

THE REAL REASON FOR THE TEN PLAGUES

From a young age, we are taught about the 10 plagues that G-d visited upon the Egyptians: Pharaoh stubbornly refused Moses' demands to "Let my people go," so G-d struck Egypt with 10 mighty blows to force him to relent. Only after the repeated crippling attacks did Pharaoh finally have no choice but to let the Israelites go free.

Indeed, this narrative seems justified based on the way the Torah portrays the interactions between Moses and Pharaoh. Moses demanded that Pharaoh cede to the will of the Almighty, but Pharaoh refused. When Moses insisted that he let the Israelites go free, Pharaoh responded defiantly: "Who is the L-rd, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the L-rd, nor will I let Israel go." In response, G-d warned: "The Egyptians will know that I am the L-rd when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it."

So the plagues were sent to humble Pharaoh and force him to cooperate.

But Why So Many Plagues?

As neat as the storyline is, there is a major problem. If the goal was to liberate the Israelites, there were many much simpler ways to achieve that. G-d could have unleashed a single plague so unbearable and so prolonged that Pharaoh would have been compelled to capitulate. Alternatively, G-d could have simply instructed Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and paralyzed the Egyptians to prevent them from doing anything to stop them. Even simpler still, G-d could have influenced Pharaoh's mind so that he would be inclined to allow the Israelites to leave. After all, we read repeatedly that "G-d hardened Pharaoh's heart" so that he would be resistant to Moses' demands. If G-d had the power to harden Pharaoh's heart, surely he also had the power to soften it. As we know, "The hearts and minds of kings are in the hand of the L-rd."

So, why 10 plagues?

The great classical commentators broadly take one of two central approaches.

Punishment

One view is that the purpose of the plagues was to punish Pharaoh and the Egyptians for their evil acts. For generations, they had exploited and mistreated the Israelites, and it would hardly be acceptable if they were not made to pay for their crimes. Indeed, G-d hardened Pharaoh's heart, so that he would continue to receive his full measure of punishment.

This is the view of Maimonides, who explains how it was justified for G-d to punish Pharaoh if He was the one preventing him from complying (by hardening his heart). According to Maimonides, Pharaoh's behavior was so appalling that it became necessary to subject him and his country to a fitting punishment in the form of the 10 plagues. By the time the plagues came around, it was irrelevant whether or not Pharaoh was ready to comply; it was about giving him a taste of his own medicine.

This is expressed in the prophecy told to Abraham, that "the nation that will subjugate [your descendants] will be judged."

Demonstrating G-d's Greatness

A second approach is that the plagues were designed to demonstrate G-d's sovereignty and might. Egypt was the most powerful empire at the time, and bringing it to its knees was to serve as a lesson to both Egypt and the whole world that the universe has an all-powerful creator.

This is the view of Rabbi Ovadia Seforno, who explains that the plagues were intended to subdue the Egyptians to accept G-d's will. According to Seforno, the purpose of the plagues was so that the Egyptians would repent of their evil ways and recognize G-d's greatness.

This sentiment is expressed in the verse in which G-d tells to Moses to tell Pharaoh: "I have preserved you for this very purpose, that I might show you My power and that My name might be proclaimed in all the earth." Pharaoh had brazenly denied any recognition of G-d by repeatedly declaring, "Who is G-d?" and "I don't know of G-d." The Divine show of force offered a resounding response to his defiance.

A Third Approach

These two perspectives (a punishment or a lesson) were the dominant views of the purpose of the 10 plagues for centuries. Yet, in an astonishing twist, the Rebbe demonstrates a third, entirely new approach. The purpose of the plagues was not primarily intended for the Egyptians, argues the Rebbe. Rather, the main aim was to inspire the Israelites. Any impact the plagues would have on the Egyptians was secondary.

The Rebbe bases this perspective on a comment from Rashi. On the verse, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and I will increase My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt," Rashi explains:

"Since he [Pharaoh] behaved wickedly and defied Me, and I know full well that there is no delight among the nations to make a wholehearted attempt to repent, it is better for Me that his heart be hardened, so that [I can] increase My signs and My wonders in him, and they will recognize My mighty deeds." This is the custom of the Holy One, blessed be He: He brings retribution on the nations so that Israel should hear and fear.

Indeed, when Moses was sent one last time to confront Pharaoh, G-d told him that the plagues were also a message for the Israelites: "In order that you tell into the ears of your son and your son's son how I made a mockery of the Egyptians, and [that you tell off] My signs that I placed in them, and you will know that I am the L-rd."

The Cosmic Arc

But what makes Rashi attribute the main focus of the plagues to their role with regards to the Israelites, when the Torah primarily highlights their role in relation to the Egyptians?

The clue is in Rashi's very opening comment to the Torah – Genesis 1:1. There, Rashi states that the world was created according to an overarching Divine plan. At the heart of this was that the Children of Israel would arrive at Mount Sinai for the Torah to be revealed to the world. Pharaoh and the Egyptians played a part in that process, but they were never the end game.

Yes, the Egyptians deserved to be punished, and justice was indeed meted out. True, Pharaoh's arrogance towards the Almighty required a powerful response, and he sure got one. But the ultimate purpose was that the departing Israelites would learn an eternal message that would resound for generations. The Egyptian pharaohs would fade from history several generations later, but the lessons of the Exodus would live on forever in the descendants of those Israelites. Ultimately, the Israelites carrying this lasting message would go on to transform the world.

by Rabbi Yossi Ives

RABBI MENACHEM BEN IBN ZORACH (1322-?)

In the month of Tammuz, about 600 years ago, the great Torah scholar, Rabbi Menachem ben Aharon Ibn Zorach, died. He was the author of the classical work, Tzedah Laderech ("Food for the journey"). Rabbi Menachem's father, Rabbi Aharon, was one of the Jews who were driven out of France in the month of Av, 5066 (1306), by order of King Louis the

PARSHAT VA'ERA

22 – 28 Tevet 5786
11 – 17 January 2026

Torah: Va'era: Exodus 6:2 - 9:35
Haftorah: Ezekiel 28:25 - 29:21

PSALMS DAILY

Psalms for our brethren in the Holy Land

Psalm 117

1. Praise the Lord, all nations, laud Him, all peoples.
2. For His kindness has overwhelmed us, and the truth of the Lord is eternal. Hallelujah!

(Please say Chapter 20 daily)

SEFER HAMITZVOT

Negative Mitzvah 294: Punishing an Individual Coerced to Sin

It is forbidden to punish a person for the commission of a sin which he was coerced to do.

Negative Mitzvah 290: Issuing a Punitive Sentence Based on Circumstantial Evidence.

We are forbidden to punish an individual based on circumstantial evidence, even if the person's guilt is virtually certain.

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Aleph Institute

Hyman & Martha Rogal Center

5804 Beacon Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15217

412-421-0111
Fax: 412-521-5948

www.AlephNE.org
info@AlephNE.org



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Tenth. The Jews left France robbed of their lands, houses and possessions, which were confiscated by the king for his own use. Rabbi Aharon then settled in the province of Navarre, north of Spain, which was, for a certain time, an independent country, and was later to become a part of France. Here, in the city of Estella, Menachem was born. He studied in the Yeshiva of Rabbi Benjamin Ebitz, the Dean and Rabbi of this city. The young Menachem excelled in his studies. When he was 16 years old, he became the son-in-law of the Dean.

In Navarre, too, the Jews did not live securely for long. After the death of the French King Phillip the Fifth (in 1322), a difficult time came upon the Jews, known as "The Shepherds Uprisings," when a fanatical band of shepherds set out to rob and murder the Jews. For several years, these wild bands roamed the countryside freely, and plenty of Jewish blood was spilled. They also reached the gates of the Jewish ghetto in Estella. The Jews defended themselves heroically, but were beaten by the overwhelming numbers of the shepherds, who robbed them and burned the ghetto. According to Rabbi Menachem, about 6000 Jews perished in Estella and other cities in the province. Rabbi Menachem's father, mother and four younger brothers were killed and died for Kiddush Hashem. Rabbi Menachem himself was murderously beaten, and left in an unconscious condition. The group of 25 bandits who attacked him left him for dead, on a pile of Jewish corpses. Rabbi Menachem lay there in that condition, till the middle of the night (23rd Iyar) when a well-known nobleman, a friend of Rabbi Menachem's father, saw signs of life in him and pulled him out from among the corpses and took him to his home. "When the great Healer," writes Menachem, "healed my wounds, although I was undeserving, I decided to go to Toledo to study the Torah."

Rabbi Menachem studied for two years at the feet of his new teacher, Rabbi Joshua ben Shuab. From there he went to Alcalla, Spain, where he learned Torah day and night, under the guidance of Rabbi Joseph Alaisch. He was also a student of Rabbi Judah ben Asher, the son of the Rosh (Rabbi Osher ben Yechiel) in Toledo. Rabbi Menachem studied here with his teachers and fellow students, for eighteen years without interruption. When Rabbi Joseph Alaisch died in 5120 (1360), the community of Alcalla appointed Rabbi Menachem as his successor. "Although I was unworthy of this honor,"

further writes Rabbi Menachem, "I had to fulfill their request."

Rabbi Menachem occupied the position of Rabbi and Dean for eight years, until the Almighty poured out His anger on the Jews once more. In the month of Iyar in the year 5128 (1368), there broke out the "Fraternal War" between the King Don Henry and his brother, Don Pedro, both the sons of King Alfonso of Castille. The victor, Don Henry, killed his brother, and became the King of Navarre.

During the civil war, the situation of the Jews was a perilous one, and they suffered from both sides of the warring brothers. Terrorizing bandits roamed around, killing and robbing the Jews without mercy. Almost the complete Jewish community of Toledo was wiped out. About 8000 Jews died from hunger and lack of necessities. Those who remained alive had to pay extremely high taxes that completely impoverished them.

As a result of all these troubles and misfortunes, Rabbi Menachem was left bare of all earthly possessions; he lost everything; his home, his community, even his holy books. A prominent Jew, Don Samuel Abravanel of Seville, well-known in the royal circles, took Rabbi Menachem under his protection, and supported him and provided for him. With his help, Rabbi Menachem returned to Toledo, where the remaining Jews asked him to spread the teachings of the Torah throughout the community. Under his leadership the Jewish community of Toledo was put on its feet once more.

Rabbi Samuel Abravanel occupied an important post in the royal court in Toledo. He was a great lover of the Torah and supported Torah scholars with an open hand. Out of gratitude to him, and for the benefit of other Jews who held posts in the royal court, or who were so occupied as to be unable to spend sufficient time on Torah study, Rabbi Menachem wrote an important work, the above mentioned Tzedah Laderech.

It was an enormous help for the Jews who, because of various reasons, and due to the troubled times, were forced to wander from place to place. It enabled them to learn the laws pertaining to their daily life in a shortened form.

The work is divided into 5 parts, which deal with important laws of everyday living;

- 1) The laws of Prayers and Blessings
- 2) Laws of Isur VeHeter (Prohibited and Allowed), e.g. meat and milk questions
- 3) Laws pertaining to Women

- 4) Laws of Shabbos and Yomtov; and
- 5) Laws of the Fast days.

All these laws were compiled in a shortened form by Rabbi Menachem, so that every Jew would be able to become familiar with them, and know how to lead a Jewish life, true to the Torah. He also gives certain explanations about the meaning and importance of certain Mitzvos; he closes with words of comfort, and strengthens the belief in the final redemption by the Messiah.

Rabbi Menachem lived to a ripe old age, and accomplished a great deal for his suffering brethren, whom he encouraged with practical help, both spiritual and material, and especially with his great trust in the Almighty, his self sacrifice, noble character and humility.

VA'ERA IN A NUTSHELL

The name of the Parshah, "Va'era," means "and I appeared" and it is found in Exodus 6:3.

G-d reveals Himself to Moses. Employing the four expressions of redemption, take out the Children of Israel from Egypt, deliver them from their enslavement, redeem them, and acquire them as His own chosen people at Mount Sinai; He will then bring them to the land He promised to the Patriarchs as their eternal heritage.

Moses and Aaron repeatedly come before Pharaoh to demand in the name of G-d, "Let My people go, so that they may serve Me in the wilderness." Pharaoh repeatedly refuses. Aaron's staff turns into a snake and swallows the magic sticks of the Egyptian sorcerers. G-d then sends a series of plagues upon the Egyptians.

The waters of the Nile turn to blood; swarms of frogs overrun the land; lice infest all men and beasts. Hordes of wild animals invade the cities; a pestilence kills the domestic animals; painful boils afflict the Egyptians. For the seventh plague, fire and ice combine to descend from the skies as a devastating hail. Still, "the heart of Pharaoh was hardened and he would not let the children of Israel go, as G-d had said to Moses."

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Sunday 22 Tevet 5786 – 11 January 2026

Purim of the Curtains (1623)

After a respected Jew was falsely accused of stealing the royal curtains from the governor's palace, the entire Jewish community of Prague was in mortal danger.

After miraculous intervention, the real culprit confessed to the crime, sparing the Jews of the city.

To commemorate this event, "Purim of the Curtains" was instituted to thank G-d for the miraculous salvation.

Tuesday, 24 Tevet 5786 – 13 January 2026

Passing of R. Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1812)

The founder of Chabad Chassidism, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812), passed away on the eve of the 24th of Tevet, 5773, at approximately 10:30 pm, shortly after reciting the Havdalah prayer marking the end of the Shabbat. The Rebbe was in the village of Peyena, fleeing Napoleon's armies, which had swept through the Rebbe's hometown of Liadi three months earlier in their advance towards Moscow. He was in his 68th year at the time of his passing, and was succeeded by his son, Rabbi DovBer of Lubavitch.