



The Third Goal

This week's parsha brings up a very basic, but puzzling, question: What was the purpose of the Ten Plagues?

Simple, right? The purpose was to free the Israelites, to bring an end to their centuries of bondage.

But there was more to it than that. As was argued in last year's Guide to [Parshat Va'era](#), the plagues also had a **second aim**: to demonstrate, beyond a doubt, that the God of Israel is the all-powerful creator and master of the universe.

It turns out that God had yet a **third goal** in mind. What was this mysterious third goal? It becomes evident when you look at the Torah's account of the tenth plague - the death of the firstborn - in Parshat Bo. Let's read through the verses and collect a list of questions as we go. Ultimately, there will emerge one single explanation which answers all of these questions - and helps us to see the plagues in a new light.

Vessels, Screams and The Final Bow

Let's dive into the verses and start building up our catalogue of questions:

Exodus 11:1

וַיֹּאמֶר יְקוֹה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, עוֹד נִגַע אֶחָד אֲבִיא עַל-פְּרַעֲהַ וְעַל-מִצְרַיִם--אַחֲרַי-כֵּן, וְשַׁלַּח אֶתְכֶם מִזֶּה: כִּשְׁלַח--כְּלָהּ, גָּרֶשׁ יִגְרַשׁ אֶתְכֶם מִזֶּה.

The Lord said to Moses, "I will bring one more plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; afterwards he will let you go from here. When he lets you out, he will completely drive you out of here.

God has just told Moses that there's going to be a tenth and final plague. What do you expect is going to happen next?

You probably expect to hear about the plague actually happening. But that's not what we get. Instead, God continues:

Exodus 11:2-3

דַּבֵּר-נָא, בְּאָזְנֵי הָעָם; וְיִשְׁאַלְוּ אִישׁ מֵאֵת רֵעֵהוּ, וְאִשָּׁה מֵאֵת רֵעוּתָהּ, כְּלֵי-כֶסֶף, וּכְלֵי זָהָב. וַיִּתֵּן יְקוֹה אֶת-חַן הָעָם, בְּעֵינֵי מִצְרַיִם.

Please, speak into the ears of the people, and let them borrow, each man from his neighbor and each woman from her neighbor, silver vessels and golden vessels." So the Lord gave the people favor in the Egyptians' eyes.



INSTRUCTIONS

There are a lot of divrei Torah on the parsha. How is this different?

At Aleph Beta, we believe that the Torah is a guidebook that answers life's biggest questions, offering profound insights about how we should live our lives. Moreover, we believe that Jewish tradition has always recognized the right of all readers, in every generation, to look at the text themselves and try to decide what they think it means. That means you. That's why you are the most important author of this quest through the sources. We think that this guide offers a fun, stimulating and relevant path through the sources, but if you get wrapped up in a stimulating discussion and never make it past page 2, we'll consider that a success!

Is this guide for self-study or should I study it with others?

Either works! You can gather a small group of friends to explore it together, share it with a chevruta (learning partner), or go through it by yourself.

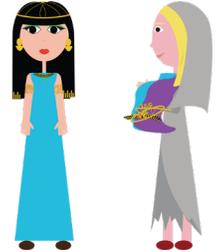
Do I need to prepare anything or can I just jump in?

Just jump in! Even if you're planning to use this for a group discussion, just open up to page 1 and get going. (If you read it in advance, it will spoil the fun!) The only thing you should do in advance is print out copies of the "Source Sheet" for the other participants, so everyone can follow along and engage with the sources.

About the Author

Most of the material within – although not the particular language contained in this guide - was first developed and taught by Rabbi David Fohrman, founder and CEO of Aleph Beta, and is presented in his video, "Parshat Bo: God's Justice In Action" (available for viewing at www.alephbeta.org). This guide was written by Beth Lesch, edited by Rivky Stern, and arranged by Laura Schembre.

The prior nine plagues followed a simple and predictable pattern: God announced the plague and then, well, it happened. But not here. With the tenth plague, God announces the plague, and then there's an odd digression. What's the connection between borrowing golden vessels and the killing of the firstborn?



And that's not the only digression in this account. Take a look at the continuation of the verse:

Exodus 11:3

גַּם הָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה, גָּדוֹל מְאֹד בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, בְּעֵינֵי עֲבָדֵי-פַרְעֹה, וּבְעֵינֵי הָעָם.

...also the man Moses was highly esteemed in the land of Egypt in the eyes of Pharaoh's servants and in the eyes of the people.

Now we *really* seem to veer off into an entirely different subject. Who cares how revered Moses is among the Egyptian populace, and what does that have to do with this final plague? What are we supposed to make of these two little digressions?

Let's keep moving with our question-gathering. In the very next verse, the Torah finally returns to the topic of the death of the firstborn - but there is something curious about the way that the plague is described:



Exodus 11:5-7

ומת כל-בכור, בארץ מצרים... והיתה צעקה גדלה, בכל-ארץ מצרים, אשר כמותו לא נהיתה, וכמותו לא תסוף. ולכל בני ישראל, לא יחרץ-קלב לשנו...
And every firstborn in the land of Egypt will die... And there will be a great scream throughout the entire land of Egypt, such as there never has been and such as there shall never be again. But to all the children of Israel, not even a dog will bark...

Moses seems to be saying that the experience of this plague, the death of every firstborn son, will somehow manifest as a “great scream.” In contrast, for the Israelites, there will be utter silence; not even a dog will bark. Moses could have used any kind of imagery to describe this disastrous plague, and he chooses language of screaming and silence. That’s a pretty interesting way to characterize the effects of the plague, don’t you think? Is the Torah just being poetic? Or is there some particular reason that the Torah uses *this* imagery, some message that it’s trying to convey?



And let’s add one final question to our list. Take a look at how Moses concludes his warning about the tenth plague:

Exodus 11:8

וירדו כל-עבדיך אלה אלי והשתחויו-לי לאמר, צא אתה וכל-העם אשר-ברגליך, ואחרי-כן, אצא.

And all these servants of yours will come down to me and prostrate themselves to me, saying, ‘Go out, you and all the people who are at your feet,’ and afterwards I will go out.

It seems that after the death of the firstborn, all of Pharaoh’s servants are going to bow down to Moses and plead with him to take the people out. Then - and *only* then - will the Israelites finally leave. But doesn’t this strike you as odd? What’s with the bowing down to Moses? Why does that have to happen? It sounds like an echo, somehow, of that earlier verse about how highly esteemed Moses was in Egypt.

To recap, here are our three questions:

Question 1: Why is there a digression about borrowing silver and gold vessels?

Question 2: Why does the Torah emphasize that Pharaoh’s servants will esteem and bow down to Moses?

Question 3: Why does Moses describe the plague in terms of screaming and silence?

Tit For Tat

What if there were a single explanation for all of these apparently disparate issues? It all boils down to the nature of justice. Yes, the Ten Plagues were designed to free the Israelites and to display God’s awesome power. But they had another goal as well: to somehow right the wrongs which had been perpetrated in Egypt, to punish the oppressors and recompense the victims. Indeed, here in the tenth plague, what we are seeing is an exquisitely-calibrated justice, wherein three key aspects of Israel’s suffering are eerily mirrored in God’s treatment of Egypt.

But how might that be? In what way is this tenth plague a sort of divine tit for tat? And how do our three questions factor into the explanation?

Well, ask yourself this: what exactly was Pharaoh's crime against the Israelites during those brutal years of bondage? **On the most basic level, he exploited them economically. That was the primary injustice.** The Israelites were Pharaoh's slaves; he took their labor, and gave them no payment in return. Thus, as the era of slavery comes to a close, God instructs the Israelites to go and ask their Egyptian neighbors for silver and gold - and God will see to it that the Egyptians will give it to them. It's as if God is saying: *You aren't leaving this nation until you take back some of the economic wealth that your backbreaking labor has helped to create.* So that curious digression about borrowing vessels from the Egyptians - it's not a digression at all. It's an essential step in divine justice.



Next, let's consider all of that talk about Moses' popularity and Pharaoh's servants bowing down to him. How might this play into divine justice? Well, aside from economic exploitation, what else was unjust about the way that Pharaoh treated the Israelites? Think back to the very first conversation that the Torah records between Pharaoh and Moses:

Exodus 5:1

בָּאוּ מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן, וַיֹּאמְרוּ, אֶל-פַּרְעֹה: כֹּה-אָמַר יְקוּה, אֱלֹקֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, שְׁלַח אֶת-עַמִּי, וַיְחַגְּגוּ לִי בַמִּדְבָּר.

Moses and Aaron came and said to Pharaoh, "So said the Lord God of Israel, 'Send out My people, and let them sacrifice to Me in the desert.'"

And what was Pharaoh's response?

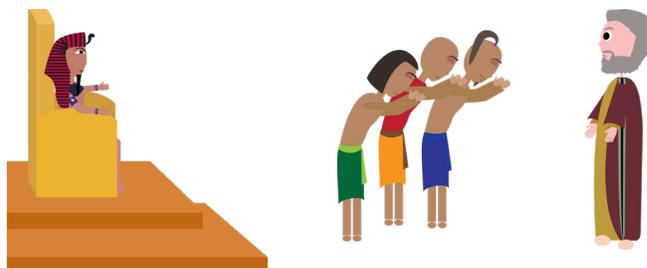
Exodus 5:2

וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה--מִי יְקוּה אֲשֶׁר אֲשַׁמַּע בְּקִלּוֹ, לְשַׁלַּח אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל: לֹא יִדְעֵתִי אֶת-יְקוּה, וְגַם אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא אֲשַׁלַּח.

And Pharaoh said, "Who is the Lord that I should heed His voice to let Israel out? I do not know the Lord, neither will I let Israel out."

Look at it from God's perspective. What had God asked for? *The Israelites are my rightful servants. Let them celebrate before me in the desert.* But Pharaoh squarely denied that request. He wouldn't allow the Israelites to serve their true master. Instead, he lorded over them as master. **He made a servant out of someone else's servants. That was the second injustice.**

So how does God right that wrong? That's what the bowing down to Moses is all about. It's as if God is saying: *Pharaoh, you didn't let My servants serve Me; you enslaved them to a foreign master. Well, Pharaoh, you too have servants: your servants in the palace. So I will take your rightful servants and make them servants of a foreign master. Moses is going to be their master.*



And finally, the screams. Was there another injustice in the Exodus story, one related to screaming? Well, think back to that first encounter between Moses and Pharaoh:

Exodus 5:6-8

ויצו פרעה, ביום ההוא, את-הנגשים בעם, ואת-שטריו לאמר. לא תאספון לתת תבן לעם, ללבן הלבנים--בתמול שלשם: הם, ילכו, וקששו להם, תבן. ואת-מתכנת הלבנים אשר הם עשים תמול שלשם, תשימו עליהם--לא תגרעו, ממנו: כי-נרפים הם--על-כן הם צעקים לאמר, נלכה נזבחה לאלקינו.

So, on that day, Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people and their officers, saying, “You shall not continue to give straw to the people to make the bricks like yesterday and the day before yesterday. Let them go and gather straw for themselves. But the number of bricks they have been making yesterday and the day before yesterday you shall impose upon them; you shall not reduce it, for they are lax. Therefore they **scream**, saying, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to our God...’”

Pharaoh heard his slaves screaming (*tzo'akim*), pleading to go and celebrate before God in the desert. And he did more than just deny their request to serve their rightful master. *If the Israelites have time to scream, Pharaoh sneered, it must be that they don't have enough work. I'll give them something to keep them busy.* There was a time when the Israelites were provided with straw to make their bricks. But no longer. Now, the Israelites would have to gather their own straw - and still produce just as many bricks as before.



Pharaoh didn't listen to the screams of the Israelite. He dismissed them with a sadistic comment about straw. That was the third injustice. Now, there would be a great scream in Egypt - but that scream would not be heard. Utter silence would resound in the quarters of the Israelites. The terror that Pharaoh inflicted would be inflicted upon him and upon his people.

Indeed, take a look at the language which is used to characterize these screams:

Exodus 11:6

והיתה צעקה גדלה, בכל-ארץ מצרים, אשר במהו לא נהיתה, וכמהו לא תסף.

And there will be a great scream throughout the entire land of Egypt, such as there never has been and such as there shall never be again.

Does that language remind you of anything? What about the concluding phrase, *lo tosif* (“it will not be again”)?

It hints back to the affair with the straw. Pharaoh had said to the taskmasters:

Exodus 11:7

לא תאספון לתת תבן לעם, ללבן הלבנים

You shall not continue to give straw to the people to make the bricks

Lo tofisun, “you shall not continue.” The Israelites were “never again” given straw, and there would “never again” be a scream like that of the Egyptians during the tenth plague. As Pharaoh’s third injustice is repaid, his sneer would come back to haunt him.

The screams of Egypt, the subjugation of Pharaoh’s servants by another master, economic restitution – it all happens in a single moment in the tenth plague. Each aspect is a perfect mirror of the injustice that the Israelites had borne. After all, God is not only supremely powerful, but also supremely precise. Through the plagues, God had demonstrated His precise mastery over the physical world. But it is not just the physical world that He masters. It is also the world of men and their affairs. Here, in the tenth plague, God displays His mastery over *that* world: through justice to the perpetrators, and compassion and freedom for the victims.



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Thanks for understanding - we love you guys, too.

Exodus 11:1-8

שמות יא:א-ח

1 The Lord said to Moses, "I will bring one more plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; afterwards he will let you go from here. When he lets you out, he will completely drive you out of here. 2 Please, speak into the ears of the people, and let them borrow, each man from his neighbor and each woman from her neighbor, silver vessels and golden vessels." 3 So the Lord gave the people favor in the Egyptians' eyes; also the man Moses was highly esteemed in the land of Egypt in the eyes of Pharaoh's servants and in the eyes of the people. 4 Moses said, "So said the Lord, At the dividing point of the night, I will go out into the midst of Egypt, 5 and every firstborn in the land of Egypt will die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the slave woman who is behind the millstones, and every firstborn animal. 6 And there will be a great scream throughout the entire land of Egypt, such as there never has been and such as there shall never be again. 7 But to all the children of Israel, not even a dog will bark against either man or beast, in order that you shall know that the Lord will separate between the Egyptians and between Israel. 8 And all these servants of yours will come down to me and prostrate themselves to me, saying, 'Go out, you and all the people who are at your feet,' and afterwards I will go out." [Then] he [Moses] exited from Pharaoh with burning anger.

א וַיֹּאמֶר יְקוּה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, עוֹד נֹגַע אֶחָד אָבִיא
עַל-פְּרַעֲהוּ וְעַל-מִצְרַיִם--אַחֲרַי-כֵּן, יִשְׁלַח אֶתְכֶם
מִזֶּה: כְּשִׁלְחוֹ--כֹּלָה, גֵּרֶשׁ יִגְרַשׁ אֶתְכֶם מִזֶּה. ב
דַּבֵּר-נָא, בְּאָזְנֵי הָעָם; וְיִשְׁאַלוּ אִישׁ מֵאֵת רֵעֵהוּ,
וְאִשָּׁה מֵאֵת רֵעוּתָהּ, כְּלֵי-כֶסֶף, וְכְלֵי זָהָב. ג וַיִּתֶּן
יְקוּה אֶת-חַן הָעָם, בְּעֵינֵי מִצְרַיִם; גַּם הָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה,
גָּדוֹל מְאֹד בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, בְּעֵינֵי עַבְדֵי-פְרַעֲהוּ, וּבְעֵינֵי
הָעָם. ד וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה, כֹּה אָמַר יְקוּה: כַּחֲצֹת
הַלַּיְלָה, אֲנִי יוֹצֵא בְּתוֹךְ מִצְרַיִם. ה וּמַת כֹּל-בְּכוֹר,
בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם--מִבְּכוֹר פְּרַעֲהוּ הַיֹּשֵׁב עַל-בֶּסֶטָו, עַד
בְּכוֹר הַשִּׁפְחָה אֲשֶׁר אַחַר הָרֹחִים; וְכֹל, בְּכוֹר
בְּהֵמָה. ו וְהִיְתָה צְעָקָה גְדֹלָה, בְּכָל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם,
אֲשֶׁר כָּמֹהוּ לֹא נִהְיְתָה, וְכָמֹהוּ לֹא תִסֶּף. ז וְלִכְלַל בְּנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל, לֹא יִחַרֶץ-כֶּלֶב לְשָׁנוֹ, לְמֵאִישׁ,
וְעַד-בְּהֵמָה--לְמַעַן, תִּדְעוּן, אֲשֶׁר יִפְּלֶה יְקוּה, בֵּין
מִצְרַיִם וּבֵין יִשְׂרָאֵל. ח וַיֵּרְדוּ כָל-עַבְדֵיךָ אֵלַי
וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ-לִי לְאִמּוֹר, צֵא אֶתָּה וְכָל-הָעָם
אֲשֶׁר-בְּרַגְלֶיךָ, וְאַחֲרַי-כֵּן, אֲצֵא; וַיֵּצֵא מֵעַם-פְּרַעֲהוּ,
בְּחָרִי-אָף.

Exodus 5:1-8

שמות ה:א-ח

1 And afterwards, Moses and Aaron came and said to Pharaoh, "So said the Lord God of Israel, 'Send out My people, and let them sacrifice to Me in the desert.'" **2** And Pharaoh said, "Who is the Lord that I should heed His voice to let Israel out? I do not know the Lord, neither will I let Israel out." **3** And they said, "The God of the Hebrews has happened upon us. Now let us go on a three day journey in the desert and sacrifice to the Lord our God, lest He strike us with a plague or with the sword." **4** But the king of Egypt said to them, "Why, Moses and Aaron, do you disturb the people from their work? Go to your own labors." **5** And Pharaoh said, "Behold, now the people of the land are many, and you are stopping them from their labors." **6** So, on that day, Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people and their officers, saying, **7** "You shall not continue to give straw to the people to make the bricks like yesterday and the day before yesterday. Let them go and gather straw for themselves. **8** But the number of bricks they have been making yesterday and the day before yesterday you shall impose upon them; you shall not reduce it, for they are lax. Therefore they cry out, saying, 'Let us go and sacrifice to our God.'

א וְאַחַר, בָּאוּ מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן, וַיֹּאמְרוּ, אֶל-פַּרְעֹה: כֹּה-אָמַר יְקוּה, אֱלֹקֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, שְׁלַח אֶת-עַמִּי, וַיַּחֲגֹּו לִי בַמִּדְבָּר. **ב** וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה--מִי יְקוּה אֲשֶׁר אֲשַׁמַּע בְּקִלּוֹ, לְשַׁלַּח אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל: לֹא יָדַעְתִּי אֶת-יְקוּה, וְגַם אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא אֲשַׁלַּח. **ג** וַיֹּאמְרוּ, אֱלֹקֵי הָעִבְרִים נִקְרָא עָלֵינוּ; נִלְכָּה נָא דֶרֶךְ שְׁלִשֵׁת יָמִים בַּמִּדְבָּר, וְנִזְבַּחַה לַיְקוּה אֱלֹקֵינוּ--פֶּן-יִפְגַּעֲנֵנוּ, בַּדָּבָר אוֹ בַחֶרֶב. **ד** וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם, מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם, לָמָּה מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן, תִּפְרִיעוּ אֶת-הָעַם מִמַּעֲשֵׂיו; לָכוּ, לְסַבְּלֵתֵיכֶם. **ה** וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה, הֵן-רַבִּים עִתָּה עִם הָאָרֶץ; וְהִשְׁבַּתְתֶּם אֹתָם, מִסַּבְּלֵתָם. **ו** וַיִּצֹו פַּרְעֹה, בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא, אֶת-הַנְּגִשִׁים בְּעַם, וְאֶת-שֹׁטְרֵיו לֵאמֹר. **ז** לֹא תֵאסְפוּן לָתֵת תְּבֹן לָעַם, לְלַבֵּן הַלְּבָנִים--בְּתַמּוּל שְׁלֶשֶׁם: הֵם, יִלְכוּ, וְקִשְׁשׁוּ לָהֶם, תְּבֹן. **ח** וְאֶת-מִתְכַנֵּת הַלְּבָנִים אֲשֶׁר הֵם עֹשִׂים תַּמּוּל שְׁלֶשֶׁם, תִּשְׁיִמוּ עֲלֵיהֶם--לֹא תִגְרַעוּ, מִמֶּנּוּ: כִּי-נִרְפִים הֵם--עַל-כֵּן הֵם צֹעְקִים לֵאמֹר, נִלְכָּה נִזְבַּחַה לַאֱלֹקֵינוּ.