our liberation, our freedom from a wholly new kind of bondage.

The story of the Pharaoh, the ten plagues, and the Exodus from Egypt can be interpreted as a cautionary tale that locusts, darkness, and death loom on the horizon. Because we all know how this story ends, it is a wake-up call not to behave like the Pharaoh but to take immediate corrective action.