

The plagues, those ten “signs and wonders” that HaShem rains down upon the Egyptians, have begun. The first seven, which occur in our parashah, are only meant to provoke, not to destroy. Blood, the first one, is highly significant. Midrash Tanchuma Vaera: “Pharaoh and the Egyptians worshiped the Nile, and the Holy One of Blessing said, ‘Smite his god first and then him ...’ Smite the water of the Nile, the roots of the plants in the rivers, and indeed, every source of their water, even that which is in their ladles. And blood appeared in the wood and stone, and even the spittle of the Egyptians turned to blood.” The midrash tells us that “The plague of blood was inflicted upon them because they would not permit the daughters of Israel to bathe after their menstrual period lest they increase and multiply.” An article in The Times of Israel suggests that the blood is a direct message to Pharaoh. The blood of the infants he ordered drowned in the Nile rises to remind him and all the Egyptians of their murderous actions against an entire people. They cannot hide their crimes. This first plague is an appeal to their sense of decency and an admonition that in the end, truth will prevail. Whatever it symbolizes, the plague of blood is a powerful opening salvo in a showdown between Moses and Aaron representing HaShem, and Pharaoh, who embodies the Egyptian belief system. Midrash Tanchuma tells us that frogs are the second plague because the Egyptians had commanded the Israelites to bring reptiles and creeping things to them, i.e., unkosher animals. In the midrash, Rabbi Akiva offers a creative commentary on an inconsistency in the Torah: 8:2 uses the singular form צְפַרְדֵּי (frog) rather than the plural: “At first there was only one frog, but after the Egyptians struck it, many frogs sprang from it.” Our sages say that they struck repeatedly in anger, which did nothing but increase their discomfort. The plague of frogs is also a direct reference to the Egyptian fertility goddess Heket, who is represented hieroglyphically as a frog. The Egyptians revered the frog as a symbol of fertility related to the annual flooding of the Nile, the lifeline of the entire region. The third plague, lice/gnats/bugs, finally defeats Pharaoh’s magicians, who are able to conjure up blood and frogs, but see in this plague “the finger of Elohim” (8:15). Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin explains: “... a demon cannot create an entity smaller than the size of a barley grain. Consequently, the magicians were not capable of duplicating the plague of lice, and they realized that this was not an act of sorcery, but was performed by God.” First battle won, but there are more, harder ones ahead. The fourth plague is a mixture of harmful creatures that lay waste to the land, after which they disappear without a trace. They are called מְצֻרָה, a word for mixture with such diverse meanings as evening (a mixture of light and darkness), weaving, and rabble. The Midrash teaches that this mix of wild animals is punishment for having forced the Israelites to hunt bears and lions with which their masters would torment them. It is significant that they are completely removed so as not to let the Egyptians derive benefit from their valuable skins. The fifth plague kills the Egyptians’ livestock, which, according to the midrash, is in retribution for forcing the Israelites to pasture their livestock in barren lands so they would not be able to increase. The sixth plague is boils/blisters/rashes that affect both humans and animals. And the seventh plague is hail, which the midrash tells us, is “because they made the Israelites plant gardens, trees, parks and vineyards. Hence they afflicted them with hail, which destroyed their trees.” The midrash calls the accompanying thunder and lightning (8:24) a miracle within a miracle – fire intermingling with water. Hail and fire made peace with each other so that they could unite against Egypt. “When an Egyptian was seated he would be pummeled by hail; when he arose he would be scorched by fire in conformity to the punishments meted out to wicked men in the netherworld.” Pharaoh is impressed enough to admit, “I have sinned this time. The Lord is the righteous One, and I and my people are the guilty ones.” (9:28) But once the thunder and hail cease, Pharaoh returns to his old stubbornness. As the midrash says, “Such is the way of the wicked: whenever they are in trouble, they humiliate themselves, but once their troubles have ceased, they become corrupt again.” Wise words that sadly, still hold true today. However, the plagues are not only a faceoff between two religious systems, they are also a tangible sign from HaShem directed toward the Israelites, and as we read at the beginning of our parashah, also toward Moses, who at the end of last week’s parashah had expressed his doubt in no uncertain terms. After centuries of slavery, the Israelites have become used to their lot and impervious to the notion of change. The initial appearance of Moses and Aaron had only increased their suffering, so why should they trust HaShem at all, having had no sign from their divine covenantal partner for so long? Belief in any sort of relationship, let alone deliverance from their oppression, has faded along with the memories of their ancestors and their special relationships with HaShem. Doubt and uncertainty will resonate in the minds and hearts of these former slaves for the rest of their lives, rendering them incapable of understanding how to function as free individuals. They, along with Moses, who had his own insecurity issues due to his dichotomous upbringing, will not enter the Promised Land. Seen in this light, the plagues are HaShem’s opening gambit in a lengthy, often frustrating attempt to teach the Israelites, their progeny, and, let’s face it, us, that freedom entails responsibilities that begin with appreciation and gratitude, which will lead to commitment.

Shabbat shalom!