

Parashat Bo, 5781, 2021:

Rabbi David Etengoff

*Of Locusts, Pharaoh and Evil*

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

*Arbeh* (locusts) is one of the *makkot* (plagues) that figure prominently in our *parasha*. Like the other *makkot*, the *arbeh* are a heuristic device that the Almighty brought upon Pharaoh and his people in an effort to teach them the unlimited nature of His power. Therefore, Moshe and Aharon made it quite clear to Pharaoh exactly what was at stake if he remained obstinate in his recalcitrance:

Moshe and Aharon came to Pharaoh and said to him, “So said the L-rd, the G-d of the Hebrews, ‘How long will you refuse to humble yourself before Me? Let My people go, and they will worship Me. For if you refuse to let [them] go, behold, tomorrow I am going to bring locusts into your borders. And they will obscure the view of the earth, and no one will be able to see the earth, and they will eat the surviving remnant, which remains for you from the hail, and they will eat all your trees that grow out of the field.’” (*Sefer Shemot* 10:3-5, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

This passage presents a terrifying apocalyptic vision of the imminent future that will ensue if Pharaoh continues his rebelliousness against Hashem. Little wonder, then, that his servants beseech him and declare: “How long will this one [Moshe] be a stumbling block to us? Let the people go and they will worship their G-d. Don’t you yet know that Egypt is lost (*haterem taida ki avda mitzrayim*)?” On the surface, Pharaoh’s inability to recognize “*haterem taida ki avda mitzrayim*” is almost incomprehensible, as seven other plagues had already taken place, each one more destructive than the former. I believe, however, that we

can explain Pharaoh's self-destructive behavior in the following manner. Like many enemies of our people, this despot represented unrepentant evil. His *yetzer hara*, in conjunction with his unlimited arrogance, prevented him from seeing even the most obvious reality: "*haterem taida ki avda mitzrayim!*" Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks *zatzal* formulates this idea in a deeply insightful manner:

Pharaoh is in fact (and this is rare in *Tanakh*) a tragic figure like Lady Macbeth, or like Captain Ahab in Melville's *Moby Dick*, trapped in an obsession which may have had rational beginnings, right or wrong, but which has taken hold of him, bringing not only him but those around him to their ruin. This is signaled, simply but deftly, early in next week's *sedra* when Pharaoh's own advisors say to him: "Let the people go so that they may worship the L-rd their G-d. Do you not yet realize that Egypt is ruined?" (10: 7). But Pharaoh has left rationality behind. He can no longer hear them. (*Covenant and Conversation*, Parashat Vaera -16<sup>th</sup> January 2010 -1<sup>st</sup> Shevat 5770)

Upon careful analysis, it appears that Pharaoh had three nemeses. The first one was G-d. Thus, he declared with the greatest possible hubris: "... Who is the L-rd [*Hashem*] that I should heed His voice to let Israel out? I do not know the L-rd, neither will I let Israel out." (*Sefer Shemot* 5:2) Herein, Pharaoh denied the dominion of the Master of the Universe over the world that He had created. Moreover, he denied Hashem's role as the supreme force in history. In Pharaoh's twisted world of irrational illusion, he, and not the Almighty, ruled the world and controlled human destiny. As a result, he believed that G-d did not exist — even when His presence could be palpably felt during the *eser makkot* (the Ten Plagues).

Pharaoh's second nemesis was *Moshe Rabbeinu* (our Teacher Moshe). Moshe was the polar opposite of Pharaoh, as he represented all that is righteous. He ceaselessly pursued that which is good, true and *tahor* (pure) with his entire being. In addition, he fulfilled his G-d-given mission with the greatest humility ever known: "Now this man Moses was

exceedingly humble, more so than any person on the face of the earth.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 12:3) In stark contrast, Pharaoh was self-serving, pursued evil for its own sake, was driven by every manner of falsehood and machination, and led Egypt and its culture to the 49<sup>th</sup> level of *tumah* (impurity).

Pharaoh’s third nemesis was none other than himself. At each twist and turn in his many encounters with G-d, Moshe and Aharon, he did his best to try to “outsmart” them and thwart their plan by further obstructing *b’nai yisrael*’s path to physical and spiritual freedom. He was a crazed individual whose evil obsessions drove him beyond all boundaries of humanity. Yet, far from being free, he was a slave to himself and his unfettered desires. As Rabbi Lord Sacks so eloquently states: “Evil has two faces. The first — turned to the outside world — is what it does to its victim. The second — turned within — is what it does to its perpetrator. Evil traps the evildoer in its mesh. Slowly but surely he or she loses freedom and becomes not evil’s master but its slave.”

In stark contrast to all that Pharaoh embodied, may we strive to fulfill the beautiful words of King David in *Sefer Tehillim*: “Shun evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it.” (34:5) May Hashem grant us the wisdom and discernment to eschew all that is evil. If we can do this, we will be truly free to authentically serve our Creator. May this time come soon and in our days. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom, and may Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the pandemic from *klal Yisrael* and from all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha's* name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: [\*\*http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd\*\*](http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd)

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.