

Parashah Fifty-Two

Exodus 10:1–12:12; Isaiah 19:1–17; John 1:29–34

notes by Tim Hegg

The Awesome God of Israel

We come, now, in our journey through *Shemot* (Exodus), to the final judgments against Egypt, culminating with the death of the first born. All of the plagues caused discomfort and trouble to the Egyptians, but none of them had been directed at the people themselves. Now, however, the power of God is shown against the Egyptians themselves as the first born is taken. As our *haftarah* expresses, the awesome power of God is unleashed against His enemy.

The opening paragraph of our *parashah* describes the sovereignty of God in no uncertain terms. Here the question of Pharaoh's hardened heart is explicitly shown to be the work of the Almighty: "I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may perform these signs of Mine among them..." That, in itself, should cause us to tremble before the Lord. How foolish for us to think that somehow we control the destiny of life! Far above us is the will of the Sovereign One, Who accomplishes His purposes in heaven and among men, and no one stays His hand or asks Him what He is doing (Daniel 4:35). *El Gibor* (Mighty Warrior) is His Name, and He regards the nations as nothing more than dust in the scales (Is 40:15). Egypt, in all of her grandeur and sophistication, will wilt before the pounding boots of this conquering Warrior.

But notice the purpose of God's conquest against Egypt (10:2-3): "that you may tell in the hearing of your son, and of your grandson, how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I performed My signs among them, that you may know that I am Adonai." The destruction of the Egyptians in the final plagues will forever stand as an indisputable testimony of how God deals with His enemies. This story, thus, must be passed down to son and grandson, from generation to generation, so that there would never be any doubt Who is the One true God, and that He is the God of Israel.

Moreover, the story of the Exodus cuts two directions. To the Israelites, the Warrior God had come to their rescue because He was keeping His promises to them. But to the Egyptians, the God of Israel would show their folly for trusting in make-believe gods who were nothing more than powerless demons when faced with the power of the Almighty. So as we read this story once again, we must decide where we stand. Are we attached to Israel through faith in her God, or do we stand outside of that circle of protection, and find ourselves amongst the enemies of this awesome Warrior?

There is a place of refuge from the wrath of God! It is not, however, to be found in a religion, nor in oneself, nor even in one's own attempts at being righteous, but in the Lamb. The most obvious and spectacular message of this *parashah* is that it was the Lamb that made the difference between salvation and destruction. It was not the blood that ran in the veins of Israelites that mattered, but the blood of the spotless Lamb that was applied to the doorposts and lintel of their dwellings. The unblemished Lamb sacrificed for the sake of Israel was the deciding factor.

Our text moves on to describe the eighth plague. Moses and Aaron go, as before, to Pharaoh and rebuke him for his failure to humble himself before the God of Israel. They once again command Pharaoh to send forth the people of Israel that they may worship God as He has commanded, and promise him that if he refuses, a plague of locust would ravish the land. The description of

the locust plague is no fanciful exaggeration. The Ancient Near East was not unfamiliar with the devastation of locust plagues. When the pests descended upon a region, they ate everything in their path. Descriptions from historical documents describe the devastation as something like fire that consumes all the plants, leaving the ground blackened. Indeed, Pharaoh's servants understand the message, and realize that every other plague prophesied by Moses and Aaron had taken place just as they had said. Any logical person would realize that this plague likewise would bring sure disaster. Their counsel to Pharaoh is straightforward: "How long will this man be a snare to us? Let the men (אֲנָשִׁים) go, that they may serve the Lord their God. Do you not realize that Egypt is destroyed?" Whether their counsel was that the adult males should be released or not, is uncertain. The Hebrew word אֲנָשִׁים, *'anashim*, could just as well be "people" as "males." But it is certain that their advice to Pharaoh was that he should take seriously the threat that Moses and Aaron had given.

Thus, Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron back to his court, and asks them who exactly would be leaving (10:8). The answer is clear: everyone of the Israelites must go, as well as all their flocks—no one would remain. This enrages Pharaoh. He responds with an outburst that can be taken two ways: "Thus may YHVH be with you, if ever I let you and your little ones go! Take heed, for evil is in your mind." Pharaoh's meaning was apparently: "You certainly will need the help of YHVH if ever I let you and your little ones go!" But the Hebrew could just as well mean "YHVH will be with you when I let you and your little ones go." Thus, though Pharaoh responded arrogantly in jest, he spoke what would be the reality: Adonai would go with the Israelites, and He would bring her up out of the land of slavery.

Though it seems that Pharaoh's counsellors advised him to let the "people" go, he turned the word "people" to its more restricted meaning of "men," and exclaims with a negative, "Not so," it won't happen as you request. Instead, Pharaoh restricts his permission to just the males. (The Egyptian word for "men" may also mean "people.")

This, of course, is not acceptable to Moses and Aaron, and so the plague of locust ensues. The strong east wind moved the locust cloud toward Egypt, and brought more locust in the land than ever before, or after (10:14). And the devastation was just as Moses and Aaron had said: nothing green remained before the marauding infestation.

Faced with utter defeat, Pharaoh once again summons Moses and Aaron, and as before, he feigns repentance (cf. 9:27). His words betray his hardened heart: (10:17) "Now therefore, please forgive my sin only this once, and make supplication to the Lord your God, that He would only remove this death from me." Pharaoh's sorrow is only in regard to the trouble. He hopes that his "humility" would solve the problem of the locust, but the real problem was with Pharaoh himself. Repentance that only seeks to alleviate the problem, but seeks no real change of heart, is not really repentance at all.

Once again, Moses intercedes on behalf of Pharaoh, and God removes the locust, this time with a strong westerly wind that drives the horde into the Red Sea. But at the same time, He hardens Pharaoh's heart. The awesome power of God was not yet fully demonstrated, for more plagues were still to come.

The ninth plague (which finishes this final set of three) comes without warning to Pharaoh and his court. The high god of Ra, the sun god in the pagan religion of the Egyptians, was next to be mocked. The Egyptians believed that there was a daily struggle between the supreme sun god, Ra, who brought daylight, and the demonic god Apophis, the embodiment of darkness. The rising

of the sun each day signalled Ra's victory over Apophis. The ninth plague, therefore, must have struck a very real psychological impact upon the Egyptian populace.

Moses is instructed to lift the staff toward the sky, and a "thick darkness" (חֹשֶׁךְ-אֲפֹלָה) fell upon the land. It was a darkness that could be felt (10:21), a metaphoric description or perhaps indicating that dust in the air contributed to the darkness. The darkness remained for three days, securing the fact that the supreme god in the Egyptian pantheon had been defeated. The text indicates that the Egyptians did not see one another for three days. Rambam suggests that the deep fog that occurred also snuffed out all flames as well, and that the Egyptians even lost track of the days.

Once again, Pharaoh summons Moses and offers a compromise. The people can go, but the flocks must remain. This, of course, was not acceptable. Moses reminds Pharaoh that the purpose of leaving was to worship the God of Israel, and this required sacrifice, which necessitated the flocks as well. Moses also tells Pharaoh that God had not yet given instructions on exactly what and how many sacrifices would be offered, and thus the flocks, not just a few animals, would need to be taken.

This outrages Pharaoh once again, and he gives a final ultimatum to Moses: "Get away from me! Beware, do not see my face again, for in the day you see my face you shall die!" (10:28). Pharaoh's hardened heart has reached its limit. In spite of the obvious power of Israel's God, Pharaoh draws a line in the sand: he has raised his fist against the Almighty and His representative, Moses. But once again, Pharaoh's words will come true—this will be last time he will see Moses' face: Moses said, "You are right; I shall never see your face again!" (10:29). There will be no turning back—the redemption of Israel is about to take place.

The order of the events as listed in chapter 11 and 12 pose an apparent problem. In 11:8, it appears that Moses returns once again to Pharaoh with yet another message: "All these your servants will come down to me and bow themselves before me, saying, 'Go out, you and all the people who follow you,' and after that I will go out." And he went out from Pharaoh in hot anger." And in 12:31 Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron again to deliver the message that Israel was to leave Egypt. The Sages give various explanations. Regarding the statement of 11:8, they suggest that this actually occurred, not after Moses instructs the people (11:1–7), but before, and that God had given Moses a direct revelation while he still stood before Pharaoh. And regarding the summons in 12:31, they suggest that Pharaoh was not actually in attendance, but that the message of Pharaoh was delivered by his servants (court officials). Thus Moses' promise never to be seen by Pharaoh again was upheld.

The instructions given to the Israelites by Moses, that they were to ask for silver and gold from their Egyptian neighbors (11:2), is sometimes read as underhanded. In 3:22, it is foretold that the Israelites would ask for items of silver and gold, as well as clothing, and the Lxx and Samaritan Pentateuch add the word "clothing" to our text as well. This sounds like borrowing without the intention of returning the items. The Sages suggest several explanations. Since the text has noted that Moses was esteemed in the eyes of the people, but does not specify whether this refers to the Israelite or the Egyptians, some suggest that the Egyptian populace had come to revere Moses in his position as stronger than Pharaoh, and that they therefore willingly gave gifts to the Israelites in honor of Moses. Others suggest that the Egyptians gave items of value to the Israelites in order to encourage them to leave, because they knew that if they remained, the God of Israel would utterly demolish the Egyptian society and land. It might also be noted that Israel had been wrongfully enslaved, and that the acquiring of silver and gold (as well as clothing) was a repayment of

wages that they should have been given for their work. Regardless, the prophecy of 3:22 was in the process of being fulfilled: Israel would, indeed, plunder the Egyptians. We should note that it was the silver and gold from the Egyptians that eventually was used to make the sacred articles of the Tabernacle.

Like the ninth plague of darkness, in which a clear distinction was made between Israel and Egypt, so the final plague would highlight this difference. Death would occur in every household of Egypt. The phrase “from the first born of the Pharaoh who sits on his throne, even to the first born of the slave girl who is behind the millstones” is a merism, a literary form that describes a totality, much like “heaven and earth,” which in some cases means “everywhere.” This would contradict the teachings of some of the Sages that the servants of Pharaoh, who approached Moses (11:8) were spared the death of their first born. In contrast, “against any of the sons of Israel a dog will not even bark, whether against man or beast” (11:7). The contrast would be fully evident: in the homes of the Egyptians, there would be great calamity and sorrow, but for the Israelites, there would be full protection. The God Who divides between holy and profane would show His sovereign hand in making a clear distinction between Israel and Egypt.

The event of the final judgment against Egypt in the killing of her first born (בְּכוֹר, *bichor* can refer to either a son or a daughter, though in matters of inheritance, it most often refers to the first born son) and the subsequent deliverance of Israel from the slavery of Egypt, would stand forever as the paradigm for God’s work of redemption. As such, God commands Moses and Aaron that this event would mark a change in the ordering of the months. It stands to reason that there would be no need to reckon the month of the exodus as the first month if it were, in fact, already the first month of the Israelite calendar. God’s instructions here are specific (12:2): “This month shall be the beginning of months for you (הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֵאשׁ חֳדָשִׁים); it is to be the first month of the year to you (רֵאשׁוֹן הוּא לָכֶם לְחֹדֶשׁ הַשָּׁנָה). This is the only time in the Tanach that רֵאשׁ, *rosh* (“head, beginning”) is used in the singular with the word “months” (חֳדָשִׁים, *chodashim*). The obvious meaning is that when it comes to reckoning the beginning and order of the months, the month in which the exodus occurred was to rank as first. From this time on in the Tanach, the designation “first month” (חֹדֶשׁ הָרֵאשׁוֹן) refers to the month of the exodus. Yet the counting of the years as pertains to the sabbatical year (every seven years) and the Jubilee (יּוֹבֵל, *yovel*) does not begin with the month of the exodus, but with the month in which Yom Kippur occurs (Lev 25:8–11). Thus, as pertains to months in the Hebrew calendar, the month of the exodus (Pesach) is first, while as regards the counting of years, the month in which Yom Kippur occurs is the beginning. The obvious importance of this is that redemption (pictured by the exodus) begins that story of God’s covenant faithfulness to Israel which is then paralleled to the final fruit of redemption, the freedom portrayed in the Yovel (Jubilee) marked by Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). The picture we are to see in this is that Israel is redeemed from slavery in order to be free to worship God, and such freedom from slavery is to characterize the nation (as lived out in the Yovel), for the ultimate destiny of God’s chosen people is that they should forever be free to worship Him.

The matter of the Pesach (Passover) lamb is detailed in 12:3-12. First, the lamb was to be selected on the 10th of the month, four days before it was slaughtered as a sacrifice. The lamb was thus “set apart” (note the command “you shall keep it,” 12:6) in advance, even as Yeshua was chosen from before the foundations of the world to be our sacrifice (1Pet 1:20). Second, the lamb was to be a one year old male without blemish, selected from either the sheep or the goats. This speaks to the fitness of the lamb for sacrifice. Third, one lamb was sufficient for a complete household,

and even beyond that limit, if the household was small. This emphasized the fact that the sacrifice of the lamb had corporate dimensions. One sacrifice for many people. But it also emphasizes that the efficacy of the sacrifice was limited. Only those within an Israelite household were protected by the blood of the lamb. This shows that God's redemption is not merely forensic but also historical. The locus of God's redemptive work is confined to His chosen ones. Only Israel is redeemed, and Israel is comprised of those God chooses, regardless of their ethnicity. Thus, a "mixed-multitude" leaves Egypt through God's saving power.

Fourth, this corporate aspect of the Pesach sacrifice is also highlighted by the fact that individual families did not perform the sacrifice, each by themselves. The text indicates (12:6) that "the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel is to kill it at twilight." Exactly how this was carried out is not specified, but it is on this basis that later, the Pesach lamb was sacrificed at the Tabernacle or Temple before it was roasted for eating.

Fifth, the sacrifice of the lamb was not sufficient in and of itself. Its blood needed to be applied to the doorposts and lintel of the family's dwelling (12:7). Even as the blood of the Yom Kippur sacrifice did not avail to the atoning of sin until it was applied to the mercy seat of the Ark in the Most Holy Place, so the blood of the Pesach lamb did not protect the Israelites until it was applied to the doorposts and lintel. In like manner, the blood of our Messiah must be applied (as it were) to each individual who would be saved from the wrath of God. Whereas in Egypt, the blood was applied to the doorpost and lintel with a hyssop branch, in the eternal aspects of which this was a foreshadow, the blood of our Savior's death is applied to each believer by the work of the Spirit through the gift of faith.

Sixth, the meat of the Pesach lamb was to be roasted whole, not boiled or eaten raw (which was often done in pagan sacrifices). The roasting of the lamb paralleled the sacrifice by fire, which signified the full giving of the offering to God. Yet the fact that the meat is also eaten by those bringing the sacrifice connects it to the fellowship offering. This aspect of the Pesach sacrifice emphasizes the covenant relationship between God and Israel. That it was roasted with fire symbolized the upward dimension: the sacrifice was presented to God. The eating of the meat symbolized the covenant fellowship that existed between God and the individual worshipper as a result of the sacrifice.

Seventh, nothing of the lamb was to be left over until the morning. Whatever was not eaten was to be burned with fire. This eventually was understood by the Sages to mean that nothing was to be eaten after midnight. This symbolizes that there was a window of time in which the requirements for Israel's redemption could be accomplished. And so it is true for us. There is a "day" of salvation, but when it is over, night comes (cf. Is 49:8; 2Cor 6:2).

Finally, the Pesach meal was to be eaten in a manner that anticipated leaving Egypt (12:11): "Now you shall eat it in this manner: with your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it in haste—it is the Lord's Passover." The point is clear: the Pesach meal, initiated at the exodus, was forward-looking. It was to emphasize God's covenant faithfulness with His chosen covenant partner Israel, but it was not the end in itself. It spoke of the redemption that was about to become a reality and the ultimate freedom that would result as seen in Yom Kippur and the Yovel. The slavery of Egypt was imposed upon Israel by her enemies, while the slavery of debt (rectified in the Yovel, the Year of Jubilee) was self-imposed. This speaks to the fact that, spiritually speaking, freedom has two dimensions: freedom from the debt of sin inherited from Adam, and freedom from the condemnation incurred by our own willful sin.

In the same way, as we celebrate Pesach each year, we do so with the realization of our having been redeemed from the slavery of sin by the death and resurrection of Yeshua. Yet we still await our full redemption (Rom 8:21–22) when we will forever be free from the burden of our own sin, when mortal puts on immortality and we reign eternally with Yeshua in full conformity to His holiness.

Paul teaches us that as we celebrate Pesach, we proclaim Yeshua’s death “until He comes” (1Cor 11:26). We too, in one sense, like Israel of old, await our final redemption. Yet we know that it is secure. The Lamb has been slain, His blood has been applied, the victory has already been won! We wait, then, prepared and ready for the coming of our Savior when death will be completely swallowed upon in victory (1Cor 15:50–58).