

## Upcoming at East 55<sup>th</sup> Street

TU B'SHEVAT SEDER AND SHABBAT DINNER

Friday, January 29<sup>th</sup>

following Shabbat services at 6:00 pm

led by Rabbi Jan Uhrbach and Cantor Marcos Askenazi

Reservation form can be downloaded at

[http://www.east55.org/images/pdfs/tu\\_bshevat\\_2010.pdf](http://www.east55.org/images/pdfs/tu_bshevat_2010.pdf)

## February 6

Back by Popular Demand!

LIVE in concert -- Cantor Marcos Askenazi

## PURIM

February 27

Not to be missed

Friday January 22, 2010 Candle Lighting 4:37 pm

Shabbat Morning  
Old Whaler's Church  
9:30

**This week's Torah reading: Bo**

Annual (Ex. 10:1-13:16): Etz Hayim p. 374

Triennial (Ex. 12:29-13:16): Etz Hayim p. 387

Haftarah (Jeremiah 46:13-28): Etz Hayim p. 395

### Musings on Bo -- "The Plagues of Darkness"

Because they would throw the Israelites into dungeons, God brought darkness upon them, the darkness of hell, so that they had to grope their way. He that sat could not rise up on his feet, and he that stood could not sit down. The infliction of darkness served another purpose. Among the Israelites there were many wicked men, who refused to leave Egypt, and God determined to put them out of the way. But that the Egyptians might not say they had succumbed to the plague like themselves, God slew them under cover of the darkness, and in the darkness they were buried by their fellow-Israelites, and the Egyptians knew nothing of what had happened. But the number of these wicked men had been very great, and the children of Israel spared to leave Egypt were but a small fraction of the original Israelitish population. The Legends of the Jews by Louis Ginzberg

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### Darkness — A Locked Mind

The ninth plague, in which a thick darkness enveloped all of Egypt, reflects the inability of the inhibited "Egyptian" soul to actualize its faculty of conception.

The power of conception is the ability of one's mind to conceive a new and original idea that had been previously inaccessible[23]. How? By the mind keenly realizing its limitations and borders, suspending its intellectual ego and opening itself up to a higher light, the previously inaccessible truth can emerge and illuminate the newly created vacuum[24].

When one is arrogant and smug, he deprives his mind of the ability to experience illumination, forcing himself to remain in darkness, constricted forever to a narrow vision of life.  
<http://www.theyeshiva.net/Article/View/54/Ten-Ways-to-Destroy-Your-Life>

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**In the story of the plagues darkness represents bondage.** The same is true in Lamentations (3:1-2): The man "who has known affliction," i.e., subjugation like the bondage in Egypt (cf. Ex. 1:11-12; 3:7), is driven in "unrelieved darkness" (lit. "darkness without light"). If darkness in biblical thought represents bondage, seeing the light signifies freedom and liberation. An ancient Babylonian text makes explicit the connection between seeing light and being liberated: "Whoever has not freed the prisoner, .. whoever has not shown light to the prisoner" (Shurpu, Tablet 2, lines 29-30, ed. E. Reiner, p. 13). The best biblical example for this metaphor is in Isaiah 9:1: "The people that walked in darkness have seen a brilliant light," i.e., will be liberated from the yoke of the gentiles. The darkness that generations of Hebrews suffered in Egypt became brilliant light, and even prior to leaving Egypt, during the plague of darkness, the Israelites experienced the sweet taste of freedom, for "all the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings" (Ex. 10:23).  
<http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/bo/gre.html>

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**Darkness during daytime has occurred not only in biblical times, but repeatedly throughout history in different parts of the world.** Though the Torah, unlike modern accounts, does not give a scientific explanation of the causes of unusual events at precise times, it does record the effect they had on people. This is true of the plague of darkness. The cause recorded in Exodus 10 is Divine - God instructs Moses to bring it on. But there have been plagues of darkness caused by volcanic eruptions that inspired terror, as did the Ninth Plague in ancient Egypt. This paper will offer modern examples of darkness that occurred during normal daylight hours and compare them to the biblical account.

Almost 3,600 years ago - around 1628 BCE - a volcanic eruption occurred on the island of Thera, at the southern tip of the Aegean Sea about 80 miles north of Crete. This volcanic activity was fairly close to the period of the Israelites sojourn in Egypt. From Thera to the Nile Delta is about 400 miles, close enough for the Egyptians to be exposed to the awesome power of nature. Whatever the exact year of this eruption, there is no doubt as to the changes in the environment. Volcanoes have predictable cycles. They can be dormant for long periods of time; decades or centuries. When they wake up, they go through a series of stages that can last days, weeks, months, years or even decades. Initially, a series of small earthquakes take place. This is generally followed by smoke, then ash. Eventually, the tremors become more violent, with the finale being a tremendous explosion. The impact on people, animals, and the environment must have been stupendous.

It can be said that the biblical Ten Plagues came in sequential order, since the Ninth Plague, darkness, is always at the end of a volcano cycle. The Torah gives a sequence of events, beginning with the First Plague: *All the water in the Nile was turned into blood and the fish in the Nile died. The Nile stank so that the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile; and there was blood throughout the land of Egypt* (Ex. 7:20-21). However, the sun was still shining. The Second Plague came a week later: *When seven days had passed after the Lord struck the Nile . . . the frogs shall come up on you and on your people and on all your courtiers* (vv. 7:25, 29). Frogs have an advantage that fish do not have; they can leave the water and if they do not die while on land they can later return to the water. Thereafter, the intervals between the Plagues is not given, but after each one Moses confronted Pharaoh and gave him a chance to avoid another Plague by letting the Israelites leave.

The darkness of the penultimate Ninth Plague suggests volcanic action. It is one of the two possible causes of darkness during normal daylight. The other, a total eclipse of the sun, lasts for

only a few hours at most, and therefore cannot explain the Ninth Plague that lasted for three days:

*Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Hold out your arm toward the sky that there may be darkness upon the land of Egypt, a darkness that can be touched. Moses held out his arm toward the sky and thick darkness descended upon all the land of Egypt **for three days**. People could not see one another, and **for three days** no one could get up from where he was (vv. 0:21-23).*

This prolonged darkness does, however, fit with a volcanic eruption.

<http://jbq.jewishbible.org/the-ninth-plague/>

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**One Last Comment:** Regarding the plague of darkness, the Torah tell us: "...thick darkness descended upon all the land of Egypt for three days. People could not see one another..." (Ex. 10:22-23) Commentators have understood this verse metaphorically. "That is the worst of all darknesses; when people are unable to 'see' their neighbors, that is note their distress and help them." "When we do not see others or want to see them, there is darkness in the world." "The Midrash calls the plague of darkness the 'darkness of Geihinnom, and it connects the darkness that afflicted Egypt with the primordial darkness that existed before God said, 'Let there be light.' Just as the light of Shabbat is a foretaste of the world to come, the reward that awaits the righteous, the darkness of the ninth plague is a foretaste of Gehinnom, the punishment that awaits those who cannot truly see their neighbors, who cannot feel the pain and recognize the dignity of their afflicted neighbors." [www.rabbihowardgorin.org/Archives\\_files/Bo.5765.doc](http://www.rabbihowardgorin.org/Archives_files/Bo.5765.doc)

### **Donation**

Sarah Engel in memory of Nathan Kleinhandler

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### **Quote of the Week**

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Shabbat shalom.

Stacy

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