

Plagues in Ancient Egypt and in Contemporary America

Shabbat Va'era 5778, commemorating The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Blood. Frogs. Lice. Wild beasts. Blight. Boils. Hail. Locusts. Darkness. The slaying of the first born.

We recite this list of the plagues upon Egypt at the Seder, each of us diminishing our cups of wine. We are commanded to be concerned about God's children who suffered in the process of our people's liberation.

A close examination of this week's Torah portion makes us wonder whether God really had to inflict the Egyptians so fatally. At the outset, God announces: "I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and will multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt."ⁱ God seems to plan, in advance, the full multitude of plagues, taking away Pharaoh's option to relent after the first one or two.

And yet, as we read further, we find that Pharaoh's heart hardens, with no apparent help from God, for quite some time. When Aaron and Moses display their connection to God's might, turning Aaron's rod into a snake, "Pharaoh's heart hardened."ⁱⁱ In the section that Alex plans to read tomorrow, Pharaoh promises to free the Israelites if Moses will only make the frogs go away. And yet, "When Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart, and would not heed them."ⁱⁱⁱ After the fifth plague, blight, "Pharaoh's heart was stubborn, and he did not let the people go."^{iv} Only after six plagues does God begin to harden Pharaoh's heart.^v

Maimonides – rabbi, philosopher, and physician in 13th Century Egypt – admits the problem: "To demand that Pharaoh free the Israelites while he was forced to do the contrary, and then to punish him because he did not free them, finally putting him and his followers to death, would undoubtedly be unjust."^{vi}

Maimonides notes that Pharaoh and his followers oppress the Israelites, persecute them in bondage, and throw every baby boy into the Nile of their own free will. Then, God gives Pharaoh no less than five chances, those first plagues, opportunities to free the Children of Israel and spare his people additional suffering. Maimonides explains that Pharaoh's punishment is that God takes away his free will, no longer permitting the Egyptian ruler to free the Israelites without

further suffering. God will go forward with the deadliest of plagues, without giving Pharaoh any more chances.^{vii} He had passed the point of no return.

We, thankfully, do not face plagues like Egypt's. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that plagues come in many different forms – often, like Pharaoh's, inflicted by leaders of nations and the people who suffer them.

This evening, even as we read about plagues, we embark upon our nation's commemoration of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King frequently took inspiration from the Exodus and referenced ancient Israel's struggle for freedom in his oratory. Ramon Tuason of the Stanford Freedom Project examines King's his famous speech, "I've Been to the Mountaintop," writing that King "reminds his followers that the Israelites suffered before gaining their freedom from the pharaoh, just like how his own listeners were suffering. ... The Exodus narrative helped King's supporters comprehend the past, present, and future of their movement; it led them to understand that, if they fought against the discriminatory society of the past and present, God would give them a blessed future just like with the Israelites."^{viii}

King fought the injustice valiantly. American Jews also played a special role in that Civil Rights Movement. Our own Rabbis Sanders and Palnick, of blessed memory, were outspoken from the pulpit and active in the community, combatting segregation and racism. Women of Congregation B'nai Israel were among the leaders of the Women's Emergency Committee, which reopened Little Rock public schools, legally desegregated. Dr. King gave his life for the cause, and he was not alone. Little girls murdered in a church bombing and the names of Black and Jewish activists – like Cheney, Schwerner, and Goodman – must never be forgotten.

Dr. King was assassinated nearly a half century ago. For many years, Americans could be forgiven if they believed that his dreams and goals had largely been achieved. No more whites-only schools. No more segregated restrooms and drinking fountains. No longer could a person be denied employment, promotion, housing, or the right to vote, solely on the basis of race. At least not legally.

More recently, though, we have become increasingly aware that Dr. King would grieve over the America we inhabit a half-century after his assassination.

On Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday in 2018, we cannot imagine that racism is dead in America. We saw hundreds of white supremacists take to the streets in Charlottesville last summer. In Dr. King's day, Ku Klux Klan racists felt the need to

hide under sheets, lest they be identified to their neighbors and employers. In Charlottesville, the racists marched openly and proudly. And why shouldn't they? The President of the United States declared them to include "some very fine people"^{ix}

Racism plagues America as we approach Martin Luther King's birthday in 2018.

School segregation is on the rise. No, we don't have all-white schools. Segregation is illegal, but it is a growing reality for too many American children. While the percentage of Black and Hispanic students in intensely segregated minority schools in the south plummeted from 77.8% in 1968 to 23% in 1980, it has steadily grown ever since, to 35.8 in the most recent study. You may wonder what "intensely segregated" means: Schools in which minorities constitute 90% or more of the student body.^x Here in Little Rock, we have two kinds of public schools. Schools attended by white students are integrated, with substantial minority populations. Other schools – meaning every Little Rock School District high school that isn't a magnet school, and countless middle and elementary schools – are "intensely segregated," with almost exclusively minority students. The problem will worsen with the growth of charter schools facilitated by the unjust state takeover of our school district, a Black-majority school board replaced by one white man. I see few white faces when I go to tutor each Wednesday morning at Williams Traditional Magnet Elementary School, despite its magnet status and its location on Evergreen between Mississippi and University, a largely white neighborhood.

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The plagues continue and increase:

Mass incarceration: The United States makes up less than five per cent of the world's population but holds over 20% of the world's prisoners, 34% of them black, more than five times the rate of whites.^{xi}

Voter suppression: Since the Supreme Court struck down the most potent section of the Voting Rights Act, states have been erecting one barrier after the other – voter ID laws, fewer polling sites, shortened early voting, and gerrymandered districts – all disproportionately impacting minority voters.

This Shabbat, let us ask ourselves: When will America have reached the point of no return? When will America be so segregated and racism so normalized that our nation can no longer repair itself? When will we have made our hearts so hard that God no longer permits us to change America's ways?

In a moment, we will sing, *Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha-olam, sh'natan lanu hizdamnut l'taken et ha-olam*. "Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Ruler of the universe, Who has given us the opportunity to repair the world."^{xii} In a kingdom that plagued his people, Moses bravely sought to free his people and repair the world. In a nation that plagued his people, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King preached that repair was yet possible. Let us pray that, even in plague-ridden 2018, God yet offers us that opportunity to repair this world.

Amen.

ⁱ Exodus 7:3.

ⁱⁱ Exodus 7:13

ⁱⁱⁱ Exodus 8:11.

^{iv} Exodus 9:7.

^v Exodus 9:12.

^{vi} Maimonides, Eight Chapters 8. Translation adapted from *Sefaria*.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Ramon Tuason, "The Biblical Exodus in the Rhetoric of Martin Luther King," *The Stanford Freedom Project*, Fall, 2015, accessed at stanfordfreedomproject.com.

^{ix} Rosie Gray, "Trump Defends White-Nationalist Protestors: 'Some Very Fine People on Both Sides,'" *The Atlantic*, August 15, 2017, accessed at theatlantic.com.

^x Erica Frankenberg, Genevieve Siegel Hawley, Jongyeon Ee, and Gary Gorfield, "Southern Schools More Than a Half-Century After the Civil Rights Revolution," *The Civil Rights Project and Center for Education and Civil Rights*, May, 2017, accessed at civilrightsproject.ucla.edu.

^{xi} NAACP Criminal Justice Fact Sheet, accessed at naacp.org, January 12, 2018.

^{xii} Rabbi Ron Klotz, words; and Dan Nichols, music, *L'taken – The Na Na Song*.