

THE PLAGUE OF DARKNESS AND THE LIGHT OF REDEMPTION

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

These are Aharon and Moshe, to whom God said, "Bring out the Children of Israel from the land of Egypt according to their hosts." (Shemos 6:26)

Someone asked me recently, is Moshiach born with everything he needs to do his job, or does he pick up assets along the way? The reason for the question is to know if Moshiach is someone we can recognize by his exceptional abilities, or if he will just become that way over time. If the latter, then he can be here today and we might not yet even know it.

There is no question in my mind that Moshiach is here today, because of the timetable that seems to be running history, and because of current events. And, if we take a page or two from Moshe Rabbeinu's life, it seems that though great Torah leaders are often exceptional from birth, they certainly pick up additional greatness along the way, especially once they take on additional communal responsibilities.

Certainly facilitating the Final Redemption will be no small feat, especially if it happens the b'ittah, Gog u'Magog route. Such a path to redemption, one can sadly assume, will find the Jewish people in a dire position, and the rest of the world spiritually out to lunch. Righting all of that will take extra siyita d'Shemaya—Heavenly help.

No problem, since whoever becomes Moshiach will have the soul of Moshe Rabbeinu, even if he has the body of someone born in this generation (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 20). The only question is, will that be enough? It wasn't enough to redeem all 15,000,000 Jews from Egypt in his time; will it be enough to redeem 15,000,000 Jews in our time?

Perhaps this is why, as the Talmud explains, the miracles that will occur at the end of our history will be much greater than the ones that occurred at the beginning of our history. And since, as the Arizal explains, the souls of the Jews at the end of days will be those that left with Moshe Rabbeinu in the first redemption, constant reincarnation may have made us more open to redemption once it finally comes.

There is another level to this discussion, and we see this all the time in the physical realm. How many times have people performed far beyond their physical capabilities? Or so we think they do. However, unless a miracle has happened for them, chances are that they only tapped into physical resources they always had but never revealed, usually because they never had to.

But, necessity is the mother of extension, meaning that when situations and crises arise that require more from us than we think we have to give, we try to give it anyhow and sometimes are quite pleasantly surprised. In times of need, people have been known to exhibit great feats of strength, physically and emotionally.

The same thing is true spiritually as well. A person's spiritual capacity goes way beyond what he thinks it is, for an even better reason than it does physically. For, whereas the physical body is limited by its physical parameters, our souls reach all the way to the top of Creation. Indeed, the soul that powers our bodies is just the final of five levels of soul, the top one receiving its light directly from God.

Then, that level filters the light and passes over the balance to the level below that, a process that continues all the way to the bottom of all five levels. This constriction of light is what allows us to receive light from God, but which also allows some of that light to make it down to our bodies without destroying them.

However, chances are, the amount of light making it to the body is still far less than what the body can handle, evident by righteous people who live on a very high spiritual level in their bodies. Hence, should a person boldly seek new spiritual heights, more light can and will be drawn down to the person increasing his spiritual capacity in the physical world.

Indeed, probably that will happen anyhow at the end of days. In order to increase our spiritual capacity to deal with what will have to happen to bring man across the threshold from this world into Yemos HaMoshiach, our spiritual reservoirs will have to be increased, something that God has been doing already, perhaps, by allowing society to advance in such a way that it helps us to better relate to the spiritual world.

At least those who wish to better relate to the spiritual world. However, those who choose not to enhance their spiritual sensitivity and instead turn their back on God will not be able to receive such additional light from above and therefore will be spiritually ill-equipped to deal with the events at the end of history. The Zohar speaks of some people dying just from the shock of the War of Gog and Magog.

Therefore, one of the most important tasks at the end of history is to make oneself into a better conduit for the light of God. As simple as that sounds, it is not so simple, not today. For, we are living in the Period of Distraction, an era of history during which more things vie for our attention than we can or should pay attention to.

Today, with the wonderful help of modern technology, we can finally be in many places at one time, and therefore never in one place completely. Even for those who keep Shabbos and Yom Tov, it is probably difficult to focus even on those days in the here-and-now after being conditioned the rest of the week to be in constant communication with the world. Just as fax machines were meant to provide more leisure time and ended up reducing what we previously had, modern technology

promises to make life more manageable but instead makes it impossible to keep up.

Just as Amalek wants it, especially at the End-of-Days. Among the many weapons Amalek uses against the Jewish people, distraction is his favorite. Success in life, especially spiritual success, is often a matter of being in the right place at the right time, doing the right thing for the spiritual opportunity. That is why we make a big production out of the Haggadah on Pesach night, so that when the light comes down that night we are in the right frame of mind to receive it.

What is worse is that not only is it easy to stay connected to so many things at one time, resulting in what one psychologist calls 'Artificial ADD,' but it is also much easier to get connected to things that we might not have in the past, and sometimes, to things we never should be connected to. This results in tremendous wastes of time, which wear us down physically, and exposure to some things that spiritually wear us down.

The net effect is that we become filled up with all kinds of nonsensical things that make it impossible for the light of God to enter us. It's like trying to fit another person into a room that is already filled to capacity, except in this case the room is the person's consciousness, which is filled with all kinds of material distractions, and the person trying to get in is the light of God.

It is not a matter of completely divesting oneself of all his gadgets and means of entertainment, although that would probably be very therapeutic. But, like a lot of things in life, it is a matter of setting up boundaries, and not trespassing them. It is an issue of making a clear distinction between what we need and what we want.

Ironically, this idea came up on the radio when I was driving home one night from shul while in Toronto recently. A financial advisor was being interviewed because statistics had just come out that revealed Canadian consumers to be spending far above their means, resulting in a lot of unnecessary and dangerous homeowner debt. Apparently she had written a book on the topic and was being sought out by many people who are trying to keep from drowning in their burdensome overspending.

She gave many examples of conversations that she had with homeowners regarding their monthly spending, and it was incredible how little self-control people exercised when it came to budgeting based upon their income. As she said, thanks to easy credit, 'affordable' has come to mean how much space remains on a person's credit cards, regardless of his or her monthly income. One person, only 22 years of age, had already racked up \$70K worth of personal debt!

Among the many reasons for such irresponsible spending is people's inability to distinguish between what they need and what they want. For example, she said, when one man was questioned regarding his cell phone, he insisted that he needed it and could not do without it. However, after analyzing his lifestyle, it became clear that his cell phone only performed meaningful functions worth about \$20/month. The remaining \$140, the analyst said, was simple unaffordable want.

This mentality has also infected the Torah world as well, resulting in debilitating debts, and in some cases, cheating, stealing, and scandals. Indeed, new cell phones, even kosher ones, are constantly in demand, but that is just one small aspect of the material lifestyle that many Torah families have since adopted and adapted, all of it creating even greater need for even larger incomes, resulting in less time for spiritual matters.

In fact, though the world keeps changing, man does not. Hence, though modern technology can keep saying, "Faster! Faster!" our inner voice keeps saying, "Slow down! Slow down!" It's not that we're working to capacity already, because we're not. It's just that we're putting too much energy into things that do not matter that much, ultimately.

That is the way it was in Egypt as well. As a result, as each plague brought more light of God into the world, 12,000,000 Jews were unable to receive it. They may not have had cell phones and computers, and they certainly didn't have big homes and fancy cars. However, whatever they did have, it prevented the light of redemption from impacting them, causing them to be left behind spiritually and physically: they died in the Plague of Darkness.

It is happening to us as well at this time. The light of redemption is entering the world, but not our consciousness. As a result, millions are dying in spiritual darkness, and not all of them are secular, making some wonder just how many Jews will be around at the end of history to turn the lights off on what once was, and to turn them on for what it is coming up.

Text

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