

Rabbi Dr. Walter Homolka

**Parashat Bo**  
(Exodus 10, 1-15 and Joel 2, 1 – 13)  
The Liberal Synagogue at St. John's Wood, London

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Dear Friends!

What a strong and powerful picture that is! The Prophet Joel surprises Israel with a most disturbing message: God is the commander of an army of locusts ready to overrun his holy hill in Zion, the land of Israel. Not only Egypt is overrun by this plague, but also Israel itself is in danger – and indeed, has often been overrun by swarms of enemies: the Assyrians, the Persians, the Greek, the Romans. Jerom, one of the church fathers, plays with that analogy of the armies of locusts and the human invaders that have slain Israel in the past.

In Islam, "Lord of the locusts" is a title of God. And it was a law established by the prophet Mahomet, "ye shall not kill the locusts, for they are the army of the most high God"; for as Mahomet sat at table a locust fell, with these words on its back and wings; "I am God, neither is there any Lord of the locusts besides me, who feed them; and when I please I send them to be food to the people, and when I please I send them to be a scourge unto them."

In the Jewish tradition, a lot of thought is given to the locust. Amazingly enough, many texts in the Talmud centre around the marks that serve to distinguish the four kinds of locusts that are considered to be kosher when some commentators count as many as six hundred different species which are not for us to be eaten.

We may not fully appreciate the value of locusts as a welcome addition to our menus. But it is good Yemenite Jewish tradition to pickle them and dry them for food – and Rashi explains about the average Egyptians that they started to collect and roast them when Moses sends down the plague of locusts onto Mitzrajim.

With the east wind the locusts came, and the wind eventually cleans them away, also those – says Rashi - that had been set aside as nutrition by the poor Egyptians who had already been punished by so many plagues before.

Joel, however, clearly emphasises the destructive force of an army of locusts that is sent to make people shiver and tremble. Travellers in all centuries report in so many words that the devastations they make are often appalling.

It was again church father Jerom who claimed that the invasions of locusts are the heaviest calamities that can befall a country. He sums up nicely the broad picture given in the Tenach:

"Their numbers exceed computation. Unable to guide their own flight, though capable of crossing large spaces, they are at the mercy of the wind, which bears them as blind instruments of Providence to the doomed region given over to them for the time. Innumerable as the drops of water or the sands of the seashore, their flight obscures the sun and casts a thick shadow on the earth (*Exodus 10:15; Judges 6:5; 7:12; Jeremiah 46:23; Joel 2:10*). It may be 'like the garden of Eden before them, but behind them is a desolate wilderness. At their approach the people are in anguish; all faces lose their colour' (*Joel 2:6*). No walls can stop them; no ditches arrest them;

fires kindled in their path are forthwith extinguished by the myriads of their dead, and the countless armies march on (*Joel 2:8,9*).

The picture is of a truly apocalyptic quality. Joel qualifies them as God's holy cavalry (*2:4 "They have the appearance of horses; they gallop along like horsemen", the Italians refer to the grasshopper as "cavalletta", the Germans as "Heupferd" and various writers have pointed out that the head of a locust is in shape like that of a horse*).

It is not by accident that the locust later appears as a mystical animal, like a horse prepared unto battle, also in the Book of Revelation (*9:7a*) reinforcing its nature as a dubious Godsend (*John Gill*).

Aim and mission of its appearance is clear: in Joel the earth shakes, the sky trembles, the people dread the coming of the day of the Lord, the day of judgment. And in our parasha the swarm of locusts is aimed at Pharaoh who has refused to humble himself before God and who has hardened his heart. The punishment for not accepting God's dominion, for ignoring God's kingship in spite of the plagues is the locust. (*"If you refuse to send forth my people, tomorrow I will bring a swarm of locust into your land..." Ex 10: 4*).

It is curious that in Aramaic (Septuagint by Onkelos) the translation of locust is 'gova', and this is more than reminiscent of the Hebrew for "height" (*geva*). The plague of the locusts comes from on high (from the sky), and reminds us that Pharaoh, the self-appointed God-King, is being punished for his lack of humility in facing the creator of the universe.

The Talmud, in tractate Shabbat 90b, speaks of a drug made from a locust called "Bird of the Vineyard" with the ability to increase learning and insight. We should have learnt by now that the locust can teach us humility – as it taught Pharaoh and as it should have taught the ancient Israelites.

The thought, how helpless humanity can be in the face of a locust plague must fill us with a sense of crushing humility. We have seen how even the powerful and arrogant Pharaoh had to admit his helplessness before these small creatures. If locusts had been created for no other reason than to teach humankind humility and submission to the Creator, they would have justified their existence.

Pharaoh was incapable of really admitting guilt. He could not face up to it that he was mistaken and had misjudged by acting against God's will. **"This time I have sinned"** was the most that Pharaoh was able to utter. Such an utterance did not deserve any true atonement because it did not recognize the harm that transgression does to a person as a whole. It is important that we understand that there was no real change in the personality of Pharaoh, no contrite heart; he was not deserving of atonement even after his partial confession. This is the reason that Pharaoh reverted back to his original position immediately after the severe punishment of the earlier plagues had been abated. Without insight he remained in darkness. As Joel described when he prophesied the arrival of the locusts: *a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness (2:2)*.

The ancient Egyptians called the absence of divinity an experience of "darkness by day." How frightening is such a reversal of nature! They worshipped the sun not only as the source of their well-being but as the regenerator of creation on a daily basis. From the Middle Kingdom on the king was venerated as the son of Re, the living incarnation of the sun. "The mystery of solar rebirth is in fact the central, salvational element in Egyptian religion" (*Jan Assmann, The Mind of Egypt, p. 209*).

Hence, it is no accident that darkness unites the final three plagues which God hurls against Egypt. The locusts darken the face of the earth, if not the sky itself (10:5, 15). The darkness that follows is so thick that one could touch it (10:21-22). We fear what we cannot see.

It is for this reason that we start the traditional evening service with the recitation of a verse from Psalm 78 (e.g. *Das jüdische Gebetbuch*, p. 168): "Yet he, the compassionate one, would forgive sin, and not destroy; time after time he would restrain his anger, and would not arouse his full wrath" (v. 38). As the darkness of night envelops us, we affirm God's nearness. God does not withdraw with the setting of the sun.

We intone Ma'ariv only after the appearance of three stars. It begins with Barkhu, the call to praise God in a congregation. Yet before that summons to prayer, we softly recite for ourselves Vehu rahum . . . And again Joel echoes in our mind with the concluding verse of our Haftarah: "Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity" (Joel 2:13). The verse is there to offset our anxiety with the onset of night. It averts the opposite of what we fear.

Interestingly, the verse with which we open the Ma'ariv service is taken from a dramatic retelling of the birth of ancient Israel. For the Psalmist, destiny came calling in a cascade of miracles that sprang Israel from slavery and sustained it through the wilderness and beyond. Yet time and again Israel repaid boundless grace with vile ingratitude and betrayal. Nevertheless as our verse makes clear, the covenant goes unruptured. Love and Compassion temper wrath. God is willing to try again.

The location of our verse near the middle of the psalm seems to imply that the historic relationship between God and Israel turns on unrequited loyalty and love. Divine compassion makes up for human frailty. By the same token, the Talmud observes that our psalm verse (78:38) constitutes the epicentre in terms of verses of the entire Psalter, the essence of biblical expression of an I-Thou relationship (BT Kiddushin 30a).

A little grasshopper teaches this lesson: nothing but God's infinite mercy can bridge the gap between our need and our merit (see *Israel Mattuck: The Thought of the Prophets*, p. 50f).

That faith in a compassionate Creator, I believe, also helps to account for the unconventional fact that in Judaism the day as a unit of twenty-four hours begins with nightfall.

It is at dawn that we are in our diurnal prime. Yet we greet the new day as our strength wanes because in the darkness we detect the light to come.

With God by our side, we can defy the obvious and affirm the mystery that informs all existence.

Amen.