



# Redemptive Chutzpah

The 10 *makkot* or plagues are commonly viewed as natural calamities which punished a wicked nation which had brutally persecuted slaves for over two centuries. Additionally, the series of ten natural disasters showcased Hashem's intervention in Nature and in human history. Finally, Pharaoh's nervous equivocation about releasing the slaves, despite the punishing plagues, demonstrated Hashem's ability to infiltrate the human heart and impact human decisions. Pharaoh could not control his own decision-making process.

Yetziat Mitzrayim is a historical milestone showcasing that Hashem, despite being different and apart from our world, is actively engaged in its affairs. Hashem is not just a heavenly Clockmaker who crafted a perfect machine which keeps ticking automatically based upon the laws of physics. Hashem actively engages in our world, shapes the arc of history, and redeems us from its thorny predicaments.

### Social Hierarchies

The term "*plagues*" in describing "*makkot*" is a misnomer. These "*episodes*" weren't merely punitive measures or divine instruments to break the arrogant will of a ruthless tyrant. Many of these 10

"*events*", which we refer to as *makkot*, also restructured Egyptian society by reordering the social hierarchies between Jew and Egyptian.

Slavery and persecution are not just physically abusive, but subject victims to economic, social, and psychological suffering. Slavery forms hardened social classes, sharply dividing between haves and the have nots. Slavery is a curse passed on from parents to children, entrapping multiple generations in never-ending cycles of poverty, poor health, and a desperate struggle for basic survival. In ancient Egypt, slaves were often banned from wearing clothing in public, further humiliating and dehumanizing them.

Enduring these excruciating conditions erodes self-confidence and eviscerates human pride. Under constant psychological pressure, slaves develop an inferiority complex when comparing their miserable lives to the experiences of their well-appointed and wealthy masters.

Slavery can only be sustained by fabricating a false but oppressive social narrative in which a superior upper class *deserves* to be supported and pampered by human labor provided by a subclass of inferior slaves. Without this hideous narrative justifying human bondage, slavery cannot be legitimated. Living under the weight of this narrative is the psychological toll of the nightmare of slavery.

## Deflated National Identity

Having lived socially degraded lives in Egypt for two centuries, we were in no condition for *geulah*. Weeks after departing Egypt we were meant to stand under a billowing mountain and hear the voice of an invisible and unknowable G-d. We were expected to submit to His will, and to adopt a lifestyle of comprehensive commandments. Judaism is a sophisticated religion which challenges the human imagination and can only be implemented by a proud nation composed of people of high self-esteem and confidence.

Moreover, a few months after Sinai, we would march into the Land of G-d and wage war with over 30 local chieftains and their ferocious militias. Dispirited slaves who had been browbeaten into submission could not successfully battle these experienced warriors. Tragically, our repeated desert betrayals rerouted history and delayed our entry by forty years, but the original plan called for a quick voyage to Israel and fierce battles for the Land of G-d. Something had to be done to reverse the social humiliation we suffered in Egypt and to restore Jewish pride. History could not advance without a reordering of social hierarchies in Egypt.

## Kinim: The Great Equalizer

Repeatedly, the insect invasion of *kinim* is described as a disaster which affected the entire country of Egypt *והיה לכן בכל ארץ מצרים*. By contrast, the prior *tzefardei'a* attack affected Egyptian palaces, kitchens, and bedrooms, but didn't infiltrate the suburb of Goshen where the Jewish slaves resided. Likewise, the disasters *subsequent* to *kinim*—the assault of the wild beasts of *arov* and the *dever*-pestilence which obliterated cattle, were directed at Egyptian cities and farms,



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but had absolutely no impact on even a single Jewish livestock or home.

Though Jews enjoyed immunity to most of the plagues, they weren't exempted from the *kinim* which covered the *entire* nation—including animals! ותהי הכנים בכל ארץ מצרים ובאדם ובבהמה.

Essentially, the actual *kinim* outbreak targeted only Egyptians providing these arrogant aggressors a small taste of life as a slave: constant filth, lice-infested bodies, and grimy food. By walking a mile in the shoes of their slaves, the Egyptians comprehended the horrific torture they had inflicted upon their victims. The *actual plague* of *kinim* only afflicted the Egyptians, but the *outcome* of *kinim* was a society in which *every* person lived under *equal conditions* of squalor. Jewish slave, Egyptian bully, and animal were all battling the swirling flies and maggots and were all encrusted in dirt and muck. Watching *kinim* degrade the quality of life for Egyptians, we felt less inferior to our condescending masters. *Kinim* was a social equalizer and launched a reordering of social hierarchies.

### **We Have a Past**

Beyond reducing Egyptian pride, something had to be done to raise Jewish pride and rebuild Jewish identity. The *dever*-infection decimated the entire Egyptian cattle population but left Jewish cattle completely untouched והנה לא מת ממקנה ישראל עד אחד

The morning after *dever*, we awoke to an eerie scene – a world lined with dead carcasses of Egyptian cattle. Admiring our perfectly healthy Jewish cattle, we had every reason to feel good about ourselves and our shepherding skills. Having successfully shepherded our cattle through a pandemic, we

suddenly remembered our glorious past as successful shepherds. We had heard ancient stories about legendary grandparents who were renowned shepherds, and now we were living these legends. We had a national past and it was a glorious one!

### **Scrubbing National Memory**

Slavery scrubs collective memory, detaching its victims from their past. By this stage, multiple generations of Jewish slaves had been born into bondage and knew no other reality other than slavery. The post-dever state of affairs reconstituted Jewish identity and prepared us for the Sinai challenge and for the mission of settling the Land of Israel.

### **Modern Pride**

If two hundred years of slavery deflated Jewish pride, two thousand years of exile and persecution disemboweled it. Inviting us back into history and expecting us to partner with Him in the redemption of history, Hashem had to, once again, restore our pride. The psychological state of our people in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was not suited for redemption. Things changed quickly and this time it wasn't through divine *makkot*, but through historical movement.

Our dream of returning home emerged during a bold century of human self-assurance. On the heels of the Enlightenment, political liberty and economic freedom, 19<sup>th</sup> century humanity dared to reimagine its world, and this confidence infected the Jewish imagination. If the world around us was transforming why couldn't the Jewish world also shift back to Israel? The brazen and daring vision of Zionism was articulated with the brazen language of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In the mid-20 century, immediately upon our return, we faced furious Arabic

opposition and global diplomatic isolation. These adverse conditions restored the Avraham Ha'ivri complex, forcing us to stand on one side of the world and "make a go of it" alone. With divine assistance we succeeded and felt legitimate pride at our outstanding accomplishments.

For good reason, Israelis developed a unique "chutzpah" which can be offensive, at times, but is preferable to a state of helplessness and to the role of victimhood. Once again, Hashem steered modern history, enabling the rebuilding of Jewish pride and the resurrection of national confidence, so that we could author redemption.

### Secularization

Sadly, much of this newfound swagger was accompanied by the abandonment of classic halachic behavior. Zionism became a predominantly secular movement, spear-headed largely by those who abandoned religion and replaced religious obedience with Jewish nationalism. Zionism was a product of a secular wave and, in turn, the movement amplified personal confidence at the cost of religious submission. At the end of history, the restoration of Jewish pride took a secular shape.

Hashem works in mysterious ways which confuse the human imagination. We would have scripted our redemption differently. We would have renewed Jewish pride without eroding halachic commitment. Unfortunately, we don't get to call the shots or to determine the style of our redemption. We just get to respond to the hand of Hashem as best we can, and to attempt to improve the process.

Hashem did his part, can we do ours? Can we take our renewed Jewish pride and inspire it with religious meaning? ■



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