

# THE NINTH PLAGUE

## JOEL FORMAN

Studying the Torah, and specifically here the story of the Exodus, often raises a basic question: Should the search for the Divine in the text include the use of natural causes of miracles? For example, the Torah introduces the splitting of the Sea of Reeds at the Exodus: "*The Lord drove back the sea wall with a strong east wind all that night, and turned the sea into dry ground*" (Ex. 14:21). In such an instance, is it possible that the Divine and nature can coincide, or are they mutually exclusive? This paper will attempt to address how the forces of nature could easily have been interpreted to express the will of the Almighty. The Ninth Plague, the descent of darkness, (10:21) is an event that lends itself to such an inquiry.

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 gen-

*Joel Forman has a B.A. in mathematics and an M.A. in computer science. Since 1979, he has been the numismatic advisor and consultant to the Simon Wiesenthal Center/Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles.*

erally 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.

Some of the earlier Plagues also have elements in common with the effects of volcanic eruptions. For example, at the time of the eruption of Mt. Saint Helens in Oregon in 1980. Fish in the Columbia River were boiled alive and decomposed, causing a strong bad odor, just as in the Nile millennia before (v. 7:16). Volcanic ash covered the city and blanketed it in darkness for three days, as in Egypt, volcanic ash in the air blotted out the sun. I myself, with my family, visited the area of the eruption a few weeks after the event and the

swirling particles still had a palpable effect – a sensation of "feeling the darkness."

Similarly, after the massive eruption of the East Indian island of Krakatoa in 1883, there was reportedly three days of total darkness. There was also an aftermath of great tidal waves, of a kind that could explain why the Egyptian host pursuing the Israelites across the Sea of Reeds were trapped there and drowned.

There is a chronological discrepancy between the violent eruption on Thera, that is dated by a range of precise scientific tests, and the earliest likely date for the Exodus. However, the effects of that eruption as well as more recent ones suggest that volcanic action in the region could be the physical cause of at least some of the Plagues that preceded the Exodus.

These momentous events are described after the crossing of the Sea of Reeds (vv. 14:15-31), inspiring the great songs of Moses (vv. 5:1-18) and of Miriam when she led the women of Israel in song and dance (vv. 15:20-21). Amazement at the extraordinary sequence of events of the Exodus has endured for millennia. No wonder that the Israelites were convinced that the God who liberated them from Egypt also saved them from being captured and returned to slavery.