

The Worst Possible Plague

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Terror. Annoyance. Foreboding. Among the Egyptians, each plague feels so much worse than anticipated. A shared sense of eeriness seeps in as the world becomes apocalyptic. Yet, each time a plague ends, the depth of the horror dissipates, forgotten until the next one arrives—more all-consuming and destructive than before. Locusts, darkness, death, grief. The world is overturned by a foreign God. Egyptian safety depends on the emotional whims of their leadership, plagues ending only when God softens Pharaoh’s heart.

What plague do you see outside your window? Fire and smoke, drought, disease, or gun violence? Or perhaps you, like the Israelites, are spared while your neighbors experience devastation. Deportation, infestation, or discrimination—whether natural or human-made, these experiences evoke the same fear that the Egyptians felt. Is our darkness as dark as their darkness? Are our plagues as terrible as the ones that the Egyptians experienced?

In Exodus 11:5, Moses tells Pharaoh of the final, most horrific plague:

וַיִּמָּט וְכָל־בְּכוֹרֵי־בְּאֶרֶץ־מִצְרַיִם מִבְּכוֹר פַּרְעֹה הַיֹּשֵׁב עַל־כִּסֵּאוֹ
עַד בְּכוֹר הַשְּׂפֹחָה אֲשֶׁר אַחַר הַרְחִימִים וְכָל בְּכוֹר בְּהֵמָה

And every [male] first-born in the land of Egypt shall die, from the first-born of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the first-born of the slave girl who is behind the millstones; and all the first-born of the cattle.

The death of the first-born son would strike all Egyptian families from the richest and most powerful to the slaves who labor alongside the Israelites. *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* suggests that “the intent of this act is to affect all Egyptian households, from the highest male aristocracy to the lowest female slave. The Torah is not concerned with

the guilt or innocence of any specific victim, nor with the ethical implications of blanket punishments; the focus remains resolutely on exemplifying God’s supreme power.” It doesn’t matter that Pharaoh is the one calling the shots, refusing to let the Israelites go. The plagues impact all Egyptians.

Furthermore, the Torah does not tell us how each plague impacted different groups of Egyptians. We don’t know if the locusts were as bothersome to Pharaoh’s courtiers as they were to the Egyptian slave girl behind the millstones. However, we do know the plagues were “the most severe they had ever been” and “the most severe ever will be.” Regarding the locusts, Exodus 10:14 states:

לִפְנֵי לֹא־הָיָה כֵּן אַרְבֵּה כְּמֹהוּ וְאַחֲרָיו לֹא יִהְיֶה־כֵּן

[N]ever before had there been so many, nor will there ever be so many again.

If the locusts in Egypt were “the worst locusts of all time,” all subsequent human experiences with locusts must be less bad, right?

Rashi and Hizkuni both wrestle with later examples of really bad locusts in Tanakh, such as those in Joel. Because Rashi and Hizkuni need Tanakh to be correct in stating that the Egyptian experience of locusts is “the worst of all time,” they need to solve the inconsistency of Joel having horrific locusts. Hizkuni quotes and agrees with Rashi’s take, saying:

וְאַחֲרָיו לֹא יִהְיֶה כֵּן
“and there will never be a plague of locusts like this;” according to Rashi, the meaning is “a single type of locust.” Seeing that the Bible records other plagues of locusts at least as severe (Psalms 105:34, Joel 1:4), and Rashi was surely aware of this, we must understand the words of Rashi as referring to a

single species of locusts at the same time. In the days of Joel ben Patuel each type of locust came separately, one after the other.

By distinguishing between different species of locusts, Rashi and Hizkuni allow all locust plagues to be “the worst of all time.”

Perhaps Rashi and Hizkuni are right to narrow the definition of the plagues. While we need to understand that what the Egyptians experienced was “the worst possible” experience of locusts and that their collective cry over the deaths of the first-born sons was “the loudest cry there could possibly be,” the depths of *their* despair do not diminish the depths of *our* despair today. The Torah needs to be clear that the Egyptians experienced horrible pain so that we understand that our freedom came at a cost to others. That clarity doesn’t take away from the pains we experience today. We face “different species of locusts.” Our cries of mourning hit a different pitch. Just as *their* grief was “the worst possible” grief, so too, *our* grief is “the worst possible grief.” We don’t have to compete for who has it hardest during a plague because we all do.

Of course, those with the least power and privilege face the hardest recovery from plagues. The Egyptian slave girl likely starved when the locusts devoured the crops, while Pharaoh remained well-fed. However, Rashi and Hizkuni’s insights remind us that grief and despair do not need to be qualified to be valid. Losing a home is materially harder to recover from for a low-income family than a celebrity family, but the grief for both families is “the worst that has ever been” and “the worst there will ever be.” We can acknowledge privilege without diminishing pain.

By illustrating the depths of the Egyptians’ despair, Parashat Bo allows us to feel the depths of our own. When we give ourselves permission to feel our pain and acknowledge its reality, we can move through it and beyond it. Living a life filled with plagues can harden our hearts. Honoring our grief—and the grief of others—can soften them again.