

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

So according to the medieval French commentator Rashi (1040-1105), God hardens Pharaoh's heart, and the heart of his courtiers, so that we can see God making a mockery of the Egyptians? Could it be that God wants us to experience *schadenfreude* - to laugh, cheer, and take pleasure in the suffering of our oppressors?

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapiro (1889-1943 CE), also known as the Piacezna Rebbe, takes issue with this in his book *Aish Kodesh*, written in the Warsaw Ghetto during the horrors of the Shoah. Writing under conditions reminiscent of the Egypt, and facing Nazi oppressors as arrogant and cruel as Pharaoh, the Piacezna Rebbe was nevertheless bothered by the idea that God would make the punishment of the wicked some kind of entertainment.

He brings a story from the Talmud that discusses the drowning of the Egyptians in Sea of Reeds: "At that time the ministering angels requested to recite a song before the Holy One, Blessed be God. The Holy One, Blessed be God, Said to them: 'My handiwork are drowning in the sea, and you are reciting a song before Me?!'" (Sanhedrin 39b). The Piacezna Rebbe sees a contradiction: God makes a show of punishing the Egyptians with the plagues, but then scolds the angels for enjoying the show when the Egyptians drown in the sea!

According to the Piacezna Rebbe, there are only two reasons to celebrate the downfall of the Egyptians, and the suffering of the wicked in general. The first is that it leads to knowledge of God. The plagues were done so that WE would know God, as it says in 10:2: "In order that you may know that I am the Lord." And the Egyptians were drowned in the Red Sea so that THEY would know God, as it says in Exodus 14:4: "and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord". Evil and falsehood must be defeated so that God and truth can be known.

The second reason is to alleviate the suffering of the innocent. Presumably the ministering angels were just as happy about the plagues as the drowning of the Egyptians in the sea, but God *only scolds them* for celebrating the drowning. The Piacezna Rebbe explains that: "in truth Israel was not suffering at that exact moment [when the sea ceased to part and the Egyptians were drowned] so the Holy One, Blessed be He was not happy from their [the Egyptians] downfall" (*Aish Kodesh*). Celebrating the Egyptians' drowning was gratuitous. The suffering of some is often necessary to alleviate the suffering of others, but that makes it no less tragic.

As we look forward to the casting down of false idols and the defeat of wicked oppressors, may we all remember the Piacezna Rebbe's example and message. We are all God's handiwork. Shabbat Shalom.



# TORAH SPARKS

## Parashat Bo

January 20, 2018 | 4 Shevat 5778

Annual | Exodus 10:1-13:16 (Etz Hayim p. 374-394; Hertz p. 248-262)  
 Triennial | Exodus 11:4-12:28 (Etz Hayim p. 379-386; Hertz p. 252-258)  
 Haftarah | Jeremiah 46:13-28 (Etz Hayim p. 395-398; Hertz p. 263-264)

## Dvar Torah

**Matthew Nelson, Conservative Yeshiva Student & Lishma Fellow**

This week's parasha tells the story of the last three plagues (locusts, darkness, and the slaying of the first born), Moses' instructions regarding the Passover sacrifice, and Pharaoh ultimately granting permission for the Israelites to leave. While some see this as Pharaoh and Egypt getting their just desserts after the years of harsh slavery and child-murder imposed on the Israelites, I am nevertheless troubled.

The parasha opens with two verses that sum up the story of the Exodus nicely: "Then God said to Moses: 'Come to Pharaoh for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his courtiers, in order that I may display these My signs among them. And that you may recount in the hearing of your sons and of your sons' sons how I dealt harshly of the Egyptians and how I displayed My signs among them in order that you may know that I am the Lord'" (Exodus 10:1-2). The medieval French commentator, Rashi (1040-1105 CE), explains that the Hebrew phrase, "התעללתי במצרים," translated above as, "I dealt harshly with the Egyptians," should be read as "שחקתי" - meaning, "I have made a mockery."

# Dvar Haftarah

**Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein**, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

There is a clear distinction between *pshat*, the plain meaning of a text, and *drash*, the interpretive meaning, which can offer differ radically. The rabbinic sages famously used both methods of reading a text to cull “divine” meaning from the Tanakh – the Hebrew Bible. The sages were fond of describing this phenomenon using a verse from Jeremiah 23:29: “Is not My (God’s) word... a hammer that breaks the rock to pieces?” – As a hammer splits the rock into many splinters, so will a Scriptural verse yield many meanings” (Sanhedrin 34a). I am reminded of this metaphor when approaching a particular verse in this week’s haftarah, whose *pshat* (plain meaning) differs radically from its *drash* (rabbinic interpretation).

Jeremiah’s prescient message in this week’s haftarah is a warning to the Egyptians immediately before the destruction of the First Temple and the fall of Judea that they would soon be defeated by the Babylonian army. To describe this inevitability, Jeremiah draws upon a rich simile: “...as surely as [Mount] Tabor is among the mountains and [Mount] Carmel is by the sea, so shall this come” (Jeremiah 46:18). The plain meaning of the verse is that the defeat of the Egyptians is as obvious and natural as the location of great mountains. (See Y. Hoffman, Jeremiah, Mikra L’Yisrael, p. 770)

A teaching from the Talmud in Megillah 29a detaches the simile used in this verse from its context and plays with the wording:

Rabbi Elazar ha-Kappar says: In the future, the synagogues and houses of learning in Babylon will be set up in Eretz Israel, as it says: ‘Tabor among the mountains and Carmel by the sea, came.’ From that we can infer that just as Carmel and Tabor, which came only on a single occasion to learn the Torah, were implanted in Eretz Israel, how much more must this be the case with the synagogues and houses of learning [outside of Eretz Israel] where the Torah is read and expounded!

Let’s break this down a bit. Rabbi Elazar ha-Kappar plays with the wording of the verse in Jeremiah to say that Mount Tabor and Mount Carmel came to Eretz Israel from elsewhere. And what made them do this? Their desire to learn Torah! And if MOUNTAINS would uproot themselves to learn Torah in Israel, then certainly Torah-loving Jews would do the same!

Certainly Rabbi Elazar ha-Kappar, who lived in Eretz Israel around 200 CE, saw Israel as the most natural place to learning Torah. But what is remarkable is that this teaching only comes to us because it was preserved in the **Babylonian Talmud** - the one produced outside of Eretz Israel!

Perhaps this was a nod of recognition by the Jewish scholars in Babylonia that love of Torah will always draw people to a place where people speak Hebrew (or, in his day, both Hebrew and Aramaic) and where life follows a natural Jewish rhythm. Looking forward to seeing you in Jerusalem!

## Table Talk

**Vered Hollander-Goldfarb**, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

We continue with the last 3 plagues, the preparation for the night when God will sweep across Egypt, and for the Exodus itself. The parasha ends with commandments commemorating this formative event.

- 1) After 7 plagues (in the previous parasha) Pharaoh’s servants tell him to let the people go and worship their God lest Egypt be destroyed (10:7-11). Does Pharaoh listen to them? How do you understand his answer to Moshe and Aaron?
- 2) The first plague in our parasha is the locusts (10:12-20). What is the great threat in this plague? (Today, this sort of situation gets the cooperation of all the countries in the region, regardless of politics.)
- 3) The last plague, the killing of the first born (11:4-8, 12:29-30), seems to break from the pattern established by the other plagues. How does it differ from the rest? Why do you think that God did not start with this last plague, which might have eliminated the need for the rest?
- 4) In preparation to leave the Israelites are told to take a sheep that they will eat together in a special manner. Think: Why is eating a sheep a special event? 8:22 and Bamidbar (Numbers) 11:5 might help you understand the place of the sheep in Egypt and in the life of the slaves.
- 5) The Israelites are asked to put the blood of the sheep on the doorposts of the houses in which they are eating (12:7-13). For whom is the blood? (God does not need a sign.) God says ‘I will see the blood and pass over you’ (12:13). What do you think that God will see/realize that will cause God to pass over those houses?

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