

January 19, 2018

This week's teaching is provided by Rabbi Joel Alter, Director of Admissions of The JTS Rabbinical School and H.L. Miller Cantorial School.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Mitch

rabbimitch@templesholom.com

Last week, God pummeled Egypt unprecedentedly with hail:

The LORD sent thunder and hail, and fire streamed down to the ground, as the LORD rained down hail upon the land of Egypt. The hail was very heavy—fire flashing in the midst of the hail—such as had not fallen on the land of Egypt since it had become a nation. (Exod. 9:23-24)

On the combination of fire and ice, Ibn Ezra comments that this was “a wonder within a wonder.”

As this week's portion opens, Moses and Aaron announce:

If you refuse to let My people go, tomorrow I will bring locusts on your territory. They shall cover the surface of the land, so that no one will be able to see the land...something that neither your fathers nor fathers' fathers have seen from the day they appeared on earth to this day. (Exod. 10:4-6)

And so it was. “Locusts invaded all the land of Egypt in a thick mass; never before had there been so many, nor will there ever be so many again” (10:14).

The Torah emphasizes the unprecedented nature of these two plagues. Neither hail nor locusts are miraculous. Naturally, some bouts are more severe than others. But the unique severity of these assaults, *and* their onset and cessation at God's directive, places them beyond the natural order.

Hail and locusts are followed by impenetrable darkness upon Egypt while light shone upon the Israelites. The plagues culminate with the horror of the selective deaths of the firstborn, in which the Israelites shield themselves from danger by smearing blood upon their door posts.

And finally, following the Israelites' release, the great coda of the splitting of the sea. These, the Torah practically shouts, are miracles. Signs of God's power and unbounded sovereignty. Instructive events down through the ages both to Pharaoh (Exod. 7:17) and the Israelites (e.g. Exod. 11:7 and 13:14): to Pharaoh, who sees himself as god and sovereign, and to the Israelites, who through the Exodus are meant to grow out of degradation in servitude to their slave master and into redemptive and sacred service to God.

These cataclysms are what we have in mind when we talk about events on a biblical scale. I'm thinking of historic weather events like Hurricanes Katrina and Harvey. Such storms' enormous scale, destructive force, and fatefulness feel “biblical.”

However, absent the biblical antecedents' will and purpose, catastrophic weather in our day is not miraculous. Fearsome winds or waters are neither orchestrated nor deliberately unleashed. Harvey and other megastorms last summer are, indeed, telling us something, and they feel biblical in scale, but the Torah is after something else when relating its miracles.

As a rabbinical student, I had the privilege to study Bible with Moshe Greenberg, one of the great scholars of Bible of the last century. By the second semester I got up the courage to meet with him privately to ask some questions. “I have no problem,” I began, “that the Torah as written is a human document and I am untroubled that its events are neither historical nor scientific reports. But I don't know what to do with the miracles. Why does the Torah need them? Why does it relate them that way?”

“When one experiences a transformational event in one’s life, it takes on enormous scale,” Greenberg replied. He related that once he was invited to the Johnson White House to sit on a panel of religious scholars. He recalled the awe he felt waiting in the Cabinet Room, overwhelmed by his august surroundings. All of a sudden, in walked President Johnson, a very tall man. Greenberg saw Johnson that day as a giant. Larger than life.

And he recalled, too, watching TV reports of the Freedom Riders in 1961. Greenberg was so moved by the righteousness of their cause and the courage of their journey that the young activists on the screen were, he was sure, the most beautiful men and women he had ever seen.

Whatever the (unknowable) events of the Exodus, Greenberg taught that the Torah’s miracles are animated by a transformational, lived experience of redemption.

I came to understand that the Torah seeks to bestir in me, and in every listener or reader, the Israelites’ leap to faith and fealty that is an explicit aim of the Exodus, but which so famously fails in the desert. “And when, in time to come, your child asks you, saying, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall say to him, ‘It was with a mighty hand that the LORD brought us out from Egypt, the house of bondage” (13:14). It astounds how much weight the Torah places on the telling. What alternative is there? Miracles don’t happen every day.

Or do they? Just before the morning Shema, the Siddur proclaims: “With kindness, You illumine the earth and all who dwell on it; in Your goodness, You renew creation day after day.” Embedded in *Birkhot Hashahar*, we extensively recount the crossing of the sea, and recall it yet again in preparation for the Amidah. By reciting *Mi Kamokha*, “Who is like you, God?” as the Israelites sang out on the far shore of the sea, we embody them. The Siddur challenges us to regard each sunrise as the recreation of the world. And to feel that being awake another morning is no less than the crossing of the sea.

The Torah’s telling of the Exodus is gripping. I experience a chill each time I read, “And Pharaoh rose at night, he and all his servants and all Egypt—and there was a great outcry in Egypt; for there was no household in which there was no dead” (12:30). Those miracles pulse with every telling.

But upon the first wakeful breath of every morning, to inhale hope from God’s love, and to exhale with wonder over renewed creation? Every day? To feel the exhilaration of redemption daily? These are the challenges of the religious life. Breaking through to gratitude is miraculous. Plain and simple.