



HARIF HANDLE WITH CARE

# THE ELEVENTH PLAGUE

When a father discovers his teenage son has included "genocide" in their family's contemporary Passover Haggadah, they disagree about whether they should discuss difficult moral questions at the Seder table.



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It was a proud moment for me. Every year I build our family haggadah with all my favorite additions and alterations. The “points” we give for asking a good question, the four children role play show, and the ten modern plagues. I love updating our seder night to reflect what’s happening in the world each year, encouraging the kids to relate to Judaism as a living tradition.

This year I was especially proud, when Joshua, my 16 year old, offered to write the modern plagues himself. Ignoring a twinge of sadness at letting go of one of my favorite tasks, I delighted in such an expression of connection from my teenager. In addition to spilling a drop of wine every time we call out each of the plagues that God wreaked on the Egyptians, we also call out the plagues of the modern era. Slavery, exploitation, fossil fuels, genocide...

“Wait a minute! Josh! Come over here,” I called. “What the hell is this?”

“It’s the list of modern plagues I came up with,” replied Josh coolly.

“Genocide? What’s that referring to?”

He looked at me with that disdain that only teenagers can conjure.

“What do you think it’s referring to, Dad?”

“No way. You’re not bringing up that word at our Seder night. Not in relation to Israel. No way.”

“What?” drawled Josh, “I put in “Kidnapping” as number 8. I thought that would even things out.”

“Even what things out?”

“They’ve kidnapped and held hundreds hostage, and we... We’re on the genocide.”

## THE ELEVENTH PLAGUE

I didn't know where to put myself. It was the glib way he dropped that word, and the way he knew that however horrifically Hamas had treated the hostages, it could not "even out" an accusation of genocide.

"I don't like the use of that word, Josh. Whatever concerns we may have for Gazan civilians, it's not a genocide, unless you go along with a wholesale redefinition of the word. I personally think it's an antisemitic slur to use that word against Jews."

"The word," repeated Josh. "Who cares about the word? All right then, let's not call it genocide. How about we spill the wine with the word plafitinity? And we can explain that we invented the word plafitinity to refer to razing an entire region to the ground, preventing humanitarian aid, and killing over 20,000 children?" He put up his hand in admission, "I know, I know, we got those numbers from the Hamas authorities. They probably exaggerated the numbers. So shall we say only 10,000 children killed? Only a few thousand children blown up? Is that not a modern plague, Dad?"

I took a breath to calm myself. It didn't help.

"I'm not arguing about numbers, Josh. The word genocide suggests there's been a wholesale, premeditated massacre against innocents. But that's what Hamas wrought on the kibbutzniks on October 7th. What's been going on in Gaza ever since is called a war. Hamas declared war on us, and we've been responding. We've been responding with terrible force, and thousands of innocents have died. It's terrible, but that's what happens in wars. If it was a genocide, how is it so many Israeli soldiers have been killed? By whom?"

"Maybe it's both? Wouldn't be the first time there was a war accompanied

#### THE ELEVENTH PLAGUE

by a genocide. How about our modern plagues one and two are war and genocide?"

I was getting nowhere.

Josh sighed. "Dad, to be honest, I don't mind if we do or don't put that word into our haggadah. I don't want to talk about a word. I want us to talk about what the hell is going on over there? And it will come up, won't it? Our whole family around the table together, of course we're going to talk about it. But if we only sigh and make faces, and shrug, and talk about what words are right to describe a modern plague, then I think I'm going to scream. I mean come on, Dad, *ma nishtana*? What's different? Why is this the only plague we avoid? Is it because it's Jews who are sending this plague? Can we talk about that?"

## GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Should they avoid talking about this "modern plague?" at the Passover Seder? At any time?
- To what extent, if at all, is Israel culpable for the death of Gazan civilians?



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