

THE PLAGUE OF DARKNESS OF EVERY GENERATION

by Rabbi Label Lam

So G-d led the people around [by] way of the desert [to] the Red Sea, and the children of Israel were armed when they went up out of Egypt. (Shemos 13:18)

armed: ... Another interpretation: חֲמִשָּׁה means "divided by five," [meaning] that one out of five (חֲמִשָּׁה) [Israelites] went out, and four fifths of the people died during the three days of darkness (Rashi)

We find out some terrible news here just as the Children of Israel are Egypt on their way out of Egypt and beyond. Only 1/5 of the nation survived the plague of darkness. Based on the numbers accounted for later we know that there were 600,000 adult males between the ages of 20 and 50. Certainly there were those on the other side of the gender gap, namely women and many more above and below the ages of 20 and 50. Perhaps there were 3 million people or more according to modest estimates.

That means that 12 million were deemed unworthy lost forever by the 9th plague, the plague of darkness. Although it was one of the single most important events in all of human history and Jewish existence, we discover now that it was also one of the biggest holocausts and tragic losses of all time.

Rabbi Avigdor Miller ztl. said that not only did this happen at the time of the exodus from Egypt, that we lost 4/5ths of our people but that in every generation 80% are lost in the plague of darkness of every generation. This is not a statement to cause us to despair and yield to the brute force of statistics. It's a powerful reminder now to become and not to allow our children to become statistics of history but rather to be children of destiny.

What is the "plague of darkness" of each generation? I suppose we can point to the intoxicating zeal with which Jews abandoning Torah embraced various "isms" at the turn of the 20th century. There was an almost messianic fervor for communism that swept through Jewish communities and yes Yeshivas in search of some new economic hope the chance for social equality.

With the benefit of tragic hindsight we can see what a disaster it turned out to be as the revolutionaries became the new elite ruling class and Stalin sent 39 million people to the gulag and stamped out Jewish culture and any memory of G-d from the psyche of whole generations. Ironically Jhid- Jew was stamped on their documents as anti-Semitism thrived within the iron curtain they helped to knit. How compelling was the lure of that seductive siren that even Chaim Nachman

Bialik wrote a poem about the existential forlornness of being alone:

Alone

Wind blew, light drew them all.
New songs revive their mornings.
Only I, small bird, am forsaken
under the Shekhina's wing.

Alone. I remain alone.
The Shekhina's broken wing
trembled over my head. My heart knew hers:
her fear for her only son.

Driven from every ridge -
one desolate corner left -
in the House of Study she hides in shadow,
and I alone share her pain.

Imprisoned beneath her wing
my heart longed for the light.
She buried her face on my shoulder
and a tear fell on my page.

Dumbly she clung and wept.
Her broken wing sheltered me:
"scattered to the four winds of heaven;
they are gone, and I am alone".

It was an ancient lament
a suppliant cry I heard
in that lost and silent weeping,
and in that scalding tear.

It's worthwhile to seriously contemplate the added responsibility that comes with the territory we occupy as the children of survivors of survivors of the plague of darkness of every generation.
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