



# DVAR TZEDEK TEXT STUDY

## Parashat Vaera 5773

January 12, 2013

This week's Dvar Tzedek takes the form of an interactive text study. We hope that you'll use this text study to actively engage with the *parashah* and contemporary global justice issues. Consider using this text study in any of the following ways:

- Learn collectively. Discuss it with friends, family or colleagues. Discuss it at your Shabbat table.
- Enrich your own learning. Read it as you would a regular Dvar Tzedek and reflect on the questions it raises.
- Teach. Use the ideas and reactions it sparks in you as the basis for your own *dvar* Torah.

Please take two minutes to share your thoughts on this piece by completing this [feedback form](#).

### Introduction

*Parashat Vaera* recounts the first seven of the ten plagues that devastated the Land of Egypt, wreaking havoc on its water source, its cattle, its people and the land itself. Indeed, the plagues described in this week's *parashah* closely mirror many plagues that affect our world today, from pollution of land and water to public health crises to natural disasters—many of which are related to global climate change. By taking a close look at exactly who was affected by the biblical plagues we can shed light on this pressing contemporary environmental issue—who it harms, who is responsible and how we can mitigate its impact.

When instructing Moses to bring the plague of *arov*—understood as either insects or wild animals—God tells him to say the following to Pharaoh:

But on that day I will set apart the region of Goshen, where My people dwell, so that no swarms of insects shall be there, that you may know that I, Adonai, am in the midst of the land. And I will make a distinction between My people and your people . . .<sup>1</sup>

Although God makes this declaration before the fourth plague, it is actually the first time that God indicates that the Israelites won't suffer alongside the Egyptians, raising the possibility that perhaps the first three plagues *did* affect them. In fact, commentators debate the question of whether the Israelites too suffered from the plague of blood:

#### Exodus Rabbah 9:10

If an Egyptian and an Israelite were in one house where there was a barrel full of water, and the Egyptian went to fill a pitcher from it, he would discover that it contained blood, but the Israelite would drink water from the same barrel. When the Egyptian said to him: 'Give me some water with your own hand,' and he gave it to him, it still became blood. Even if he said to him: 'Let us both drink from one vessel,' the Israelite would drink water, but the Egyptian blood. (Soncino translation)

#### שמות רבה ט:י

המצרי וישראל בבית אחד והגיגית מלאה  
מים ומצרי הלך למלאות הקיתון מתוכה  
מוציאה מליאה דם, וישראל שותה מים  
מתוך הגיגית. והמצרי אומר לו תן לי בידך  
מעט מים ונתן לו ונעשו דם. ואומר לו נשתה  
אני ואתה מן קערה אחת וישראל שותה מים  
והמצרי דם

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 8:18-19.

**Ibn Ezra, Exodus 7:24**

And they dug. Many say that the water in the hands of the Egyptians was red like blood and became clear in the hands of the Israelites. If so, why doesn't it say that in the Torah? In my opinion, the plagues of blood, frogs and lice included the Egyptians and the Israelites . . .

**אבן עזרא, שמות ז:כד**

ויחפרו. רבים אומרים, כי המים היו ביד המצרי אדומים כדם, ונתלבנו ביד הישראלי. אי"כ למה לא נכתב אות זה בתורה. ולפי דעתי כי מכת הדם והצפרדעים והכניסיהתה כוללת המצרים והעברים . . .

**Guiding Questions**

- Why do you think the *midrash* draws such a dramatic picture of the Israelites being protected from the plague of blood?
- Ibn Ezra finds no textual evidence that the Israelites were protected from the first three plagues and therefore assumes that they weren't. How do you respond to the idea that the Israelites too might have suffered from these plagues? How does this idea affect your understanding of the plagues?

Because the Exodus narrative emphasizes God's protection of the Israelites, we may find it surprising to imagine them suffering from plagues that were meant to punish the Egyptians. In today's world, too, we often assume that some people are immune from suffering because they live in places in which their human rights are guaranteed and they have access to money, education and health care. However, as many people experienced during Hurricane Sandy several months ago, this assumption of immunity, especially in light of global climate change, is being challenged.

**"Climate Change Impacts Globally," Climate Action Network, Australia<sup>2</sup>**

**Climate change will affect everyone.** In a hotter and more volatile world, both rich and poor stand to lose. Those already affected by poverty, malnutrition and disease will face displacement and new hardships. In the developed world, our industries, livelihoods and public health will face serious threats from drought, disease and extreme weather events.

**Guiding Questions**

- In what ways have you seen the predictions in this text play out in the last several years?
- How does the knowledge that climate change will affect everyone affect your inclination to take action to reduce climate change and its effects?

**Conclusion**

While global climate change has been largely caused by industrialization in developed countries, it disproportionately affects poor people in developing countries. However, as indicated by the text above, global climate change will increasingly affect everyone on the planet. Ibn Ezra's expansive interpretation—that some plagues affect us all, even those we would expect to be immune to—can guide us to a greater sense of unity as we navigate the challenges of global climate change. May the recent experiences of suffering from Hurricane Sandy give us the empathy and compassion necessary to motivate us to take action to mitigate the effects of natural disasters, if not to prevent them altogether.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cana.net.au/general-info/climate-change-impacts-globally>

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