

Thoughts On The Parashah

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Although we praise God for redeeming the Israelites with ten plagues, they were not necessarily supernatural events. One theory, first proposed by a Dutch scholar named Greta Hort in 1957, describes how at least the first nine plagues could be explained according to the laws of nature.

The Nile River is fed by melting snow and summer rains from Ethiopia carrying sediment from tropical red earth. During the plagues, an abnormally heavy rainfall brought in far more sediment than usual. The higher rise of the river brought more bacteria from mountain lakes, killing fish and producing a stench. While the Nile was filled with sediment, digging around would enable the Egyptians to obtain potable water (see Exodus 7:24). Eventually, the Nile would wash the sediment out to the sea, which explains why Pharaoh was so unconcerned and why the plague ended by itself. An ancient Egyptian text dated at latest to 2050 B.C.E., long before the exodus, describes a similar phenomenon: "Why really, the River [Nile] is blood. If one drinks of it, one rejects (it) as human and thirsts for water."

Because of the stench from the dead fish, frogs left the river earlier than usual. The dead fish would have been the source of infection carried by insects, so the frogs would die en masse. After the first two plagues, lice or mosquitoes would have multiplied astronomically.

Stable flies are vicious blood sucking insects that multiply in tropical or subtropical conditions. Israelites lived in Goshen which has a Mediterranean climate. *Arov* (swarms) is the first plague where the Torah explicitly says that the Israelites were not affected.

Contaminated by rotting frogs, the soil became a breeding ground for disease, probably anthrax. Again, Goshen would be unaffected. Anthrax was transmitted to cattle by grazing in contaminated fields, and to humans by stable flies. Skin ulcerations and malignant pustules characterize anthrax. Since the swarms affected only Upper Egypt, these plagues would not have affected the Israelites in Goshen.

Thunderstorms originating in Upper Egypt and moving northward may be trapped in the narrow Nile valley and not affect Goshen in the northeastern part of the Nile Delta. Locusts also could follow that pattern.

The plague of darkness likely was a *bamsin*, a scorching wind that blows in each spring, raising a thick layer of dust. It may persist several days and blacken the sky. It would have been worse than usual because of the locust plague. Based on the way a *bamsin* travels, Goshen could escape unscathed.

The Torah does not make sharp distinctions between natural and supernatural, since all ultimately emanates from God. Many religious people may look to the plagues as a source of mystery, and may become discouraged with Hort's theory. The fact remains that we can explain these phenomena within the laws of nature. Many who are not religiously inclined may dismiss the plagues as natural phenomena, but they miss the Torah's focus on how nature itself should bring us to a recognition of God, the Creator of nature.

Caring Connection

To volunteer or to seek support or referrals from our synagogue's hesed group, contact Rabbi.hjangel@shearithisrael.org 212-873-0300 x206

This Shabbat

Bo 5772

January 28, 2012

MORNING SERVICES — 8:15 am

REMARKS ON THE PARASHAH

Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Before the Torah Reading, at approximately 9:30 am.

LEARNER'S SERVICE

Rabbi Shalom Morris

9:30 am - 10:45 am

CHILDCARE AND YOUTH CLUBS

Groups begin at 10:00 am. Junior Congregation at 10:30 am in the Little Synagogue.

SERMON

Rabbi Hayyim Angel discusses The World Turned Upside Down.

KIDDUSH

In Levy Auditorium, sponsored by the Haberman Family in honor of Eva and Simon's anniversary, the anniversary of Alexander's Bar Mitzvah, and Ariel's birthday.

KIDDUSH ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Around 12 noon

Rabbi Hayyim Angel will hold an "Ask the Rabbi" session. All are welcome. Bring over your plate of food and questions.

SHABBAT AFTERNOON CLASS

History of Biblical Interpretation

3:30 pm

Rabbi Hayyim Angel explores Abarbanel.

MINHAH/ARBIT — 4:45 pm

HABDALAH — 5:36 pm



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This Week

Weekday Services

Morning Services: Sunday, 8:00 am
Monday - Friday 7:15 am
Evening Services: (Arbit only) 6:30 pm

Mitzvot Training Class

Sunday, January 29
9:15 am
Spend an hour learning to perform mitzvot in the Synagogue. For men, women and children. RSVP to Zechariah Edinger, zedinger@shearithisrael.org

Shearith Israel League Lecture

Thursday, February 2
8:00 pm
Professor James Kugel: *In the Valley of the Shadow – Thoughts on Serious Illness*
Professor Kugel's new book will be on sale at a special discounted price. If you are unable to attend the lecture, but would like to purchase the book, please e-mail ShearithIsraelLeague@gmail.com or contact Arnie Goldfarb at 212-724-3366.

Upcoming Events

James Kugel Scholar-in-Residence

Saturday, February 4
We are pleased to welcome renowned Bible scholar Professor James Kugel. Shabbat Morning Seminar, 11:30 am *What Did Moses Do Wrong? The Mystery and History of Massah and Meribah*
Shabbat Afternoon Class, 3:45 pm *How Our Ancient Interpreters Understood the Song at the Sea*

Women's Service

Shabbat morning, February 4
For more information, please contact Lisa Rohde 212-787-3161 or Lirohdecsi@yahoo.com.

Special Toddler Shabbat Program

February 4
10:45 am
Toddlers and their families are invited to a special Toddler Shabbat morning. A child-friendly Kiddush will follow a fun Shabbat performance for children 4 and younger at 11:00 am in the toddler room. All are invited. Invite your friends! RSVP is not necessary.

Where Yeshiva Meets The University

Day of Learning
Sunday, February 5
9:30 am - 1:00 pm
Rabbi Hayyim Angel, Mrs. Rachel Friedman, Rabbi Nathaniel Helfgot, and Professor James Kugel illustrate how both traditional and academic study methodologies enhance our ability to derive meaning from the Bible. Light Refreshments Served. Co-sponsored by Congregation Shearith Israel and the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals (jewishideas.org).

New York Historical Society Visit

Tuesday, February 7
4:30 pm
Guided tour of the NY Historical Society featuring artifacts and documents on loan from the Shearith Israel collection. 170 Central Park West at 77th street. \$12 museum admission. RSVP to alana.shultz@shearithisrael.org, 212-873-0300 x209

Topics For Jewish Living: Shabbat Observance

February 13
8:00 pm - 9:00 pm
Learn about Kiddush, *habdalah*, candle lighting and other rituals of Shabbat.

Lunch & Learn

Wednesday, February 22
12:15pm
Discuss current events effecting Israel with Aryeh Green, Director of Media Central, a provider of support services for journalists in Israel and neighboring nations. \$10 suggested donation. RSVP to Alana.shultz@shearithisrael.org.

Sponsorship

To sponsor a Kiddush, Lunch and Learn or Bet Midrash Evening, please contact Alana Shultz 212.873.0300 ext. 209 or Alana.shultz@shearithisrael.org

Weekly Classes

SUNDAY

Maimonides
8:40 am - 9:40 am
Rabbi Marc Angel

Kuzari of Rabbi Judah HaLevi

9:40 am - 10:40 am
Sjimon den Hollander

Hebrew Classes, Levels I,II,III

10:00 am - 11:00 am
Register at csilearning.com

MONDAY

Parashah
Rabbi Shalom Morris
Class is taught in Hebrew

Bet Midrash (House of Study)

7:00 pm – 9:00 pm

TUESDAY

Halakhah B'Shanah Begins February 7
7:00 pm – 8:00 pm
Register at csilearning.com
Rabbi Shalom Morris

THURSDAY

Pre-Shabbat For Tots
10:00 am – 10:45 am
Register at csilearning.com
Rabbi Shalom Morris

Tai Chi

\$10 per session
Lewis Paleias