

Bo 5780
Darkness
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I have a habit of making things harder than they need to be. Often, a d'var Torah topic springs to mind when I read the weekly *parashah*, and within seconds I write it off, thinking it is not nuanced or sophisticated enough for all of us.

That is a mistake. For, although I love speaking to an intellectually charged and erudite community, the truth is that sometimes we do not have to dig too deep for the messages we need to hear.

Today, I would like to think with you about 9th plague--the Plague of Darkness.

It is not obvious why this plague should be so terrible. Little, if any, immediate harm comes as a result of darkness. It does not hurt physically. In fact, many people find darkness a pleasant refuge, an austere and beautiful state, not to mention an alluring, or romantic setting. Yet this 9th Plague is supposed to be the penultimate step in a sequential, tragic flow toward total devastation. How are we to understand the Plague of Darkness, and what does it come to teach us?

I offer a true story as a way into understanding this Plague. Rabbi Aaron Rubinger was visiting Israel the day after the Gulf War started, just before the first Scud missile attacked Israeli airspace.. He describes his experience thusly:

I was in the Kings Hotel in Jerusalem and, when the sirens rang, all the guests in the hotel had to run to the top floor, put on gas masks, and wait for the attack. What I observed was that there were two very different reactions on the part of people, two distinct and opposite reactions by different individuals that had nothing to do with their age, sex, or nationality.

One reaction was absolute panic and being completely self-absorbed. When the sirens went off and we were running up the stairs, there were indeed some people who were pushing to get in front of others, with the result that sometimes they inadvertently knocked others down. Some people collapsed and fainted simply from their own fright. Yet, at the very same time, there were those [of us] who, seeing this great panic and fear in others, came to offer assistance, helping people get up the stairs, helping them put on their gas masks, helping them to remain calm.

I am struck by the image of those frightened people sitting in the dark, some seeing others and some seeing only their own fear or despair. It seems to me that much of communal life is like that.

Our tradition teaches that the worst darkness is the form of blindness in which one person will not see another, refusing to look up one's neighbor's misery and offer help. One who does not see another becomes incapable of rising from their own sorrow and isolation. That is the nature of the Plague of Darkness. It comes to *imprison people* whose *land* has already been decimated. That is why the text tells us that the darkness could be touched. It took physical form in walls of darkness as real as the walls of a prison cell (Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Bo 4:1). Those who kept the Hebrew slaves imprisoned in Egypt become now, themselves, imprisoned (Ibid., 5:1).

Our sages wonder why the Plague of Darkness had to be so thick. They suggest that it is because of the Egyptian's resistance to hearing the Word of God (Midrash Tanchuma, Bo 1:1). In a more modern idiom, I would say that means that the Egyptians are unable to see the dignity of their afflicted neighbors, or envision an economy founded on just principles and grounded in broader reality emanating from a source beyond their Pharaoh. We are called not to be like the Egyptians who cannot not see beyond themselves.

But there is more here. In the Midrash, we find the intriguing suggestion the Plague of Darkness falls not only upon the Egyptians, but upon some of the *Israelites*, as well: those who live in affluence and honor, supported by Egyptian patrons. Those people prefer to remain living comfortably in a corrupt place (Exodus Rabbah 14:3). That suggestion brings the point closer to home. It's not only others who create distance from us. We do it among ourselves. Perhaps this plague calls us to push through our own discomfort, to reach out in the darkness and grasp the nearest hand, and to sit in the darkness and hold on.

I want to suggest that despite our best intentions, there are times when we imprison ourselves in our suffering, and there are times when we imprison other people in their suffering. Drawing walls around suffering serves to imprison all of us, and bars us from the full flourishing of our humanity and from building the culture toward which we strive.

We want to help others--of course we do--, and we want to think that our friends are there for us when we need them. Yet when we experience real grief or existential angst, we often don't want to bother people. And, not wanting to impose, we deprive family and friends of critical opportunities to show up and share the human condition with us.

These imprisonments not only cut us off from communion with others; they also impair our exercise of humanity. Moreover, when we do show up, but without full presence, we perpetuate those imprisonments and further constrain our own growth and thriving.

The Plague of Darkness lasts for seven days. The Midrash teaches that during the first 3 days, a person who was sitting could stand up, and a person who was standing could sit down. During the last three days, people no longer could change their position from seated to standing, or the reverse (Midrash Tanchuma, Bo 3:1). [Now, many of you know that I have problems with numbers, but this is what the Midrash says: There were seven days: a first three and a last three.] I want to know about the day in between. I want to learn how to operate in the space between what is difficult and what is impossible, because it is that space, between what is difficult and what is impossible, where we can build lives of holiness.

In our kahal we have members who become ill, or suffer a loss, and only tell us once they have recovered or gotten up from *shiva*. In the past week, I have spoken with four such individuals. I have a feeling we've all been there, in our own ways, acting the stoic rather than sharing our difficulty with people who really would care and would be grateful for the opportunity to help. It seems that people don't want to bother their friends with their troubles or impose even on the Rabbi with their suffering. And so they endure their travails more or less alone. I want, tenderly, to suggest that isolating ourselves like that adds alienation, not only to our own experience, but to our community and our culture, more broadly.

We need to be able to sit with people. We need to hear each other's pain. Only by sharing in the human condition can we hope to build the kind of society our hearts know is possible, and tear down the walls we, and those around us, build on scaffolds of anxiety and loss, real or perceived.

I'm talking about *sharing* the darkness, because darkness is part of life. Yes, we can bring light to a dark situation, and I'm sure many rabbis are giving sermons about bringing light to the darkness, which is also a good idea, but I am saying something different. I am saying that we can also join someone else in the dark moments of their life. It makes us more human when we do that. It forces us to confront our own anxieties over loss, illness, status, or whatever it might be. We need and benefit from opportunities to flex our kindness muscles, not only in word and thought but by showing up in person and making our hearts available.

We can bridge darkness by serving meals and offering human companionship to the people our community serves at Porchlight, or making deliveries for Meals on Wheels, by supporting our refugee efforts, and much more, through the organized structures already in place through our *kahal* and beyond.

We can bridge darkness when we attend a shiva home and offer our presence without feeling like we must say something. We can hold space for the agonized silence of a fellow traveler. When we do, may be surprised to find ourselves more aware of the Divine presence than when we made ourselves busy with conversation over kugel, however supportive our intention, however kind our words, and however delicious the kugel. {This is not a critique. I see it as a growing edge for us, which we will have other opportunities to discuss.}

We are *never* completely in the dark. Fortunately, we do not live with the Plague of Darkness. That Plague lives in a story that comes to teach us. And one of its lessons is that there is *always* light. It lives in the depths of our souls, and it finds the souls we encounter in full presence.

The kind of vision we need in times of darkness is the kind that deepens our gaze and makes room for what is real and true in the moment. The kind of vision we need is the ability to see ourselves connected and available to one another. We need to cultivate our ability to live in the interpersonal space between what is difficult and what is impossible.

There is an expression Jews like to say to each other: “Only for simchas.” The idea is that we hope that only occasions of joy will bring us together. That thinking does not serve us well. It reinforces our fear of being together when life is hard and our fear of darkness. It seems to me that when the chips are down, we need each other more than ever. And only by walking together in shared humanity will we redeem our world.

I hope and pray that we will have the courage and Divine grace to reach toward one another in the darkness that life inevitably brings, and hold on, for dear life.