

The locust plague is unique and multidimensional. The 8th plague, it is the first that comes solely from HaShem, who by this deed establishes an international presence. It is the only plague that contains the words, "... in order that you tell into the ears of your son and your son's son how I have mocked Mitzrayim ..." Into the ears is exactly what the first paragraph of the Shema Yisrael means when it enjoins us to instill Torah in our children so that it becomes an intrinsic part of our identity. We not only repeat the story of the Exodus every year at our Pesach Seder we experience it quasi firsthand because it has been inculcated into us, from mouth to ear, from mind to heart, from generation to generation.

Now, let's look at two wonderfully insightful words and wordplays: The word used here for locusts is *arbeh*. There are actually seven different words for this destructive insect in our TaNaKh, but *arbeh* stands eloquently for all of them. It derives from the root רבה – to increase, to multiply. The word is used in negative context in Parashah Bereshit to describe to Eve the birthing pains women will suffer (*harbah arbeh itzvoneich v'heironeich* I will certainly increase your pain and your pregnancy), and in positive context in Parashah Vayeira when the messenger of HaShem tells Abram, "*Harbah arbeh et zar'acha* I will certainly multiply your seed ..." *Arbeh* is a double-edged sword in our parashah too. In positive light, locusts are among the few edible kosher insects, and their coming marks the beginning of HaShem's direct action to free the Israelites. But in numbers that had never before been seen in Egypt, they destroy all the vegetation the hail had left standing, and once that is accomplished, they completely disappear from the land, leaving the Egyptian economy in ruins and the Egyptians with nothing to eat. The locusts are so numerous that they obscure the view (literally the eye) of all the earth. This is also the exact wording Balak uses to describe the Israelites, whom he says have come in droves out of Egypt, and whom Moab fears and loathes. As we will see when we unpack the next word, the locusts are also the first of three plagues involving darkness.

Ra = evil or *Ra* = Egyptian sun god or *Ra* = friend/neighbor – an powerful, albeit coincidental pun: The last straw before the locust plague is unleashed is Pharaoh's accusatory comment (10:10) to Moses, "*re'u ki ra'a neged penekem* – See, there is evil before your faces." I love puns, and I especially love multilingual puns, and hur**RAH**, this tiny word holds a world of them. The sun god Ra is the not only the main god of Egypt, he is also the patron of the pharaohs. In again denying Moses' request to let all the Israelites go to worship HaShem, Pharaoh's likely unintentional double entendre seems to be placing Ra in the forefront, a menacing provocation to Moses, who was raised in his own court and fully understands the implications of these words. As his world darkens, Pharaoh becomes ever more obstinate for fear of losing face. As a result, the last three plagues are increasingly lethal variations on the theme of darkness. The locusts blot out the sun, but only for one day; Ra and his earthly representative Pharaoh seem still to be in control. The darkness, so oppressive that it literally imprisons the Egyptians, lasts for three days; Pharaoh, shaken but undeterred, sends Moses away with a threat. The final blow, the death of the firstborn, occurs at the darkest time of the night when Ra the sun god is farthest away. In the end, Ra is overpowered by HaShem, the covenantal, omnipotent, transcendent friend – and – one last pun, please – רֹעֵה (*ra'ah* = shepherd) to all who acknowledge HaShem's supremacy.

Through his repeated obstinance, Pharaoh is now chronically, pathologically narcissistic, so inflexible that he does not see that a higher power is mocking him. Like so many other autocrats who have brought disaster upon themselves and their people, he has locked himself into a prison of hubris and denial, blind to the suffering of others, including of his own people, and impervious to all admonitions. His courtiers try to reason with him, but completely controlled by his addiction to adulation and validation, he is beyond understanding. After three plagues brought about by Aaron, three by Moses, and one by Moses and Aaron together, Pharaoh has grown so implacable that only a power higher than he can ever begin to comprehend is able to reach him. The last three plagues flow directly from HaShem, plunging Pharaoh into a darkness which can only end at the bottom of the sea.

No wonder we are to recount the locust plague directly into the ears of our children. It is first of all a powerful warning against becoming a prisoner of self-deception. In addition, and more importantly, the locust plague is the harbinger of a vastly different theological concept – the concept of an invisible, nurturing, omnipotent, and transcendent God. It is a concept that does not deify earthly creatures, but that instead, teaches us to respect all life. We even respect the locust, that small double-edged sword of an insect that helped bring about a huge paradigm shift.

Shabbat shalom!