

Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

VA'EIRA

G-d said to Moshe: ... Go to Par'o in the morning; behold he is going down to the water. Meet him on the banks of the river. Tell him that G-d... said: 'Let my people go'... The water... that I shall strike shall turn into blood' (7:14-17).

Thus the Torah opens its record of the Ten Plagues, with which G-d struck Par'o and the Egyptians before Israel's final release from the land of bondage.

With the first plague, blood, Moshe warned Par'o in private to 'let my people go'; on his early morning walk. With the second, frogs, Moshe was to give the same warning, but this time to 'come to Par'oh' (7:26). To his palace, in front of his courtiers (c.f. 10:7). And with the third, lice, as the Rashbam emphasizes, there was no warning at all. Moshe brought on the plague without saying anything to Par'o, or even meeting him. And that plague did not affect his mere environment, but the Egyptians and no doubt Par'o himself: bodily, physically, and painfully.

This cycle repeats itself with the fourth plague, wild animals. Again, Moshe warned Par'o in private to 'let my people go'. As ineffective, despite the plague, he brought on the fifth

plague, pestilence, to Par'o by 'coming to Par'o': once more, in his home, in company. With the boils, the sixth plague, like the third, as the Rashbam points out, there was no warning. Just like the lice, the boils affected the Egyptians: bodily, physically, and painfully and again, no doubt Par'o himself.

And then the cycle went over one final time. With the seventh plague, hail, Moshe warned Par'o in private. With the eighth, locusts (next week's sedra), the warning was delivered in front of Par'oh's courtiers who this time actually tried to persuade Par'o to let the people go. He didn't listen. And the ninth, like the third and the sixth, extreme darkness struck without warning, derailing all movements and activities and no doubt those of Par'o himself.

R. Ze'ev Zechariah Breuer (Si'ach HaShulchan) comments on this pattern. He writes that the three parts of the cycle are to teach people the following. A teacher sees a student doing something wrong, something that very much affects the wellbeing of the class. For example a student spreads malicious rumours about others. First he should warn him in private. If there is no improvement and he has no alternative, he should warn him in front of his classmates. And if there is no progress whatsoever, he should punish him.

This idea may be extended further. Even if the student is punished a first time, the teacher should not reject him entirely. He should start the cycle again. The fourth time should be a warning in private, bearing in mind the severity of the previous punishment. Perhaps he finally might get it. If that doesn't work, the penny might drop after a more public caution. Or being actually punished on the sixth occasion...

Or he might even 'get it' at some point on the third cycle...

But so far and no further. If that cycle has repeated itself three times and there is no perceptible signs of progress in the errant student coming to terms with the errors of his ways, on the tenth occasion (represented by the tenth plague - the ultimate killing of the firstborn), the axe falls. The aberrant student has reached the end of the road...

Which gives an insight into R. Yehuda's mnemonic, placing the three cycles into those particular three groups: D'TZACH, ADASH, B'ACHAV. 📖