



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB
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“Combating Idolatrous ‘Gods’”

I was recently interviewed by one of my great-granddaughters. She is a high school student and was assigned to interview one of her ancestors. After responding to her questions about the different stages of my many careers, she commented, “Wow! You had some very colorful experiences!”

Among those “experiences” were my various encounters with non-Jews who took their Bible seriously. They included famous politicians such as President Bill Clinton, college professors of philosophy, and Christian clergymen. They also included students of biblical criticism.

I must admit that they often asked me questions that had me stumped. That is, stumped until I gave those questions further thought and researched traditional Jewish commentaries.

I’d like to confront you, dear reader, with one

of those questions and share with you some of the answers that I have discovered over the years.

In this week’s Torah portion, *Parshat Va’eira* (Exodus 6:2-9:25) we read about seven of the ten plagues that the Almighty brought upon Egypt/*Mitzrayim*. In next week’s Torah portion, the final three plagues are described. In His prelude to the final plague, the Almighty informs Moses and Aaron, “I will pass through the land of *Mitzrayim* on that night and I will smite every first born in that land, man and beast, and I will mete out harsh justice (*shefatim*) to all the gods of *Mitzrayim* – I, the Lord!” (Exodus 12:12).

The question that I’ve been asked by my skeptical acquaintances is this: “Where in the biblical text is there any reference to the implementation of that harsh judgement?”

Yes, plenty of harsh judgements are meted out to the Egyptian slave masters, to the firstborn, to the general Egyptian populace, to the cattle in the pastures and the crops on the fields, and eventually to the Pharaoh himself. But where in the text, this week or next week, is there any evidence of the punishment of “all the gods of *Mitzrayim*”?

Admittedly, I was stumped by this question during the early stages of my serious Torah study. But it was not very long before I was “enlightened”. Several classical Jewish scholars raised this question centuries ago, and many more have raised it in the centuries since, down to modern times.

There is now a panoply of explanations available to us. One is offered by *Ramban al HaTorah*, the thirteenth century rabbinic sage,

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whose commentary can be consulted by the reader on the verse in question. The other is much more recent.

I came upon the latter when, as a young man, I received a birthday gift from my much younger sister, now an avid reader and frequent critic of this weekly column. I treasure that gift to this day.

The gift was a book in Hebrew, entitled *Bina B'Mikra*, by Rabbi Issachar Jacobson. It remains one of my favorite collections of analyses of the weekly Torah portions.

Rabbi Jacobson, whose works are available in English translation, deals with this question in his essay on this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Va'era*, although the verse in question is in *Parashat Bo*.

He cites an article by Professor A. Sh. Yehudah, from his book of learned articles entitled *Avar V'Erev*, which I respectfully translate as *Past and Prelude*. Professor Yehudah's thesis is a simple one. He asserts that each of the ten plagues, when “decoded”, is aimed directly at one of the numerous gods of ancient Egypt.

Let's begin with the first plague, blood, *dam*. The waters of the Nile turned to blood. Surely rendering the waters of the mighty river undrinkable punished those guilty of enslaving the Children of Israel. But more to the point, states Professor Yehudah, one must be aware that the Nile was the source of the fertile farms and flourishing gardens and orchards of ancient Egypt. As such, it was worshipped as one of the gods of Egypt. Pharaoh descends to the banks of the Nile every morning to worship the river as a deity. When Moses insisted that he wished for the Jews to be freed to worship the Lord in the wilderness/*Midbar*, he was asserting that the God of Israel was not confined to one river but extended His dominion even unto the farthest reaches of Planet Earth and beyond. Thus,

argues Professor Yehudah, the plague of blood was a “direct hit” not only upon the people of Egypt but upon one of their gods!

Let's move on to plague number two, the frogs that infested the length and breadth of *Mitzrayim*, hopping around the living quarters of every citizen. Professor Yehudah informs us that the frog/*tzefardea* was a goddess of the ancient Egyptian people, the goddess of the midwives, whose image was that of a woman with a frog's head. Why a frog, you ask? Because frogs notoriously multiply rapidly and profusely. What better symbol of blessing for procreation and population growth, and what a wonderful emblem of blessing for the midwives who bring new babies into the world. Infesting the entire citizenry with frogs defames the goddess and is a “harsh punishment” for her, as well as for those midwives who collaborated with the decree to rid *Mitzrayim* of male Israelite babies.

And on to plague number three: *kinim*, fleas and lice, here, there, and everywhere. Brilliantly, Professor Yehudah draws upon one of the myths of the ancient Egyptian religion: One of the gods wanted to overthrow the ruling god.

The rebel disguised himself as a pig, approached his rival sneakily, and poked out the eye of the superior god with his finger. No wonder that Pharaoh's sorcerers exclaimed that the plague of fleas and lice was *etzba Elokim*, “the finger of the Almighty”! Furthermore, Professor Yehudah continues, one might be puzzled over the fact that, of course, lice and fleas were rife in ancient Near East countries—and still are to some degree. But the impact of those insects was not limited to the general populace. Rather, they descended upon

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the priests, holy men, and wizards of Egypt, who typically kept themselves meticulously pure and clean, shaven to retain their sanctity, and yet the plague brought the “harsh judgments” even upon these supposed delegates or surrogates of the gods of ancient Egypt.

Professor Yehudah goes on to show how all ten plagues were indeed directed toward “all the gods of *Mitzrayim*” as the Lord had assured Moses and Aaron would come to pass.

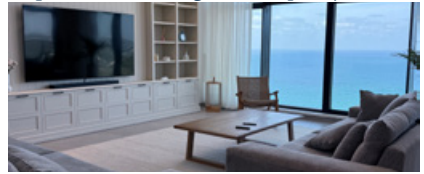
I close with an attempt to update the notion of the “gods” of an ancient culture to consider the “gods” of the cultures of our times. I must restrain my temptation to outline my thoughts of how to dethrone the ruling deities of contemporary society. But I can close this column with my “short list” of the “gods” we tend to worship: Power, Wealth, Beauty, Fame, Greed, Arrogance, Revenge, Victory.

I'm sure you can think of others.

Shabbat Shalom! ■

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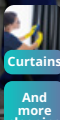
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