

Frogs Everywhere  
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The frogs in this week's parsha, Vaera, erupt into daily Egyptian life:

שמות ז'כ"ח וְשָׂרָץ הָיָא צְפָרְדַּיִם וְעָלוּ וּבָאוּ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְחֲדָר מִשְׁכָּבְךָ וְעַל־מִטְתְּךָ וּבְבֵית עֲבָדֶיךָ וּבְעֶמְלֶיךָ וּבְתַנּוּרֶיךָ וּבְמִשְׁאֲרוֹתֶיךָ:
Exodus 7:28 The Nile shall swarm with frogs, and they shall come up and enter your palace, your bedchamber and your bed, the houses of your courtiers and your people, and your ovens and your kneading bowls. (JPS)

The frogs invade into the Egyptian home. The bedchamber and the bed, the ovens and the kneading bowls are domains of domesticity. As noted by [Professor Cynthia Chapman](#), "The Hebrew Bible presents agriculture as primarily the work of men, while grinding grain, mixing and kneading dough, and baking bread is most frequently presented as women's work." While other plagues focus on the effect on agriculture, the frogs are present in the sphere of women; the plague is gendered. The commentators discuss whether "kneading bowls" (מִשְׁאֲרוֹתֶיךָ) really refer instead to the content of those bowls. It is not just the receptacles that are invaded, but the fruit of women's labors, the dough itself.

The frogs also invade sites of pregnancy and rising dough. Fertility is a general topic of the Israelites' slavery in Egypt: "The midwives said to Pharaoh, 'Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth.'" (Shemot 1:19) The Hebrew women have a life-giving power which the Egyptian women do not. In reaction to such fertility, Pharaoh decrees death to children.

Israelite fertility is presented in [the midrash](#) as a concrete form of resistance to slavery. Like the Exodus story as a whole, the fertility of the Israelites can be ascribed to the actions of the God of Israel in competition with Pharaoh.

This competition is complicated by fertility itself, which, like the frogs, is everywhere in the story. "Heqet, the goddess of life and fertility, is represented by a frog in Egyptian art and iconography," [points out](#) Gary Rendsburg. But other plagues themselves feature

variations on fertility; the blood flooding like water; quickly breeding lice; spreading disease; proliferating boils; swarming locusts.

It is perhaps confusing to parse the plague of the frogs in particular, as taking a certain side in the battle of the Israelites with their Egyptian enslavers. The frogs multiply everywhere fertility has a hold, just like the Egyptian goddess Heqet (or in parodic opposition to her) but they are accompanied by the life-giving birthing of Israelite midwives and Israelite women in the fields.

In this regard, we are reminded that the plagues in general are not unidirectional. Egyptians die in this parsha, and so do Israelites. Frogs are fertile at the same time as many other things are fertile, but frogs are not pro-Israelite per se any more than blood or death are. The Angel of Death cuts down indiscriminately — that's why the blood in the doorposts is necessary at all. There is not even a standard order to the plagues (it is different in the [Book of Psalms](#)), nor is it clear why one yields to the next. While many try to make sense of the narrative chain of plagues, one could assume that there is no internal logic to the plagues.

The oppositional nature of life and death is something we don't often examine. By the same token, fertility seems like a sustaining power in the world, and when a conquering power attacks mothers and children, we know whom to side with. But that power, as well, can encourage its own fertility to overrun the domesticity of those it controls. The same edicts that deal death can also decide who is worthy of life.

When frogs sit placidly in the pond, they can be endearing. But they are also, says the poet [Flower Conroy](#), the “pocket pet of witches, reincarnated child souls, most toxic augers of weather & superstitions.”

Fertility is in the service of power, in both directions. Even as death makes itself felt in the Land of Egypt, there are also forces of reproduction on the march, and the crawl, until the end.