

## A Muse: Va'era

“The Lord said to Moses, early in the morning station yourself before Pharaoh and say to him, thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews: let my people go to worship me. For this time I will send all my plagues upon your person, and your courtiers, and your people, in order that you may know that there is none like Me in all the world.”(Exodus 9: 13-14)

How are we to understand the purpose and nature of the plagues? Were they a means to punish the Egyptians for enslaving the Hebrews or part of God's scheme to demonstrate His power and in so doing degrade the power and value of the Egyptian deities? Were the plagues a result of divine intervention in the natural order of things, or perhaps the plagues weren't an act of God, but were part of nature; its timing and intensity orchestrated by God?

The Rambam references the plagues to raise the question of free will. How can the Egyptians be blamed for the continued enslavement of the Hebrews if God won't allow Pharaoh to set the Hebrews free? The Rambam resolves this issue by calling attention not to the current state of affairs when Moshe pleads on behalf of the Hebrews, but their prior condition of slavery. The punishment they are receiving is for the inhuman treatment of them prior to the arrival of Moses. God, according to the Rambam was interested in Pharaoh refusing to teshuva in order at they could be punished for crimes already committed. Had the Pharaoh set them free upon request it would have been difficult for God to punish Pharaoh to the extent that He subsequently did.

The Rambam's understanding of punishment and its purpose fits in with the world view of Chazal who also buy into the scheme of mida k'neged mida, that for every action there is an opposite reaction, or in the vernacular there is pay back. This tends to be the approach of the underdog in general who feels that their only vindication will come as a result of payback. We have seen this many times in our history; retribution for sins against the Jewish people would be realized sometime in the future – if not in this world then in the next. Regarding the plagues the sages link each of the ten plagues to an event that relates back to the plague. For example: the plague of blood references the fact that

the Egyptians wouldn't allow Hebrew women to purify themselves after menses. (never mind that Torah and all that evolved from torah shel baal peh hadn't been given yet to the Hebrews) The sages cleverly crafted this kind of mind set for each of the plagues. There are different versions of this throughout the midrashim. The point however is that the plagues weren't randomly chosen, but were carefully crafted by God with the intent of delivering a clear message to the Egyptians and to bring them to their knees.

Shmuel David Luzzatto, the Shadal believed that the plagues were really occurrences in nature however, they appeared miraculously. He further says that the timing of the plagues and their intensity was what gave them divine quality and provenance. Thus according to the Shadal, although the ten plagues were occurrences which took place within nature they nevertheless had supernatural elements associated with them; their timing and intensity.

The plagues, apart from being a punishment were also a method by which to educate. By observing the plagues, according to the Shadal one could understand better the way of God. Accordingly, not every intervention by God has to be miraculous. God may intervene through the natural order of things but tweak the timing as well as the intensity. Is it possible therefore those phenomena like global warming (assuming it isn't man induced) or the ice age although not acts of God are manifestations of his presence by tweaking our environment?