

Bo: The Tenth Plague - The Warning to Pharaoh vs. The Torah's Account of It

Rabbi Eliot Malomet January 24, 2026 6 Shvat 5786

Before God slays the firstborn of Egypt, Moses warns Pharaoh of what is going to happen. Then, at midnight of the 14th of the first month, that terrible plague takes place. When we read the **warning** of the plague (Exod. 11:4-6) followed by the Torah's **account** of what happened (Exod. 12:29-30) we observe that the two texts are almost identical. But then read them again closely side-by-side. There are the some very interesting differences between the two.

שמות יב:כט-ל	שמות יא:ד-ו
	ויאמר מעה פה אמר מה ה'
ויהי ב <u>חצאי הלילה</u>	חצצת הלילה
ויהי הכה	אני יוצא בתוך מצרים
כל ב <u>בכור הארץ מצרים</u>	וימת כל ב <u>בכור הארץ מצרים</u>
מ <u>בבכור פרעה היישב על כסאו</u>	מ <u>בבכור פרעה היישב על כסאו</u>
עד ב<u>בכור השפהח אשר אמר קרתים</u>	עד ב<u>בכור השפהח אשר אמר קרתים</u>
ו <u>כל ב<u>בכור בהמה</u></u>	ו <u>כל ב<u>בכור בהמה</u></u>
ונ <u>קים פרעה לילה הוא וכל עבורי וכל מצרים</u>	ונ <u>קים פרעה לילה הוא וכל עבורי וכל מצרים</u>
ותהית צעקה גדלה בכל הארץ	ותהית צעקה גדלה בכל הארץ
אשר פמה לא נתקה ובמהו לא תסח.	כיו אין בית אשר אין שם מות.

The Warning - Exodus 11:4-6	The Account - Exodus 12:29-30
Moses said: Thus says God:	
1 At about midnight,	At midnight
2 I will go out into the midst of Egypt,	and God struck
and every firstborn throughout the land of Egypt shall die	every firstborn in the land of Egypt,
from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne	from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne
3 to the firstborn of the maid who is behind the handmill,	to the firstborn of the captive in the dungeon,
and every firstborn of beast.	and every firstborn of beast.
	Pharaoh arose at night, he and all his servants and all Egypt,
Then shall there be a cry throughout all the land of Egypt	and there was a great cry in Egypt,
4 the likes of which has never been, the like of which will never be again.	for there was not a house in which there was not one dead.

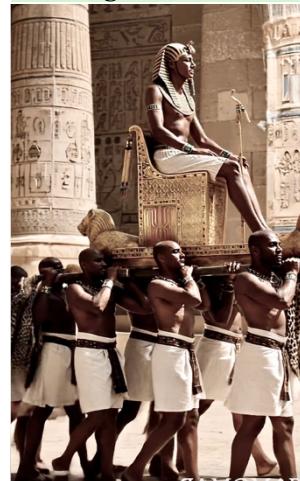
1. At About Midnight vs. At Midnight. Pardon the pica-
nunity but there is a big difference between **about** and **at**.
About is approximate; **at** is precise. Why does Moses issue the **warning** only with an approximate timestamp? Because it gives him a psychological advantage. It communicates ambiguity and puts Pharaoh on edge. Like when we say, **I'll call you between 12 and 2** rather than **I'll call you exactly at 12**. It creates uncertainty. The deeper story here has to do with timekeeping in ancient Egypt. Timekeeping relied on observable astronomical phenomena: dawn and dusk and the movement of stars. Days were divided into twelve equal units, which varied in length throughout the year (longer in

summer, shorter in winter). Evening was similarly divided into twelve units, and the precise hour was determined by the position of the stars in the nighttime sky. More importantly though, in Egyptian mythology crucial things happen at night: the sun-god journeys through the netherworld. Each hour, rather than being a unit of time, is a region through which the god traverses. **And the midnight region is the most vulnerable region of the journey.** Midnight is the liminal region of regeneration and renewal. It is the deepest zone of darkness, where chaos reigns supreme. In Egyptian religion, the priests who were assigned to the midnight rituals would be on **high alert** to facilitate the safety of the god's journey. When Moses says **At about midnight** Pharaoh would have heard this: **Just when your gods are trying to secure order and continuity, all havoc will break loose and there will be death instead of life. The God of Israel will go unchecked throughout Egypt and direct his immeasurable power towards the specific humans and animals that are entrusted with the process of regeneration, namely the firstborn males.** But in the Torah's **account** of this (in Exod. 12:29), it specifies that God went out **precisely at midnight**. This underscores how deliberate and focused God's actions were. **At the precise moment that the firstborn of Egypt died, the firstborn of God (the nation of Israel) was born.**

2. I (God) Will Go Out vs. And God Struck. Moses' warning to Pharaoh is an example of cultural appropriation. When Pharaoh goes out in the midst of the people it is not to gain popularity and be received by adoring crowds. Rather it is to demonstrate divine kingship and to symbolize order (*ma'at*); **it is a highly choreographed reenactment of the god asserting order over chaos and life over death.** Thus, when Moses says that **God will go out in the midst of Egypt**, Pharaoh hears that the hermetic boundaries of the sacred land of Egypt will be penetrated by a foreign god! This breaking of the hermetic boundary will result in chaos and death. **And God struck...** in the **account** of the plague (12:29) is terse, blunt, and direct. Subject-verb-object; grammar that comports with a theology of a God who acts directly and delivers on his promises, including this one given to Moses at the outset of the story (Exod. 3:20)

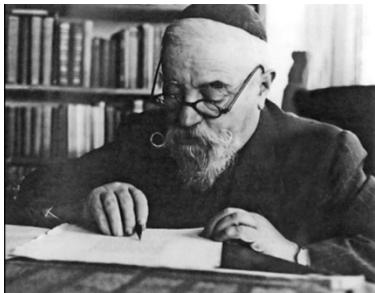
וְשָׁלַחֲתִי אֶת יְדִי וְהִבְטִיתִי אֶת מַצְרִים בְּכָל נְפָלָתִי אֲשֶׁר אָעָשָׂה בְּקָרְבָּנוֹ
וְאַחֲרֵי כֵּן יִשְׁלַחְתֶּם.

So I will send forth my hand and I will strike Egypt with all my wonders which I will do in its midst— after that he will send you free!



3. The Firstborn of the Maid vs. The Firstborn of the Captive.

Umberto Cassuto (1883-1951, picture below) comments that the phrase **firstborn of the maid** occurs frequently in ancient Egyptian literature and denotes the poorest of the poor.



Thus, when **warning** Pharaoh of what is to come, Moses uses an Egyptian idiom, and the message he is conveying is that no matter how rich or how poor, from the highest echelons of Egyptian society to the

lowest, all firstborns will be struck. By telling Pharaoh that the firstborn of the maidservants will die, Moses is undermining Pharaoh's sovereignty and domination. The message to him is this: **I have told you time and again that the Israelite slaves are not yours to do with as you wish. They belong to God. You think your maidservants, the lowliest collaborators of your oppressive regime, are your property. You protect them even as you exploit them. Your protection is worthless.** But when the Torah **recounts** the plague (12:29) it says that God struck the **firstborn of the captive in the dungeon**, firstborns who come from a totally different group of the lowliest rank of people. **It is a different message for a different audience. The plague of the firstborn was not an atomic bomb that destroyed everything indiscriminately. Rather, it was a precise, targeted use of lethal force, whose purpose was to punish Pharaoh and the leadership at every level of society, from the firstborns of the royal household to the firstborns of the criminals, who were partners in a murderous regime.**

4. A Cry Like No Other vs. A Cry From Every Household.

Moses **warns** Pharaoh that the destruction will be so severe that the cry heard in Egypt will be historic in its intensity.

The like of which has never been and the like of which will never be again. Sound is emotion. To be part of a large chorus of song is to experience an indescribable transcendence. To be part of a chorus of wailing is to experience unspeakable pain and despair. Human beings are wired for sound. Sound also conveys order and chaos. In the highly structured world of Egyptian culture, a royal procession, symbolizing cosmic order, would be accompanied by a soundscape that consisted of musical chants, rhythmic drumming, orchestrated shouts, waves of human sonic energy that was an attempt to imitate and approximate the infinite power and order of the gods. Wailing, sobbing, lamentation and screams of agony, on the other hand, represent disorder, chaos, and collapse. Pharaoh would normally be the focal point of jubilant sound and order but will now be located at the epicenter of grief and chaos.

When Moses **warns** Pharaoh that the sound of the wailing will be historic, he is telling him that this moment, at around midnight, will be the historic undoing of his power. But when the Torah **recounts** what happened (12:30) it frames the crying in totally different terms. **For there was not a**

house in which there was not one dead. This humanizes the Egyptian loss. This locates the Egyptian dead in the shared universality of human suffering. It is hard not to read this, even now, without feeling a visceral emotional response and without identifying in some way with each household who has lost a member, each family who has lost a son. Through Israelite eyes, Egypt becomes its mirror image. The plague of the firstborns causes the kingdom of Egypt to collapse (albeit temporarily) from a kingdom into a collection of broken and grieving families. Egypt is no longer a single household run by a king, the source of order and life, but a nation of smaller grieving households, where death is at the center, not life. Israel, having been spared from this plague, remains on the outside. They witness the families in pain. They hear the agony that is taking place. While they may experience relief at the vanquishing of their oppressors, this **account** will also elicit genuine sympathy from them.

The Comparison of the Two Texts: A Reflection. What do we make of these two passages, the **warning** to Pharaoh (11:4-6) and then the **account** of the plague (12:29-30)? First, as with all our Torah study, let us take a moment to be in awe of the text. That the text can yield such deep meaning attests to its spiritual power, its complex subtlety, its intricate texture and its artistic beauty. Second, let us recognize that these two texts, the **warning** and the **account**, **are intended for two different audiences.** The **warning** of the Tenth Plague (11:4-6) is directed to Pharaoh. The **account** of the Tenth Plague (12:29-30) is directed to the reader of the text at home, the listener of the Torah reading in shul. **To us!** That makes us, (the descendants of those redeemed slaves who now live 3500 years after the event) part of the story! Moses' **warning** is a reproach to Pharaoh for being the individual most responsible for incalculable human suffering, misery, and indignity. It is a stinging rebuke of human cruelty, which as history demonstrates over and over again, is the inevitable result of idolatry and the veneration of power. The Torah's **account** of the plague shapes our lives as retell and reenact it in liturgy and symbol on a daily basis (the recitation of the *Sh'ma*, the wearing of *tfillin*, the affixing of *mezuzot*) and at the annual commemoration of the exodus at the Seder. The **warning** to Pharaoh contains a blunt message: **Before the God of Israel, you are a mere mortal. Despite your wealth and magnificence, you are powerless. The chaos and suffering you caused is your historic legacy.** The Torah's **account** of the plague contains this message for all of us: **Our God and God of our ancestors is a just God, who renders precise justice to all those who perpetrate evil. Yet we are to have compassion for the victims of God's justice. Living up to the role of God's firstborn is our historic responsibility.**

SHABBAT SHALOM!

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REMEMBERING RAN GIVILI THE LAST HOSTAGE
WHOSE FAMILY IS STILL WAITING FOR HIM