
D'var Torah

The Plagues: A Developmental-Psychological Interpretation

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WHEN MY SON WAS ABOUT FOUR, I READ HIM THE STORY OF THE FROG PRINCE. AS I APPROACHED THE END OF THE STORY, I DID SOME QUICK, ON-THE-SPOT EDITING, REACTING IN HORROR AT THE apparent message of the tale. A little girl promises anything to a frog who will fetch her golden ball from the well. Once he makes good on his end of the bargain, she attempts to renege. Her father, however, admonishes her that she must grant the frog what he wishes, which is to eat at her table and sleep on her pillow. In an act of defiance, the girl disgustedly takes the frog and throws him against the wall, whereupon he becomes a handsome prince whom she marries.

I did not want my son to think that breaking promises was acceptable, or that throwing things against the wall was all right. I did not want him to think he should defy his parents the way the girl in the story defies hers. So I made this into a moral tale about being reliable, about obedience. I could not understand why the girl got rewarded for such seemingly bad behavior.

Over time, I came to understand that I had made a grave error in editing The Frog Prince. I had edited out exactly what was crucial, and had made it a static, rather puritanical story, robbed of poetry and metaphor. It is precisely in the act of defiance, in the little girl's assertion that she will not be held accountable for a promise made through the naïveté of her childishness,

in her disgust at oral/dependent greediness implied by the frog at her plate, in her awareness that she is not ready for the sexual encounter suggested by the frog on her pillow, and in her rejection and redefining of the rules imposed upon her for her growing up, that she, in fact, grows up. The frog's transformation into a human being is a metaphor for her own parallel transformation and her ability, through that transformation, to be accountable to fellow human beings, represented by her capacity to love the prince, and accept him as her life mate. Now she is ready to honor her promises and participate in a relationship based on mutuality—not before. How little I understood when I first read this story of the richness of experience it offers children. It is not about a message or a moral. It is simply, or not so simply, about life.

OF LATE, I HAVE GONE BACK TO THE EXODUS STORY TO TRY TO FIND OUT IF I have similarly missed some crucial element. What is this “I’m stronger-than-you-are” game that God plays with Pharaoh? Is this story of Moses and Pharaoh and God about power and obedience and submissiveness, as many commentators suggest, and as I thought *The Frog Prince* was about parental authority? Is it about morality that is effected through fear? Or could all of this be a metaphor for something quite different?

I approach Exodus as if it were not so different, after all, from *The Frog Prince*, or other tales that deal with emergence. And if the Exodus is about being thrust out of one world and into another, then the events immediately preceding the Exodus—the plagues—must lay that groundwork, must prepare for the transformation that will enable the Israelites to emerge.

The portion *Vaera* [EXODUS 6:2-9:35] begins not with the Israelites desiring their freedom, but with God deciding that they are ready. God cites past history, reminding Moses that God had appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but not in the same guise, as Adonai. God further reminds Moses that he had promised to give Abraham the land, which he now intends to do.

From this brief introduction we understand several things. First, that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were forerunners, inchoate forms of what is now to come to fruition. God did not appear to them the way he will appear to Moses. In a sense, whatever force this God is was also not fully formed, but nascent, awaiting its time. This is further suggested by the fact that God did

not bring Abraham and his immediate descendants into the land; in some important way they were not yet ready to receive the land, nor God ready to give it. Thus, the stage is set for a story about growing, in which all characters, including God, represent parts of this motif.

The frame is also set for conflict around the issue of growth, which neither the Israelites nor Pharaoh wants to happen. Like parent and child, there is comfort for both in the securities of sameness, in protection, no matter how stunting that protection may be. God, however, represents the force that impels maturation. It is time—and God knows it—for slavish dependencies to end, for the Israelites to leave their temporary home, to find the land, the place in which they belong, the place where selfhood is at home, free to flourish into thriving community.

God instructs Moses to speak to the children of Israel; they do not heed him. God then instructs Moses to speak to Pharaoh; perhaps the parent will be an ally in effecting maturation. Movement is frozen for the moment, as the Israelite “children” seem content to live in their father’s home, in Pharaoh’s land. As the maturational, psychological timetable unfolds, Moses will come to represent the path that each human being must traverse, with God, representing development’s necessities, nudging him forward, and Pharaoh, representing parental protections, serving as his anchor.

What is this “I’m-stronger-than-you-are” game that God plays with Pharaoh?

At this point, however, Moses remains a sapling, suggested by his impeded speech. He is unable to speak clearly, to communicate effectively. He is not yet a full human being until he claims his voice and it becomes an instrument of effective expression. So Moses and the Israelites are not ready, Pharaoh is not ready, but God is ready. The process of maturation must be set in motion.

Following the introductory verses, the text reviews the generations of which Moses and Aaron are a part, to assure us, seemingly, that the Moses and Aaron to whom God has spoken are the same Moses and Aaron who are the descendants of Levi. Surely we do not doubt the identities of Moses and

Aaron! Why the digression here? Following the current line of interpretation, this family tree helps us see in telescopic form that people grow from being “begotten” to “begetting,” from being sons to being fathers, from being daughters and sisters to bearing children. This, again, underscores our interpretation of *Vaera* as being about the movement from potentiality to actuality, from childhood to adulthood, from the slavery of dependency to the freedom of independence.

What follows are the plagues. Although there are many ways in which to view the plagues, for our focus on development and growth, we examine each plague in light of three interwoven dimensions. The first is the most apparent—the content of the plagues themselves. The second dimension concerns who enacts the plague, and the third concerns who is affected by each plague. There is progression along each of these dimensions, and each contributes to the motif of growth and development.

Plagues 1 and 2: Blood, frogs [EXODUS 7:8-8:11]

Content. Thematically, the first two plagues form a cluster along with the “pre-plague” demonstration of turning the rod into a serpent. Looking at the pre-plague, we witness a transformation of something inanimate into something writhing with life. This alerts us to a theme replayed throughout the plagues: the lifeless, or rudimentary life becoming transformed into fully emergent life. The not-too-subtle phallic-sexual overtones further contribute to this interpretation. We are dealing with the potential for life, with the not-yet consummated. In the first plague, too, the image of the Nile’s water becoming blood represents a transformation in the direction of life, and the suggestion of womb fluids is evoked. Thus we have both male and female procreative images as our first encounters between Pharaoh and Moses and Aaron.

The second plague, that of frogs, continues the transformational imagery, as frogs are animals that change their physical form in the maturational process. That we are dealing with procreative processes is further underscored by the emphasis that the frogs will enter your palace, your bedchamber and your bed [EXODUS 7:28]. For me, this recalls the image from *The Frog Prince* in which the frog extracts a promise from the girl that he will be able to sleep on her pillow. Regarding content, therefore, the first two plagues and the pre-plague may be viewed not as destructive acts, but as

displays about the possibilities of creation, of making life, and of growing into fully mature life.

Agent of Action. For all three of these displays, although Moses speaks to Pharaoh, Aaron is the one who actually enacts each display. However, because God, who may be seen as the propelling force of growth, speaks to Moses, we know that Moses is the story’s main character, not Aaron. Why is Moses not the performer of these plagues from the beginning? It would seem that Moses is not yet ready. Aaron, as the first born, is ready, but we are not so interested in him, perhaps because there is no conflict surrounding Aaron and growth; he is already competent in front of the Pharaoh/father. Having arrived is much less interesting than the journey that still lies ahead.

Thus the second dimension, that of who performs the act, also represents the potential for growing. As the tadpole must grow legs and lose its tail and acquire the capacity to breathe in both water and air, so Moses must learn that he must act as well as speak, and acquire the ability to replace Pharaoh/father as an adult.

Effect. Pharaoh seems not terribly bothered by the first three displays. His magicians can do as much. This may suggest that in the earliest stages of growing, parent and child have congruent experiences. In psychological terms, this experience may be what Winnicott calls Primary Maternal Preoccupation¹—the emotional state where normal adult needs are suspended, temporarily, as a mother-to-be and new mother experiences her own needs as being totally congruent with her baby’s.

At this point in our story, Pharaoh, like a patient parent, seems to ignore his children: Pharaoh turned and went into his palace, paying no regard even to this [EXODUS 7:23]. The Israelites’ actions are premature “stabs” at differentiation, not really meant to cause the parent to relax his protective vigil over them. They are not really ready to “grow up,” and Pharaoh knows this, as seen by the fact that Moses does not perform the actions himself. However, even the child’s earliest forays away from security are important steps. The Nile remains red, suggesting that developmental movement, even at this stage, cannot be undone.

Plagues 3-6: Lice, insects, pestilence, boils [EXODUS 8:12-9:17]

Content. Unlike the first few plagues which represent images of life, the next four plagues represent parasitic or infectious elements—things that “feed” off, or derive their sustenance from, other living things. These may be apt metaphors for the next developmental stage, where there begins to be divergence between the needs of parent and child. We may recall here the images from *The Frog Prince* cited earlier of the little princess grabbing her

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ball back from the frog and running off without fulfilling her end of the bargain, or of the frog sitting slimily on her plate and smarmily on her pillow. These plagues seem to be about the stage of development when the growing child greedily takes from the environment and feeds off it.

Agent of Action. Moving to the second dimension, we see a shift, although not a perfect one, in the agent of action. Aaron performs the first plague of this set, bringing on the lice, but his role is coming to a close. For the plagues of insects and pestilence, God acts in communion with Moses, performing the action while Moses continues to do the speaking. Gradually Moses undergoes a transformation from speaker to agent of action. By the sixth plague, Moses is the agent (although Aaron is still ready in the wings). God instructs both Moses and Aaron to take a handful of soot and throw it toward the sky. The dust that settles over the land will cause boils. While we may assume that both brothers take the soot, only Moses throws it up. Although the courtiers have begun to take notice, it is not until Moses finally performs this action, his first, that Pharaoh’s people are afflicted. When the child finally takes action, the parent must take notice.

Effect. As these four plagues unfold, Pharaoh’s magicians no longer can match the feats, signaling a change from the first cluster of plagues. Parent and child are no longer in synchrony. At first, for the plague of lice, even

though Pharaoh’s magicians are outperformed, Pharaoh is not particularly bothered, and does not ask Moses to stop. Here, again, we have an incomplete transition from one stage to the next on the part of the parent, who seems unable to recognize that a significant shift has occurred in the child, an increase in capacity that is moving him beyond the parental orbit.

By the second plague in this cluster, this shift becomes clearer. The change is underscored in God’s literal separation of the Israelites from the Egyptians. Child and parent are now on divergent paths, although they share the experience of ambivalence. While the child protagonists/Israelites are pulling away, they nonetheless remain attached to the parent in their continued need for protection and sustenance. Pharaoh hangs onto the child, trying to abort separation and growth, but he also, ambivalently and with no real conviction, begins to consider the necessity of permitting separation. After the plague of insects, Pharaoh agrees to let the Israelites go and sacrifice to their God, if Moses will remove the insects. Of course, Pharaoh does not uphold his end of the bargain, but we do not expect him to, as we are only midway along our journey’s path.

This may be a way of understanding the motif that is repeated throughout the Torah portion, that God hardens Pharaoh’s heart. If we understand God as the guiding principle of maturation, then God ensures that Pharaoh will not let go too soon—he cannot let go until his child, Moses, and by extension, Israel, are ready.

Plague 7: Hail [EXODUS 9:18-35]

Content. The final plague in *Vaera* represents a partial culmination along all three dimensions of exploration. Hail is a different kind of plague from the parasitic ones before it. Hail has a kind of environmental inevitability that comes about as a result of natural forces in conflict. It is less “personal” than the plagues preceding it. Because it is formed as a result of a clash of elements, hail represents an apt continuation of the metaphor we are following. Until now, we were dealing with two forces—Moses and Pharaoh—neither of whom was ready for a life independent of the other (the fact that Moses was literally raised as Pharaoh’s son further underscores this interpretation). Both were preparing themselves for this inevitability: Pharaoh, by not acting prematurely, but waiting for Moses/Israel to grow up

and demand independence, with voice and action unified; and Moses, by his gradual accession to the forces of maturation, his gradual assumption of adult responsibilities, and his eventual ability to leave his father's home.

Agent. For the first time, at the seventh plague, Moses alone both speaks and acts; Aaron no longer is the understudy. This may be key to understanding why the weekly Torah portions were divided as they are. It certainly would have made sense to group all of the plagues together in one portion. However, perhaps *Vaera* concludes with the seventh plague because it is a turning point: Moses is ready.

Effect. Although Moses is ready, dad is not. Parent and child are on separate, although compatible, tracks—the Israelites in Goshen with life forces intact, and Pharaoh in his region, with his cattle and slaves and Egyptian men and women protected indoors from the hail. This could be a turning point for Pharaoh, if he were able to do what a parent needs to do to foster the development of his child. In truth, he is not allowed to yet. God continues to “harden his heart,” to ensure that Pharaoh will not yet gratify Moses' demand for independence. Is this because Moses is not really ready? Or is it because Moses too, like Aaron before him, is only a representative? Perhaps this is the reason that the story must shift again, from Moses to the Israelites, who themselves must become ready before Pharaoh will be permitted by God, or the inevitability of human development, to let go.

THE PLAGUES PRESENTED IN THE NEXT TORAH PORTION, BO, CONTINUE THE metaphor of development. Locusts are insects which experience a stage of prolonged, subterranean incubation prior to their emergence as mature adults. Both larva and pupa stages signal moments of imminent transformations—from the wingless to the winged, from immobility to a fully mobile adult insect. The parallel of this image of crowds to the Israelites on the verge of their own stepping forth, is striking.

The next-to-last plague represents the mythic descent into darkness that classically precedes the emergence into light which heralds rebirth. The Israelites are ready for their “coming of age,” as they remain in light during this plague [EXODUS 10:23]. Pharaoh, the parent, must wrestle with himself,

preparing to accept the maturity that will soon stand before him.

By the end of the plagues, Moses will again speak to the Israelites, as he did at the beginning of *Vaera*. This time they will heed him. Their readiness to listen is a reflection of the fact that Moses is different now. He has claimed his voice through his actions and is worthy of being heeded. We will also come full circle with the image of blood that began the plagues, its life-affirming presence and meaning now made manifest.

God's decree to destroy the firstborn recalls Pharaoh's own similar decree earlier. But, in keeping with our understanding of this story, the son that Pharaoh loses in the final plague is not his young Egyptian son—that son is only a metaphor. The son that Pharaoh loses is Moses. And he does not lose him to death, but to life. Moses has carved out his own identity, different from his Egyptian father's, but similar, after all, to his Hebrew father's. These two fathers, Pharaoh and Amram, are split screen images for Moses' final differentiation, where some parental values are rejected and some embraced. This is the hallmark of real maturity: that identification does not happen *in toto*, but rather, selective identifications are “digested” and synthesized into a new and distinct personality.

The son that Pharaoh loses is Moses

Like in the pre-plague which foreshadowed the final plague, one son, one serpent, must be destroyed for the other to emerge. If both sons are metaphors for development, it is not sad that Pharaoh's young son “dies” while Moses lives. Like the frog in *The Frog Prince*, the earlier incarnations must disappear for the next developmental stage to unfold. One cannot move on to maturity while remaining infantile. Letting go and giving up are prerequisites for movement.

In the end, it is not death that forces Pharaoh's hand, but life. Although Pharaoh experiences Moses' life, his independence, and his emergent adulthood as the ultimate loss of his “son,” he does finally let go. And Moses, like each of us, finally leaves his father's home—“to find a land more kind than home, more large than earth...”²

DURING OUR NEXT PASSOVER SEDER, AS WE SPILL A DROP OF WINE FOR EACH plague in sadness at the suffering of innocent Egyptians, we might view this ritual through a different lens. It may be, after all, that we are not diminished by the deaths of the Egyptians, for the Egyptians might be understood not literally as a separate nation, some of whom perished at the bottom of the sea, but rather a metaphor for a state within—our earlier “tadpole” selves, which we had to relinquish in order to grow beyond. While the relinquishing may have been accompanied by ambivalence, the loss which is crystallized in our memories and our myths is balanced by the recompense of a fuller life. Perhaps the drops of wine may be seen as remembrances of steps along our way, remembrance that each plague only seemed to be about destruction—that the process of growing up, with its harsh demands, its wrenching separations, its moments of frightening insecurity, are often experienced by us as being dictated by a cruel and arbitrary authority. But at another level, growing up is always about the possibility of continued life and richness. In our ritual remembrance of our people’s mythic history, slavery and freedom and the journey from one to the other are also external metaphors for the internal odyssey that we each must make to become a human being.

Notes

1. D.W. Winnicott, “Primary Maternal Preoccupation,” (1956) in *Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1975).
2. Thomas Wolfe, *You Can’t Go Home Again*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 576.

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