

THE TEN PLAGUES AND CLIMATE CHANGE

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BY RABBI STUART W. GERSHON

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For the sake of the children at the Passover Seder, we generally tend to make light and make fun of the story of the Pharaoh and the Ten Plagues. This is actually a disservice to the Torah narrative and its deeper meaning. In context, the Ten Plagues can only be described as terribly frightening as they increase in terrible severity. What the Torah wants us to understand is that the Ten Plagues are nothing less than a series of cataclysmic environmental disasters.

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This is, actually, a disservice to the Torah narrative and its deeper meaning. In context, the ten plagues can only be described as terribly frightening as they increase in terrible severity: blood, frogs, lice, insects, disease, boils, locusts, darkness, and death of the first-born.

What the Torah wants us to understand is that the ten plagues are nothing less than a series of cataclysmic environmental disasters. For me, the true significance of ten plagues leads inescapably to parallels with climate change.

Nor does it matter whether or not we ascribe that climate change to global warming or natural cosmic occurrences. Bottom line: there is no doubt that the earth is getting warmer. Respected climatologists express shock at the rate of climate change, the speed of how negatively the earth is responding to the volume of pollution we put in it and above it.

The key question is no longer how to stop climate change. Climate change is inevitable. The only question is to what degree the climate will change.

A warmer earth may lead to extreme heat waves and drought that will cause significant loss of life. Because potable water is going to become more scarce, nations may go to war for it. The melting of the polar ice shelves may cause sea levels to rise, submerging highly-populated coastal cities around the world.

I am surely not alone in the fear that this planet may be far less hospitable to human life – to the lives of our children and grandchildren -- in the late 21st century. Are the Ten Plagues coming in our time too?

Now this brings us to the Pharaoh. Pharaoh is a historical figure. He is also much more than a historical figure. Pharaoh is a metaphor for the negative, self-destructive characteristics of human nature. How does the Pharaoh behave? How would you characterize him? The Pharaoh is arrogant and ruthless, fearful and dishonest, inflexible and stubborn.

Pharaoh's response to the Ten Plagues is to refuse to believe they are coming. Pharaoh "hardened his heart." That is, he refuses to concede what is obvious, to accept what is common sense.

For the Egyptian people well-knew the plagues were real. Pharaoh's magicians knew that the Pharaoh was contending with supernatural forces he could not even comprehend, much less control. Unlike his magicians and his people, Pharaoh lived in a state of utter denial.

Just like the Pharaoh, many people today still refuse to believe that the ten plagues may really be coming. In its own state of denial, our society doesn't take the necessary sacrificial steps to insure our liberation, our freedom from a wholly new kind of bondage. The story of the Pharaoh and the Ten Plagues is a cautionary tale for the 21st century. And because we all know how badly this story ends, it is a wake-up call. The good news is: There is still time to learn from Pharaoh's mistakes and to take immediate corrective action.