

A Teaching from Rabbi Weintraub: Va'era – Why believe in one G-d?

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I remember, years ago, a reaction which a Christian friend had to sitting through a Synagogue service while we read these early chapters of Exodus, so full of bitter enslavement, beatings, genocidal schemes, plagues, drowning, marches and battle. He turned to me and said simply "It's so violent!"

We also may wonder, as Rabbis have for centuries, why the relentless, excruciating series of ten plagues were necessary. Why didn't G-d just rescue the Hebrews right off the bat, with the "strong hand and outstretched arm" eventually seen at the Reed Sea. Why not at least reduce the number of plagues to say, five or three or one?

The text tells us that the purpose of the plagues is to "know G-d". "And the Egyptian will know that I am the L-rd" is repeated in various fashions ten times, once for each plague.

Why is knowledge of G-d so important? Is G-d an egotist? Is He jealous for our attention? Does He want awe at His power, praise for His works?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, of blessed memory, the great Jewish philosopher and civil rights activist, used to challenge his students to prove to him that all human beings are equal. Can we scientifically show that whites and blacks, men and women, Jews and gentiles are equal? What would be our criteria – mean IQ, published articles, athletic achievement, political power? What does "equal" mean anyway?

Rather, we are equal only in the sense that we are all created by G-d and all contain within us sparks of G-dliness. We share the right to physical safety, the ethical obligation to act justly, but more, we share the G-d given privilege, first recognized in Exodus, to live in freedom. That is why Pharaoh's recognition of G-d was central. Without it, there was no reason to honor the right of the Israelites or any one else to freedom. With it, later on, the Talmudic Rabbis were able to develop an understanding of human worth so deep that they ruled that an individual may not be turned over to a marauding group for death, even to save an entire city (Palestinian Talmud, Tractate Terumah 7:20).

The value of a life is not contingent upon one's power, education, talents, or position. It is a corollary of the existence of One G-d. It urges us to temper our compulsions to use and control others, and that is as difficult for us today as letting the Israelites go was for Pharaoh three thousand years ago.