

THE PAINFUL DARKNESS OF LIGHT

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

The Painful Darkness of Light ¹

Hashem said to Moshe: Stretch forth your hand over the Heavens, and there will be darkness upon the land of Egypt. ²

Nothing we know or can imagine approximates the darkness that overcame Egypt in the next to the last plague. It was miasmic; there was substance and body to it, not merely the absence of light. So different in character was this darkness, that the *medrash*³ labors to understand its provenance. From where did such darkness come? The *medrash* offers a source: the darkness came from on high, from the Heavens themselves.

But what could this possibly mean? What darkness is there above, where there is only light?

Moshe was told to stretch his hand over, above the Heavens. We would have expected him to be instructed to lift his hand towards Heaven. Moshe, however, was not meant to point with his hand in the direction of a higher place. He was told to reach above the Heavens, take hold of some lofty and elevated spiritual level, and bring it down to Egypt. There, explains the *Toldos Yaakov Yosef*, this wonderful light would turn to painful darkness for the Egyptians.

Consider a thoroughly evil fellow, somehow finding himself in Gan Eden, moving about among the righteous, who all sit there resplendent in their crowns of glory, basking in the radiance of the *Shechinah*. *Tzadikim* there experience this as indescribable pleasure; he suffers immeasurably. Completely unaccustomed to spirituality, he experiences this Gan Eden as unbearable discomfort.

This, then, is the essence of the plague of darkness. Moshe took some of the light from above. It plunged Egypt into a darkness like no other.

After crossing the Sea, the Jews went for three days "and could not find water."⁴ What they really were missing was the sweet water of Torah.⁵ Consequently, when they traveled a bit further, "they could not drink the waters...because they were bitter." Having gone a significant time without learning, says the *Toldos*, when they returned to it, they found it bitter rather than a source of joy and pleasure. Unaccustomed to Torah for only a short while, they found it unattractive and foreign when they returned to it. All the more so a person who never experienced the sweetness of Torah, who spent a lifetime distant from all Torah and mitzvos! He gags on them; he finds them devoid of

meaning and uncomfortable. There is no greater darkness than this! (Rambam⁶ mentions the same phenomenon. In sickness, a patient will sometimes report that bitter foods taste sweet, and sweet foods taste bitter. Spiritual ailments cause something similar. Spiritually diseased people relish traits that are evil, and spurn good and proper ones.)

The Jews experienced the very opposite. Unlike the Egyptians, they were not overcome by palpable darkness. On the contrary, the illumination that Moshe brought down from on high bathed them in light. "For all the Bnei Yisrael there was light in their dwellings."⁷ Those who dwelled often in light, who sought it, cherished, looked for it - who made a home for themselves in it - they found novelty and excitement in this light brought by Moshe.

We have not yet done justice to this darkness from above. We speak of Hashem as "*yotzer* / fashioning light and *borei* / creating darkness"⁸ "Creation," we are told is on a higher plane than "fashioning." Why, then, is darkness linked to *beriah*?

The *sefarim ha-kedoshim* explain that the "darkness" linked to *beriah* in this verse is actually light - light that is even brighter than what is connected with *yetzirah*. Some light is so powerful, that staring at it leaves one blinded, incapable of seeing anything else. People who stare at the sun for even a brief moment are temporarily left unable to focus properly. One who is not equipped to handle the light loses his vision because of it. Chazal⁹ tell us that in the future, Hashem will take the sun out of its sheath. It will then inflict punishment upon the evil, while simultaneously curing the righteous. The righteous, accustomed to spiritual illumination, will make good use of it. They will find it curative and redemptive. The evil, unaccustomed to such illumination in their lives, will be overwhelmed and pained by it.

So it was to the Egyptians. Moshe did not bring darkness from above, but light. Unable to bear what their souls were unaccustomed to processing, the Egyptians were paralyzed by the overdose of light, and they were unable to see each other or rise up from their places for three days. The dwellings of Bnei Yisrael, however, were suffused with light.

Chazal tell us that a common thread ties together all the plagues: each acted in two opposing fashions. Each struck at the Egyptians, but brought relief to the Jews. We should not think that two different natures were unleashed in tandem by Hashem in each plague. Rather, we should understand this as above. Each *makah* had but a single quality. It was experienced differently by Bnei Yisrael and by the Egyptians, proving useful and positive to the Jews and devastating to the Egyptians.

Rav Moshe Midner adds a grace note to our discussion. "To all Bnei Yisrael there was light in their dwellings." Sometimes, the light is too much for any individual to bear. When Jews dwelt together, when they band together as a group to bring down Hashem's light, they are able to jointly receive it.

This is why Jews gather and sit with each other in large groups on Shabbos.¹⁰

¹ Based on Nesivos Shalom pgs. 73-74

² Shemos 10:21

³ Shemos Rabbah 14:2

⁴ Shemos 15:22

⁵ Bava Kama 82A

⁶ Yad, Deas 2:1

⁷ Shemos 15:23

⁸ Yeshayahu 45:7

⁹ Avodah Zarah 3B

¹⁰ I.e. in a *chassidishe tisch*

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