

Darkness Deciphered: Parshat Bo

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Mrs. Shira Smiles
Summary by Channie Koplowitz Stein

One of the most enigmatic of all the plagues brought upon Egypt was the plague of darkness. First came three days of thick darkness and then three additional days when the darkness was so "tangible" that no one could move. The Birkat Mordechai asks, how can darkness be so physically oppressive as to prevent movement? Why was this plague necessary? What made it different?

Rashi tells us that the darkness served two purposes. First, a portion of the Jewish people had assimilated and did not merit to be redeemed. Hashem killed them during the plague of darkness so that the Egyptians would not see them die and mockingly assert that the Israelites were also suffering. Second, Hashem had promised Avraham that his descendants would leave Egypt with great riches. The darkness gave the Israelites the opportunity to uncover the places where the Egyptians hid their treasures so those Egyptians could not deny later that they had them.

The Areshet Sefateynu asks what was the nature of this darkness? The Torah does not say that the Jews had no darkness. Rather, "There was light *be'moshvoteyhem*, in their dwellings." He further notes that the verb *yomush*, as in *v'yamesh choshech*, often means "remove." How can we reconcile the idea of removing darkness with the tangibility of this darkness? What was the source of this darkness?

The Tanna, Rabbi Yehudah, claims that this darkness originated in the highest realms of heaven, in absolute purity. On the other hand, Rabbi Nechemiah claims it emanated from the regions of Gehinom. According to Rabbi Yehudah, this darkness was parallel to the state of nothingness before creation when only God existed. But since the wicked are unworthy of witnessing such purity, they simply could not see.

The Ohr Gedalyahu observes that the ten plagues parallel the ten utterances of creation, but in reverse order. The ninth plague of darkness parallels the utterance, "Let there be light." When Hashem created light, He also created its opposite, darkness. Anyone who believed in God, lived in light. Anyone who did not, lived in darkness. Rabbi Wolbe citing the Saba of Slabodka adds that during the plague people were able to see individual Divine providence. The light shone for everyone, yet each individual perceived it differently.

Mima'amakim explains that at the beginning of creation Hashem did indeed see that the light was good. This was the light of absolute clarity in which man could see all the secrets of the hidden world. But Hashem was afraid it would be abused by evil people, so He concealed it behind layers of darkness. *Mima'amakim* cites the Malbim who says that the plague was not darkness or an absence of light, but the original, completely spiritual, bright, light. While the Israelites gained clarity with this light to the point that they could see the hidden treasures,

the Egyptians were blinded by its intensity. As Rabbi Schlesinger quoting the Kedushat Levi explains, *V'yameish choshech* means the darkness was palpable. The veils of darkness that hid the original light were removed.

Rabbi Pincus uses this idea to give us some contemporary advice. The way for us to subdue our enemies today is no different from the way it was then. Through the light of Torah and *mitzvot* we can move forward and paralyze them.

The Ner Uziel writes that light exists both in the upper spiritual world and in the lower, physical realm. What the Torah refers to as light is actually a manifestation of the spiritual essence known as truth. As light is truth and clarity, darkness is confusion and a distorted view of reality. This confusion paralyzed the Egyptians and prevented them from moving forward. In contrast, the Jews experienced heightened awareness. One who "can't see the light" has no understanding, notes Rabbi Ezrachi. If there's a break in communication between the brain's message and the appropriate limb, the limb will not move. The darkness of the Egyptians was intellectual. They had lost all understanding and couldn't even function in the world.

What allowed Bnei Yisroel to be redeemed? It was nothing more than an intense desire for that redemption. We must open our eyes, for we are also submerged in darkness. Hashem is waiting for us.

Chovot Halevovot Inhibiting Chochmas Hashem Part II

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rabbi Yitzchak Cohen

When the Jews left Egypt, they could find no water in the desert. They complained to Moshe, "*Hayesh Hashem b'kirbeinu im ayin*. Is Hashem among us or not?" Rashi compares this to a father who was carrying his son on his shoulders. Whenever the son wanted something, he would ask his father and the father would give it to him. Along the way they encountered a man and the son called out, "Have you seen my father?"

Immediately his father threw him off his shoulders. Rashi notes that immediately after the Jew's doubted Hashem's presence, Amalek came and attacked them.

Amalek comes when we are weak in Torah and *emunah*. They were the first nation to attack us. The Torah tells us, "*V'lo yaraei Elokim*. Amalek had no fear of Hashem." It wasn't just a continuation of the hatred of Esav

towards Yaakov. Amalek tries their hardest to break *Klal Yisrael's* faith in Divine Providence. They want to destroy the loving relationship between the Jews and their Creator. When the Jewish people cried out, "*Hayesh Hashem b'kirbeinu*," they separated themselves from Hashem, and Amalek jumped in to that space.

The Torah tells us, "*Asher karcha b'derech*. They happened upon you on the way."

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Karcha is an expression of coldness. Amalek's goal was to make *Klal Yisrael* insensitive to holiness. The Mishna in Teruma cites a disagreement between Rabbi Meir and the sages. If an employer mistakenly gave his workers food that was *teruma*, the law is that one must pay back *keren v'chomesh* to the *kohanim*, the principle plus a fifth more. Rabbi Meir says the employer pays the principle and the workers pay the fifth. The Sages, though, say that the workers pay the entire amount because they derived pleasure from the food. However, the boss must give them another meal. The Yerushalmi explains that the boss is obligated to feed his workers, but it is as if he gave them nothing because he gave them forbidden food. Why then is the onus on the workers? The Gemara and the Midrash

explain that if the Torah would have not been given, we would have learned from an ant not to steal. The nature of an ant is to gather crumbs of bread and place them in the middle of the road. Thousands of ants will pass by but they will not touch the crumbs because they can smell that it's not theirs. We know stealing is wrong. We don't need the ant to tell us that. But if the ant can intuitively differentiate what is not his, surely a human should be able to sense that. Amalek made us insensitive.

This is what we learn in Shaar Habechina. The evil inclination within us prevents us from recognizing Hashem. This arrogance comes from the coldness of Amalek. When the employer gave his workers the food, they should have sensed that it was *terumah* and

refused to eat it. Therefore, the Mishna tells us according to the sages that the workers must pay, because their own insensitivity caused them to enjoy forbidden food. Amalek is so powerful that he prevents a person not only from doing *mitzvot*, but convinces him into thinking that the *mitzvot* don't apply to him. Amalek takes away the love and desire for Torah and *mitzvot*. A person who lacks fear of Hashem looks for loopholes to get out of *mitzvot*. The Shaar Habechina tells us we need to do the opposite. We should look for opportunities that will bring us to a higher level of serving Hashem. We should search for His presence in our lives and hope and pray for the redemption when His name will be recognized by all.

Preparing Oneself for G-d Part III

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rabbi Ari Jacobson

There's a discussion in the Kitzur as to what type of *tzoah* (waste matter) would inhibit one from reciting *devarim she'bekedusha* (holy words). The presence of human excrement and waste from a cat or rooster would prevent one from reciting *devarim she'bekedusha*. Other types of animal waste do not affect this *halacha*, unless they emit an odor.

In *Seif yud*, the Kitzur discusses the question of someone who prayed *shemone esrei* and then realized that the nearby baby had an unclean diaper. Is he required to repeat *shemone esrei*? If the baby was expected to have a dirty diaper and the person forgot to check, he would have to repeat the prayer. If it was unexpected, he does not have to go back. The Kitzur rules that for *birchat hamazon* one would never have to repeat it. The Mishna Berura disagrees and states that if one was negligent in inspecting the cleanliness of the place prior to bentching, one would have to go back.

The halacha states that a part of the body that

is normally covered must be covered when praying or reciting a *bracha*. The Aruch Hashulchan is lenient and rules that if in a particular society it is normal for people to reveal certain areas, it wouldn't be a problem. The Shulchan Aruch rules stringently. Does closing one's eyes or turning away help? Some say yes and others say no. When necessary, one should ask a competent Rabbi. In *Seif yud zayin*, the Kitzur notes that there must be a separation between the upper and lower body when reciting a *davar shebekedusha*. Normal Western garb usually accomplishes this. However, if a person is wearing a hospital gown, he should place his hands against his waist to create a separation. Wearing a gartel expresses additional respect for prayer.

In *Siman vav, seiph aleph*, the Kitzur points out that prior to making a *bracha* a person should be aware of what blessing he will say. One is not permitted to engage in any type of activity while reciting a *bracha*. When washing for bread, one should not recite the *bracha* while drying one's hands. One should not to

say the *brachot* quickly. Rather one should contemplate the meaning of the words. If one doesn't understand the words, does one fulfill one's obligation? In the majority of cases, yes, but there are exceptions. One must have intentions in the first verse of *shema* and the first blessing of *shemone esrei*. If one is not proficient in Hebrew he is allowed to recite a *bracha* in a different language, although there are exceptions.

The Kitzur quotes the Sefer Chassidim that when a person says a blessing on food or on performing a *mitzvah* he should not say it by rote, but with specific intent to praise and thank Hashem for his kindness. This can be challenging as human nature is to pay less attention to something we do all the time. If we would stop and contemplate the meaning of the *brachot*, our whole day would be different. In fact, this is the purpose of the blessings, to pause throughout the day and focus on Hashem and how He constantly provides for us. The *brachot* are woven into our lives to sensitize and infuse our daily life with meaning.