

## **Drashah Bo 5770: Light for Israel**

I have to admit—I find this time of year, the dark time of year, very challenging. I am someone who needs the sun. So when my alarm goes off in the morning, and the sun has not yet risen, I have a hard time dragging myself out of bed. In the afternoons, as the day turns too quickly back to night, I find myself feeling sluggish, like it's time for bed at 5:00 in the afternoon. I feel like I spend the winter in a bit of a fog. I eat more, and move less. I'm more easily distracted. I find it more difficult just to get stuff done.

I also have to admit, even before I realized how much the seasonal change in light affected me, I never liked the dark. As a child, I slept not only with a night light, but with a lamp blazing in my bedroom. My parents would often come in and turn off my light after I fell asleep, but I would become so upset if I woke up in the middle of the night to a dark room that they just gave up after awhile. Even now, as an adult, I find darkness just a little spooky. Coming home in the evenings to a pitch dark home, I feel my blood pressure rise as I grope around looking for the light switch. I'm afraid I'll trip over

something, or, less rationally, that something will trip over me.

Especially during this time of year, I leave lights on all over the house, which may drive my husband a little crazy, but it gives me a sense of comfort, particularly during this time of year.

This two-sided understanding of darkness—that it impedes our activities and that it's sinister and frightening—finds deep expression in our parashah this week. Looking through the parashah as a whole, the idea of darkness is a pervasive motif. The final three plagues that take up the majority of the Torah reading all put darkness on display. The plague of locusts, the Torah tells us, was so massive that the insects literally darkened the land. The plague of darkness brought a darkness so thick that one could almost feel it. And the slaying of the first born happened in the middle of the night, in the darkness. With increasing darkness came increasing devastation.

But the darkness, we learn, was not universal. We read in our parashah: <sup>21</sup> Then the Lord said to Moses, "Hold out your arm toward the sky that there may be darkness upon the land of Egypt, a darkness that can be touched." <sup>22</sup> Moses held out his arm toward the

sky and thick darkness descended upon all the land of Egypt for three days.<sup>23</sup> 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.” (Ex. 10:21-23) The darkness only affected the Egyptians—the Israelites did not suffer from this manifestation of God’s power.

The choice of darkness as a plague is one that demands further interpretation. Darkness, after all, is natural. The Torah begins with an acknowledgement of the role of darkness. The first act of Creation, we read at the beginning of Bereishit, Genesis, is the creation of light. This light does not banish the darkness entirely; it balances it. The world created with God’s wisdom and beneficence is one that needs both light and darkness.

The darkness we read of in our Torah reading, then, is of a different sort. Ramban, R. Moshe ben Nahman, a 13<sup>th</sup> century Spanish Kabbalist and commentator, elaborates on the intensity of the darkness sent against the Egyptians. He explains that the plague of darkness wasn’t just the absence of the sun’s light, like when the sun

sets and it is night. Rather, this was an extreme darkness, caused by a thick vapor that descended from heaven, falling on the Egyptians and extinguishing any flame. Just as in deep trenches and other dark places candle flames won't stay lit, so too in Egypt, the darkness was so strong that no flames could be kept burning to bring light. It was so strong that it could even be touched, as though it were a physical object.

This understanding of the darkness makes the contrast between the experience of the Egyptians and that of the Israelites even more stark. While the Egyptians were groping about in a dark fog, the Israelites were able to see. This prompts us to ask what benefit they were able to derive from having light when the rest of Egypt was mired in darkness.

On a practical level, the continued presence of light gave the Israelites the advantage of secrecy. While the Egyptians were suffering from this plague, the Israelites were able to make preparations—not under the cover of darkness, but under the cover of light—for the impending exodus from Egypt. This explanation

yields an important insight—that the plagues were shifting in focus. They were no longer exclusively about showing Pharaoh God’s might; they were also a means to give Israel the tools they needed to leave Egypt.

While this straightforward reading of the text is meaningful, the Midrashic interpretations of the phenomenon of the light here is much more interesting. A Midrash from Shemot Rabbah, the exegetical midrash on the book of Exodus, declares that not all Israelites were immune to the darkness. Some Israelites had become so inured to the condition of slavery, so resistant to the sea change that would come with their liberation, that they didn’t want to leave Egypt. It may be cliché, but they couldn’t see the light. These Israelites were almost like Egyptians, and so they were shrouded in darkness. They never left Egypt, but perished there.

This interpretation hints at the deeper meaning of the light that shone on the Israelites while the Egyptians were paralyzed by darkness. The Israelites who also suffered from this plague couldn’t see the potential for redemption, they couldn’t grasp the hope and meaning

that would come with liberation from servitude and the covenant with God. Those who did benefit from the light, by extension, were the ones who were ready to leave Egypt, who were willing to embrace God's promise. The light they enjoyed represents both that promise, the promise of liberation and the promise of God's protecting presence, and their capacity, our capacity, for being partners in God's covenant, for following God's ways.

Indeed, light is a powerful symbol for being in relationship with God, both in our literary tradition and in our ritual practice. The book of Proverbs teaches, נר ה' נשמת אדם, the light of God is the human soul. And it also uses that same word, נר, light, to refer to *mitzvot*, commandments, the practices and observances that frame the Jewish tradition. Mitzvot are our light, and we are God's light. A beautiful midrash takes this idea of light as the matrix of our relationship with God, and casts it back into the light that illuminated the dwellings of the Israelites during Egypt's time of darkness.

This Midrash imagines God consulting with the angels about the Creation of the World. The Holy One explains to the angels that each of the acts of creation is meant to prefigure an important event in the life of Israel. The heavenly bodies that God would create on the fourth day, the sun and the moon, were created in order that God could provide a pillar of fire by day and a pillar of fire by night for the Israelites during their journey through the wilderness. The grasses and plant life that came into being on the third day would find their parallel in the manna that God would provide for Israel in the desert. Even the first act of Creation, the distinction between light and dark, was enacted so that God could distinguish between Israel and Egypt, providing light for the Israelites while the Egyptians suffered in the dark. The angels, astonished at God's focus on Israel, ask God, "Why so much?" Why are you doing all this for them? God's answer: Because of all that they will do for me in the future. Our *mitzvot*, our practices and traditions, are the light we give back to God in response to the light God has given us.

There are a number of prominent *mitzvot* that literally bring light into the world. We light candles to begin Shabbat and holidays, and we

light another candle at Havdalah, when we end Shabbat. I would suggest, however, that all of our *mitzvot* bring us light in a more metaphoric sense. A few examples: The *mitzvah* of prayer, which helps us see into our souls and which has the power to enlighten our whole community through joyous song and praise; the *mitzvah* of *gemilut hesed*, of acts of loving-kindness to others, which give us the opportunity to bring light to the parts of our society and of ourselves that are shrouded in the darkness of need, poverty, and powerlessness; the *mitzvah* of *kashrut*, which increases our awareness of the impact that our food can have on our bodies and our souls, elevating even that simple daily act to a place of holiness; the *mitzvah* of Shabbat, which is itself bookended by light, and which allows us a respite from the busy-ness of the week, so that we can better appreciate the light in our lives.

Another Midrash from Shemot Rabbah emphasizes the power of the light that the Israelites experienced in Egypt. Commenting on the non-specificity of the verse: “all the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings,” the Midrash teaches that the Torah chose its wording on purpose. It did not say that there was light for the Israelites in the

land of Goshen, where they lived. Rather, it says “in their dwellings.” Anyplace a Jew would enter, there would be light. I’d like to take the teaching of this midrash one step further. Anywhere we let the light of mitzvot enter into us, we will benefit from its light. May we all find our way to appreciate the light of *mitzvot*, and may their brightness illuminate our lives.

Shabbat Shalom.