



Egyptian Firstborn Death and Israelite Escaping the Womb

What made the Plague of the Firstborn so fearsome? What made it the culminating plague, the plague which finally brought Pharaoh to his knees before God, Moses and the Israelites? I mean, having a “plague of the firstborn” culminate the Ten Plagues certainly serves a later purpose in justifying the consecration of Israel’s firstborn to God. It certainly had a very “eerie” quality to it: After all, how could God single out just one member of a family or litter, and always the same one, by birth order, to smite? But many of the other plagues were pretty “eerie,” as well. And why couldn’t the plagues have come in a different order?

To be sure: The Plague of the Firstborn was the only plague which directly “aimed to kill” people and animals. With the other plagues, there was great damage done, but any loss of life to the Egyptians, both to people and animals, was caused more indirectly. Of course, the Israelites had long suffered the direct murder of apparently all of their sons. But the Plague of the First Born is culminating in its severity by taking direct aim to kill Egyptians.

However, why should it have been the Firstborn which were so smitten? It’s true, everything is owed back to God, and God is entitled to be “paid-back” for His bounty as soon as possible. So one reason was because, like our taxes, that which was condemned was taken “off-the-top, from the first profits, from the first which came to hand.

But the Firstborn has a special place in the generative and regenerative cycle. The firstborn mammalian animal “opens the womb.” He opens the door to the generation which follows. Before the firstborn, the gateway to new life is closed and locked in the darkness of death. Until the firstborn clears the way, there can be no regeneration, and there is no release from the grip of mortality. The death of a firstborn means that he who we thought had finally escaped into the light of day from the dark vise of the womb has only returned to the darkness of the grave. The killing of the firstborn makes all our attempts to surmount death through generation of new life seem futile. Among ancient Egyptians, much of their religion, whether through Osiris and Isis, whether through their embalming and mummification, or through the fertility rites associated with the worship of Apis the Bull, was about escaping mortality. The Firstborn is the first to escape death, the first to open the way to new life. Through killing the Firstborn, the God of Israel mocks he who seemed to have shown the way to escape, returning him to death. This will severely dishearten any attempts to regenerate which may follow. Certainly, human attempts to start and raise a family are fraught with uncertainties, risks, and impediments, and the quashing of their first efforts can lead to disheartening them from further attempts.

But the Israelites do indeed escape this Plague and show that they, in contrast to the Egyptians, have the capacity to bring about new fertile life and thereby cheat death. The Egyptians had already noted Israelite fertility; this plague’s sparing the Israelites and killing the Egyptian Firstborn must have affected the Egyptians all the more so. This is what finally brought Pharaoh to his knees.

Israelite commemoration of this Escape into new life is placed after the death of Winter and into the Spring season, to commemorate the season of Fertility and New Life. Israel commemorates God’s letting them escape and bringing them New Life in a New Land through the Paschal sacrifice of a young lamb and through the education of a new generation of Israel that they too can escape oppression and death and flourish. Of course, Israel has a debt to God for this: In return for their escape, Israel owes God such sacrifices as the Passover as well as offerings of the firstborn of their animals and the first of their crops. But in remembering and acknowledging the uncertainties and risks associated with “opening the womb,” Israel affirms the importance of bearing new life and our capacity for it.

Shabbat Bo

January 27-28, 2023 | 6 Shebat 5783

SHABBAT SCHEDULE

Hertz: p. 248 | Haftarah: p. 263

Kaplan: p. 300 | Haftarah: p. 1102

Candle Lighting | 4:49 pm

Friday Evening Services | 5:00 pm | Main Sanctuary

Friday Night Lights | following services | Main Sanctuary | 2022-2023
Season sponsored by the Julis-Rabinowitz family

Zemirot | 8:15 am

Shahrit | 9:00 am | Main Sanctuary | Lecture by Rabbi Soloveichik:
“A Connecticut Yankee in Pharaoh’s Court: Shedding New Light on
Darkness”

Youth Program | 10:00 am | Fidanque Youth Room

Kiddush | following services | *Sponsored by Suchu & Meyer Solny, in memory
of Mrs. Betty Solny, a”b (Hinda Baila b. Meyer Bendit)*

Shabbat Afternoon Class | 4:00 pm | Rabbi Soloveichik

Evening Services | 4:45 pm | Main Sanctuary

Habdala | 5:37 pm

Weekday Service Times

Mornings:

Sunday: 8:05 am

Monday-Friday: 7:05 am

Evenings:

Sunday-Thursday: 5:00 pm

If you can help out and attend minyan, morning or evening, please contact Z. Edinger.

DEADLINE ALERT

DEADLINE: THIS MONDAY, JANUARY 30

A Community Shabbat Dinner with *Magevet*,

Yale's Jewish Acapella Group

and a featurette by our own Rabbi Robde and Rev. Edinger

Friday Evening, Shabbat Shira, February 3

Following Evening Services & *Friday Night Lights*

To register, visit shearithisrael.org/events/magevet-dinner.

PRICING

Member Adult - \$52

Non-member Adult - \$56

Child - \$35

Sponsorship opportunities available

COMING UP

The Sisterhood presents

Bird Rescue Workshop with Wild Bird Fund

For all ages!

Sunday, February 5 | 11:00 am-1:00 pm | Levy Auditorium

The Sisterhood has partnered with the Wild Bird Fund to present this special workshop for all ages. Have you ever wondered who the NYC birds are? What is bird rehabilitation? How can you help? Join us to learn!

Register at shearithisrael.org/events/wbf.

How to Talk To Your Children About Antisemitism

Virtual Event | Wednesday, February 1 | 8:00 pm

This virtual event is open to all but specifically geared for parents of children in grades K-8

Refer to our emails for the registration link

In the face of the increasing normalization of antisemitism across mainstream society, join UJA-Federation of New York for a timely briefing on how parents can communicate to their children about this critical topic.

West Side-Wide Ski Trip

Sunday, February 5 | 7:30 am - 4:30 pm | Camelback Mountain | For all ages

Register at jewishcenter.org.

Deadline: THIS Saturday night, January 28

THIS SUNDAY

Youth Tour of the American Museum of Natural History

With Rabbi Soloveichik

Sunday, January 29 | 11:00 am | For kids & their parents

Registration is closed but registrants should check their email for the meetup location.

The Shearith Israel League, the American Sephardi Federation, the Sephardic Jewish Brotherhood of America, & the Sephardic Foundation on Aging proudly present:

Kontar i Kantar: 6th Annual New York Ladino Day

In-Person | Sunday, January 29 | 2:00 pm

Center for Jewish History, 15 West 16th Street, Manhattan

Ladino is a bridge to many cultures. A variety of Spanish, it has absorbed words from Hebrew, Turkish, Arabic, French, Greek, and Portuguese. The mother tongue of Jews in the Ottoman Empire for 500 years, Ladino became the home language of Sephardim worldwide.

While the number of Ladino speakers has sharply declined, distinguished Ladino Day programs like ours celebrate a vibrant language and heritage.

For registration and details, visit shearithisrael.org/events/ladino-day2023.

COMING UP

Guided Tour of “Crossroads of Sefarad” Exhibit

February 12 | 4:00 pm - 5:00 pm | Levy Auditorium

Created by ANU – *Museum of the Jewish People*, in partnership with the Jewish Heritage Alliance, this exhibit explores the history of the Sephardic Jews on the Iberian Peninsula, their prosperity and growth under different governments, and eventual expulsion starting in 1492.

Warren Klein, curator of the Herbert & Eileen Bernard Museum of Judaica at Temple Emanu-El, will lead a guided tour of the exhibit on February 12 - don't miss it!

Sign up for the tour at shearithisrael.org/events/crossroads.

Readers Welcome!

Women's Megillah Reading

Purim Morning, Tues, March 7 | 8:00 am | Rehearsals: Feb 16 & 26 | 6:15 pm

On the morning of Purim, the women and girls of the synagogue conduct a parallel

Women's Megillah reading in the Small Synagogue. Join us for our 34th year!

New readers are warmly invited to participate.

Any woman or girl above bat mitzvah age is very welcome to participate and should contact Mrs. Lisa Robde at lrohde-csi@yahoo.com as soon as possible for an assignment of at least half a chapter.