

Va'era (Mike Fenster, Jan 1st 2022)

Today we read of the first 7 plagues - – Dam Tsefardeya Kinim Arov Dever Sh'chin and Barad, familiar to all of us from our seder services. Blood frogs lice swarming insects, disease of the cattle, boils and Hail..

I gave the drash on this sedrah in 2019 and barely mentioned the plagues, and I can't remember what Nahum focussed on when he gave a drash on this sedrah in January 2020 – probably the current significance of plagues seemed still remote then.

And in 2021 there wasn't a shabbat morning service at all, because of Covid.

But as 2022 starts today, plagues continue to make this sedrah relevant, even if it is the 3rd Vaera of the age of Covid

So how does the bible view plagues? How do we know what is a plague and what is a natural event? And how do we prevent plagues?

In a prequel of our story of plagues in Egypt, in Genesis, Abraham goes to Egypt with Sarah almost as soon as they had arrived from Haran, because there is a famine in the south of Canaan. The famine isn't regarded as a plague, it seems to have been a natural phenomenon. Abraham tells Sarah to say she is his sister. Sarah was taken from Abraham by Pharaoh, and while we don't know what happened to her in Pharaoh's palace, or for how long she was there, Abraham was richly rewarded with livestock and servants. But God sends plagues on Pharaoh's house, plagues that are described here in the Hebrew as *nega'im gedolim* נגעיִם גדולים. These plagues are clearly from God, unlikely the natural famine that drove our ancestors to Egypt in the first place.

What are the plagues in this Genesis story? We aren't given details – Rashi thinks it was some form of affliction that would have stopped Pharaoh having sexual relations with Sarah, but that might just be an attempt to preserve Sarah's reputation. So already in Genesis we have natural phenomenon like famines, and we have plagues from God

Various other famines are recorded in Bereshit, culminating in a 7 year famine in Egypt at the time of Joseph, but again these seem to be natural and though they maybe are needed for the Genesis narrative, they are not seen as punishments.

Plagues return in this week's sedrah. In Ex 9:14, as Moses threatens Pharaoh with hail and thunder, he uses the word *Magefa* for a plague. *Dever* is used to describe the 5th plague, being variously translated as pestilence a disease, or murrain (one of those words that only seem to exist in the King James bible).

In next week's sedrah, the 10th plague is also described as a *Nehga*. The word which was used to describe a very personal plague visited on the earlier Pharaoh in the Abraham story is used here in Shemot for the most personal of the 10 plagues – the killing of Pharaoh's son

Interestingly in the Haggadah, neither *Nehgah* or *magefa* is used, but the plagues are described as blows, *Macah*, or the plural *Macot*.

And throughout Shemot and Bamidbar we read about more and more plagues. These plagues are like natural events, but the timing, the ferocity, the geographic focus are un-natural. God threatens them, and God sends them - plagues are always associated with the misdeeds of the Children of Yisrael. .

On the other hand, we have seen famines and drought may be a natural phenomenon like Abraham's famine, Abraham had to escape to Egypt to avoid famine, as did his descendants - they did not hang around to pray to God for the famine to end. But famines and drought can also be like a plague, a means for God to threaten and punish us for our misdeeds. Indeed, in the Mishnah, 40 days without rain is called a 'plague of drought'.

How do we recognise the ones which are natural phenomenon, which we cannot do anything about in a religious sense? How do we recognise the ones which might be punishments from God, the ones we might expect that God can prevent or end.?

And, for those plagues and disasters that the Torah warns us **are** potentially punishments, what can we do to prevent them? They are communal disasters, not personal ones. And so it requires communal action to prevent or bring them to an end.

How do the Jewish people avoid the community suffering from plagues and famines -

There is a whole tractate of Talmud, Ta'anit, which looks at just this – how to recognise a plague, and how to stop one. Perhaps it isn't surprising for rabbis living in Israel and Babylon, modern day Iraq, that they were preoccupied with rain, drought and famine. Water was scarce. In the 2nd para of the Shema, rain was a gift from God, which could be withdrawn by God when we did wrong. Drought was something which people could influence through their relationship with God. 1800 years ago the rabbis saw epidemics and many other potential natural disasters in the same way.

The Mishnah details an emergency disaster prevention programme laid out in advance on how to deal with plagues and famine. Whether for drought, epidemics, collapsing buildings, an invasion of locusts or wild animals – there was a prescribed program of action, starting with individual fasts, rising to more frequent and stricter communal fasts, all accompanied by blowing the shofar. But there was an understanding that rather like Yom Kippur, much of the work that needed to be done was about righting the wrongs that had led God to send a plague as a punishment in the first place, and so (19b) according to the Mishnah, half the day should be spent in sorting out the affairs of the town and half the day performing the rituals.

But when does one start to take action – when do the authorities decide that the lack of rain, or the rising death toll from a disease, constitutes a plague for which the program of fasts and other actions can occur. So for example the Mishnah describes how many must die for a plague. One has to look at the statistics – and Chief medical officer Rav Nahman and Chief scientific officer Rav Shmuel have to determine if the threshold has been reached. For a town that can muster 500

soldiers, so maybe a town of 2000 people, the Mishnah states that if there are three plague-related deaths on three consecutive days, it's a plague. If they all die on one day, it isn't a plague. And while the Gemarah didn't quite come up with the concept of travel bans because of the plague, they were well aware of the problem, and (21b) when Rav Nahman, a Babylonian rabbi, was told of a plague in Eretz Israel, he called for fasting and shofar blowing in Babylon – not out of solidarity, but because they realised that plagues would travel between cities and between countries, and for them, fasting was about the only preventive measure they could think of.

And so to more recent times. On 18th March 2020, there was a curious ceremony held at the Ponovezh cemetery in Bnei Berak to try to avert the latest plague, Covid, that was just about to engulf Israel. They were holding a plague wedding¹, a ceremony that started, so we think, in 17th century Poland. A huppah is set up in a graveyard, a wedding is held for a couple who in normal circumstances would not get married because they were orphans, or disabled or otherwise not likely to find a partner, the community come together to celebrate the wedding and, in some mystical way which intermingles the hopes and happiness of a wedding with the grief of those recently buried in the cemetery, they hope to avert the plague. These plague weddings were quite common in eastern Europe. They are well documented, were held when there was an outbreak of cholera, typhus or some other epidemic, and were held well into the 20th century in Europe and America but also in Israel in the 19th century, and this most recent one in 2020 in Bnei Berak. It's a radically different approach – simcha instead of fasting, wedding music instead of shofar blasts, and has no halachic validity, but was still a popular custom. In one of the sources recording these weddings, it says

It was a tradition used in order to link the living and the dead, and perhaps to appease the victims of the plague who died before their time, so that they would

¹ Article by Jeremy Brown: <https://traditiononline.org/the-plague-wedding/>

beseech God for mercy on us. In addition to this, the very act of the marriage and the seven days of celebration carried power and influence in the upper worlds, and a sort of oath lest Heaven did not do its part.

These plague weddings seem to ignore the traditional reason for plagues that we are not following the mitzvot, and instead they seek some mystical way to deal with symptom, the plague, rather than the cause. Which is maybe why the wedding in Bnei Berak was unsuccessful in stopping Covid in the town. And maybe why we rationalists, who see the epidemics and droughts as either natural or anthropogenic events, cannot really accept that either fasts or plague weddings will prevent them. Though we can discuss another time why we still pray for rain and dew in the Amidah, and for a refuah sheleyma on Shabbat.

Back in Va'era we have had 7 waves of plagues on the Egyptians – after each plague, Pharaoh had an option to address the cause of the plague and prevent further catastrophe, but each time he refuses to let the people go. We'll read about many more plagues before we reach the end of this cycle on Simchat Torah, but let's hope that by then, COVID will no longer be a threat. Should we be praying for that?

Shabbat Shalom