

D'var Torah for Parshat Vaeira
January 1, 2022; Congregation Sinai, San Jose, CA
Doug Brook

For the record, I'm calling this my first Rosh Hashanah sermon. Not because it's January 1st, but because I'll need a day of atonement ten days from now.

As it happens, the last dvar Torah I did was this same parshah, two weeks shy of a year ago. But I'm *good* with talking about the same parshah two years in a row.

Every year, I ask my students why we read the Torah over and over again, year after year. I then ask my students' blank faces if they've ever seen a movie more than once. They all say yes. I then ask if they noticed anything different in the second viewing. They all say yes. That's because there's always something new for us to find, whether it's because we know what's coming so we notice other things, or because we're in a different place in life than last time, whether being a different age or having new experiences. That's why we read the Torah over and over again, year after year. To find new things, new relevancies to our *current* lives.

As nearly a couple of you might remember, I said those exact words last time. They're still true. In recent years, I've heard a tenet of teaching that students need to hear something eight times to truly learn it. Also, that if students hear something eight times they'll learn it better. Not to mention that true learning comes from hearing something eight times. But I think we're disproving that today because, later today, you're going to still be thinking "thank god he didn't say that eight-times thing all eight times." Though I guess that right there would count as a fourth.

But, again, hearing the parshah every year is not (necessarily) about hearing *the same exact lesson* over and over again. It's about re-exploring it, finding new things that speak to us and our lives today. And if we can do it with movies or books or sports or, heavens forbid, politics... why not with the core of our people that's somehow been relevant enough to last thousands of years, and bring each of us to here today.

I like to talk about what I call the Talmud of Everything. By that I mean that everyone engages in Talmudic-like discourse. They just don't realize it. Whether it's Harry Potter, Star Wars, baseball, Shakespeare, whatever... everyone has something into which they immerse themselves and explore, debate, and even argue. In the Talmud, rabbinic opinions are pulled together into a debate about trying to explain inconsistencies in the Torah – like why the Ten Commandments are worded a little differently in Exodus and Deuteronomy. How is that different than the contortions of Star Wars fans to rationalize why Leia kissed Luke like that early in The Empire Strikes Back despite finding out in the next film – spoiler alert – that they're brother and sister? Ew. And fans coming up with off-screen backstory to explain things that happening on-screen... how is that different than the rabbis coming up with Midrash like Abraham smashing his father's idols or baby Moses and the burning plate of coal?

The Talmud is the original retcon. (That's retroactive continuity – coming up with something after the fact to explain away things like this.) We do it for the Torah just like we do it for Shakespeare or a galaxy far far away. And it's no different. Star Wars fans watch over a dozen films, several TV series – usually multiple times – so that they can

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truly explore these things. Is that any different than reading the Torah over and over again each year? Just like Star Wars, the Torah has huge special effects like the flood, the desert swallowing Korach's followers, the burning bush, the parting of the Sea of Reeds, and... the ten plagues.

Which brings us back to today's parshah, Va'eira, in which we hear about the first seven plagues. And since today is the premiere of 2020: Episode Three, it's not a stretch to assert that plagues are relevant today.

This parsha begins with the Big G appearing to Moses and telling him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. They go through the familiar moments of Moses being slow of speech and slow of tongue, of Aaron going with him to Pharaoh, staffs changing into serpents, and several other scenes the Torah adapted from Cecil B. DeMille's film. And then the plagues.

The Torah recounts these events focusing on the leaders. Moses, Aaron, Pharaoh and Pharaoh's staff. What about everyone else? What about us? What was it like for John Q. Egyptian to be watching all this happen, and to be the one suffering from the consequences the most?

Well, the haftarah today was from Ezekiel – 700 years after the Exodus from Egypt. To us, this he's ancient – over 2500 years ago. But really that gap between us and Ezekiel is only 3.5 times longer than the gap between him and the Exodus. It's not as far back as we think. And Ezekiel was doing exactly what we're doing now: tying something from the Torah into current events. The haftarah always has some connection to the Torah reading, and in this one he recounts the exodus from Egypt and ties it in to issues with Egypt in his day. Current for him was 2500 years ago, ancient to us. 500 years from now, what *we* say today will be ancient to them. So, how is it any different?

Context is everything. Like how today we think “an eye for an eye” is distastefully vengeful, but in the context of the Torah's time it was progressive. Back then, revenge was like what Rodney Dangerfield says in Back to School “at my high school, after they tackled the quarterback they went after his family.” The Torah saying an eye for an eye was progressive and pacifistic compared to common practice in that era, where revenge for any action often entailed a much-bigger-than equal reaction. The Torah doesn't say “only” an eye for an eye because in its time that meaning was understood and obvious. Again, what we see today as arcane and backward was progressive in its time, just like how what we think is progressive today will seem arcane when Buck Rogers returns to earth five hundred years from now.

With all this in mind, let's consider the ten plagues. Not from the perspective of the leaders, but of the everyday Egyptian – trying to go about his life while hardships settle in. To do this, let's consider what the diary of an ancient Egyptian might have sounded like. Let's call him Fred. If you followed closely a few minutes ago, you'll notice that a lot of what you're about to hear aligns with how today's Torah reading described the plagues. I'll point out a few of those moments. Here's Fred's first entry.

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“We should have seen this coming. We’d heard the early reports. Staffs being turned into serpents and eating each other. But we were told it was no big deal. It’s just an isolated thing, doesn’t affect the populace as a whole. Go on with your lives.

Then before we know it the entire Nile River has turned to blood. Everyone’s panicking. All the water is unusable. The fish in the river have all died. Everyone’s running around trying to stock up on the essentials – even digging around the Nile for water (yes, verse 24 actually says it) – everyone’s desperate because nobody knows how long this might last, or what might come next. It might end up being a few weeks, even.

But again we’re being told it’s no big deal. Apparently Pharaoh’s people understand it and are able to reproduce it, so they say they have it under control and there’s nothing to worry about.”

Then there’s Fred’s entry a week later.

“Okay, now it’s been seven days and the Nile is still blood red. And it doesn’t smell good, anywhere. (That’s all in the verses.) It seems like it’s starting to return to normal, that this was just a week or so of inconvenience in the late winter.

But now there are frogs. Everywhere. We can’t go anywhere. They’re even in our houses, bedrooms, our beds, our OVENS (again, this is real, verse 28). With the blood, Pharaoh just shrugged and walked away. This time he apparently asked for a little help in eradicating the frogs. He said something about how this isn’t originating from us, but from some other people from someplace else, some of whom live and work among us. His people are calling it an Israelite plague. They’re apparently gathering the frogs together, isolating them from the rest of us. But we can still smell them – it’s in the air everywhere and no place feels safe.”

Then, the next day Fred wrote:

“No sooner are the frogs gone, but now there’s lice everywhere. As we know, it’s so easily transmissible from one person to the next. Everyone’s at risk of exposure. We all have to keep a safe distance from each other. They’re talking about wearing special head coverings to mask our hair, but there’s debate about how effective that is. Some are refusing to do it. Everyone has to stay at home or risk it spreading to them.

The palace is still trying to downplay this whole thing. Saying that while a lot of people might be catching the lice, most of them can recover pretty quickly and only a relatively small number might die from it. Still, that’s not very reassuring.

It’s leaked out that some of Pharaoh’s people think this is worse than we’re hearing. For the blood and the frogs, apparently his advisors could keep up with it – they seemed like they were a match for it. But apparently with this one they can’t keep up. This doesn’t seem like something that’ll be just a couple of weeks after all, despite assurances that it will just go away... like a miracle. It does seem like it takes a miracle to make each wave of this go away.”

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Almost immediately after that, Fred wrote:

“Well, the rate of people having lice is slowing down some but it certainly hasn’t stopped, and as people were trying to return to normal life, now already the next wave has hit us. All kinds of beasts are flooding in everywhere, throughout the country. It doesn’t matter who you are or where you are, nobody’s safe.

It sounds like Pharaoh might be starting to acknowledge there’s a big issue here. He seems ready to let Moses take his people out to worship for a few days, as long as they’ll return. I don’t know what this might do to help us stop wave after wave of plague afflicting us, and it’ll cause a worker shortage for however long it is until they return, but I guess Pharaoh is trying to drum up all kinds of alternative treatments for current conditions.”

But before the dust settles from the stampeding herds, Fred relates:

“What’s worse than animals everywhere? Animals everywhere that suddenly have some kind of widespread disease. Everyone’s quarantining themselves however much they can. People can’t go work, or don’t want to. Between the impact of the water issues, then the frogs, everyone getting lice, and now being flooded by animals that are now diseased, there are shortages of so many things. Including patience, on Pharaoh’s part. Maybe that means they’ll finally take some radical steps to stop this thing.”

Fred’s next entry shows that the waves of plagues wouldn’t stop at five:

“So, a lot of people had stocked up on what they needed and didn’t go out much, so everyone who’s still alive got away with thinking this was no big deal. It hasn’t really affected them directly – the only way they got sick is that they got sick of not going out and living normal life. I guess their short memories forgot about the lice affecting so many people. But now they’re all boiling mad because suddenly they’ve all got boils.

And this time even a bunch of Pharaoh’s staff was afflicted and couldn’t show up to work. (Really, that one’s in verse 11.) People are even starting to worry about longterm effects from this plague, not just on society, supplies, and all that. But even long impact on health, like the boils leaving scars.”

And then on the next day Fred said...

“I’d heard it was going to rain. That sounded great, it could soothe these boils, wash away the stench and remnants of all these waves of plague. Let nature wipe it out and keep it to a seasonal thing. But then the rain came – it was raining hail onto the entire country. And it’s not like any hail we’ve ever seen; it’s heavy and with fire flaming inside of it (verse 24). Will this never end?

We’re in full-on quarantine now. At least, we’re supposed to be. Lots of people insist that the wave after wave of this plague isn’t real at all. They’re in denial, and I don’t mean the

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Nile river because it's still kind of nasty. But they probably won't be in denial for long, if they decide to go outside just out of spite. Because anyone who goes out gets struck with the hail, and dies. (Another real item, verse 19.) The hail is destroying all the vegetation, all the trees. (Verse 25.) The flax, the barley (verse 31). So there are even more supply issues now. There's a simple solution. It's the right thing to do. Why is anyone resisting doing it? If it'll solve all this, let the Israelites go already."

But as we all know, and Fred would soon find out, Pharaoh once again changed his mind and tried to act like nothing needed to change.

And that's where this week's parsha ends – a great cliffhanger going into next week, second only to the suspense in Genesis a month ago where the parsha ended right before the Benjamin Calypso number in Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.

That all might have sounded like it was gratuitously trying to sound like today. But, was it really? Vernacular notwithstanding, it really does align with the bits the Torah gives us about the first seven plagues. And it's no different than any midrash that tries to fill in the gaps between the lines. It's not much different than what Ezekiel did to tie in with what was happening in his day.

Last year when I did the drash for this parsha, the Alabama Crimson Tide had just won its 18th national championship. Yesterday, they won this year's semifinal in the Cotton Bowl and, Big G willing, just might win it all again a week from Monday.

Last year I mentioned that to lead in to a summation about Process, how it's more about how we prepare and live every day, and that if you do that well enough the results take care of themselves. I won't go through it all again, you can read it again online. This time I mention it because we're in a world of instant gratification. Of impatience. Impatience with a waiter. Or a tech support person. Or a person in line ahead of us. Or potentially anyone in a given moment. A world where we increasingly lack recognition of how it takes time to understand things, and how understandings can evolve. And how the things we need to do, even just to survive, can change as they evolve over time. And even mistakes can be made along the way.

But that doesn't mean we should stop trusting the process. It's not about the mistakes we make, but how we heal from them. Pharaoh didn't learn from his mistakes, plague after plague after plague times ten. Even at ten, he changed his mind one more time and ended up taking his army on a day trip to the local wave pool.

The plague we live with now – and it's not a stretch to call it one – is about to enter year three. All ten plagues combined lasted a few weeks, just a fraction as long. Three thousand years later, we're letting wave after wave of one plague last exponentially longer than ten plagues did back then. And back then, ending it was beyond most people's control; this time, we absolutely have the means to end it ourselves. So, in our allegedly advanced enlightened society, one plague we are equipped to stop has lasted

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exceedingly longer than ten plagues they had no control to stop. Perhaps there's more we can learn from the Torah after all.

Shabbat Shalom. And Roll Tide.

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