

## A CLASH OF CULTURES

By Rabbi David Algaze

***“G-d said to Moshe, ‘Come to Pharaoh, for I have made his heart and the heart of his servants stubborn so that I can put these signs of Mine in his midst; and so that you...may know that I am Hashem.’” (Shemot 10:1-2)***

The entire story of the Exodus and the lengthy process that preceded it seems startling. Why did G-d send so many plagues upon the Egyptians throughout the course of a year when He could have liberated the Israelites much sooner? The Midrash raises this question and answers, “At the beginning when G-d wanted to bring the plague of the firstborn, He said, ‘If I bring them the plague of the firstborn, he (the Pharaoh) would immediately deliver them. Rather I will bring other plagues first.’” (Shemot Rabba 8:5) Why did G-d create such havoc in Egypt? What was the purpose of this painful process against the Egyptian Empire—the pinnacle of civilization in the Ancient world? Why did G-d sow among them such tragedy and desolation bringing the population to despair and fright?

The Torah provides with a clear answer several times: “And the Egyptians will know that I am G-d.” (Shemot 7:5 and several other verses in the story). The message is that the destruction was not sent in order to free the Israelites from bondage but rather for another function. The plagues do not appear to be a punishment for the cruel treatment of the slaves either. The plagues and the destruction wrought upon the Egyptian civilization were meant to convey a different message: that G-d is the Lord of the Universe and that all that happens is under His control.

The commentators have observed that this process of the plagues demonstrates G-d’s mastery over nature and His control of the events of the world. The Exodus and the phenomena leading to it are a powerful antithesis to the philosophy of Egypt and thus of the whole non-Jewish world. The story of the plagues is a veritable war of cultures. From the moment that Moses stood before Pharaoh and demanded, “Let My people go” the confrontation began. Here stood the messenger of G-d against one who denied the existence and the power of a G-d over him. In Pharaoh’s words, “Who is Hashem that I should heed His command...? I do not know Hashem nor will I send out Israel.” (id. 5:2)

Abarbanel points out the philosophy underlying Pharaoh’s stance and his claim echoes similar arguments down to our own time. Pharaoh represents the culture that denies the existence of the Creator and His governance of the universe down to the last minute detail. This culture assumes the power of Nature to be absolute and it surrenders itself to its supremacy completely. This is a society that believes in determinism and necessity where natural laws determine the outcome of everything. Man is not free but rather a mere puppet of instinct, environment and other such natural causes. He is subject to the influence of the stars, obeys the will of soothsayers and prognosticators and is ultimately a slave to magicians and witchcraft. Against Moses

and Aaron are the sorcerers and the necromancers who presided over the philosophy of Egypt. This indicates that the Egyptian culture was essentially a society that believed that the only way out of the power of Nature was through incantations and magic. All events are predetermined and Man is not responsible for his actions. In this worldview, there can be no ethics nor a moral code since Man is not free and thus cannot be held accountable or punishable for his deeds.

Against this background, Moshe stands and claims that the slaves must be freed. He represents the philosophy that Man is free because a free Deity has created him and because he was created with a resemblance to the Creator. Man possesses a soul, a divine spark that endows him with inalienable rights and the capacity to act freely. He can choose his way in the world and become accountable for his actions, thus allowing for the development of a system of ethics and morality. The establishment of morality as a foundation of all social systems is at the root of the Torah’s view of the world. Moshe claims that all men are equal and that no one has the right to enslave another. This was a declaration of war against the culture of Egypt—a real Kulturkampf—and a refutation of Pharaoh’s claim that he did not know G-d. The plagues thus constitute an indubitable statement that the power of Nature is not limitless and that there is a Power over it. Therefore, it was necessary to momentarily suspend the natural course and bring about the plagues upon Egypt, to show to everyone that natural laws are themselves subject to a Higher Authority and that everything that exists is answerable to that Force.

Together with the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt a new concept invaded the world, led by the Jewish people, the concept of Man as a free being and the supremacy of ethics atop all other values.

In our times, we too have been subjected to a major shakeup of our social and financial conditions. A crisis of confidence is affecting legions of bankers, investors and workers. The thesis that success equals monetary success is being challenged. Many who believed blindly in constant upward mobility and who held that the potential for success was limitless are now reconsidering their priorities and their values. The trust and truth telling that were at the basis of our financial structure have been severely tested and the immorality and greed have been exposed. The Torah concept that all income comes from G-d and that everything is in His power is now clearly highlighted by the crisis. We needed this predicament to awaken ourselves to these fundamental concepts that are at the root of Judaism. A tectonic shift is occurring that will alter how the world conducts business and is changing the aspirations and career choices as well as the economic expectations of many. As the definition of happiness and success begin changing, a new appreciation of G-d’s control of the world is emerging as well. Those who asked, “Who is G-d?”—just as Pharaoh did—are being given a clear answer and its clarion voice will resonate throughout the world.