

Dear Chavraya,

Pouring off drops of wine with the recitation of the ten plagues at the Pesach Seder is a familiar ritual. Ironically, what should be a powerful opportunity for moral wrestling often becomes a moment of levity. The very idea of dripping wine, especially if using one's finger, onto the plates of a festively set table is so out of the usual and counter-intuitive, it is hard for people not to comment on and laugh about. Equally problematic is the absence of the plagues from some *haggadahs*, left out as an expression of moral repugnance at the harm brought to so many innocent Egyptians, especially with the killing of the first born in the fearsome tenth plague. Both in their absence and in their humorous recitation, the opportunity to confront the violence of the plagues is lost. While satisfying one pedagogic element of the Seder, engaging children, such props as plastic frogs and locusts obscure the teachable moment of what it means to feel the pain of others, even our enemies.

Well before we arrive at the Pesach Seder, we have opportunity to wrestle with the ten plagues in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Va'era*, the source from which they come to the *Haggadah*. As with all of Torah, so the plagues too offer a context in which to wrestle with the moral challenges of our own world and with our responses to them. In approaching a particular incident or apparently time-bound instruction in the Torah, we need to always ask the question that appears in Chassidic commentary, *mah ha'netzchi'yut/what is eternal?* What the question really means is, how does this incident apply to us? Not meant to be read simply as history, we approach the Torah as living word, an ever in the present guide to life, *Torat Chayyim/living Torah, Torah of life*. The question, *mah ha'netzchi'yut*, therefore, comes with an assumption -- of course it applies to us! Our task is to search out how.

Wrestling with the ten plagues as we encounter them in the Torah, we come to the Seder better prepared to engage the hard questions, and through the gateway of Pesach to take our place in bringing the ultimate redemption. I am drawn to two essential lessons that emerge from the presence of the ten plagues in both the Torah and in the *Haggadah*. Highlighted by the ritual act of pouring off a drop of wine with the recitation of each of the plagues, we are meant to see the sacredness of all life. A full cup indicates complete joy, but our joy upon liberation is diminished due to the suffering of the Egyptians. As the rabbis taught, we are not to gloat at the downfall of our enemies. As we follow the unfolding of the first six plagues in this week's Torah portion, we are meant to feel uncomfortable, to struggle. That is what God wants and waits for. The true test of our response is when we go out into the world, so full of violence and the degradation of human life.

On one hand, we respond to the plagues as the slaves. We are *b'nei Yisra'el*, the children of Israel. Seeing the brutality of those who oppress, our selves and others, can we also see a hint of humanity, the hidden image of God? Easily avoided, so too we are meant to see our selves as the oppressor, to learn as well from the ways of Pharaoh. Hardly meant to see ourselves as evil, do we yet have

the courage to ask, what are the ways that I cause hurt to others and am I willing to soften my heart and change?

One of the hard moral questions in regard to the ten plagues is that of free will. The common reading and understanding of the plagues is that God hardened Pharaoh's heart right from the beginning. With a careful reading of the Hebrew, or with the use of an honest translation, we come to see that through the first five, and possibly six plagues, it is not God that hardened Pharaoh's heart, but Pharaoh himself. More than diminishing a stark moral tension, the injustice of Pharaoh's lack of choice in the face of such fierce consequence, we are given to look carefully within ourselves, each one to consider the patterns of her or his own life. At the outset of the portion, God says to Moses, "Pharaoh's heart is difficult to move; he refuses to let the people go." Hardening his own heart time after time, Pharaoh enslaves himself to a pattern whose shackles become impossible to break out of, and to which God eventually responds. That is the second essential lesson to be drawn from our engaging with the plagues, harmful patterns calcify over time, to our detriment. As individuals and as nations, patterns that emerge from hardness of heart, come over time to seed destruction.

Responding to the moral challenge of the ten plagues, neither with avoidance nor levity, we have already begun to walk a new path. Just as we can become habituated to patterns that cause harm to our selves and others, so we can become habituated to patterns of good. Of lessons learned that are eternal, may our response to Torah help us to bring the ultimate redemption.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor