



Darkness and Light

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During Passover, we recount the ten plagues that descended on Egypt. They were blood, frogs, lice, insects, pestilence, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and death of the first born. We understand that the plagues were necessary to persuade Pharaoh to relinquish his hold over the Israelites. It was going to take some terrible natural disasters to force Pharaoh to free our people.

Many would say we are living right now through a time of plague. The plague of Covid 19, a respiratory virus that is highly contagious and fatal to people. It has led to death and illness for too many. There are severe medical shortages of masks, ventilators, and hospital beds. In order to flatten the curve, we have closed down schools, businesses, and life as we know it. We are living in a time of fear, uncertainty, and we are all unsure of when the plague will be lifted.

The ninth plague over Egypt was darkness. Moses held out his arm towards the sky and a deep gloom descended over Egypt. It was so black that people couldn't even see one another. It's hard to imagine such darkness. When we go outside at night there are street lights or ambient lighting from homes. Some of us have been in the wilderness or away from cities where we start to get a sense of the darkness of the night. If we can imagine going out beyond civilization and clouds obscuring the glow of the moon or stars, well, then we can sense the darkness that descended in Egypt almost three thousand years ago.

What was the darkness of the ninth plague? The Conservative movement's commentary to the Torah, *Etz Chayim*, (pg. 377) suggests that "During all the other plaques, the average Egyptian could do nothing to end them. During the plague of darkness, however, could Egyptians not light candles? Perhaps the plague was not a physical darkness, a sandstorm, or a solar eclipse (eclipses last for a few minutes, never for three days); perhaps it was a spiritual or psychological darkness, a deep depression. [the word "melancholy" comes from a Greek root meaning "dark mood."]

Well, we can relate to the darkness of melancholy. Being isolated through social distancing, avoiding friends and even family, can bring on such a dreariness to our moods and thoughts. Things we loved to do have been taken away and we are told to shelter at home. Even if our homes are peaceful, there can still be a loneliness and frustration. We are all doing our part as an abundance of caution but it is taking a toll, to be sure on us.

So what will it take to lift the darkness? Well, for the virus to be contained. At least for there to be enough medical equipment for our wonderful doctors and nurses. Progress is being made on that front. Some add that we need the spread of the virus to be contained through ubiquitous testing, continued forms of social distancing, a vaccine, or at least our fear to lessen enough that we can take the chance at life.

In the meantime, how do we live in darkness for the upcoming weeks and beyond if necessary. Etz chayim continues, “People suffering from depression lack the energy to move about or to be concerned with anyone other than themselves, precisely as the Torah describes the Egyptians. Perhaps the Egyptians were depressed by the series of calamities that had struck them or by the realization of how much their own comfort depended on the enslavement of others.”

The plague of darkness in the Torah surprisingly wasn't all consuming in Exodus 10:23 we are told, “

לֹא-רָאוּ אִישׁ אֶת-אָחִיו וְלֹא-קָמוּ אִישׁ מִמַּחֲבְרֵי שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים וְלִכְל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל תָּהָה אֹר בְּמוֹשְׁבֹתָם:

People could not see one another, and for three days no one could get up from where he was; but all the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings.

How did the Israelites have light in their dwellings? A miracle from God? Yes, but there is an interesting midrash in Exodus Rabba that connects the plague of darkness to the primordial darkness that preceded creation and is a prominent feature of the Jewish conception of Gehinnom or Hell. Etz Chayim adds that darkness is a punishment for those who cannot truly see their neighbors or feel their pain or recognize their dignity. Darkness is the antithesis of life and human connection.

The Israelites, on the other hand, were still able to care and look out for one another. This is what brought light into their dwellings. The ability to see one another and relate to our humanity is so important that when the Talmud examines when there is enough morning light to pray, it defines “dawn” as “when one can recognize the face of a friend” (BT Ber. 9b) In other words, when you can recognize a person, the darkness begins lift.

I would like to suggest that even as we live under the dark cloud of Covid19, we can bring light into our dwellings and into our lives. We can strive to connect with one another to the best of our ability. We can call people we haven't spoken to for a long time. We can write an email. We can use all the tools of social media to share and strengthen our relationships with one another. We can do what we can to help others. Whether through caring calls, giving Tzedakah, or assisting another person. We have the power to bring the light of hope to others. We have the power to bring smiles to people. We have the power to assist the needy. Throughout words and

deeds, we can bring light to the darkness. We can make our days significant and infused with meaning. And we will discover there are many rays of hope out there after all.