

BO (EXODUS 10:1-13:16)

How Many Plagues Does It Take to Punish a Pharaoh?”, or, “A Plague on TEN of Your Houses?

2012 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

[This week’s Torah Talk message is based upon a talk by Rabbi Moshe Bick, of Blessed Memory. I cannot vouch for its accuracy, since it was quoted to me by someone who heard it from his father, who was quoting Rabbi Bick’s son quoting his father. (Have you ever played “Telephone”?) Also, I abbreviated it a bit. If you like it, Rav Bick and his quoters deserve the credit. If you don’t, I accept the blame!]**

In this week’s and last week’s Torah Portions we read of the devastation that befell the Egyptians as a result of the Ten Plagues.

The Pharaoh was repeatedly asked to release the Hebrew slaves. He repeatedly refused. And he was repeatedly punished.

But why ten times? That certainly wasn’t the original message:

G-d told Moses to tell Pharaoh*, “G-d said, ‘My firstborn son is* *Israel*...*You have refused to release him...I will kill your firstborn son.*’” (Exodus, 4:23-23)

As we all know, he refused to release G-d’s “firstborn”, and eventually he sustained the loss of the Egyptian firstborn in the Tenth Plague. Based upon this original warning, it appears that the only punishment necessary for refusing to release the slaves was the tenth Plague. Why the other nine?

Another question. The Ninth Plague, the Plague of Darkness. It doesn’t seem to have been such a big deal. The other Plagues had led to death and destruction, and seem to have gotten successively more harsh. But the Plague of Darkness, consisting of three days when they couldn’t see and three days when they couldn’t move, seems to have been mostly an annoyance, but not a severe plague.

Also, Rashi implies that the Plague of Darkness was not because of the Pharaoh’s refusal to release the slaves. He states that many wicked Israelites who refused to leave Egypt died during the darkness so that the Egyptians wouldn’t see their deaths and negate their own punishment by saying, “See, the Hebrews are dying too!” Also, the darkness gave the Israelites the opportunity to see what possessions the Egyptians had so that they could request them on the way out of Egypt. (Basically, reparations for the years of slavery.)

Rabbi Bick answered that different plagues served different purposes.

The Pharaoh didn't respond well to Moses' initial request:

"Who is G-d that I should listen to His Voice to release Israel? I don't know G-d! Also, I will not release Israel!" (ibid, 5:2)

Pharaoh here committed two sins: 1) *"Who is G-d that I should listen to His Voice...?"* 2) **Also**, *I will not release Israel!"*

Pharaoh committed blasphemy against G-d. **ALSO**, he was disrespectful toward Israel. Both of these sins needed to be punished.

The Plagues began: 1) Blood. 2) Frogs. 3) Lice. 4) Wild animals. 5) Cattle disease. 6) Boils. 7) Hail.

Pharaoh began to see the error of his ways:

*Pharaoh sent and summoned Moses and Aaron and said to them, "This time I have sinned. **G-d is the Righteous One**, and I and my people are the wicked ones.* (ibid, 9:27)

Pharaoh repented for sinning against G-d. But G-d still had a score to settle for his sin against Israel.

The Plagues continued: 8) Locusts.

Pharaoh was getting better:

Pharaoh hastened to summon Moses and Aaron and he said, "I have sinned to G-d and to you..." (ibid, 10:16)

... **and to you...**" Pharaoh had now repented for sinning against Israel. His punishment for his disrespect was fulfilled. The first 8 Plagues had taken care of that.

Then came Plague #9. The Plague of Darkness was really not a punishment per se. That is why it wasn't so severe. As Rashi explains, the purpose of that Ninth Plague was more about benefiting Israel than punishing Egyptians. Therefore, it was more a nuisance than a plague.

Pharaoh still refused to release the slaves. He repented for "dissing" G-d and Israel after suffering the first eight Plagues. He endured the Ninth Plague for Israel's sake.

But he still refused to heed G-d's warning that he must release G-d's firstborn or he would lose Egypt's firstborn.

That was the one Plague that needed to be done for his refusal. The other Plagues were a punishment for opening his big mouth!!!

No bad deed goes unpunished. Every additional nuance of Pharaoh's sin led to additional punishment. G-d is very specific, and He has a very good memory. He misses nothing.

Whatever applies to the negative applies all the more so to the positive. Every good deed we do gets noticed. Every positive facet of every Mitzvah is rewarded.

Do a Mitzvah. Do it now. G-d is watching!

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

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