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Just in time for Passover, Israel braces for locust invasion

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With Passover just three weeks away, the timing of a massive infestation of locusts in Egypt is striking many Israelis as downright biblical.

Millions of the grasshopper-like insects swarmed Israel's southern neighbor, damaging crops. Some have since made their way to southern Israel.

On the eve of Passover, which this year begins at sundown March 25, Jews around the world will recall the Exodus story and the 10 plagues that befell Egypt.

According to the Old Testament Book of Exodus, God sent 10 plagues to Egypt because the pharaoh refused to free the Israelites from captivity.

Locusts were the eighth plague. The pharaoh relented after the 10th plague and the Israelites left, but the Egyptian army pursued them until the soldiers drowned in the sea.

The last sporadic swarm of locusts was eight years ago, Keith Cressman, the senior locust forecasting officer at the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization's headquarters in Rome, told NBC News. Cressman said the insects started along the Sudan-Egypt border after breeding and got caught up in a weather system that carried them north and east.

Although Israeli agricultural experts are on high alert and fear the locusts could devastate crops, many Israelis have been more laid back, with some noting that some varieties of the leggy pests are kosher.

"Not only does the Torah permit man to eat certain mammals, birds and fish, but it even permits him to eat certain insects -- namely several types of locusts," Rabbi Natan Slifkin wrote in *The Times of Israel*.

Although most Jews of European descent have scant experience with locusts and don't know how to identify the kosher kinds, some Jews of North African descent do have the expertise, Slifkin said.

Slifkin proceeded to explain how best to cook the locusts -- with some oil and spices.

"My wife, however, insists that I do not use her kitchen utensils for the task; she is locust-intolerant," the rabbi said.

"The rationale for certain locusts being kosher may be a practical matter -- when your crops are wiped out by locusts, at least you're not left with nothing to eat."

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