



The 5776 (2015-2016) cycle of Dvar Tzedek is a special one. To commemorate AJWS's 30th anniversary, we are sharing a selection of some of our favorite commentaries from past years. Each legacy commentary will be introduced with a related reflection on AJWS's work and contemporary issues.

Introductory Reflection

In her 2010 Dvar Tzedek on *Parashat Vaera*, Aviva Presser Aiden writes of the first plague cast upon the Egyptian people during the Israelites' exodus from Egypt—the plague of blood. The waters of the Nile ran red, making it undrinkable and toxic to the crops that sustained life. Terrified, the Egyptians furiously dug wells in the hope of reaching water.

Today, lack of access to water still plagues many areas of the developing world. In Mexico, for example, Oaxaca's Central Valleys experience frequent droughts. For thousands of years, indigenous people have coped with the water shortages by using traditional farming practices that respect the ebb and flow of the water table. They dug wells that tapped into natural aquifers; and when water was sparse, they conserved it until the wells refilled.

In 2006, Mexico's national water authority, CONAGUA, interfered with this delicate balance: the government began restricting indigenous communities' use of water from the wells and overcharging them for it. The farmers could no longer thwart the effects of drought naturally—and could not afford to pay the government's high rates. As a result—like the Egyptians cursed with the bloody Nile—their crops suffered, their livelihoods were devastated and their lives were in danger. But Oaxaca's farmers are overcoming this plague. Flor y Canto, a local women-led organization, organized the farmers to sue CONAGUA—and in 2013, it won the case. A municipal tribunal ruled that the water commission must consult with the farmers and give them a say in how water resources are allocated. With AJWS's support, Flor y Canto has not only held the government accountable, but it has also trained hundreds of local farmers to know their rights and stand up to their government.

Read our [Mexico Country Profile](#) to learn more about Flor y Canto and Mexico's movement for natural resource rights; and read Aviva's fascinating piece below for a deeper understanding of the plague of blood and contemporary efforts to defend access to clean and safe water around the globe.

Parashat Vaera 5776

By Aviva Presser Aiden

January 9, 2016

(Reprinted from January 16, 2010)

Parashat Vaera describes part of perhaps the most famous narrative in Jewish history—the Exodus. Moshe and Aharon were appointed as Divine emissaries to Pharaoh, demanding the release of the Israelites from the bondage of Egypt. Refused, Moshe and Aharon were then tasked with bringing plagues upon Egypt, ostensibly to compel Pharaoh to release the Jewish people. The first of these plagues was the plague of blood.

Regardless of the chemical dynamics the Nile underwent during the plague of blood, it was doubtless an impressive and awful sight—the waters of the life-sustaining river running red. Not only was the Nile plagued, but in God’s instructions to Moshe, all the bodies of water in Egypt were affected—from the mighty river down to the water contained in vessels of wood and stone. The text specifies that the waters of the Nile were undrinkable, and the plague caused the death of all of the fish in the river. The Egyptians, bereft of their ordinary sources of drinking water, tried to dig wells beside the Nile, in an attempt to reach potable water.¹

Midrashic sources indicate that each of the Egyptian plagues lasted seven days. In the case of most plagues, we see Moshe requesting a cessation of the plague on Egypt’s behalf, and the plague is subsequently removed from the land. But the biblical text gives us no such description of this plague’s end. The text merely suggests that after seven days, Moshe and Aharon approach Pharaoh with a warning of the upcoming plague of frogs.²

The never-ending corruption of water still plagues many areas of the Global South today. Over a billion people worldwide lack access to clean drinking water which often has severe and deadly consequences. Cholera and other water-borne diarrheal diseases are among the leading causes of child deaths worldwide—greater than HIV or malaria.³ Indeed, they are responsible for twenty-five percent of deaths in that demographic in the Global South.

One of the major causes of water contamination today is lack of effective sanitation. In fact, in about a third of all African countries, less than 50 percent of people have access to toilet facilities that do not need to be emptied by hand. Similar rates plague many Asian nations such as India, Nepal and Mongolia.⁴ Those without adequate facilities often turn to a nearby river or stream for washing, cooking and disposal of human waste, making entire communities vulnerable to cholera and other diseases.

Even in areas where clean water is available, it is not necessarily easy to access. For example, near the village of Kingori, Tanzania, there is a single public tap yielding clean water for the surrounding area, shared between both the people and domestic animals. In Ingwavuma, South Africa, the residents of the rural areas surrounding the town access water through boreholes. During the summers, the boreholes in the highland areas dry up, and people in those regions need to pay to take buses to the town to acquire water, which they must then carry home for their families. The transport of water for family use is a task that falls disproportionately on young women and girls, often consuming hours of their day and preventing them from attending school.

The biblical text indicates that Moshe and Aharon did not end the plague of blood. In many ways, this task has been left to us. Thankfully, today there are numerous ways to ensure that communities have access to clean drinking water. Organizations such as Partners in Health⁵ and Lifewater International⁶ have developed novel latrine designs suited to various communities in the Global South, and have created educational programs to encourage the

¹ Exodus 7:18-24.

² Exodus 7:25-8:4

³ “World Water Day: Lack of Access to Clean Drinking Water and Proper Sanitation is a Growing Challenge.” US AID. 22 March 2006. http://www.usaid.gov/locations/sub-saharan_africa/features/worldwaterday06.html

⁴ WHO and UNICEF. Global Water Supply and Sanitation Assessment 2000 Report. <http://www.who.int/en/>

⁵ Abu-Libdeh, Reem. “Fixing Haiti’s Environmental Woes.” Partners In Health, July 2009. http://www.pih.org/inforesources/news/Hait_environmental_projects_2009.html

⁶ “Sanitation: Latrine Design & Construction.” Lifewater International. <http://www.lifewater.org>

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development of effective sanitation programs within those communities. There are also many new technologies that ease water purification and transportation, including inexpensive filters that can purify water of contaminants down to the scale of cholera-causing bacteria. Some of these products have been developed by communities that need them. Both the Hippo Roller and AquaPort were invented by Africans to alleviate the time-intensive labor of hauling water.

All of these programs are excellent solutions, but remain just a start. Contaminated water sources and diarrheal disease are not “sexy” issues, and don’t get the same press as other urgent world crises such as the genocide in Darfur or AIDS. But they are no less devastating—indeed, perhaps they are even more so—in terms of loss of life and productivity. We need to raise awareness about the magnitude of water contamination worldwide, and continue working to improve access to clean drinking water for communities still facing this plague.



Aviva Presser Aiden, a first-year medical student at Harvard Medical School, received her PhD from Harvard’s School of Engineering and Applied Sciences in 2009. She co-founded Bears Without Borders, an organization fostering economic opportunities among developing-world artisans, and is co-founder and CTO of Lebônê, a social enterprise developing microbial fuel cells as an off-grid energy and lighting solution for Africa. These initiatives have received significant public acclaim, including a novella inspired by Bears Without Borders and New York Times coverage of Lebônê’s technology. Aviva can be reached at aviva.ajws@gmail.com.

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