

BLINDING LIGHT

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

A large portion of Parshas Ki Savo is taken up by the Tochacha - Moshe's admonition that there will be great suffering and destruction if the Jews fail to faithfully observe the Torah. One with even the slightest knowledge of Jewish history would have no problem identifying how the warnings and threats of the Tochacha have come true, down to their last letter. Even so, the Holy Zohar writes that while superficially the Tochacha contains curses and affliction, in truth, great blessing and good are hidden beneath its surface. Let us examine one small section of the Tochacha, with the intention of finding within it both its curse and its hidden blessing.

"Hashem will smite you with blindness... And you will grope at noontime as the blind man gropes in the darkness." [28:28-29]

Isn't it sad, muses Rabbi Meir of Dzikov zt"l, that it seems people only turn to Hashem for help when they feel they have exhausted all other avenues. It is only when we feel trapped, with no where to turn, that we finally cry out in desperation, "Hashem, help me! I don't know what to do - I've got no where to turn!" Shouldn't we be beseeching Hashem for His help from the onset, in realization that without Him, even the most simple and doable task is impossible?

For the blind, darkness reigns constantly. They grope by night and by day. So why does the verse describe our groping, "like the blind man in the darkness?" The answer is, because by day, although the blind man sees nothing, others are able to see; they help him reach his destination. But in the darkness, with no one to come to his aid, the blind man gropes alone.

This, explains R' Meir, is where the hidden blessing lies. "And you will grope at noontime" - noontime is a metaphor for light. It represents good times and success. The Torah blesses us that even at the height of our success and accomplishment, we realize we are in truth groping in the dark - "as the blind man gropes in the darkness," in full realization that we have no one and nothing in which to place our trust, save the Almighty. [Imrei Noam]

Soon after in the Tochacha, the Torah warns:

"And you will go mad from the sight of your eyes, that you will see." [28:34]

Yet weren't we just struck by blindness? Perhaps the blindness that the Torah describes is symbolic of some deeper curse, an allegorical blindness (see indeed Ibn Ezra). Also, why does the verse end with the words, "that you will see?"

It seems to me that in our society, blessing is synonymous with more. The more one has of any given commodity, the greater the blessing. More money, more blessing. More possessions, more blessing. More food, more space, more clothing, more information, more knowledge, more communication, more time, more stuff - the more we have, the more we are blessed. We are enticed to buy foods by their label; it cries out: "Now 35% More!" And why not pay just a pittance more, and get a "Super-Extra Heavy-Duty [pizza, soda, etc.]" instead of just a large, or [do they still sell these?] even a medium or a small?

Most 12 year-olds today have more general knowledge and street-smarts than their parents did when they got married. Aren't we blessed? Today, we know everything going on, in every forsaken nook and cranny of the earth, with a speed that's simply mind-numbing. We are obsessed with facts, information, and statistics.

No longer do we have to miss important phone calls while in the middle of our tefillah (prayers) - our cell phones keep us connected to our friends even as we connect with Hashem. We can now shop 24 hours a day; it's almost hard to imagine the strife and turmoil our ancestors must have gone through if they suddenly got the itch to wallpaper their house (hut?) at 3 am, and had to wait until the morning to do so. We are truly blessed; we have everything our grandparents ever dreamed of, and so much more!

I once saw a sefer called Niflaos Mi-Torasecha. In it, the author painstakingly numbered every pasuk (verse) in the Torah (i.e. Bereishis bara is 1, etc.). He then attempted to connect each pasuk with its corresponding year. For instance, he would attempt to connect the 500th pasuk in the Torah with the 500th year since the creation of the world.

Now listen to this peleh mi-Toraseinu: Thomas Alva Edison is often credited with the invention of the lightbulb in 1879 c.e., which corresponds to the Jewish year 5639. So which is the 5639th pasuk in the Torah? "And you will go mad from the sight of your eyes, that you will see."

Once upon a time, when night fell, people went home and went to bed. There wasn't all that much one could do to the light of a candle. Today, the world's lightbulbs light-up the night. No longer are we restricted by the natural phenomena of night and day. We've got more useful time, more light, more to do... And we've gone mad. We're overloaded. Our senses have been dulled. And the sad thing is, we know it's so, yet we don't know how to stop.

"And you will go mad from the sight of your eyes - that you will see." We know we're going mad, yet we continue to look and see and desire and crave. Perhaps Elul is just the right time for us to sit back and contemplate where our priorities lie; where we've overdosed, and where we're sorely lacking. To turn out the lights, make a deep cheshbon ha-nefesh (self-reckoning), and set ourselves straight, so that when we greet the Yemei haDin (Days of Judgement), we do so with a pureness of heart, and a clarity of vision.

Have a good Shabbos.

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