

5785 - Exodus 6-9 - Va'eira (And I appeared)

THE RED NILE¹

Moses and Aaron did so, as G-d had commanded. [Aaron] raised the staff and struck the water that was in the Nile, before the eyes of Pharaoh and before the eyes of his servants; and all the water that was in the Nile turned into blood (Exodus 7:20).

On the most basic level, the Ten Plagues were brought upon the Egyptians to punish them for their cruelty and to force Pharaoh to free the Children of Israel. But they also had a far more significant function.

The purpose of the Exodus was not only to get the Children of Israel out of Egypt but also, and more importantly, to get the Egypt out of the Israelites. Four generations of servitude to the pagan culture of Egypt had enslaved the Jews in soul as well as in body. For Israel to become a free people in the true sense of the word, they had to divest themselves of their spiritual subjugation to the idols and debased mores of their Egyptian taskmasters.

The plagues were thus directed to the Children of Israel as much as they were to the Egyptians. They came not only to punish and threaten Pharaoh and his henchmen, **but also to crush the icons of Egyptian culture, to expose the fallacy of the very soul of Egypt in the eyes and minds of its Hebrew slaves.**

Thus, the very first plague was directed against the Nile, turning its waters to blood. The Nile was the very backbone of Egypt, the mainstay of its economy, its arch idol, its most dependable god. **During the flood season the Nile would overflow its banks, filling a network of canals and irrigating the fields and orchards of Egypt.** It was the source of all sustenance in this rainless land.

The farmer who depends on rainfall to water his seedlings is forever aware of his dependence on forces beyond his control, forever lifting his eyes heavenward in hopeful prayer. But **the Nile-sustained society of Egypt, which trusted in a river-god whose waters rise with seasonal clockwork,** was a society in which the self reigned supreme—a society which arrogantly rejected the very notion of a Supreme Authority, a binding morality, or a higher purpose to life.

FREEDOM AS SERVITUDE, SERVITUDE AS FREEDOM

Such a society, supposedly free of all constraint and responsibility, is a society enslaved to the most base and animal elements of human nature. The Exodus came to liberate the people of Israel from this pagan mentality, to free them from this servitude to the temporal and the mundane.

The purpose of the Exodus was to bring the Children of Israel to Mount Sinai, where the slavery in the guise of freedom of Egypt was replaced by a commitment to be servants of G-d—a **servitude which, in truth, is the ultimate spiritual emancipation.** A life that is faithful to the divine purpose in creation releases the soul from the strictures of the material and enables it to realize its higher, noteworthy potentials. The fulfillment of G-d's will, as expressed in the edicts of the Torah, is the means, and only means, by which the human being can reach beyond the inherent limitations of his or her own existence and connect to their infinite and all-pervading Source and Creator.

So, when the time came for Israel to be redeemed, the first thing the Almighty did was to destroy the Nile before their eyes. Its unfaltering waters turned to blood, shattering the illusion of Egypt's faith in its self-sufficiency and exposing the lie in the "freedom" of its corporeal life.

THE WARMTH OF LIFE

The fact that the Nile was discredited by its waters turning to blood is also significant. This represents another aspect of the transformation that the people of Israel had to undergo in their spiritual exodus from Egypt to Sinai.

Rabbi Shalom DovBer² of Lubavitch once said:

Between coldness and heresy stands an extremely thin wall. The Torah states that, "G-d your G-d is a consuming fire (Deu 9:3). G-dliness is a blazing flame. Anything G-dly and holy is warm, vibrant, fervently alive.

Water is the antithesis of the vibrancy of spirituality: cold, damp, and still. The waters of the Nile characterized the coldness and apathy of Egypt's self-worship and apostasy. Blood represents the warmth and throb of life. So with the first plague, the waters of the Nile were transformed into blood. This was the first step in Israel's redemption, the first step in the process to extricate them from the spiritual frigidity of Egypt and ignite in them the fervor of life—life as ultimately defined by the verse, "You who cleave to G-d are alive" (Deu 4:4).

1. *The purpose of the Exodus was not only to get the Children of Israel out of Egypt but also, **and more importantly,** to get the Egypt out of the Israelites.*

a. Exodus 20:1-6

¹And God spoke all these words: 1) ²"I am the LORD your God, who

2 Sholom Dovber Schneersohn (1860–1920) was the fifth rebbe (spiritual leader) of the Chabad-Lubavitch chasidic movement. He is known as "the Rebbe *Rashab*" (for Reb Sholom Ber). His teachings that encouraged outreach were further developed later.

1 Yanki Tauber, *The Inside Story, Exodus*, (Meaningful Life Center), pp. 58-60.

brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

2) ³"**You shall have no other gods before me.**

⁴"**You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.** ⁵**You shall not bow down to them or worship them;** for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

3) ⁷"You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

- 1) In its simplest formulation, idolatry is the worship of gods (or natural phenomena) **in place of the one God who created the world, redeemed the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, and revealed the Torah on Mount Sinai.** The prohibition includes the worship of celestial bodies or other natural phenomena, people, inanimate objects or foreign gods, as well as worshipping God in the manner in which idols were worshipped, which according to some biblical passages featured child sacrifice and prostitution. It is likewise forbidden to make any object of divine worship, even if it is merely for decoration.³
- 2) The seven Noahide laws as traditionally enumerated in the Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 56a-b and Tosefta *Avodah Zarah* 9:4, are the following: 1) **Not to worship idols** ...
- 3) All the various forms of modern idolatry have one thing at their core: **self**. Most of the world no longer explicitly bows down to idols and images. Instead, **we worship at the altar of the god of self**. This brand of modern idolatry takes various forms.⁴

First, we worship at the altar of **materialism** which feeds our need to build our egos through the acquisition of more "stuff." Our homes are filled with all manner of possessions. We build bigger and bigger houses with more closets and storage space in order to house all the things we buy, much of which we haven't even paid for yet. Most of our stuff has "planned obsolescence" built into it, making it useless in no time, and so we consign it to the garage or other storage space. Then we rush out to buy the newest item, garment or gadget and the whole process starts over ...

Second, we worship at the altar of **our own pride and ego**. This often takes the form of obsession with careers and jobs. Millions of men—and increasingly more women—spend 60-80 hours a week working. This often takes the form of obsession with careers and jobs. Even on the weekends and during vacations, our laptops are humming and our minds are whirling with thoughts of how to make our businesses more successful, how to get that promotion, how to get the next raise, how to close the next deal. In the meantime, our children are starving for attention and love. We fool ourselves into thinking we are doing it for them, to give them a better life. But the truth is we are doing it for ourselves, to increase our self-esteem by appearing more successful in the eyes of the world ...

Third, we idolize **mankind** through naturalism and the power of science. **We cling to the illusion that we are lords of our world** and build our self-esteem to godlike proportions. We reject God's Word and His description of how He created the heavens and the earth ...

Finally, and perhaps most destructively, we worship at the altar of **self-aggrandizement** or **the fulfillment of the self to the exclusion of all others and their needs and desires**. This manifests itself in self-indulgence through alcohol, drugs, sexual sins, and food. Those in affluent countries have unlimited access to alcohol, drugs (prescription drug use is at an all-time high, even among children), and food. Obesity rates in the U.S. have skyrocketed, and childhood diabetes brought on by over-eating is epidemic. The self-control we so desperately need is spurned in our insatiable desire to eat, drink, and medicate more and more ...

All idolatry of self has at its core the three lusts found in 1John 2:16: "For all that is in the world, **the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life**, is not of the Father, but is of the world."

b. Genesis 13:8-12

⁸So Abram said to Lot, "Let's not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herders and mine, for we are close relatives. ⁹Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company. **If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left.**" ¹⁰Lot looked around and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan toward Zoar was well watered, **like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt**. (This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) ¹¹So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east. The two men parted com-

³ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/idolatry-the-ultimate-betrayal-of-god/>

⁴ <https://www.gotquestions.org/idolatry-modern.html>

pany: ¹²Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom.

1) Genesis 13:1-2

¹So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, with his wife and everything he had, and Lot went with him.

²**Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold.**

2) PHE De Abrahamo (Philo,⁵ On Abraham)1:209

Abraham, being rich above most men in abundance of gold and silver, and having numerous herds of cattle and flocks of sheep, and being equal in his affluence and abundance to any of the men of the country, or of the original inhabitants, who were the most wealthy, and being, in fact, richer than any sojourner could be expected to be, was never unpopular with any of the people among whom he was dwelling, but was continually praised and beloved by all who had any acquaintance with him;

c. Jeremiah 35:15

¹⁵Again and again I sent all my servants the prophets to you. They said, "Each of you must turn from your wicked ways and reform your actions; **do not follow other gods to serve them**. Then you will live in the land I have given to you and your ancestors." **But you have not paid attention or listened to me.**

d. 1 Corinthians 10:14

¹⁴Therefore, my dear friends, **flee from idolatry**.

2. *The plagues were thus directed to the Children of Israel as much as they were to the Egyptians. They came not only to punish and threaten Pharaoh and his henchmen, but also to crush the icons of Egyptian culture, to expose the fallacy of the very soul of Egypt in the eyes and minds of its Hebrew slaves.*

a. Isaiah 31:3

³But **the Egyptians are mere mortals and not God**; their horses are flesh and not spirit. When the LORD stretches out his hand, those who help will stumble, those who are helped will fall; all will perish together.

b. Psalms 9:16-20

¹⁶The LORD is known by his acts of justice; **the wicked are ensnared by the work of their hands**. ¹⁷**The wicked go down to the realm of the dead**, all the nations that forget God. ¹⁸But God will never forget the needy; the hope of the afflicted will never perish.

¹⁹Arise, LORD, do not let mortals triumph; let the nations be judged in your presence. ²⁰Strike them with terror, LORD; let the nations know they are only mortal.

c. Romans 1:18-23

¹⁸The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. ²¹For although **they knew God**, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²²Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³and **exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles**.

3. *But the Nile-sustained society of Egypt, which trusted in a river-god whose waters rise with seasonal clockwork, was a society in which the self reigned supreme—a society which arrogantly rejected the very notion of a Supreme Authority, a binding morality, or a higher purpose to life.*

a. Luke 12:13-21

¹³Someone in the crowd said to (Yeshua), "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." ¹⁴Yeshua replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" ¹⁵Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions." ¹⁶And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. ¹⁷He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? **I have no place to store my crops**.'" ¹⁸Then he said, "This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and **there I will store my surplus grain**." ¹⁹And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." ²⁰But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" ²¹**This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.**"

1) The "rich man" did have a place to store his crops, "I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones" (v. 18)—but of course, that wasn't the problem—he didn't consider (or care) what Ha-Shem may have wanted him to do with the excess. **When is enough, enough?**

⁵ Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BCE–c. 50 CE), also called Philō Judæus, was a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher who lived in Alexandria, in the Roman province of Egypt.

4. *The purpose of the Exodus was to bring the Children of Israel to Mount Sinai, where the slavery in the guise of freedom of Egypt was replaced by a commitment to be servants of G-d—a servitude which, in truth, is the ultimate spiritual emancipation.*

a. Exodus 8:20

²⁰Then the LORD said to Moses, "Get up early in the morning and confront Pharaoh as he goes to the river and say to him, "This is what the LORD says: Let my people go, **so that they may worship me.**

1) עָבַד (*avad*)—work, serve, worship.

a) Worship—reverence offered a divine being or supernatural power, also: an act of expressing such reverence. Extravagant respect or admiration for or devotion to an object of esteem.⁶

b. Luke 4:5-8

⁵The devil led (Yeshua) up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. ⁷If you worship me, it will all be yours." ⁸Yeshua answered, "**It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only'**" (Deu 6:13).

c. Romans 7:21-25

²¹So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²²For **in my inner being I delight in God's law;** ²³but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. ²⁴What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? ²⁵Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Yeshua the Messiah our Lord! So then, I myself **in my mind (heart) am a slave to God's law**, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.

d. 2Timothy 1:2-4

²To Timothy, my dear son: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Messiah Yeshua our Lord.

³I thank God, **whom I serve, as my ancestors did**, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. ⁴Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy.

5. *The fulfillment of G-d's will, as expressed in the edicts of the Torah, is the means, and only means, by which the human being can reach beyond the inherent limitations of his or her own existence and connect to their infinite and all-pervading Source and Creator.*

a. Ecclesiastes 12:13

¹³Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for **this is the duty of all mankind.**

b. Daniel 9:3-19

³So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting ... ⁴I prayed to the LORD my God and confessed: "Lord, the great and awesome God, **who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments,** ⁵**we have sinned and done wrong.** We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. ⁶We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes and our ancestors, and to all the people of the land. ⁷"Lord, you are righteous, but this day we are covered with shame—the people of Judah ... and all Israel ... in all the countries where you have scattered us because of our unfaithfulness to you. ⁸We and our kings, our princes and our ancestors are covered with shame, LORD, because we have sinned against you. ⁹**The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him;** ¹⁰we have not obeyed the LORD our God ... ¹¹All Israel has transgressed your law and turned away, refusing to obey you. "Therefore the curses and sworn judgments written in the Law of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured out on us, because we have sinned against you. ¹²You have fulfilled the words spoken against us ... ¹³Just as it is written in the Law of Moses, all this disaster has come on us, yet we have not sought the favor of the LORD our God by turning from our sins and giving attention to your truth. ¹⁴The LORD did not hesitate to bring the disaster on us, for the LORD our God is righteous in everything he does; yet we have not obeyed him. ¹⁵"Now, Lord our God, who brought your people out of Egypt with a mighty hand and who made for yourself a name that endures to this day, we have sinned, we have done wrong. ¹⁶Lord, in keeping with all your righteous acts, turn away your anger and your wrath from Jerusalem, your city, your holy hill. Our sins and the iniquities of our ancestors have made Jerusalem and your people an object of scorn to all those around us. ¹⁷"Now, our God, hear the prayers and petitions of your servant. **For your sake, Lord, look with favor on your desolate sanctuary.** ¹⁸Give ear, our God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. **We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy.** ¹⁹Lord, listen! Lord, forgive! Lord, hear and act! For your sake, my God, do not delay, because **your city and your people bear your Name."**

⁶ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/worship>