



## Parshat Va'era - **Fire and Ice: The Seventh Plague**

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Years ago, when my wife and I were living in Jerusalem for the year, the city was hit with massive winter storms. Trees sagged under the weight of the snow and ice. Some trees collapsed from the strain; traffic came to a standstill. And there I was making snowballs to stash in our freezer for use at our Pesach Seder. I plotted to use them during the part about the ten plagues, and pelted our friends with them to help us experience the plague of hail. I actually forgot to use those snowballs that year, but always felt a connection to the hail.

The core of Parshat Va'era is Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh and the first seven of the ten plagues. I have always wanted to get a clear sense of what living through the plagues was like. For me, the recitation of these plagues as we spill out ten drops of wine onto our plates never does them justice. I always look for ways to make the plagues come alive, to understand the terror and suffering they inflicted. Blood: no drinkable water. Frogs: complete infestation. Lice: inescapable itching. And so on. Miraculous they may each have been in terms of timing and intensity; I could imagine the first six of them to some degree based on my own experience. And then came hail.

The Torah describes the hail with its built-in contradictions:

So Moses held out his rod toward the sky, and God sent thunder and hail, and fire streamed down to the ground, as God rained down hail upon the land of Egypt. The hail was very heavy — **fire flashing in the midst of the hail** — such as had not fallen on the land of Egypt since it had become a nation.

Fire and ice. That's impossible. Fire and ice are mortal enemies. Move one close to the other, and inevitably the water will evaporate or the fire will be extinguished. How are we to understand this mysterious plague? Naturally, I turn to Torah commentaries.

We find a classic understanding of the hail in the *Keter Yonatan*, an ancient Hebrew translation of the Torah that explains some unclear passages. *Keter Yonatan* describes the fire as "jumping inside the ice." Imagine a fire in the center of each ball of hail. Somehow the ice contained the fire. When the hail would strike, the fire would burst out and spread. Ibn Ezra, the Spanish commentator, agrees with the *Keter Yonatan* and describes the hail as "an opposite within an opposite."

One of the most remarkable comments about the hail appears in the commentary of Sforno, the 15<sup>th</sup> century Italian commentator and philosopher. Centuries before anything human-made reached the speed of sound, he taught that the hail during the plagues was traveling so fast that it heated up the air around it and caused thunder. Having spent years in California hearing the Space Shuttle's sonic booms, this seems to fit with what Sforno describes. When a body moves through the atmosphere, it heats up, and when it hits the speed of sound, it creates a thunderous sonic boom. In other words, the hail was supersonic. In my mind, this is the most terrifying vision of the hail I have ever encountered. No wonder this is the first plague in Parshat Va'era that mentions human casualties.

This week, my mind mixes together imaginary images of Egypt in the midst of its destruction with real images of Haiti after its terrible earthquake, which has left the small island nation devastated. Even though I read in the Torah this week about God meting out punishment through natural phenomena, when I read the statements by Pat Robertson claiming that Haiti was being punished for making a "pact with the devil", I shudder. No matter what I read in the Torah about God and Pharaoh's confrontation, I do not believe that God actually hands out punishment like this. For me, weather and nature are not theological. Robertson finds God in the wrong part of the equation. He sees God in the destruction. I see God in the hand that reaches out to her or his fellow human being.

We can turn to for another commentator for another understanding of the hail. Rashi, the 12<sup>th</sup> Century French commentator, adds a comment that takes the hail to a new level. Rashi finds within the "opposite in the opposite" a powerful lesson for us today. He says that the hail was, "a miracle within a miracle. Fire mixed with ice, which is water. To do the will of their Creator, they made peace between them." Yes, the mere fact of a hailstorm (unheard of in Egypt) was a miracle, and more than that, these two elemental opposites were able to exist side by side in order to do God's bidding. If fire and ice can work together for a higher purpose, then people who do not normally get along can come together for a higher purpose. With God's help, the world will speedily come together to serve God by saving as many lives as possible in Haiti.

Shabbat Shalom!

#### **AS A FAMILY:**

- As is appropriate for the age of your children, talk about the earthquake in Haiti, what various countries are doing to help the victims of the quake.
- Find our ways in which you can [help](#) our fellow human beings in Haiti.

#### **TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS WEEK'S [TORAH](#) PORTION, TRY TO ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:**

1. What is the connection between God's speech at the beginning of the parashah and the Pesach Seder?
2. Who is the only woman mentioned in the Levite family tree? Figure out her family tree: father, sons, husband, brother, brother-in-law, grandson.
3. Why does Moses still object to being sent to free the Hebrews?
4. How long did the plague of blood last? How did people get water during those days?
5. What was it like after the plague of the frogs ended?

6. Which plague are the Egyptian magicians unable to perform? How do they describe the plague?
7. Which is the first plague that only affects Egyptians and not the Israelites?
8. Why does Moses tell Pharaoh that the Israelites need to make a three-day journey to worship God?
9. What do Moses and Aaron take handfuls of to bring on the plague of boils?
10. What does Pharaoh say for the first time after the plague of the hail?