

I recently saw a photograph of a public announcement outside a church. It read "The class on prophecy has been cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances." Being human often means being confused about the significance of events in our own lives, of seeing what is happening but not understanding where it is leading. When things are going well we assume that they will continue to be just as good in the future, which is usually naïve; when things go badly we fear they will never improve, which is usually . However much we like to think we saw things coming, it is usually the wisdom of hindsight which convinces us that we were on top of things. Much of the time we are just doing our best to do our best in spite a total lack of knowledge about the future.

When we read about the plagues in Egypt this week and next, we know well what will happen, because we have been reading this story our whole lives, when these parshiot occur during the winter, again in the spring when we relive the story of the Exodus, and in daily prayer when we sing the song of the sea and the many other references to coming out of Egypt. But the story would not have been anywhere near as familiar at the moment when the plagues were taking place, and their significance would only become clear as they intensified into a truly horrific end.

The plagues in Egypt are signs of God's power and tools of God's deliverance. It is misguided to view them as originating in nature, a series of natural phenomena which incidentally led to the Israelites liberation. The whole point of the Torah's account of the plagues is that they are instigated by God's will, in a carefully orchestrated sequence, slowly ratcheting up the pressure until finally destroying Pharaoh's, and Egypt's will with the death of the firstborn. The language of these verses is carefully constructed to depict the plagues as planned, orderly, and purposeful.

We read the Torah's account of the plagues as a description of events in our sacred history, but there are many empty spaces that invite us to ask more questions, and to imagine a few answers. Who knew about the conversations between Moses and Pharaoh? Who heard the repeated warnings by Moses about what was about to happen? Did the average Egyptian know enough to connect what was happening to their treatment of the Israelite slaves? When terrible

things begin to pile up, one after another, what meaning might someone experiencing those plagues assign to them?

A close reading of the text helps to clarify some of these questions. The Torah tells us early on that the Israelites lived separately from the Egyptians, in an area called Goshen. At first, during the initial plagues of *dam* (blood), *tzefarde'ah* (frogs) and *kinnim* (vermin), the Israelites suffered along with the Egyptians; they were universal plagues within Egypt. Everyone was getting a lesson in God's power and ability to control the natural world at will. But the rest of the plagues will exclude the Israelites, making it clear that even if they needed some educating about who God was, the real target of the plagues was the rest of Egypt. That point is made by Pharaoh's own magicians who, after the third plague, are no longer to use magic tricks to replicate the divinely driven punishments. So all of Egypt, including the Israelites in Goshen, experienced the first three plagues; all of Egypt except Goshen suffered the rest; those who were closest to Pharaoh understood their significance and even warned him of their meaning.

But for the rest of Egypt the plagues must have been a terrible and confusing series of catastrophes. Lacking mass communication, and probably without explanation from their king, they may have attributed their suffering to the many gods whom they believed ruled the sun, the Nile and so on. They would have known something was horribly wrong, but they would have no true understanding of what it was or how to alleviate it. And as it became clear that the Israelites were no longer suffering the plagues' effects, and that at their grisly conclusion, no Israelites suffered the death of the firstborn, the meaning of what was happening must have been a shock and an awakening for the Egyptians. What the final plagues made plain was that there was one true God, that Pharaoh had been defeated by God, and that God wanted the Israelites out of Egypt.

Sometimes it takes the multiplying effect of repeated suffering to awaken us from the dream of our own infallibility, mistakes and even evil. One of the lessons of the plagues in Egypt is that people often don't see a connection between their own actions and the effects of those actions, until it is too late to make a meaningful difference. Then things have to continue to get worse until we can slow or reverse the suffering we have caused. There are many examples we could cite: Our poisoning of the land, air and water through mass factory farming of animals; the

refusal to acknowledge the full humanity of other people, be they racial minorities, women, Jews; the steady degradation of language, civil discourse and simple kindness. In all of these instances the status quo holds long past the point where corrective action should have been taken, in part because of our inability to see just how serious these things are while they are happening. We don't connect the dots; we refuse to recognize the patterns until long after we should. Like the Egyptians we see the plagues piling up but don't see, or claim not to see, their significance.

But if the Exodus is a story about human blindness, it is also a redemption tale about the possibility of change and our deep need to feel God's help in lifting us up, out of the bonds of our denials about our problems, out of the shackles of our refusal to see what is plainly before us. You can do this, the Torah tells us, and God will help you. Moreover, it is not simply out of a spirit of generosity that God redeemed us from slavery in Egypt, or redeems us on a daily basis in each of our lives, but rather because of an expectation of reciprocal action on our part. God inspires us to see the patterns of imperfection in the world, the things that plague us through our own mistakes, and so too expects that newfound awareness to inspire us to the work of repairing this broken world. God freed us then through patterned plagues, in order that we might see those patterns, be eternally grateful, and dedicate ourselves to creating a world without the cruelty of Mitzrayim. God frees us now by giving us the insight to recognize recurring patterns of disarray, and then expects us to remake the world, day by day, in our own time. Seeing the patterns is, then, not a gift only from God but an obligation.

The question is: Once we see that things are not as they should be, how will we respond? Freedom from slavery means having a choice in how we interact with the world, unlike slaves. Recognizing a wrong but not taking action to correct it is not merely learning to live with imperfection; it is a conscious choice to permit that wrong to continue. We know how easy it is to not act, to let others to take the lead, to wait for the perfect opportunity to do something. But every day we hesitate, we permit what could be made better to become worse through our inaction. We must continually remind ourselves that the slavery from which God freed us is the status quo of 'that's just how things are.' Slaves never initiate change, only free people. When the free refuse their responsibility to remake the world for the better, they turn themselves into slaves of the status quo.

Reading the Exodus story once again, we recall how very much remains at stake when we tie our identity as Jews to this moment of redemption, the degree to which we remain obligated to repair the world. Each time we read these words, in the winter, in the spring, and on a daily basis, we have an opportunity to see ourselves as redeemed by God, and as charged by God to live up to that obligation.

Shabbat shalom.