

# *I Survived the Ten Plagues of Egypt*

## By Ariella Benor

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I'm one of the lucky ones. My job has shade. I grow and harvest fruit trees, delivering most of the fruits to Pharaoh. Climbing to the top of a mango tree, I look into the distance at the pyramids, where the Israelites are working tirelessly building them. I glance to the right at the brick-making area where they're completing the first step - mixing sand and water. At least I'm paid in two fruits per tree every day - they get nothing. Looking back at my trees, I pick a ripe mango and throw it into the basket on the ground. I climb down, hang from a lower branch, and let go. Dropping on the ground, I stand up and head over to the plantain trees, where I take a knife out of my pocket and hack at the stem that attaches a ripe bunch to the tree. It falls, and I heave it from the ground and choose two from the bunch to take home. Putting the rest in my basket, I sit on the grass and scratch a mosquito bite.

Picking up my water jug and shovel, I get to work on expanding the orchard, this time with pomegranate seeds. Turning the dry dirt over, I pour some water over it. I turn the dirt over again and put more water on it. I repeat this until the dirt looks healthier. Picking another two jugs from my stash in a pile on the grass, I jog over across the sandstone path to the edge of the Nile. My feet burn. I don't have shoes. There, I fill one jug with rich, healthy soil and the other with mud. On the way back, I stop at the Chicken Shack to purchase eggs. The shells are good for plants.

"Good afternoon, Zahra. Did you come for eggs or chicks?" The chicken lady has always been nice to me. "Eggs, please! My trees need some extra strength. My best friend Kana says that I should prepare for not having any water."

"Egyptian kids these days. Always making something up to distress other people. Don't listen to her, *aesel*." *Aesel* means honey in Coptic.

"Oh, she's not Egyptian."

"Oh! Did she emigrate from beyond the Nile then?"

"Close enough. Anyways, should I pay in money or fruit?"

"I'll give you five eggs for one papaya and four dates."

"Eight eggs."

"Six eggs."

"Seven eggs."

"Fine. Seven."

I take the eggs and place them in my fabric pouch that I had sewn onto my shirt, which I call a "pocket." I put down my jugs, run to grab my "I get to take this home" basket, and run back to pay for the eggs. I hand over the papaya and dates and pick up my mud and dirt jugs again, going back to my little orchard. I pour the thick mud over the soil that I'll plant pomegranate seeds in and crack the eggs into an empty jug. Crushing the shells into my Nile soil, I mix it up and pour that over the mud. Now, I plant the

pomegranate seeds. Eight holes. Pomegranate seeds in the holes. More Nile eggshell dirt on top. Some plain eggshells on the top. Done! I make my rounds and collect two fruits from every tree that I haven't already. Putting those in my pocket, I pick up my water jug and my egg liquid jug, leaving the dirt and mud, and head home. Passing a square of Israelite homes, I turn and find the one with the reed roof. I knock on the sandstone wall. Kana lifts the animal skin that she uses as a door.

"Did you follow my advice about the trees?"

"Yeah, I took extra care of them, but a tarp over the whole thing wouldn't work because they need sunlight."

"Oh... well, I'm not entirely sure how the blood water thing will work yet. It might not rain blood. But I have no idea. All I know is it has something to do with water and blood."

"Well, thanks for warning me. And, for our deal, half of my fruit." I pick out one of each and hand it to her. She nods.

"As promised, your reed sandals." She hands me a pair of yellowy green sandals. They have thick soles made out of many layers of reeds bound together with dried mud and twine, a softer layer of fig leaves on top where the foot goes, and two over-the-foot straps, one on the front and one on the heel made out of bendy reeds wrapped in a plantain leaf. The heel one has dried jasmine and poppy flowers attached with more twine. They're beautiful. I haven't had shoes in four years – since I was 10.

"Wow. They're beautiful! Thank you so much! These are worth much more than 7 pieces of fruit. Way more. Shoes are expensive, and these are so beautiful!"

"They're for you!"

"No way. I'm giving you more."

"No, you don't have to."

"Yes I do. Do you know how much this would be worth in the market? A third of a deben!"

"Wow. Maybe I should start selling these."

"You're missing the point, Kana. You basically gave me 30 grams of gold for seven pieces of fruit. That's not a fair trade at all. Do you remember my brownish orange and white goat? I'll give you the fruit I already gave you and a baby goat. That's a fair trade."

"No, a baby goat is too much, you need those goats. That milk for trading is basically half of your job."

"Hmm. Then what do you want?"

"Um. Do you still carve beads?"

I nod.

I used to be really into carving beads out of everything I could find: wood, glass, stone and clay, even some gold and silver. I even have some shell ones. "Let me run and get my beads. I'll be right back". I run home as quickly as I can, put my egg liquid on the table, and find that basket with the beads. I cover it with cloth so they don't fall out, and run back.

"Here are the beads. Be careful, most of them are breakable." Kana's eyes light up as she takes the basket and listens to the beads roll and clink over each other.

"They sound so cool!" She lifts the fabric and sees all the beads lying there. "Wow! Is that crystal?" She holds a particularly shiny clear one up to the sun.

"No, it's glass with silver designs."

"All of these are so pretty! Thank you so much!"

“Thank you for making such pretty shoes!” I hold the reed footwear carefully. Putting them on the ground, I carefully step into them. They’re soft on my calloused feet, and the sand isn’t burning my toes anymore.

“Well, I have to go, but remember, the plague starts tomorrow morning.” Kana says. We wave goodbye and I walk home.

The house that every Egyptian gets for free starts out all sandstone brick, with a wooden door and a wooden door frame. But over time they erode. By now, the outside of mine looks like a combination of seven different houses, with different kinds of wood, different kinds of sandstone brick, and in some places, the holes are filled with just bare rocks. It’s broken, patched up, and patched up again. There’s no door, only a bunch of beaded strings. The whole thing is a constant reminder of how poor I am, but I know I’m lucky compared to the Israelites. I place a pot of water over the firepit and pour the egg liquid into that. It’ll poach slowly during the night in the embers. I take off my new sandals and place them next to the doorway. Mom and Dad will get home late from helping the slaves, which they do after they finish their work for the day, so I just go to bed.



Blood. I smell blood. Opening my eyes one at a time, I sniff again. *Why would I smell blood?* Then I remember the plague. Something with water and blood. A surge of energy hits me and I hop out of bed. Remembering how I poached some eggs last night, I go and check on it. But the water isn’t water anymore! It’s... blood! Where’s a place with a lot of water? I sprint to the Nile. The whole thing is made out of blood! I step back in shock. What about the bricks in the pyramids? They have water in them. Racing to one, I see that every brick is orange-ish. They’re usually yellowish cream colored. I run back home. Mom is just stirring, and Dad is already up.

“Oh, hey Zahra, I was just looking for you. Would you please go to the town well and get some water?”

“Actually, remember when I told you there was going to be a plague?”

“That’s not going to actually happen. I know it’s sad, but I don’t think the Israelites will be free. If they had a god, their god would have freed them already.”

“No. It did actually happen. All the water turned into blood. I saw the Nile. It was all red.” Someone knocks on the outside wall. I look outside, and Kana is standing there.

“Pharaoh said we can leave!”

“Congratulations! When? How do you know?”

“Today. I know because I was standing outside the throne room window since the sun started coming out. Pharaoh said to Moses that we could leave if the plague stopped. God is going to stop the plague.” I hug her. Suddenly, the ground rumbles and shakes. I fall onto my knees. It gets stronger. Kana also drops, and Dad clings to the table. It feels like the ground is jumping. Sand bounces into the house. A branch from a nearby tree falls. Kana looks up and nudges me. I look to where she’s looking. The pyramids with the newly orange bricks. The orange is draining from the tops! Gaining speed, the orange is condensing into red and sliding off the pyramids, and the pyramids crumble to sand. The blood is racing toward the Nile. I turn towards the Nile, where the river is blocked from sight by palm trees and houses. The same phenomenon is coming from there, also! The red starts rising from the sand, a hovering ring of pure blood coming toward us and getting smaller as it does. It’s right in front of us now. The liquid goes through the walls of

the house as if they weren't even there. I flatten myself to the ground. Kana stands, though, and the blood turns to water as it touches her. We watch the ring of blood enclose into a sphere in the middle of the town. Then it turns into water and shoots back to where it came from. The sand mountains that were the pyramids turn back into bricks that turn back into pyramids. The Nile water goes back behind the trees. The air doesn't smell like blood anymore. The sky is clear and blue. I blink, trying to comprehend what just happened. I turn to Kana.

"I'm so happy you're going to be free now! Will you tell me when you leave?" She nods, happy.

"I have to pack now, I'll make sure to stop by your house before I leave." We hug, and she goes off to the Israelite square of houses. I turn to Dad.

"Believe me now?" He nods, still kind of in shock. "Well, I should go to my orchard. I'll see you later!" I slip on my sandals, take a pitcher out of the cabinet, and run off, skidding on the sand, toward the center of town, where my little grove stands. It's already getting pretty hot, so I make sure to stop on the way to draw some water from the well.



I feel something slimy and cold on my face. I twitch. I'm so tired, and it's really early. What is a slimy and cold thing doing on my face? It ribbits. I bolt upright, and it falls onto the ground. Wiping slime from my eyelid, I hear a croak. And then another. Opening my eyes, I see what seems like hundreds of frogs in my room, their features murky in the pre-dawn glow. Why are there frogs in my room? It's not even light out yet. I get out of bed and go outside. There are frogs everywhere. I just stand and stare at all these frogs. And as soon as the sky turns from blackish purple to lighter bluish purple, the frogs all start croaking. It's so loud that I have to crouch down with my head in between my knees. My neighbors start coming outside. *Is this a plague? Did Pharaoh change his mind?* I run to Kana's house, trying not to step on frogs. When I get to the Israelite square that she lives in, the noise stops. I have to flick my ears to make sure they still work. The frogs aren't coming over here, either. That's so weird! I step off the sandstone path and the noise starts again. I quickly step on it again. So as long as I'm in the Israelite neighborhood, I guess the plagues don't affect me. Two days pass. My parents and I have temporarily moved into an alleyway next to Kana's house.

I go to work, but I have to hold a little bit of stone that comes off of a brick from an Israelite house. And it only works for about twenty minutes. After twenty minutes, the noise comes back and the frogs swarm me again. Once two more days pass, Pharaoh says the Israelites can go. The frogs leave. But he changes his mind once the frogs have gone. Kana thinks the next plague will be related to bugs of some sort.



I don't take itchiness very well. A lot of the time, I just scratch until it bleeds. So when I wake up with a bad case of head lice, I have to rub honey into my hair so that I don't scratch all my hair out. I spend three days with honey-coated hair. Pharaoh says the Israelites can go, and the lice leave. But he changes his mind again, and Kana couldn't get into the meeting, so we have no idea what's coming next. But she suspects that the plagues will only get worse. I make sure the bead strings that block the entrance to the house are as closed as they can be before I go to bed.



I wake up and immediately hop out of bed, expecting the worst. But... nothing's out of the ordinary. Maybe this is a dream? But if it's a dream, I wouldn't know it's a dream while I'm in it. Right? I cautiously step outside, feeling the cool sand against my feet. Nothing is happening. I find the sandstone path and follow it to the Nile. Shielded by reeds, palm trees, and other plants, I find an area that I haven't explored yet and sit on a rock, staring at the rushing water. *Why is nothing happening?* A few minutes pass and there's a noise behind me. The reeds part and Kana steps forward.

"I found you! I've been looking everywhere."

"Hey Kana? Do you know why nothing's happening?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I see no plague. No noise, no blood, no itchiness, no screaming."

"Another slave who got into the meeting told me that this plague is just for Pharaoh. So you don't have to worry!" I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Then, in that case, tag, you're it!"

I run into the reeds. This is a game my cousin made up, where if you're it, you try to tag someone else and if you're not it, you try not to get tagged. If you get tagged, you're the new it. We call it "tag." Kana chases after me but quickly loses me in the reeds. She looks right at me and I duck. Too late, though. She runs toward me. I try to get up and run away but she tags me.

"You're it!" We play for a while and then go back home.



One side of the pita is cooked, so I turn it over. Whoops, it's a little bit burned. I flip over another one. Someone shouts from outside. I look up from the half-baked pita. The person shouting outside is saying something.

"Crocodiles in the palace! Crocodiles in the palace!"

I perk up. *A plague only for Pharaoh.* This could get interesting. I look back at my pita, look at the door, and look at the pita. I flip one more and run out and down the path to the part of the Nile shore where Kana does her slave-work, making reed canoes. I find her trying to bend a stiff stem, her knees coated in mud. She looks up at me.

"A crocodile is in the palace!" I say. At the same time, Kana says,

"A crocodile is in Pharaoh's palace!" She chuckles. "If in 7,000 years someone writes about us, they'll probably say the whole country was overrun with crocodiles." I laugh.

"And lions, too, probably," I add.

"Lions and snakes and every wild animal."

"Well, I'm glad we aren't overrun with lions and snakes," I remark. I'm scared of snakes. "I just realized I've never helped you make a canoe before. How does it work?"

"You want to help?" Kana hands me a curved knife. "Pick some reeds that are green. Not yellow or brown. Put them in a pile." I nod and start slicing a bright green stem. It's harder than it looks. I thought it would cut in one clean slice, but instead, I have to hack at it a lot. With every hack, I have to yank the

curved dagger out with all my might. It takes at least twenty hacks to cut one reed. I put it on the ground by Kana's feet. Sitting on my knees, I start on another one. As I'm in the middle of the fourth one, I remember I'm cooking pitas. I jump up and run back home. They're completely burnt. I quickly take them off of the coals. Baking bread is not my strong suit. Usually they turn out doughy or burnt. One time, I forgot to light the fire and didn't notice for some reason. The dough was just sitting on rocks on a pile of wood for 20 minutes until I realized that it wasn't cooking.



The eggs have run out, so in the morning I have to go to the chicken lady. I make a stop at my trees to collect a few bananas for trade. When I get to the Chicken Shack, I see a papyrus note on the wooden counter. It reads:

*Cow is sick. If you need eggs, come back tomorrow.*

That's sad. The chicken lady doubles as the milk lady, so if her cow dies, she'll lose half of her profit. I'll have to get eggs tomorrow. But I'm all the way over here, so I should get *something*. I've been thinking of taking up my bead-making hobby again, and there's a shop that sells everything I need. Glass, shells, wood, even a little bit of silver, crystal, and gold. And special knives for carving. I think the shopkeeper got the materials left over from building the palace. I step out of the Chicken Shack and go toward the richer stores, the ones closer to the palace. I see which one it is right away because it has the palace insignia on it, and a real wooden door. But when I go inside, a similar card is on the counter.

*My cow is sick. I'll come back in two days.*

Another sick cow? Is there another cow sickness epidemic? There was one a few years ago. Or maybe this is the next plague. If it is, I'm glad I don't have any cows. But then I remember something. *The goats!* I run out and back home, around the exterior, made of sandstone, wood, and brick, to the wooden pen. They're all there, looking healthy. I breathe a sigh of relief. I'm glad that they're okay. Maybe it's only for cows. My family is too poor for cows. Only the rich have cows - they're sacred, so that means they're expensive. This time, the plague lasts a week. Pharaoh says that the Israelites can go. But it's a surprise to no one when he changes his mind.



Everyone has the boils, even the Israelites, although theirs aren't so bad. Earlier, when lice was a plague, I had to coat my hair with honey so I wouldn't have scars on my scalp. This time, I don't need any help with not itching. The boils hurt too much. My entire body is covered with them. But the few that only itch and don't hurt are bleeding by the end of the day. It's over in four days. These plagues are starting to get really unbearable.



Something lands on the roof. I shiver and pull the blanket up to my chin. Another one lands. And another. Another one lands, and I hear the roof splintering. Bolting upright, I jump out of bed and run outside. Ice is falling from the still-dark sky. It's freezing cold, and ice keeps falling. Suddenly, a hot wind blasts downward, and the falling ice catches on fire! Adrenaline shoots through me. Fire really scares me. One time, my neighbor's house caught on fire. She had to rebuild the entire thing. One lands right next to me, and I jump back and stare at it for a second. The fire isn't going out. The ice isn't melting. What's happening? One lands on the roof of my house, the wood cracks a bit, and the fire starts to spread. The roof is the only completely wooden part of the house. I start to panic.

"Mom!" I call out. "Dad!" How are they still asleep?

There's a pomegranate tree right next to the wall, and I climb it, dropping onto the roof. I stomp on the spreading flames and they go out, but when I get to the flaming piece of ice, it won't go out. It keeps trying to spread. I kick the hailstone into the sand, climb off of the roof, and throw handfuls of sand on top of it. *Why isn't it going out?* At least it's under the sand. More are landing on the roof, though. I climb up and keep kicking them off, and smothering the flames that have spread already. One hits me. Ouch! I jump away from it. Climbing down from the roof again, I take a big bowl from inside and fill it with sand, which I dump onto the roof. I do this until fire can't spread on it anymore.

I look over at the Israelite houses and see that there are no flaming hailstones over there. But they are landing on my neighbors' homes, so I take my bowl and cover the roofs of my closest neighbors' houses with sand too. I can do nothing about the walls, though. One of my neighbors steps outside his house and screams, jumping back in. Suddenly, a freezing cold wind blows from the north. A hailstone lands next to me on the sandy ground, and under it a sheet of ice appears. Every time a hailstone lands on the ground, a sheet of ice appears under it. One lands on my shoulder, and I hear more than feel the ice, crackling as it spreads a bit. I break the ice off. Why am I standing outside? I run inside and pull my blanket up. I doze off, waking up every few minutes to a scream or a thunk on the roof.

When I wake up again, it's light out. It's too hot to have a blanket, so I get up. There's a ceramic cup on the table with well water in it, so I drink that. Then I think of the hail. I push back the beaded strings that hang in the doorway. The flaming hail pieces are piling on top of each other, and more are falling. Mom is running around and screaming, and Dad is running toward a neighbor whose wood pile has caught on fire. I don't know how much more I can take of these plagues. Two of my neighbors are running around with shovels and shoveling around the hail pieces. Good idea. I find a shovel leaning against the wall and run outside, clearing a space of hailstones. I start digging in the sand, and pretty soon I have a big pit. I then shovel a bunch of hailstones into it, topping it with more sand. Wiping the sweat from my face, I survey my work. I dig another one. After I'm finished, I start digging a long trench, pushing hailstones into it as I go. Kana walks up to me. The hailstones move out of her way.

"What are you doing?"

"Digging a trench to the Nile. If I get water to flow into it, like they do in the farms, then the fire can't spread in it, and hail will land in it instead of all over the place." I dodge a hailstone. She bends down and starts to help me, using her hands. Together, we make it to the Nile pretty quickly. The water flows into it! I run with it as it flows. A hailstone splashes in it and ice doesn't spread, and neither does fire! Yes! I dig a little branch coming off of the main trench, and the water flows into it also. Kana makes another one.



This is going to get easier. I connect my branch to the main trench. I stop to rest, then dig another, longer one. This doesn't seem so bad now. Some of my neighbors are helping on the trench, and even though the hail is still falling, at least a lot of it is landing in the water. I walk around the neighborhood. The other house squares are doing similar things, although none of them have made a trench to the Nile. They're mostly digging holes. Suddenly, the hailstones around me melt. The fire on them goes out. Yes! It's over! I'm so glad that didn't last long.



I hear a buzzing sound. Looking up from milking a goat, I see a yellowish brownish cloud coming over the horizon. What is that? The buzzing sounds get louder as the cloud gets closer. A buzzing, brownish yellow cloud. Never heard of it before. I stand up and shade my eyes from the sun, trying to get a better look at it. It looks like a swarm of some sort. Bugs? I step out of the pen and climb the pomegranate tree, stepping onto the roof. I'm careful to avoid the part that was damaged from the hail. Yup, that's definitely bugs. It's coming closer. Should I stay or run? I decide to run. But once I reach the mountains, wind pushes me back. I lean into the wind, but it still pushes me back. It gains strength and hurls me backward. The cloud of bugs - I can see now that they're locusts - are swarming over Egypt, so thick that I can't see through it. I run back and try to find Kana, but I'm only halfway to her house when the locusts engulf me. I close my eyes and clamp my hands over my ears. They're so loud! I curl up into a ball on the ground to protect my nose. I've never seen so many locusts at once. They crawl all over me. All I hear is locusts. Then, I hear something else. Kana.

"Zahra! ZAHRA!" She keeps calling my name. I almost open my mouth to answer her, but then think better of it. Locusts in my mouth does not sound like a good idea. I manage a squeak.

"Zahra! Where are you?" She's closer now. The locusts swarm all over me, clicking, buzzing, and screeching.

"Zahra! ZAHRA!" The voice is right above me now. A foot bumps my back. "Zahra?" A hand touches my back, and all the locusts on me fly away. The sound is muted. I uncurl myself and open my eyes, taking my hands off of my ears.

"Thanks."

Kana stays with me for the rest of the day. We walk to the Nile, watching the locusts devour all things green. They really are fast eaters. The trees are stripped to bare wood, the reeds gone. It's a sad sight to see.

"Zahra?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you think this is fair? All these plagues that you have to go through?"

"Yeah. You're a slave. No one should be owned by someone else."

"But... What about Egyptians like you? Who don't own any slaves? Who don't benefit from slavery and are nice to the Israelites?"

"Where are you going with this?"

"I'm saying, *you* don't deserve it. Other Egyptians might, but people like you don't." Suddenly, all the locusts lift off of the ground at once. They start moving in sync, toward the East. They form a V-formation like the birds that come here once a year, and they fly off over the horizon. In front of us there's a desolate landscape filled with sand and dead locusts. The bare, bark-stripped trees look like spines. I pick up a dead locust.



“That’s a lot of dead locusts. Do you think we could eat them?”

“Yeah, probably. One of my cousins really likes eating crickets, and they’re pretty much the same thing.”  
We eat well tonight.



A week later and the land is recovering. Everyday, some plant appears again. It’s like magic. Kana is quick to point out that it’s not magic, it’s her God. Soon, the trees have bark and leaves again. The grass and plants are back. The Nile is no longer only mud and water. It feels so good to have vegetation again.



Something blows into my open mouth. Sand. Gross. I spit it out, but more sand blows. I open my eyes, still half asleep. There’s a thin layer of sand on the floor. I guess today is going to be windy. I’m glad. These past few days have been so hot, and it’s nice to have some cooler weather for a change. Even the hail day five days ago was hot. Light streams through a small hole in the wall. Sand blows through it also. Suddenly, I feel a change in the air pressure. Wind starts going much faster, and the sand streams through the hole at an angle, pelting me. *Sandstorm*. The word comes to my brain automatically. There hasn’t been one in my lifetime, but Mom told me about them. Sandstorms mean leave as fast as you can. Find higher ground. Cover the well to protect it. Take all livestock with you. Take as much food and water as you can. I spring into action, waking up Mom and Dad, and getting outside as quickly as I can. There’s already sand inside the well, but I slide the stone top onto it anyways. The sand is already blowing pretty fast, but I can see an even bigger cloud coming. I could wake up all my neighbors individually, but there’s no time for that. I take a deep breath and scream as loudly as I can. I hope people wake up. Because if they don’t, they could be buried alive. I run around the house to the goat pen and pick a little one up. I can’t fit anything else in my arms. Mom comes with a rope and ties it around the necks of two older ones. Dad takes another little goat. I open the gate to set the others free. It’s their only chance of survival.

The bigger cloud engulfs us. The sun is blocked. The sand pelts my face, even though for some reason it’s not in my mouth, and I can breathe just fine. Already the house and pen have a few inches of sand on the bottom. I trip on a rock. In a few seconds, I have sand up to my waist. The goat in my arms is struggling to wiggle free and succeeds, the wind hurtling its small body through the air. I lose sight of it in the dusty darkness. The sand gets thicker. Now I can’t even see my parents. Stumbling around, I find myself clinging to a tree. I feel around for a branch. Finding one, I pull myself up and set my feet on it, finding a higher branch. I keep climbing this way. Soon, I feel the branches getting thinner, so I stop climbing. I cling tighter. The wind gets faster, flinging me off the tree. I land on my side. If the sand weren’t so soft, I would be badly hurt. Standing, I feel around. Stumbling against the wind, I find myself in a clump of reeds. Grabbing a bunch, I tie my feet to a few and tie my legs down, too. I use some others to just cling. I try to hang on.

Suddenly, the sand seems frozen in midair. Then the wind shoots back the opposite way. All the sand lifts and goes back where it came from. I’m hurtled through the air again. I find myself sitting in a tree. A baby goat flies by, and I catch it. It was the same one I was holding before. I slowly climb down from the tree, my knees shaking. I lean over onto one side and a bunch of sand falls out of my ear. I do the same on the

other side. Brushing all the sand off of my clothes, I take a deep breath. I'm so glad it's all over and everyone's ok.

I'm just finishing sweeping sand out of the house when Kana appears at the doorway. I stand up. She's holding a plate of the special braided bread she makes.

"Why is there so much sand in your house?"

"That giant sandstorm."

"What sandstorm?"

"What do you mean?" Huh? "You didn't see that sandstorm at all?"

"No...?" She pulls off a chunk of her braided bread and hands it to me. I take a bite.

"Maybe that was a plague?"

"I guess that's the only explanation." Kana fiddles with her hair.

"I guess." Mom walks up to the doorway, and Kana hands her a chunk of the bread. "I'm assuming Pharaoh said you guys could leave, considering the sandstorm stopped like that. Hope he doesn't change his mind."

"Yeah," Kana sighs.



Three days pass. No news about Pharaoh changing his mind. But he's the kind of person who gives criminals false hope about not being decapitated, and the bad news hits twice as hard.



"Zahra!" Someone is banging on the wall and yelling my name. "Zahra! Come quickly!" I run from my bed and look out the doorway. Kana is standing there, sweating and panting.

"What is it?"

"Moses just... he... he made the announcement for the last plague." My eyes widen.

"Oh no. Is it bad?"

"It's the worst one yet."

"You say that every time!"

"He says it'll be the last plague."

"And how does he know that?"

"He just does."

"Well, what is it?"

"Death..."

"Everyone is gonna die?!"

"Death of the firstborn." I freeze. I'm an only child. "You need to prepare." I nod numbly. "Kill a baby lamb. I need to also. Um... I don't have a baby lamb. Could I take one of yours?" I nod. "It's supposed to be perfect or something. And a boy. Oh, it could also be a baby goat. Um... watch it until the fourteenth day of this month. Maybe thirteenth? No, it was fourteenth. Kill it at twilight. Take some blood and put it on the doorposts and lintel of your house. Then eat it roasted. Apparently, that part's important. Eat all of it, and burn the leftovers. You're supposed to eat it super quickly with shoes on and a stick in your hand. Also, you're supposed to borrow gold and silver from your neighbor. You already gave me those beads, I'll give you a few silver and gold ones back. Later that night, God will kill every firstborn, human and animal.

But the people who have the blood on their doorposts and lintel will be fine. Oh, right. Eat the lamb with bitter herbs and unleavened bread. Eat that unleavened bread for seven more days – that part’s important. What else? Um... oh yeah. Paint the blood on your doorpost and lintel with hyssop. And don’t go outside.” I bite my thumbnail and then immediately regret it because I had a boil right under it and touching the scar hurts.

“Kana? How do you know this will work?”

“I don’t. I just have to blindly trust in it.”

“Will you help me?” I ask nervously. I don’t think I can remember all that on my own.

“Yeah, we’ll help each other. But first, the goat or sheep.” I nod and lead her outside and to the back where the wooden pen is. Opening the gate, I bend down to pick up a baby goat, carob brown and sandy brown, little horns that are just starting to grow. He licks my face. I hand him to Kana.

“Now you pick one for me.” She sits on her haunches, and a baby goat saunters over to her. He has caramel brown and carob brown spots and little white speckles. He has the same just-growing horns. She picks him up and holds him out to me. I take him and put him in the cat’s pen, taking the cat out so she doesn’t do the slaughtering for me. The cat looks up briefly and then goes back to her nap, this time on the sandy ground. Kana brings her goat home.

Flour and water. Salt. Oil. I mix it all up and start kneading it. I take a flat rock that’s been cleaned and put it in the fire to heat up. Taking the unleavened dough, I split it into pieces and flatten them into pita shape, spreading them out on the now heated stone, and let them cook. Meanwhile, I run over to Kana’s house to get a silver bead and a gold bead. But she’s not home. I check the place where she makes reed canoes. Not there either. *Where is she?* I run from her house to her work area. When I get back to her house, I see her walking home.



I run home, clutching the beads in my hands. I’m so glad I found Kana. Kana said that if I don’t follow the instructions exactly, I might end up dead. And I don’t like the idea of that, so I’m happy I have the beads. When I get inside, I smell something burning. What is it? I go to the fireplace. The unleavened pita! It’s just black ashes! I frantically try to salvage some of the dust with a stick, but it’s useless. And I had used the last of the flour for this. Will it still work without the unleavened pita? I guess I just have to try.

I know that a type of bitter herb grows up in the mountains, so I’m hiking from the valley. Now what did it look like? Light green, kind of fuzzy. Close to the ground. Singular leaves, not a bush or tree. I find some growing out of a crack in a rock. Picking it, I put it in my pocket. It’s not a lot, but it’ll have to do. My foot slips on the shifty sand and I fall, but I regain my balance and lean against the rock, looking back at the valley that is my city. I wish people didn’t have to die. If Pharaoh wasn’t so stubborn, maybe they wouldn’t. Standing, I start the hike back down.

The next day, I gather some money and trading items and head to the marketplace. I have thirteen days to wait. I haven’t done something nice for Kana in a while, and she’s been so nice lately getting me out of these plagues. So I think I’m going to revisit that store that sells extra materials that weren’t used for the construction of the palace and get some materials. I never knew Kana loved beads so much. The person at the counter looks at me.

“Ah, an Israelite slave has something to beg for?” I blink. Did he just call me a slave?

“Um sir? I’m Egyptian, not a slave.”

“Oh, sorry. I thought you were a slave. If you’re not a slave, why do you dress like one? I mean... sorry about that. Uh... what can I do to make it up to you?” I wasn’t offended. He probably thought I was a slave because of the patches in my clothes and how I look poor. But I might as well take advantage of this.

“Well, I came for some wood, stone, shells, gold, silver, other metals, and crystal. But if you think I’m a slave, I could just walk out...”

“No, no, no, no, don’t leave. Look. I don’t usually do this, but just for you, I’ll give you everything for two thirds of a deben. It usually costs a whole deben. Just for you, two thirds of a deben. Plus a curved carving knife.” He quickly grabs everything and puts it into a large basket. I give him two thirds of a deben and pick up the basket. The richer stores are so weird.



“Twenty eight beads carved!” I say out loud, putting the one I just finished into the basket. It took so long to make. It’s wooden, but I put gold flakes on it, and it was really hard to even get a tiny chip of gold to come off the small square. I had to put it in the fireplace for so long before it softened the tiniest bit. And the only bits that I could get off of the block were from the corners. It might take a while to get the hang of this again. Good thing I have five days left before the plague hits. The other beads I carved were just plain wood, although one of them looks like a butterfly. My fingers are hurting, so I should probably do something else.



I burned the Sacrifice. Why do I burn everything I try to cook? It’s all black and crispy. When I touch it, it erodes under my fingertip. Gross. I don’t think I should eat that. I put it outside for the vultures. At least I have the goat’s blood. Stepping into the darkening outside, I find a patch of hyssop and pick one. I dip it in the blood and paint the doorposts. Mom walks out and gives me a weird look but doesn’t ask any questions. Jumping up, I try to reach the lintel, but I only manage to splatter a few beads. I grab a nearby rock and stand on it. I still can’t reach. I climb the pomegranate tree and go onto the roof, leaning over. I can reach it now. Just in case, I cover all of it in blood, even the part that’s inside. I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep tonight. I’m worried that it’s not going to work because of how I burnt the Sacrifice and the pita. I go inside, careful to make sure the beaded strings are as close together as possible. The sky is dark. It’s night. I eat a banana for dinner and roast the bitter herbs, taking a few bites of that too. Mom and Dad are home. Neither of them are firstborns, though. I grab my blanket and wrap myself in it, sitting behind the beads in the doorway. I’m terrified, but some messed-up, twisted part of me wants to see. And curiosity usually wins. Anyways, it’s probably better to be as close to the blood on the doorway as possible while still being inside. There’s a few holes in the wall in my room, and whoever will kill the firstborns might think it’s a doorway without blood. I wait.

And wait.

And wait.

After about an hour, I’ve eaten two more bananas, and it’s pitch black outside. It also dropped about ten degrees. Nothing’s happening. Suddenly, I hear something. A whooshing sound, like wind. That doesn’t

usually happen unless it's already windy. I sit up. The night sky gets a reddish tint. The whooshing sound gets closer. I feel my heartbeat picking up. Suddenly, I see something flying in the corner of my eye. I turn and see a sphere of blood hovering in the air. It flies down the street, going into a house. I hear someone crying out, and then the cry stops abruptly. The blood comes out a little bigger. Someone runs down the sandstone path. A little girl. Why can't she see the blood? The blood surrounds the kid, moving with her. It pushes her to a standstill, and I see terror on her face. The blood goes into her mouth, into her ears, into her nose, into her eyes. The kid cries out and the blood extracts itself. The girl's eyes get black all over, and she drops down. Not moving, not breathing. The blood is bigger. I sit there in shock, clutching my blanket. The blood comes up to me. The strings of beads clink against each other. It hesitates, and then goes away. It goes into another house. I don't see anything. I hear a cry, and then another. A crash. The blood comes out much bigger. It comes toward me again, but this time it goes around the house. I hear a goat bleating, and then stopping. The blood comes back darker and a bit bigger. Suddenly, it goes higher into the sky, toward the moon. The blood splits into thousands of droplets, and each of them goes to a different house. I see some go into the Israelite neighborhood and then immediately fly out, toward Egyptian houses. Walking outside, I climb onto the pomegranate tree and then up to the roof. I see the droplets all go into different houses. A cry comes from one house, another, another. The cries are so loud I have to cover my ears. Each cry is a life lost. Tears are streaming down my face. The blood whooshes out and all the droplets reconfigure into a sphere again. A giant sphere of blood that contains all the blood of the Egyptian firstborns. It disappears. The icy silence sinks in. I slowly, quietly climb down the tree and go inside. Every time I close my eyes, I see that kid's face in terror and their eyes turning black. So I lie in bed, not closing my eyes. The red slowly drains from the sky, which returns to indigo.

After a few hours, the sun starts to rise. I get up and go to the well. Hauling the bucket up, I wash my face and then sit on the stone, watching the sun slowly come up over the Nile. The sky turns from indigo to orange and yellow to blue, as the rising sun melts from orange to yellow to white. I go inside before people start waking up. The screams start. Big, sobbing screams, starting from one house and then spreading like a wildfire. I cover my head with my blanket. If I wasn't friends with Kana, I would be dead now. I wrap the blanket tighter around me. The screaming continues and then sputters out. I hear my parents run outside. They talk to a neighbor. I catch snippets of conversation.

"My firstborn son..."

"Why is..."

"Don't know..."

Another person's voice comes in now.

"My child..."

"Also a firstborn..."

"So sorry..." I stand up and walk to the beads, holding them part-way open, like a curtain. Mom is talking to someone, Dad is talking to someone else. Other neighbors wander, looking numb. One is kneeling over a body in the middle of the path. *The kid I saw earlier.*

"You too..."

"She wasn't even sick..."

"What happened..."

"My eldest..."

I hug myself. Coming outside, I wander among the mourning. Mom turns around and sees me. She taps Dad's shoulder. They both run up to me and hug me.

"I'm so glad you're ok!" Dad mumbles through tears. Mom still hasn't let go of me.

"I love you guys so much." I sob.

I let my feet carry me throughout the city. Somehow, I end up at Pharaoh's palace. I hear screams, shrieks, sobs. I walk up to the wall and put my hand on a stone. My muscles itch, begging me to run away. I follow the itch and run. I run where my feet carry me, and I find myself at the Nile. I brush past the reeds, in a daze. The mud on my feet is soft and cool. I find a rock that looks familiar and sit on it. I put my hand in the water. It's a calmer, more shallow part of the giant river. I hear rustling behind me. The reeds part. I don't bother turning. I know it's Kana.

"Hey," she says.

"Hey," I reply.

"It's really sad about all those people." Kana says heavily. I nod. "This place is where we played that 'tag' game that your cousin made up, right?"

"Yeah, that was fun," I say, smiling a bit for the first time all day. "I like hiding in the reeds."

"I never find you when you do that! Except for that one time." I smile a little more. Then I think about how I burnt the Sacrifice and pita, and I shift on my rock, thinking. I probably should have died, considering I burnt the Sacrifice and the pita. Why didn't I die? Turning to Kana, I start to say something and then hesitate, turning back to the river.

"Kana?"

"Yeah?" She answers, still chuckling a bit.

"I think God made a mistake. I think I should have died."

"What?! Why?" She turns to face me.

"I burnt the pita. And the Sacrifice."

"What?! Wait, what?! You burned the Sacrifice AND the pita?" I nod. "Come on. We need to talk to Moses about this." Kana grabs me by the hand and pulls me up. We make our way through the reeds, and when we emerge from the vegetation, Kana pulls me left when I would normally go forward. We go past her working area where there's a half-finished canoe on the ground. A few minutes later, we arrive at a palm tree grove. Kana leads me inside the grove, and we come across a circle of tents. They're made out of hole-y fabric and sticks. They all have patches. A few have patches made out of leaves. I guess they ran out of fabric. In the middle of the circle, a firepit still has last night's embers in it. I wonder why they even lit a fire last night. Wouldn't they be inside during the Death of the Firstborn plague? A camel tied to a palm tree grunts at us. All of the tents have blood on the opening. A boy runs by, and another, younger boy holding a dried reed chases him. They look like they're Midianite. The younger boy trips over a root and drops his stick. Kana bends to pick it up.

"Thanks," he says.

"Where's Moses's tent? Do you know?" Kana asks him. He points to one, takes the stick, and runs after the older boy. Calling over his shoulder, he says,

"He's not here right now though! Come back later!" Kana walks to the tent and I follow. She sits on a rock. I sit on a root. We wait. Someone walks out of the tent. A woman with skin a bit lighter than my coppery brown, and long hair. She has golden earrings, indigo clothing, and green eyes.

"Hello. Are you guys Egyptian or Israelite?"

"I'm Israelite. She's Egyptian. Don't worry, we're friends. She's nice." Kana answers.

“Oh, ok then. Why are you here? My name’s Zipporah, by the way. Moses’s wife.”

“Well, we were going to ask Moses, but I guess we could ask you. This here’s Zahra.” Kana points to me.

“I’m Kana. Zahra’s firstborn, and she tried to follow my instructions, which were Moses’s instructions, but she burnt both the matzah and the Sacrifice. It doesn’t make sense why she isn’t dead right now. And we don’t know why she isn’t.” Zipporah nods thoughtfully. I dig my toes into the sand to avoid the hot top layer.

“We’re in the same boat. I did everything right, I even got Moses to check it. But I was still worried about dying in this plague because I’m also not Israelite and I’m a firstborn. But your experience made me realize that it’s not about following the instructions or being an Israelite, it’s about being a good person.”

“So you’re saying that the matzah and the sacrifice and stuff don’t matter at all?” Kana asks.

“I’m saying that God already knows who’s Israelite and who’s Egyptian without seeing the blood. He also knows who’s kind to Israelites and who’s not.”

Am I friendly to Israelites? *Am I?* I think about how close I am to Kana. I think about how I’m sometimes mistaken for a slave. I think about how I tried to help Kana cut reeds. I think about how I make beads for Kana. I think about that time when Kana and I gave twenty Israelite strangers dinner.

“Well, that sums up Zahra pretty well.” Kana stands and holds out a hand to help me up. “I think Pharaoh will actually let us go this time. You coming?” I nod and take her hand.



Mom and Dad walk together on the sand dunes. Kana and I run ahead, near the front of the Israelites, jumping down sand dunes and running over them, too. Egypt is gradually disappearing in the distance, but that’s ok. It was a broken place. The sea is ahead. Kana and I run down the sand dune, sliding a bit.



I step over a coral plant. It’s nighttime. The stars are bright. The people of Israel are walking through the split sea, speedily and quietly. Kana looks up at the sky beside me. I trip over a rock and stand up again. The waves that tower over us are filled with bioluminescence, little glowing blue specks. It’s beautiful. A dying fish flops around on the sand. I kick it back into the water. In the near distance, I see the end of the water. A little boy in front of me stops and puts his hand in the water. Someone ushers him forward. The ground is slowly rising – we’re reaching the end of the sea. I don’t know where we’re going, but I know we’ll be free.



Sources: Exodus (of course), Talmud Megillah, Midrash Rabbah: Exodus, Mekhilta d’Rabbi Yishmael, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Sefer Ha-Aggadah, The Jewish Study Bible, by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, The New Cambridge Bible Commentary: Exodus, by Carol Meyers, The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus, by Nahum Sarna, The Anchor Bible: Commentary by William H.C. Propp, Dreamworks’ The Prince of Egypt. People who helped with this midrash by providing sources or suggestions: Rabbi Sharon Brous, Professor Kristi Garroway, Teacher Nili Isenberg, Rabbi Jill Jacobs, Professor Jason Kalman, Rabbi David Kasher, Writer Michal Lemberger, Miriam Benor (Aunt Shves), Roberta Benor, David Benor, Mom, Dad, Dalia, and Aliza.