



Visual Midrash: Plagues and Visions

Nancy Current artwork from a joint exhibit with Robin Atlas

Visual Midrash is a genre of art in which Biblical commentary is made visible. The artist develops a thoughtful approach to the text and then decides how to render it in a way that has both intellectual and artistic integrity. For this show I have used two mediums to express different interpretations of the ten plagues on Egypt: ***Separation and Prophecy*** using mixed media on paper, and ***Pharaoh's Heart*** using painted glass.

The ten plagues were not randomly inspired; God's message was truly deliberate. The Egyptians were idolaters; they worshipped the Nile River, the sun, and a host of beasts, including insects. By design, the plagues attacked the pillars of Egyptian orthodoxy – the Nile was turned to blood, darkness smothered the sun, and exalted beasts were annihilated by disease and extreme natural forces. The plagues were also intended as “signs and wonders” through which God would become “known” in the land, by both Egyptians and Israelites, as the one all-mighty God. In the end, the concept of Pharaoh's omnipotent godliness was shattered. All of Egypt was punished for its inhumanity, and Egyptian theology was humbled in the face of the God of the children of Israel.

First Series: **SEPARATION and PROPHECY**

mixed media on paper, 15" x 11"

Before the plagues begin, God declares "And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch forth My Hand upon Egypt and bring out the children of Israel from among them." (Ex 7:5)

Plagues 1, 2 and 3: G-d Makes Himself Known in the Land

The plagues of Blood, Frogs and Gnats arise from the dust of the earth or its waters. The background color, gold, represents both earth and Pharaoh's pride. The Israelites have not yet been separated from the people of Egypt, so they also suffer the effects of the first three plagues. The destruction wrought by the plagues appears over the earth and its waters as a net-like entrapment invading everything living there.



First Plague- BLOOD - DAM



Second Plague- FROGS - TZ'FARDAYAH



Third Plague- GNATS - KINIM

Plagues 4, 5 and 6: G-d Separates the Israelites

Swarming Things, *Cattle Disease (Murrain)* and *Boils* are all plagues of defilement, a direct attack on Egyptian religion. Cattle, considered gods by Egyptians, are contaminated by disease, as are the people. But God declares, "And I will put a division between My people and your people- by tomorrow this sign shall be." (Ex 8:19) This sign of separation is the beginning of the process of sanctification, the creation of a people who will be holy to God.

Thus the land of Goshen protects the Israelites so they and their animals do not suffer disease/defilement. Goshen is symbolized by fragments of Jewish manuscripts from the storeroom of the ancient Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo, known as the Cairo Genizah.



Fourth Plague- SWARMING THINGS -
AROV



Fifth Plague- MURRAIN - DEVER



Sixth Plague- BOILS - SH'CHIN

Plagues 7, 8 and 9: Fulfillment of Prophecy

Hail, Locusts and Darkness reveal the fulfillment of God's prophecies about what would happen to Egypt should Pharaoh continue to refuse to acknowledge Him. God made Pharaoh's heart "strong" (the actual meaning of "hardening his heart") so that Pharaoh could exercise his free will, but he was caught in a trap of his own making. As a result, these plagues inflict increasing darkness on Egypt as a prelude to the final "darkness", the death of the firstborn. In Goshen, however, Israelites live in light and plenty, unscathed by the plagues. The color blue in the background symbolizes the theme of prophecy.



Seventh Plague- HAIL - BARAD



Eighth Plague- LOCUSTS - ARBEH



Ninth Plague- DARKNESS - CHOSHECH

Plague 10: Exodus from Egypt

The Death of the Firstborn results in the release of the Israelites, and they are seen departing Egypt from the land of Goshen. They leave behind a grid of black death with scattered red shapes: the destruction of Egyptian gods and society.



Tenth Plague- DEATH OF THE FIRSTBORN -
MAKAT B'CHOROT

Second Series: **PHARAOH'S HEART**

vitreous glass paint on Fremont Antique stained glass, 9" x 9"

The midrashic message in these glass paintings is told in two layers of glass: the topmost narrative is the progression of Pharaoh's heart, represented by a pyramid shape, and is seen in tandem with the story of the plague layer behind it. As the plagues progress, Pharaoh's pride and control diminish until the final dénouement in the Death of the Firstborn. The issue is the nature of man's freewill and his relationship to God. There is no struggle between God and Pharaoh - only the struggle within Pharaoh who does not "know the Lord".

Plagues 1 and 2: Pharaoh Believes in Himself and Magic

The plagues of Blood and Frogs do not impress Pharaoh or the Egyptians, because their magicians call up more blood and frogs. The gold pyramids represent Pharaoh's supreme confidence in his own godhood and his refusal to "know God" or free the Israelites.



First Plague- BLOOD - DAM



Second Plague- FROGS - TZ'FARDAYAH

Plagues 3, 4 and 5: Pharaoh's Heart is Stubborn

When God strikes Egypt with the plague of Gnats, the magicians admit defeat, but not Pharaoh, nor does he in the ensuing plagues of Swarming Things and Cattle Disease (Murrain). He is given the opportunity to repent and acknowledge God, but each time that he refuses he becomes more deeply attached to his ego and ensnared in his own pride. The pyramid of Pharaoh's heart is no longer gold, but it is strongly silver in the third plague, then progressively disintegrates in the fourth and fifth plagues.



Third Plague- GNATS -
KINIM



Fourth Plague- SWARMING
THINGS - AROV



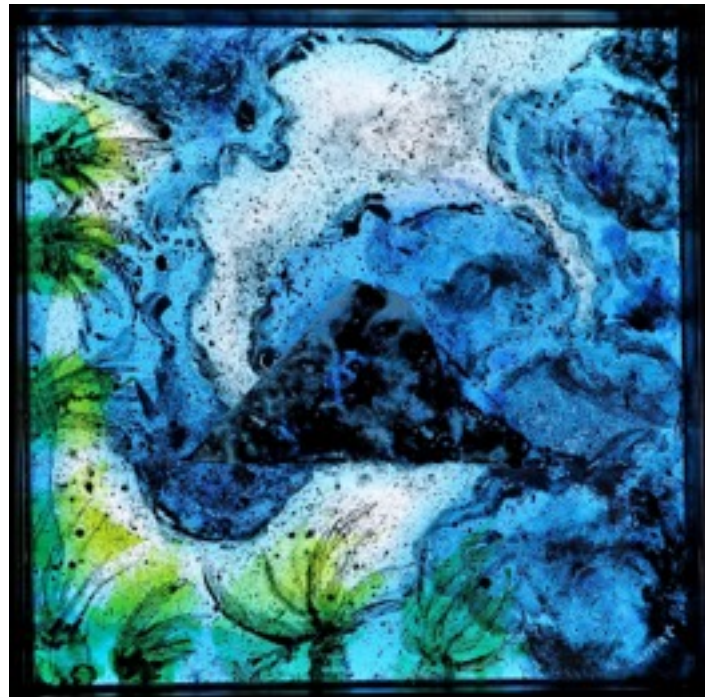
Fifth Plague- MURRAIN -
DEVER

Plagues 6 and 7: God Strengthens Pharaoh's Heart

Boils and Hail signal increasingly personal attacks on the people of Egypt. Some rabbis explain that God strengthens Pharaoh's heart (the word "chazayk" means "strengthen") so that he can resist the pleas of his people to let the Israelites go, and instead indulge the wishes of his prideful heart, which he has spent the first five plagues reinforcing. The black pyramids represent this strengthening of Pharaoh's heart.



Sixth Plague- BOILS - SH'CHIN



Seventh Plague- HAIL - BARAD

Plagues 8, 9 and 10: Pharaoh is Defeated by His Pride

The plagues of Locusts, Darkness and the Death of the Firstborn result in the release of the Israelites. Pharaoh can no longer resist the cries of his people when he finds his own son dead, and he relents temporarily, long enough for them to leave. Although his prideful heart seems to have suffered defeat, he still does not want to completely acknowledge G-d and will chase the Israelites into the Sea of Reeds.



Eighth Plague- LOCUSTS
- ARBEH



Ninth Plague- DARKNESS -
CHOSHECH



Tenth Plague- DEATH OF THE
FIRSTBORN -
MAKAT B'CHOROT