

The Plagues Project

A light look at the deep lessons the *makkot* teach us

by Rebecca Allen

(Author's note: This is my personal take on the plagues. It is based mostly on the Torah of Rabbi Moshe Shapiro as published in the Reflections and Introspection Series, Mima'amakim, Sefer Shemot, by Rabbi Alexander Aryeh Mandelbaum, and The Intellect and the Exodus by Rabbi Jeremy Kagen. This piece in no way reflects the depth and beauty of the sources I used. Any errors in it are my own. My intention in developing this was to enhance our family's Pesach by adding meaning to a section of the seder which had become (enjoyably) overwhelmed by props and unfortunately underwhelmed with meaningful, down-to-earth lessons. I hope you will enjoy it in the spirit it is offered, as a starting point for imagination and discussion.)

Act I: History of the World (The Beginning)

The story of the plagues. It begins, not as you might think, in Egypt, but rather in an empty void. Specifically, the empty space into which our world was created. While there are a great many things I will ask you to imagine as we continue on with our story, this isn't one of them. We can't understand this in any way. What we do know, from the first verses in the Torah, is that Hashem spoke into this empty void ten times. And with those ten *ma'amarot*, those ten utterances or emanations, our world was created. The ten *ma'amarot* are Hashem's expression of the way the world is supposed to be.

Once spoken, the *ma'amarot* continue to exist forever, as it says in Tehillim 119:89, "Forever, Hashem, Your word stands in the heavens." And in the beginning, we heard these words perfectly. The world was a perfect expression of G-d's Will. However, Hashem gave us (by this I mean humanity as a whole) the choice of how to experience our world. We could use everything Hashem gave us for good . . . or for not-so-good. For the most part, we did not choose well. We were kicked out of Gan Eden. We caused the flood. We built the tower of Babel. And the list continues.

Avraham was the bright light that broke the dreary pattern. He understood the message of the *ma'amarot*, and he taught his children what he knew. But we were only a small family of believers, and we soon found ourselves in a bit of a situation. (This would be a good place to take a moment to imagine the scene.) More than 2000 years into the history of mankind, Egypt is the superpower of the known world, and the not-yet-born Jewish nation is struggling to exist in their midst. They've been there for about 200 years, and they are trying to remember what Avraham taught them. They are holding onto their unique language, names, and mode of dress with both hands, but it's so hard!

I would imagine that we Jews in our funny clothes did not like the Egyptians very much. They were, after all, not exactly nice to us. At the same time, I have to think that we must have respected them. Their society was cutting edge, their cities were big, their pyramids were wonderous feats.

The Egyptians had the exact wrong way of understanding the world. They had no idea, and I mean really no idea, how to understand the true nature of the *ma'amarot*. On the other hand, they did seem to be doing very well their whole worldview. And us, with our true faith? We were withering away day after day under the yoke of slavery.

This my friends, is the setting. And into the setting we bring the biggest prop: the staff.

Act II: The *Mateh*, The Staff

In order to move on, I'm sorry to tell you, we have to return to the very beginning. Luckily, not all the way back to the unimaginable void, but instead to a time almost as incomprehensible: twilight on the sixth day of creation. This was the close of the creation of the world, a time when it was neither night or day. Ten last things were created in this uncertain time, and Moshe's sapphire staff, his *mateh*, was one of them (Pirkei Avot 5:6).

Rav Moshe Shapiro tells us that the essence of the *mateh* is expressed, as all things are, in its Hebrew name. The root *mateh* means inclining or transferring from one side to another. Everything in the world was created with the ability to be used for good or for bad. At twilight, in that time between day and night, Hashem created an instrument which could be used to incline things back to the side of good. Through the *mateh*, Moshe brought the plagues, and through them taught the world the correct way to understand the *ma'amarot*.

In Egypt, the *ma'amarot*, the energies which uphold the whole world, were being used to create an evil society. In response Hashem sent the *makkot*. The *makkot* are plagues that harm, but also heal (Yeshayahu 19:22). There are ten of them, because they are ten lessons, which destroy the false meaning of the ten *ma'amarot*, and reveal their true meaning at the same time.

What this means, for us, is that if we can imagine for ourselves a bit of the experience of the *makkot*, we might be able to grasp some of the lessons Hashem was teaching us about His relationship with the world and with us.

The 10 *makkot* are part of a path that leads from the 10 *ma'amarot* to the 10 *dibrot* (commandments). More specifically, the *makkot* reveal their lesson in backwards order, giving the lesson of the last *ma'amar* first. In this way the experience of the *makkot* is the experience of peeling away the layers of falsehood, in order to get to the truth. Each *makkah* revealed a lesson from its corresponding *ma'amar*, which was then reflected in the corresponding *dibra*. In this way, the experience of the *makkot* were a learning experience, a path that led to experiencing the truth of *Bereisheit* and the truth of *Anochi Hashem Elokecha*.

And so, my friends, if you don't mind playing along, I'd love to travel this path with you, *makkah* by *Makkah*. We can start by imagining the experience of the *makkah*, and then connect it to the *ma'amar* it reveals something about, and from there to the *dibra* it relates to. Just for fun, we can connect some of this to the *sefirot*, as well. The *sefirot* are the paradigms through which Hashem relates to the world, and, since we are created in Hashem's image, they reflect the way we relate to the world as well. The true depth of this Torah is beyond my grasp, but I hope that together we can reach a bit of an understanding on a *pshat* level.

The Midrash tells us that the first letters of the plagues were carved into Moshe's staff and grouped into three, to spell the words "*Detzach Adash B'Achav*" (Shemot Rabbah 5). As Rabbi Kagen points out, "A memory device was not needed to remember the plagues, of which there were only ten. It was there to indicate their proper grouping (The Intellect and the Exodus, p. 157)." And so, let's follow this grouping, and try to unravel this pattern together.

The First Group of Plagues: *Detzach* (Blood, Frogs and Lice)

Act III: Gushing Blood

Take a moment to revisit the joy you've surely experienced at some point, when you gulped a mouthful of cold clear water on a brutally hot day. Are you there? There's no mistaking the expansiveness and joyfulness of water. Water is a life force.

The interesting thing about this *makkah*, when all the water in Egypt turned into blood, is that blood is also a force of life. The blood flowing through our veins is as much a force of life as the water flowing through the world. The first plague, therefore exchanged one life force for another, water for blood.

Conceptually, what's the difference between water and blood as sources of life? Rav Moshe Shapiro explains that water is an expansive life force. Wherever we find water, we find it connecting and transforming. It gives to whatever it touches, and without it not only would things not grow, but we would not be able to transform flour into dough, or sand into building material.

Blood, on the other hand, is a much more limited life force. It brings life only as long as it is contained within the body. It cannot expand beyond one being. Blood spilling out of the body is not life, it is death (Reflections and Introspection, Shemos, p.97-98).

Let's step back for a moment from the plague and look at the last time we see the words "And He said" in the creation story. With the last *ma'amar* Hashem gave the world over to us. Hashem said, "Behold, I have given you every seed-bearing herb, which is upon the surface of the entire earth, and every tree that has seed bearing fruit; it will be yours for food (Bereisheit 1:29)."

The world is ours. We create the experience we have in it. The *sefirah* that relates to this is the *sefirah* of *malchut*, kingship. We rule over our world. We get to choose how to animate our world, how to bring it to life, and how we will experience it.

On the one hand, we can be like water. We can look beyond ourselves. We can choose to be open to the reality that the world is so much bigger than ourselves. We can make space for so much more just our own understanding and our own immediate needs.

On the other hand, we can be like blood. We can choose to make our world all about ourselves. Our free choice allows us to forget that the world is bigger than us, bigger than what we can comprehend. We can choose to use our life force only for what serves us. We can consider

important only our own needs, and only what we can comprehend. We can choose to ignore or forget our creator.

When Hashem turned the expansive, overflowing Nile into a blood-spill, it killed all the fish that were in it. It was a stark illustration of what happens when we try to animate our world from a restrictive, self-centered life force. At the same time, all that was blood for the Egyptians was water for us. When we connect back to our Source, our Creator, our life becomes expansive. There is room for everyone to flourish and to live. In a world of expansiveness, when we are connected to Hashem, we are prepared for the last commandment, where we are asked to make room for everyone around us: “Do not be jealous of your neighbor’s house . . .” (Shemot 20:14).

Summary

The makkah: Blood

The ma’amar: Bereisheit 1:29

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים הִנֵּה נֹתַתִּי לָכֶם אֶת-כָּל-יִצְעָב זֶרַע זָרַע אֲשֶׁר עַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָאָרֶץ וְאֶת-כָּל-יִצְעָב אֲשֶׁר-בּוֹ פְּרִי-יִצְעָב זֶרַע זָרַע לָכֶם יִהְיֶה לְאֹכְלָהּ

And God said, "Behold, I have given you every seed bearing herb, which is upon the surface of the entire earth, and every tree that has seed bearing fruit; it will be yours for food.

The sefirah: Malchut/Kingship

The dibra: Shemot 20:14

לֹא תַחְמֹד בַּיִת רֵעֶךָ לֹא-תַחְמֹד אִשְׁתִּי רֵעֶךָ וְעַבְדּוֹ וְאִמָּתּוֹ וְשׁוֹר׃ וְדוֹנְקוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֶךָ

You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, his manservant, his maidservant, his ox, his donkey, or whatever belongs to your neighbor.

The Message

Hashem, in His infinite kindness, gave us the ability to animate our world. When we cut ourselves off from our Source, when we are closed into ourselves, and focus only on our own needs and our own limited understanding, we bring death to our true self, and to those around us. When we live in a world of expansiveness, connected to our Source, we can clearly see how the world is so much bigger than us. There is room in our world for ourselves, and for everyone else.

Act IV: The Croaking Frogs

Take a moment to imagine the frogs: a sea of hopping, jumping green that covered Egypt. And as you are imagining, take an additional moment to imagine what that must have sounded like. The Vilna Gaon tells us that the characteristic of the frog is that it never stops croaking. And not only did the frogs make their natural noises, Shemot Rabbah (10:6) tells us that the frogs also entered into the Egyptian's bodies, and made noise whenever the Egyptians tried to speak. Imagine the cacophony of a gazillion frogs and people croaking in unison. Are you there? The sound of the second plague was intense.

An interesting Yalkut Shimoni (Tehillim 889) gives us some insight into this sound. The midrash describes the elation that David Hamelech felt when he finished Sefer Tehillim. He turned to Hashem and asked if anyone had ever sung *shira* to Hashem the way he had. Hashem responded by summoning a frog to appear before David, and to proclaim its song greater than David's. Here the Midrash ends, and Rav Shapiro points out that from the simple reading of the midrash, it seems that the frog won the argument.

The point of the frog is that he was created to croak, and he fulfills what he was created to do perfectly. We, too, were created to make noise. The *ma'amar* that corresponds to the second plague is Bereisheit 1:26, "Let us make humans in our image." We are created in the image of G-d, and this gives us the ability to speak. Speech gives us the ability to use our body to express our soul.

The plague of blood explored the way we animate our world. This plague explores the way we animate ourselves. We were created with the ability to create who we are. The tool we can use to do this is our thoughts and our speech.

One way we can use our speech is to express our bodies and ignore our souls. The plague of frogs was the sound of what happens when our speech is used to express a vision of self that is not true to who we are. Rabbi Kagen explains that the plague of frogs was "not a mere *displacement* by frogs, this was a *replacement* by frogs." Hashem was illustrating what happens when we use our speech incorrectly. Our speech has no more meaning than the croaking of frogs, and neither do we (see *The Intellect and the Exodus*, p. 203-207).

We can also choose to be inspired by the frog, instead of identifying with the frog. We, too, can use our speech to actualize who we were created to be. We can use it to express the truth of who we are. We can actualize our true selves. In a world where we speak spiritual truth, we are prepared for the 9th *dibra*, when we are asked to use our speech correctly: "do not bear false witness against your neighbor."

Summary

The makkah: Frogs

The ma'amar: Bereisheit 1:26

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֵׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כִּדְמוּתֵנוּ

And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness"

The sefirah: Yesod/Foundation or Formation

The dibra: Shemot 20:13

לֹא-תִעַנֶּה בְּרֵעֶךָ עֵד שָׁקֵר

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor

The Message

We create not only the world around us, but also ourselves. We can ignore the spiritual truth of who we are and use our speech to express only our physical selves, and we can sound like frogs. We also have the opportunity to choose to speak the truth and to express our soul through our body. When we do that, we create ourselves the way we were meant to be.

Act V: Lots and Lots of Little Lice

This is the plague of the insignificant. Dust and small bugs. Until I mentioned them, I bet you hadn't spared a thought for them. Take a moment to really appreciate how little we generally care about these things. Are you there? That's what it was like in Egypt, too. At least, that's how it was until Aaron hit his staff into the dust of the earth, and the tiny little particles of dust became tiny little bugs, which became a very big problem.

Lice is the first plague that the magicians of Egypt couldn't replicate—not because it was too grand and complicated, but because their magic can't be bothered with anything that small. As Rashi explains, their magic has no effect on something smaller than a barley (Shemot 8:14).

This *makkah* corresponds to the *ma'amar* that created all the land animals. "And G-d said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kind, cattle and creeping things and the beasts of the earth according to their kind." When Hashem created the creatures, He created all the creatures, with no difference between big or small. It is humans who refuse to give importance to that which is small. But that is our limitation, not Hashem's.

We sometimes decide that certain things or people are not important. Certainly, the Egyptians decided that all Jewish lives were not important. Hashem has another perspective. He is not limited. He has the time, energy, and capacity to care for and about us all, regardless of how small we might seem.

The message of this *makkah* is that we all have an important place in Hashem's world. In a world where we understand that everything and everyone has its own unique importance, we are prepared to accept the *dibra* that asks us to be careful about everyone's property and time. The *dibra* that relates to this *makkah* is, "do not steal."

Summary

The makkah: Lice

The ma'amar: Bereisheit 1:24

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים תּוֹצֵא אֶת־הָאָרֶץ נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה לְמִינֶיהָ בְּהֵמָה וְרֶמֶשׂ וְחַיְתוֹ-אֶרֶץ לְמִינֶיהָ וְיִהְיֶה-כֵן

And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kind, cattle and creeping things and the beasts of the earth according to their kind."

The sefirah: Hod/Splendor or Restraint

The dibra: Shemot 20:13

לֹא תִגְנוֹב

Do Not Steal

The Message

We are limited in our time and energy, and therefore limited in what we can focus on and what we can care about. The same is true for the magic the Egyptians relied upon. But Hashem has no such limitations. Hashem cares for every aspect of this world, down to the tiniest detail. And when we think about that in the context of our relationship with Hashem, we understand that no matter how small we think we may be, we have an important place in Hashem's world.

The Second Group of Plagues: Adash (Wild Animals, Cattle Disease and Boils)

Act VI. Animals Let Loose

Ever have a wild animal suddenly invade your space? Maybe a poisonous spider that crawled into your home, or a bee or hornet that landed on your head? Maybe a wild dog or coyote or bear crossed your path when you were out walking at night? It's kind of terrifying. Take a moment to

remember that fear, and then multiply it a hundred-fold. Are you there? That's the fear of this plague. It's the fear of loss of control in the face of powerful forces. For the Jews, who lived in Goshen, where no wild animals dared to enter, it was also the peace of knowing that there's a place you can feel safe.

If we take a step back for a moment, we can see that the first set of plagues taught us about how we create our world and ourselves. This second group of plagues focus on the nature of humanity. The *ma'amar* that relates to this plague (Bereisheit 1:20) describes the outburst of animal life as it was first created in the world, when Hashem commanded life to burst forth and fill the heavens and the seas. Part of this first burst of life was the creation of the Leviatan (see Rashi, Bereisheit 1:21), an enormous sea creature whose very existence threatened the continuation of the world. Life was beautiful, but also dangerous.

There is a duality which is being expressed here. Life is will. It is desire. The nature of everything that lives is that it wants. And this is especially true of humans. We have strong desires. And this is both a positive and a negative. On the one hand, these wild animals running free are a vivid example of what happens when we let our base desires run free. They trample everything meaningful. They put us in danger. On the other hand, when we live in a world where we channel our will, and when we use our desires as a means for growth, we create a land of calm, the land of Goshen.

The *sefirah* that relates to this plague is the *sefirah* of *netzach*, which can mean both overpowering and prevailing. It is the *sefirah* that is connected to Moshe Rabbeinu. Unrestrained desire can destroy, but when we channel that desire, what we can achieve is almost unlimited. In a world where we are in tune with our desire, and we channel it for good, we are prepared to accept the seventh commandment, "Do not commit adultery," and to channel our desire for the deepest form of love and connection into something lasting and meaningful.

Summary

The makkah: Wild Animals

The ma'amar: Bereisheit 1:20

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יִשְׂרָאֵל הַמַּיִם שְׂרֹץ חַיִּים וְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם

And God said, "Let the waters swarm a swarming of living creatures, and let fowl fly over the earth, across the expanse of the heavens."

The sefirah: Netzach/ Overpowering or Prevailing

The dibra: Shemot 20:13

לֹא תִנְאָף

Do Not Commit Adultery

The Message

We are powerful people. Each of us is animated by powerful desires. Unrestrained they are dangerous but used correctly they are beautiful. We can know our own strength and we can use it to wonderful ends.

Act VII: The Day All The Cows Fell Down

In this plague, it wasn't just that random animals died. The animals that were sick were the ones that the Egyptians took care of, the ones they fed and housed. Let's not imagine exactly what that might feel like, but instead perhaps we could remember a time when a plant we took care of began to wither. Are you there? Can you feel how this is about the loss of the plant, but also about the loss of whatever pride we might have had in our ability to take care of the plant?

At the moment that the animals got sick, the Egyptians knew exactly where to turn. In Egyptian culture, Sekhmet, the daughter of the sun god Ra, was responsible for pestilence (see *The Intellect and the Exodus* p. 229). And so, we can imagine the Egyptians watching their livestock get ill, and running to their half-lion-half-woman goddess to help them. They were, of course, unsuccessful.

It is not by accident, of course, that this plague had the Egyptians running to their sun god. The *ma'amar* connected to this plague is the moment in creation when Hashem said, "Let there be luminaries in the expanse of the heavens," and the sun and the moon were placed in the sky.

The sun and the moon are interesting. The moon, especially at the middle of the month when its light is full, appears to be a self-sufficient light. Of course, we know that when it lights up the night sky, it is only reflecting the light of the sun. And the sun? It, too, seems to be a self-sufficient source of energy and warmth for our world. Of course, the sun, as well, is only channeling the energy given to it by Hashem.

This plague is about how we act as caregivers for our world. When we believe, as Pharaoh did, that we can stand in the place of G-d, we believe that we have the power, on our own, to determine who will live and who will die. The reality, of course, is that it's all from Hashem. No lion-woman-god could save the Egyptian's cattle, and no technology can guarantee that we can accomplish everything we want in this world.

We act as Hashem's emissaries in this world. When we separate ourselves from Hashem and imagine that we are the source of our own power, we put ourselves and everything that depends on us in danger. On the other hand, we have the option of turning to Hashem, relying on Him, and bringing tremendous bracha to everything and everyone around us. In a world where we rely on Hashem, we are prepared to keep the commandment, not only not to murder, but also not to bring any amount of spiritual or physical death to the world around us.

Summary

The makkah: Cattle Disease

The ma'amar: Bereisheit 1:14

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי מְאֹרֹת בְּרַקִּיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם

And God said, "Let there be luminaries in the expanse of the heavens"

The sefirah: Tiferet/ Splendor or Integration

The dibra: Shemot 20:13

לֹא תרצח

Do Not Murder

The Message

It's all from Hashem. It was Hashem Who gave us the ability to affect the world around us, both for good and for evil. It was Hashem Who asked us to sustain our world. But we can only be real conduits of life in the world when we connect ourselves back to the source of our strength, to our Creator.

Act VIII: Bursting Boils and Blisters

The third plague in every group has no warning, so Moshe's voice is not heard before this plague. But his actions speak loud and clear. For the first time in this plague, there is an extended process that begins the plague. Take a moment to imagine being a spectator as the plague begins. The setting is a little hazy, but we know that we are somewhere in the presence of Pharaoh, who is accompanied by his ever-present magicians (we haven't heard from them since the plague of lice, but they come back for an appearance here.) Moshe and Aharon are there as well. And there appears to be a furnace of some kind, because both Moshe and Aharon take two big heaping handfuls of soot. Are you there in the room, with Pharaoh, the magicians, Moshe and Aharon, and the four heaping handfuls of soot?

What happens next is a series of miracles (see Rashi, Shemot 9:8). Aharon empties his two handfuls into Moshe's already full hands, and then Moshe miraculously manages to fit all the soot into one hand, so that he can forcefully throw it up towards the heavens. The soot takes off on a flight of its own, spreading all over the land of Egypt, and then falling onto humans and animals and erupting into boils. Some ash lands on the Egyptian magicians, and the Torah tells us that, because of the boils, they were no longer able to be part of the scene. They could no longer stand before Moshe.

We know that in the time of the Torah, skin ailments were a way Hashem communicated with us about our behavior. These boils were a form of *tzara'at*. They were an eruption of the skin, an inflammation that grew beyond its bounds and is now causing pain. When we think of them this way, boils share some of the imagery of yeast. They puff up a person, unnaturally expanding him beyond his space. They are *ga'avah*, the haughtiness of thinking we are much more than what we really are.

The *ma'amar* that corresponds to this plague is when Hashem commanded the earth to create vegetation. And God said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation, seed yielding herbs and fruit trees producing fruit according to its kind in which its seed is found, on the earth (Bereisheit 1:11)." This is the point in the creation process when Hashem first makes room for the created to also become creator. Hashem made room in His world for us to take part, to act and to create.

We were created to be very much a part of the process, to act and to create. But we were not created for the purpose of having that go to our heads. The magicians thought that they were the ultimate source of all the magic they created in the world. They thought they were the source of their own creative power. Their spiritual reality, the ugly puffing up of their ego, was reflected on their skin. And they lost the ability to continue to act and even to stand.

On the other hand, Moshe and Aharon, who were able to act with tremendous strength and power, understood that they were acting with the strength Hashem gave them, and according to His Will. They were unaffected by the soot.

In this world Hashem gives us plenty of leeway to express our individual selves. We all have amazing things to do in this world. But the reminder of this plague is that we do not do them alone. We do them in partnership with Hashem. When we recognize that our strength is not from ourselves alone, but from Hashem, we are prepared to recognize that we all owe our strength to many things, and to many people who have come before us. We do not move forward without giving honor and respect to those who are most closely responsible for our lives and everything we have: our parents.

Summary

The plague: Boils

The ma'amar: Bereisheit 1:11

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים תִּדְשָׂא הָאֲרֶזֶץ דָּשָׂא עֵשֶׂב מִזֵּרִיעַ זָרַע עֵץ פְּרִי עֵשֶׂה פְּרִי לְמִינֹו אֲשֶׁר זָרַע-בוּ עַל-הָאֲרֶזֶץ

And God said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation, seed yielding herbs and fruit trees producing fruit according to its kind in which its seed is found, on the earth,"

The sefirah: Gevurah/ Strength

The dibra: Shemot 20:12

כְּבֹד אֶת-אָבִיךָ וְאֶת-אִמְךָ

Honor your father and your mother.

The Message

We all have different strengths and abilities, and there is room in the world to use them. We can do amazing things. But we don't do them on our own. We do them in partnership with Hashem.

The Final Group of Plagues: *B'achav* (Hail, Locusts, Darkness, Death of the Firstborn)

Act IX: Goodness, Gracious, Great Balls of Icy, Noisy, Fire

Before the plague began, Hashem sent a very clear warning: anything left out in the field will be destroyed. All people and animals need to be gathered into the house. Take a moment to imagine the crowding, and the stench, and the noise from all the people and animals crowded together. Are you there? It was in their crowded homes that the Egyptians experienced the hail.

As Jews, we often focus on the sight of the hail, which came down mixed with fire (Shemot 9:24). However, Rav Tzaddok HaKohen (Pri Tzaddik, Bo 3) tells us that this fire was only perceived by the Jews. The Egyptians didn't see it and it had no effect on them. What scared the Egyptians most about the hail was the noise that came with it. Along with the hail there were huge thunderclaps that shook the earth. It was these *kolot* which Pharaoh specifically begged to be rid of at the end of the plague, and which Moshe specifically said would stop (Shemot 9: 28-29).

In the crowded, noisy, smelly homes of the Egyptians, the feeling, as Rabbi Kagen explains (The Intellect and the Exodus p.244-245), was one of losing their sense of place. As the booming sound of thunder shook their home, and shook them, there was nowhere to run, and no place to feel safe.

The *ma'amar* that corresponds to this *makkah* is Hashem's command to the waters to move over and reveal dry land (Bereisheit 1:9). It was the moment when the world made space for man to exist. The Egyptians, who refused to admit that Hashem is the Creator of the world, lost their right to have a place in this world.

The message for us was different. We are now entering into the last grouping of plagues. The first group focused on how the world was given over to us to form and create and use as a means of creating a relationship with Hashem. The second group of plagues focused on our internal strengths, and the ways in which our power as humans can be both used and abused as we express ourselves in the world. In this last group of plagues, we are moving into a deeper understanding of how both the world and ourselves connect to Hashem in a deep and supernatural way.

As the Egyptians lost their sense of place, we were given a sign about the nature of our place in this world. The hail fell as balls of fire and ice mixed together in a miraculous way (Rashi, Shemot 9:24). The message was that we, too, had no guaranteed place in the world through the system of nature. As Jews in this world, we exist supernaturally. Through all the ages, through times of prosperity and through the deepest times of *galut*, our place in the world exists and is sustained

from beyond the natural world. Hashem is our place. This is the reality we remind ourselves of and return to each week, when we experience the fourth *dibra*, and enter into Shabbat.

Summary

The plague: Hail

The ma'amar: Bereisheit 1:9

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְקוּוּ הַמַּיִם מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם אֶל־מְקוֹם אֶחָד וַתִּרְצֵה הַיַּבֵּשָׁה

And God said, "Let the water that is beneath the heavens gather into one place, and let the dry land appear."

The sefirah: Chesed/ Kindness or Expansion

The dibra: Shemot 20:8

זְכוֹר אֶת־יְוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ

Remember the Shabbat to make it Holy

The Message

Hashem is our place. We exist in this world in the space that Hashem, in His eternal, unending kindness makes for us. Our place in this world is supernatural.

Act X. Locusts Leaping as One

A swarm of locusts. Take a moment, if you've ever seen it on video, or read about it, to imagine it in your mind. The size and strength of a swarm of locusts is immense. Some species of locusts can travel 81 miles or more in a day. Desert locusts can create swarms that include 40 to 80 million locusts and are 460 square miles in size. They can eat the same amount of food in one day as half the population of France. Can you imagine seeing that coming towards you on the horizon?

The interesting thing about a locust is that it begins life as a loner. It is completely unconcerned and unconnected to other locusts. Then, certain environmental conditions trigger the locust to completely change its nature. Its color, size, and activity changes, and instead of being a loner, the locust now becomes part of the swarm.

The *ma'amar* that is connected to this *makkah* is one of the hardest to relate to. Bereisheit 1:6 tells us that Hashem said, "Let there be a *rakia* in the midst of the water, and let it be a separation between water and water." What's a *rakia*? The *rakia* is the separation between the higher world and the lower world. In the higher world the unity of Hashem is obvious. In the lower world, when we look around, we see many, many particulars and very little unity.

Our world appears as if it is made up of disjointed particulars bumping into each other randomly. In reality, every detail of our world is part of Hashem's plan. We are all moving forward toward our purpose, which will be realized at the time of Moshiach.

The locusts are solitary insects that suddenly swarm together as one, with no king and nothing to unify them. They are each focused on themselves, and yet they act together. In Egypt, the locusts were unified around their basest needs, and they brought with them tremendous destruction. Imagine what forces would be unleashed if all the individual identities in the world were unified around a force of good? Imagine what amazing good could be unleashed in the world.

The locusts teach that even when we can't understand how or why, everything is unified as part of Hashem's plan. In a world where we recognize that we are all expressions of Hashem's name, we are careful to keep the third *dibra*, to speak carefully when we invoke Hashem's name, and not to take His name in vain.

Summary

The plague: Locusts

The ma'amar: Bereisheit 1:6

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי רָקִיעַ בְּתוֹךְ הַמַּיִם וַיְהִי מַבְדִּיל בֵּין מַיִם לְמַיִם

And God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water, and let it be a separation between water and water."

The sefirah: Da'at/ Knowledge or Inspiration in Action

The dibra: Shemot 20:7

לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת־שֵׁם־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוֹן

You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain

The Message

Our world can feel like it is broken into a thousand fragments, each jostling meaninglessly against each other. However, the reality of our world is that all its disparate pieces are connected. We might think we are acting alone, but we are all moving together in Hashem's plan.

Act XI. The Depths of Darkness

Imagine six days of darkness. Not just any darkness, this was thick darkness. It was tangible and it got worse as the plague went on. For the first three days it was so dark the Egyptians could not see each other, and then for another three days they could not even move (Rashi, Shemot 10:21). Are you there, in that inescapable darkness?

Now keep imagining, because an entirely different reality existed for us. It's not just that the Jews had light in Goshen, where we lived. We had light wherever we went. The Midrash (Tanchuma, Bo 3) describes how the Jews could walk into the Egyptian homes, and see, not just what was normally seen, but also everything hidden. Imagine seeing into every cabinet and every barrel, every nook and cranny. We could see all the hidden wealth of the Egyptians (and later ask for it, and get it, as well!).

However, there is more to this story. The light that we saw with was not the light of the sun. The *ma'amar* that corresponds to this *makkah* is the *ma'amar* of the second day, when Hashem said, "Let there be light." As we know, that was not the light of the sun and the moon, which were not created until the fourth day. The light of the second day was the *ohr haganuz*, the hidden light, which is kept hidden for the *tzaddikim*.

This is the light we saw with during the *makkah* of darkness. It illuminated the entire world. We saw, not only the external nature of the world, and not only into the cracks and crevices and hidden places of the physical world, but also the inner spiritual nature of the world. Even in the depths of *galut*, in the Egyptian homes, in the spaces our evil taskmasters had created, we could find spiritual treasure. We could look around the world and see how each aspect of it reveals Hashem's plan and His Will. Can you imagine that? Since we have a bit of this light with us on Pesach, and especially at the seder night, can you imagine how the events and circumstances of our own lives are also hiding Hashem's Will and Hashem's plan within?

The message of this plague is that Hashem's light is with us everywhere. And in a world where we can see with spiritual clarity, of course we will be prepared to keep the second commandment, negating idolatry, and not confuse anything else in the world with the power of Hashem.

Summary

The plague: Darkness

The ma'amar: Bereisheit 1:3

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי-אֹר

And God said, "Let there be light"

The sefirah: Bina/ Understanding or Applied Wisdom

The dibra: Shemot 20:3

לֹא יִהְיֶה-לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עִלַּי-פְּנֵי

You shall not have the gods of others in My presence.

The Message

We can choose to see with the light of the sun, or we can choose to try to see with the *ohr haganuz*. In fact, this is the choice we make every Shabbat, when we light our Shabbat candles while it is still light outside. We emphasize that we light the candles, not because we need the light to see, but because we are inviting spiritual light into our homes.

Hashem's light accompanies us everywhere, even in the darkest places of the galut. It is with us wherever we let it in.

Act XII. Experiencing Our Essence

For this plague, we have to expand our imagination a bit, because this is not a plague that has to do with something on the outside. This is about what happens internally. On the night of Pesach, Hashem tells us that He, Himself, carried out the plague. His presence filled the land. That is what we experienced on the first seder night and is the spiritual reality of every Pesach seder from that time.

The first *ma'amar*, the first *dibra*, and the last *makkah* are all expressions of experience. The first *ma'amar* is not even something Hashem said. It is the word "*bereisheit*." It is the essence of creation, the moment before anything was formed, when all that existed in actuality was the relationship between creation and Creator. The first *dibra* is similarly not a command, but a statement that underlies every command in the Torah. "I am Hashem, your G-d, Who took you out of Egypt." We have a relationship with Hashem. He is part of our lives and our history.

In this last *makkah*, we experienced what it means to have Hashem in our world, in the most real way possible. I don't know that we can imagine this accurately. But we can take a moment to close our eyes, and imagine the truth: that Hashem is right in front of us, and around us, and next to us. Mamash, He's right here. Are you there?

What happens when we come face to face with our Creator, is that not only is Hashem revealed, but we are revealed. All the external layers of ourselves are stripped away, and we come face to face with who we are at our core.

This was not a good thing to happen to the Egyptians. They were a people who had built their culture, their lives, and their identities on a false version of reality. This *makkah* was accompanied by a great cry that filled the land of Egypt (Shemot 11:6 and 12:30). Part of that cry was the cry of despair that came from the Egyptians. They were faced with the reality that when they looked into the essence of who they were, there was nothing there.

However, there was also a cry that came from us. The Zohar (2:20a) tells us that a cry is the greatest form of prayer. It is an expression from the depth of our soul. It is an expression of the essence of our being. At the moment of *chatzot* on Pesach night, we cried the cry of a new-born baby. This was our birth-cry. And it was a cry of ...prayer. At our core we are beings who were created to reach out to our Creator. We were created to delight in our relationship with Hashem. When we come face to face with who we are at our essence, we pray, we sing, we praise Hashem.

On the night of the seder, we hide a piece of the matzah, from the beginning of the seder to the end. At the end of the meal, we eat the hidden part. That is the part of us that was hidden from ourselves. At the end of the seder, what is hidden within us becomes revealed. We recognize who we are at our core. At that moment we become free, and in our freedom, we sing.

Summary

The plague: Death of the Firstborn

The ma'amar: Bereisheit 1:1

בראשית ברא אלוקים

In the beginning G-d created

The sefirah: Chochma/ Wisdom or Inspiration

The dibra: Shemot 20:2

על-פני אנכי יהוה אלהיך אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים מבית עבדים

I am the Lord, your God, Who took you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage

The Message

At the end of the *makkot*, we experience the amazing depth and beauty of who we are at our core. We each are connected to Hashem, created in order to experience that connection and to delight in it. When we recognize who we are, the beauty of who we are, what response can we have but to sing, in joy, before our Creator?

May we all end our Seder night in joyous song, and may we merit to bring the final redemption, speedily and in our days!