



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

בא תשע"ט
Bo 5779

**Against
Their Gods**

WELCOME TO COVENANT & CONVERSATION 5779 FAMILY EDITION

Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition is a new and exciting initiative from The Office of Rabbi Sacks for 5779. Written as an accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the *Family Edition* is aimed at connecting older children and teenagers with his ideas and thoughts on the *parsha*. To receive this via email please make sure you are subscribed to Rabbi Sacks' main mailing list at www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe.



PARSHAT BO IN A NUTSHELL

The *parsha* of Bo details the last three of the plagues and the institution of Passover, both at the time of the exodus itself and as it was subsequently to be celebrated. God sends the eighth and ninth plagues, locusts and darkness, but Pharaoh still refuses to free the Israelite slaves. God tells Moses that the tenth plague will be the killing of all

the firstborn Egyptians and commands each Israelite home to slaughter a lamb and spread the blood on their doorposts, in order to protect their firstborns. After the death of the firstborns, Pharaoh demands that the Israelites leave. The long exile is at an end. The Israelites have begun their journey to freedom.



THE CORE IDEA

The ninth plague – darkness – comes shrouded in a darkness of its own. What is this plague doing here? It seems out of sequence. So far there have been eight plagues, and they have become steadily and increasingly more serious. The first two, blood and frogs, seemed more like signs than anything else. The third and fourth, gnats and wild beasts, caused worry, not crisis. The fifth, the plague that killed livestock, affected animals, not human beings. The sixth, boils, was again a discomfort, but more serious this time. The seventh and eighth, hail and locusts, destroyed the Egyptian grain. Together with the previous loss of livestock, now there was no food. Still to come was the tenth plague, the death of the firstborn, that would eventually break Pharaoh. So we would expect the ninth plague to be very serious indeed.

Instead it seems to be an anticlimax. Darkness is a nuisance, but no more. The phrase “darkness that can be felt” suggests what happened: a khamsin, a sandstorm usually produced by a southern wind that blows into Egypt from the Sahara Desert, was probably not unusual for Egyptians, especially at this time of year in the spring. It can last for several days and produce sand- and dust-filled air that obliterates the light of the sun. The ninth plague

was no doubt unusual in its intensity, but it was not an event unfamiliar to the Egyptians, then or now. Why then does it figure in the plague story, and why did it not happen nearer the beginning, as one of the less severe plagues?

The answer lies in a line from “Dayeinu,” the song we sing as part of the Haggadah: “If God had executed judgment against them [the Egyptians] but had not done so against their gods, it would have been sufficient.” And this sentiment is also found in the Torah itself: “I will perform acts of judgment against all the gods of Egypt: I (alone) am God.” (Exodus 12:12)

Not all the plagues were directed, in the first instance, against the Egyptians. Some were directed against things they worshipped as gods. That is the case in the first two plagues. The Nile was considered the god of fertility and frogs were associated with the goddess who was present at births. The plagues were not only intended to punish Pharaoh and his people for their mistreatment of the Israelites, but also to show them the powerlessness of the gods in which they believed. The greatest god in the Egyptian pantheon was Ra the sun god. The obliteration

of the sun was a message - that there is a power greater than Ra – God.



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Here is a translation of the Chad Gadya song from the Pesach Haggadah:

One little goat my father bought for two zuzim. Along came a cat and ate the goat. Then came a dog and bit the cat. Then came a stick and hit the dog. Then came a fire and burned the stick. Then came water and put out the fire. Then came an ox and drank the water. Then came a slaughterer and slew the ox. Then came the angel of death and slew the slaughterer.

Then came the Holy One and slew the angel of death, who slew the slaughterer who slew the ox who drank the water that put out the fire that burned the stick that hit the dog who bit

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What objectives were the plagues designed to achieve?
2. For whose benefit were the plagues?
3. Why does God, who is all-powerful, need to prove that the Egyptian gods were not true?

the cat who ate the goat my father bought for two zuzim; one little goat, one little goat.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What do you think is the symbolism of all the characters in this story? What do you think is the overall meaning? Why do you think this song is found in the Haggadah?
2. How is the message of this song connected to the message of *The Core Idea* this week?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

As set out in *The Core Idea* above, the plagues were not only intended to punish Pharaoh and his people for their mistreatment of the Israelites, but also to show them the powerlessness of the gods in which they believed. The symbolism of these plagues, often lost on us, would have been immediately apparent to the Egyptians.

By first ordering the midwives to kill all male Israelite babies, and then, when that failed, by commanding, “Every boy who is born must be cast into the Nile” (Exodus 1:22), Pharaoh had turned what should have been symbols of life (the Nile, which fed Egyptian agriculture, and midwives) into agents of death. The river that turned to blood, and the frogs (that represent childbirth in Egyptian culture) that infested the land, were not afflictions as such, but rather coded communications, as if to say to the Egyptians: reality has an ethical structure. See what it feels like when the gods you turned against the Israelites turn on you. If used for evil ends, the powers of nature will turn against man, so that what he does will be done to him in turn. There is justice in history.

Hence the tenth plague, to which all the others were a mere prelude. Whereas the first two plagues were symbolic representations of the Egyptian murder of Israelite children, the tenth plague was the enactment of retributive justice, as if heaven was saying to the Egyptians: You committed, or supported, or passively accepted the murder of innocent

children. There is only one way you will ever realise the wrong you did, namely, if you yourself suffer what you did to others.

This too helps explain the difference between the two words the Torah regularly uses to describe what God did in Egypt: *otot u'moftim*, “signs and wonders.” These two words are not two ways of describing the same thing – miracles. They describe quite different things. A *moftet*, a wonder, is indeed a miracle. An *ot*, a sign, is something else: a symbol (like tefillin or circumcision, both of which are called *ot*), that is to say, a coded communication, a message.

The significance of the ninth plague is now obvious. The greatest god in the Egyptian pantheon was Ra or Re, the sun god. The name of the Pharaoh often associated with the Exodus, Ramses II, means *meses*, “son of” (as in the name Moses) Ra, the god of the sun. Egypt – so its people believed – was ruled by the sun. Its human ruler, or Pharaoh, was semi-divine, the child of the sun god.

The plague of darkness was not a *moftet* but an *ot*, a sign. The obliteration of the sun signalled that there is a power greater than Ra. Yet what the plague represented was less the power of God over the sun, but the rejection by God of a civilisation that turned one man, Pharaoh, into an absolute ruler (son of the sun god) with the ability to enslave other human beings –

and of a culture that could tolerate the murder of children because that is what Ra himself did.

When God told Moses to say to Pharaoh, “My son, My firstborn, Israel,” He was saying: I am the God who cares for His children, not one who kills His children. The ninth plague

was a divine act of communication that said: there is not only physical darkness but also moral darkness. The best test of a civilisation is to see how it treats children, its own and others’. In an age of broken families, neglected and impoverished children, and worse – the use of children as instruments of war – that is a lesson we still need to learn.



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

There can be no doubt that the religion of ancient Israel was one of the most stunning transformations ever wrought in humanity’s moral imagination, never more so than in the fact of the Exodus itself. In antiquity the gods were on the side of the established power. They underwrote the reign of kings, emperors, and princes – an idea revived in Europe in the Middle Ages in the form of the doctrine of the “divine right of kings.” Rulers ruled because they were gods, or children of gods, or prime intermediaries between the gods and mankind. They held sway on earth for the same reason as did the sun in the sky: there was an order on earth as in heaven, by which the strong ruled the weak, and power was the guarantor of order. That God, creator of heaven and earth, might intervene in history *to liberate slaves* was the ultimately unthinkable. Thus a paradox was born, which ever since has inspired men and women to break the chains of their

oppression: that true power is distinguished by its concern for the powerless, that greatness is measured by the ability to hear the cry of the otherwise unheard – the weak, the vulnerable, “the widow, the orphan, and the stranger” – and that freedom is not worthy of its name unless it means freedom for all.

*The Jonathan Sacks Haggadah, from the essay,
“Building a Society of Freedom”*

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How is Judaism a protest against hierarchy?
2. How was this message broadcast to the world throughout history through the Exodus narrative?



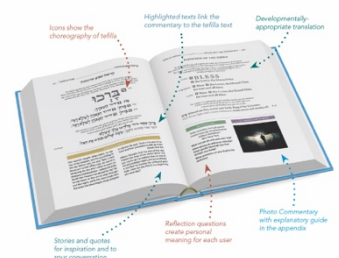
AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why do you think God chose to take the Israelites out of Egypt with so many plagues rather than just one miraculous act of liberation?
2. If the ninth plague was just a regular sandstorm (a khamsin) does that make it less miraculous?
3. What is the difference between a *mofet* and an *ot*? Can a *mofet* also function as an *ot*?
4. Do you think there is a similar phenomenon in modern times of leaders who think they are gods or the son of gods?
5. What do you think the ultimate message of the Exodus story is to the world?



QUESTION TIME

Do you want to win a **Koren Aviv Weekday Siddur**? This siddur has been designed to help young people explore their relationship to their God, and the values, history and religion of their people. Email CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org with your name, age, city and your best question or observation about the *parsha* from the *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition*. **Entrants must be 18 or younger.** Each month we will select two of the best entries, and the individuals will each be sent a siddur inscribed by Rabbi Sacks! Thank you to Koren Publishers for kindly donating these wonderful siddurim.





THE CORE IDEA

1. The plagues had a multifaceted function that can be understood on three levels. On a basic level they were designed to liberate the Israelites. But it is often asked why God didn't do this in a simpler, less dramatic way (or in fact why did He allow or orchestrate their enslavement in the first place)? The basic premise of this week's *Covenant & Conversation* is that the Exodus narrative in general and the plagues in particular had another function to achieve. This could be the punishment of Pharaoh and in fact the Egyptian people who were complicit at least in the Israelite enslavement. In which case, the third level of comprehending God's agenda in the story is the re-education of the Egyptian people (a regional super-power in the world) and the world, throughout history. In a nutshell, they were designed to show the inherent flaws in a hierarchical society built on the back of an oppressed minority, and to show the way to the building of an ideal ethical society based on the core values of the Torah of liberty and equality for all.
2. The plagues were therefore not just for the benefit of the Israelites who gained their liberty from them, but also for the Egyptian people as a process of reeducation, and in fact the entire world throughout history who have learned and incorporated the values of the narrative to society in every generation.
3. Education is a lengthy process. The end result, the comprehension of truths such as these, necessitates an experiential journey. A sudden and miraculous demonstration of strength would have proven merely that the Israelite god at that moment was stronger than the Egyptian gods, rather than the core message: One ultimate power who created all humans in His image, and has charged them to build societies based on the values of liberty and equality.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. According to Rabbi Sacks, in his essay "One Little Goat" in the Jonathan Sacks Haggadah, each character represents a different nation that attempted to destroy the Jewish people. The message is that each one has been destroyed in one way or another and no longer exists, but God has ensured that the Jewish people survive. This is one possible interpretation, and there could be others. But the overarching message is that while at any point in history it seems as if there are nations or people or other forces that are all-mighty and seemingly invincible, only God is truly invincible. The story told in the Haggadah is the beginning of the long story of the Jewish people and signifies the first time in history where a nation tried to destroy them. While it was not the last, the result will always be the same, for the Jewish people have an unbreakable covenant with God that protects them.
2. Just as each element in the Chad Gadya song believes itself to be invincible, it was proved not to be the case and that only Hashem is the ultimate ruler of the world. While the people of Egypt believed in the invincibility of their gods and of their leader Pharaoh, as the son of god, the truth became painfully apparent by the end of the Exodus story.

FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. Judaism's core values, that every human being is created in the image of God, ensures that while soft hierarchies may be necessary in society, all people are created equally and have equal worth and rights. Judaism as a civilisation and moral code places great emphasis in protecting the weak in society.
2. The despot Pharaoh, who believed himself to be an invisible deity, and who had built his empire and power on the back of defenceless, weak and oppressed people within his kingdom, was unceremoniously dethroned and in the process the one true God was revealed. The core message of liberty and equality has captured the hearts and minds of humanity ever since. This story has not only impacted and deeply influenced the Jewish people who continue to retell the story every year, but all societies under the influence of the Judeo-Christian worldview have built their societies on its values and transmitted its story to each following generation.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. See *The Core Idea*, questions 1-3.
2. There are some scholars that have found ways to explain all ten plagues, and the splitting of the Red Sea, in natural terms. This does not take away from the miraculous nature, because we believe even through nature God acts and influences history. The exact timing to achieve a divine agenda in itself should be seen as part of the miraculous nature of the story. In this particular case, the Torah also goes out of its way to mention that there was light in the dwellings of the Israelites, suggesting that there was still a supernatural aspect to this miracle, even if you explain it as a khamsin.
3. A *mofet* is a super-natural miracle, while an *ot* focuses on the outcome of the wonder. An *ot* could be through natural means, but its timing and clear message make it more about the message it delivers. A *mofet* can still function as an *ot* delivering a clear message.
4. Many despots and dictators throughout history, including contemporary times, have a sense of their own invincibility, and display signs of a god-like demagoguery. The political system of democracy tries to ensure enough transparency and checks and balances to protect from such demagogues rising to power and abusing the power they have. However, history has proven this not to always be sufficient.
5. This is best summed up in the quote from the *Jonathan Sacks Haggadah*, found here in *From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks*.