

“Greet the light: the plague of darkness”

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Beth Chayim Chadashim

Years ago Tracy and I went to visit her niece, Dorsey. She was about 2 years old at the time. Our plane arrived after Dorsey had gone to sleep, and she awoke in the morning with a terrible cold and a fever, so she felt just awful. We of course were just happy to see her, so we came toward her all smiles.

She took one look at our cheerful countenances and said,
“Don’t talk to me; don’t even look at me.”

Dorsey will graduate from college next May, but we still quote that remark she made when was 2. Not because she hasn’t said anything interesting since! But because it’s amazing how often people – either Tracy or I or someone we see – feels the way Dorsey did. Usually adults wouldn’t say so directly that they’re feeling that way, but their faces and body language manage to convey that same message:

“Don’t talk to me; don’t even look at me.”

A few of you are conveying that message right now...!

In this week’s Torah portion, Bo, Pharaoh delivers that message to Moses at the end of the 9th plague upon the Egyptians, the plague of *choshekh* – darkness.

Not just one dark night, and not a solar eclipse – it lasted for 3 days (day and night). This 9th plague – like all the plagues before it - was unlike anything they had experienced before.

After the plague of darkness ends, Pharaoh summons Moses yet again, they negotiate again, they reach a stand-off again, and Pharaoh sends Moses from his presence, saying: “Go away from me! Watch yourself! Don’t continue to see my face. Because in the day you see my face you’ll die!” [Ex. 10:28, Friedman trans.]

Hear it? “Don’t talk to me; don’t even look at me.”

After the plague of darkness, and this fearsome exchange between Pharaoh and Moses, their negotiations come to an end. All that remains is the 10th plague, the death of the first born, and with

IT the Israelites are out of there.

But I'm still left sitting in the dark, for that is the plague, of all of them, that makes me wonder the most. Not that I would choose it, but would it be so terrible to sit in darkness 3 days? Unlike the plagues of bloody water, and frogs, vermin, insects, disease, boils, hail and locusts, and even the 10th and most horrid death of the first born, the plague of darkness seems the least off-putting. Granted it wasn't just one really dark night – it was three days and nights that Torah describes as a darkness that could be “felt” – *ya-mesh* (Friedman, *yamesh*, 10:21), a “dismal darkness” – *kho-shekh a-fei-LAH* (Friedman, *a-fei-LAH*, v. 22). But the clue to what was really frightening about this plague is in the next verse: “Each man did not see his brother; and each man did not get up from under it – three days.” [Friedman's trans. V. 23]

This was a darkness that isolated each person--“Each man did not see his brother;” does that mean they could not see each other even if they were right next to one another? Perhaps, and bad enough. And perhaps it also means they did not *try* to find each other. – For “they did not get up from under it” – it weighed them down – they couldn't get out from under it.

Some contemporary commentators (1) suggest the darkness of the 9th plague was “a spiritual or psychological darkness, a deep depression.”

A few days ago on NPR I heard someone say that last Monday was, according to a list of strange criteria, going to be the most depressing day of the year. I don't know if it was, but it made me wonder what it would be like if, even for a one day, all the people in the world felt depressed.

If you've ever been plagued with what is commonly called clinical depression, you probably recognized the description from Torah of the plague of darkness. Each person was not unable *physically* to see their brother, their neighbor, but rather, unable *emotionally* to see anyone else . . . to care about them. Unable to get up not because you can't see where you're going – but emotionally unable to get yourself out of bed or off the couch or out of the house and into the world.

Unable to get out from under, the Egyptians stayed each one alone, isolated, depressed -- perhaps by the physical realities, the horrific challenges the plagues had brought upon them; or depressed from dread of what was yet to come; or plagued perhaps by guilt for what they had done to the Israelite slaves; or just filled with ennui - with an inability to care or with anxiety that brings what many describe as a great weight pressing on their chest, making it difficult to breathe.

IF the 9th plague – the plague of darkness – was depression, was deep melancholy, God made it blessedly and unrealistically *short* at only 3 days. For most people it lasts much longer, some people battle it all their lives, conveying a daily message to others: Don't talk to me; don't even look at me. If it's true that the plagues increased in order of the misery they brought, then the plague of depression is second only to the plague of watching one's children die – for the death of the first born was the

only plague remaining. Depression is a kind of death for its sufferers, and those who love them. It puts a damper – and sometimes, most sadly, a full stop -- to life as a pleasure, to life as a series of choices and adventures, options and possibilities. And if depression seems more prevalent in our day and age, perhaps it is not because it is more common, but because it is more recognized, and more publicized because it is more treatable.

If you or someone you care about is suffering from some variation of this plague – I encourage you – and you can come see me privately and I will encourage you more – to seek help from a doctor, or from a therapist or support group, etc. And I ask others of you to help me do this too, for many in our community and in our families experience the pain and the difficulties of depression. There are a variety of therapies around today that help very many people, and it is worth the effort even though I know it takes great effort indeed. I used the word “encourage” a moment ago on purpose – it means “to give someone courage,” and courage is what it takes to pursue help for this ailment.

The modern Torah commentary I mentioned earlier, the one that suggested that the plague of darkness was a kind of melancholy, cited in its discussion a verse from Talmud in which the rabbis are discussing the definition of “dawn.” The definition offered is that you know it is “dawn” “when you can recognize the face of a friend” [BI Berachot 9b]. (repeat)

It is dawn when you can recognize the face of a friend.

For some, still under the weight of the plague of depression, they will not be able to recognize the face of a friend, not even in broad daylight. And then it is left to those of us not weighed down to take notice that the face of our friend may have changed.

The commentary builds on our Talmud verse, saying, “When one can see other people and recognize them as friends, the darkness has begun to lift.” [*Etz Hayim*, p.377, end of note on v. 23] That would be a sweet sign of relief for those who suffer, but tonight I’m asking those of you not suffering to lift yourselves up, look up, look around, and recognize as friends those whose faces say “don’t talk to me, don’t even look at me.” Perhaps together we can help lift the darkness, and escape from the narrow places, the shackles that bind the hands and faces of those who suffer this sad plague of mind and heart.

And if so, then perhaps next year on a strange day in January we’ll be able to look around and experience, not the most depressing day of the year, but on the contrary, a day, a world, of people who, as we sang a little while ago in *Lecha Dodi*, a world of people who “awake and arise to greet the new light, *uri uri shir dabeiri*, who sing out, for the darkness is hidden from sight” [translation Siddur Sim Shalom].

Shabbat shalom

(1) See *Etz Hayim Chumash and commentary*, p. 376-77, notes on v. 21, 23