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Parashat Bo

(Exodus 10, 1-11 and Joel 2, 1 – 13)
Rodef Shalom Temple Pittsburgh, PA

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Dear Friends!

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.

The Prophet 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 and of a truly apocalyptic quality. Joel qualifies them as God's holy cavalry. 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.

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*).

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. As the darkness of night envelops us, we affirm God's nearness and our conviction that 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.

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.

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.