

Darkness and Light

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In this week's *parsha*, we study the final three *makkos* with which Hashem punished Mitzrayim. The ninth *makkah* was that of *choshech*, darkness. We learned in school that for a week, Mitzrayim was frozen in a thick, blinding darkness. The Mitzrim couldn't see and couldn't move; they were incapacitated. But the Jews were unaffected by the *makkah* and had light wherever they went.

The *posuk* in *Beshalach*, (13:18) states regarding the exit from Mitzrayim, "*vachamushim olu bnei Yisroel m'eretz Mitzrayim.*" Rashi, quoting the Medrash, deduces from the word *chamushim* that only 1/5 of the Jews were redeemed from Mitzrayim, the rest died during *makkas choshech*.

The wicked among them who didn't merit redemption died while the shroud of black engulfed Mitzrayim. Those who lacked the strength of faith to maintain their belief in Hashem and remain loyal to their customs and traditions perished during the darkness.

As we grow older and delve into *seforim*, we merit to develop a deeper understanding of the *pesukim* and of what transpired. There is discussion in *seforim* that to bring about the *makkah* of *choshech*, *Hakadosh Boruch Hu* removed the covering from the *ohr haganuz*, the great light that shined when the world was created and will shine again when the world will realize its potential following *Moshiach's* redemption.

Sometimes we encounter a very bright light, so bright that we are warned not to look directly at it, for it damages the eyes of those who gaze at it. The same is true of the sun. Its light is so strong that it is literally blinding; therefore, we don't stare directly at the sun. Yet the light of the sun is vital to life and without it everything would darken and shrivel.

That light at that time was so bright that those who were not leading meaningful lives were blinded by it. To them, everything was dark. To the Mitzrim, everything was dark.

Some of *Klal Yisroel* at the time of *geulas Mitzrayim* were on a high level, as they were preparing themselves to be worthy of redemption. Thus, they were able to withstand the severity of light and were able to benefit from it. But not all of them were righteous. A very high percentage of them were not. For them, the light of the *ohr haganuz* was deadly. In the face of so much holiness, they could not exist, and thus four-fifths of the Jewish people perished during the plague.

The Mitzrim lived a life of darkness, occupying their time satisfying physical desires, subsumed with immorality and filth. The Jews who survived were subjected physically, but lived on a higher plane. The others, who died during *makkas choshech*, sought to be like the Egyptians. Their desire for a life of darkness led them to disappear when the great light came. They were drawn to the darkness, to a life of a million slow deaths, and when the force of light was ascendant, they were overcome and died.

For the good *Yidden*, who sought to live a life of meaning and value, the light of the *ohr haganuz* was illuminating and invigorating, as it enabled them to see

past their physical constraints and towards the day they would be freed and set on the path to nationhood and Har Sinai.

What transpired to our forefathers is a precursor of what will happen to us. As *Chazal* teach: "*Maaseh avos siman labonim.*" The trajectory of the Jews in Mitzrayim foretells what will happen to us as we approach our period of redemption. The Jewish people, dispersed around the world, will be faced with many *nisyonos*. We will suffer until the appointed time arrives.

Today, we live during the period of *ikvesa deMeshicha*, leading up to *Moshiach's* arrival. Just as during the period leading up to the redemption from Mitzrayim there was a plague of darkness, so too, in our day, there is darkness all around us.

Wherever we turn, we see darkness. The world is enveloped by lies and evil, falsehoods and debauchery. People are vacuous and empty, devoid of meaning, as they live hedonistic lives of little value, chasing passions, trends, thrills, adventures and delights. They contribute little to the enhancement and betterment of the world in general and themselves in particular. Every day is a new opportunity for a new whim, to pursue a new temptation, a new taste, a more sumptuous steak, a more exotic vacation, and to accumulate more money.

At a certain point, the dreams crash, and those people find themselves beset by feelings of emptiness and desolation. They have everything and yet they have nothing. They become anxious and seek therapy and help to find some meaning and value. Pursuing darkness and emptiness leads to a dark, empty life.

The *chamushim* are thankful that our pursuit of Torah, our observance of *mitzvos*, and our devotion to *chesed* and *maasim tovim* give meaning to our lives. Our concentration on the *chinuch* of our children grounds us and them. Being guided by the forces of light and goodness brings us happiness and satisfaction in a listless world gone mad.

We know that to merit redemption, we have to protect ourselves from the steady onslaught of *tumah*, of insidious influences, lures and temptations. We have to raise our levels of *kedusha*, becoming better in all we do.

New problems arise daily. In order to merit the coming of *Moshiach*, we have to exert ourselves to remain steadfast to that which makes us great. We have to remember why we were created and what our mission is. When we do something, we should consider whether it brings us closer to *Moshiach* or draws us away from him. If our action will bring the *geulah* closer, then we should continue what we are doing. But if it will not hasten the *geulah* and will not bring light to the world, we should refrain from that action.

The challenges are tough. The tests to our *emunah* and *bitachon* are great. *Tzaros* abound. The good suffer, the weak squabble, and Jews around the world fear the future.

We can only imagine what transpired during the awful period of Egyptian slavery, as tens of thousands of grandchildren of Yaakov Avinu gave up. Mitzrayim, with its dark and corrupt values and attitudes, appealed to them. They viewed *Yiddishkeit* as regressive and constricting. And then the plague of darkness descended on the country and those poor souls slipped away into oblivion.

At a time that cries out for light, let us each do our share to shine some light on a dark world and help reveal the truths about the occurrences of our time, so that we may better prepare for the coming redemption. We see many things that are plainly obvious to us, yet we see how the media, culture and outside world misinterpret and lie to further their agenda.

The *mitzvah* of *Kiddush Hachodesh*, also in this week's *parsha*, reminds us on a monthly basis that we should never despair. Although the moon shrinks and disappears, it always returns to its former glory, size and strength. The Jewish people, as a nation and as individuals, should never perceive loss and hardship as eternal setbacks. Hashem watches over us and provides us the ability of resurgence and growth.

As we see forces of darkness and fiction vying for leadership, we should not be placing our faith in any person, as if our salvation lies in his hands. These weeks especially, we should be strengthening our *emunah* and *bitachon* in Hashem and living our lives in the way that we will find favor in His eyes.

Many of our brethren fall prey to false prophets and foreign ideas. People are enticed by charismatic speakers, charming thoughts and moving tales. Purveyors of darkness wrap their goods in color and glitter to entice unsuspecting people.

We must remember that there is strength in humility and nobleness in character. In a world where greatness is elusive, mediocrity is mistaken for superiority. Fairness has been replaced with intolerance, as those who called for unity work towards establishing division.

There are many *mitzvos* that the Torah refers to as *zeicher l'Yetzias Mitzrayim*. We do them to remember our deliverance from Mitzrayim. Hashem could have led the Jews out of slavery in many natural ways. By twisting the laws of nature to free the *Bnei Yisroel*, Hashem demonstrated that the world was created for the Jews and therefore when it comes to them rules of nature don't always apply.

Tefillin is one of those *mitzvos*. The *posuk* commands us at the very end of the *parsha* (13:16) to affix *tefillin* to our arm and head: "*Vehoyah l'os al yodcha uletotafos bein einecha, ki b'chozek yod hotzianu Hashem miMitzroyim.*"

Since the Torah refers to *tefillin* as an "os," a "sign," *Chazal* derive that we do not wear *tefillin* on *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov*. We wear *tefillin* because they are an *os*, but since *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov* are each an *os*, another *os* is not required.

What does it mean that *tefillin* is an *os*, *Shabbos* is an *os*, and *Yom Tov* is an *os*?

The *Sefas Emes* says that when man was created, he was on a higher level than angels. After Adam sinned, his loftier *neshomah* was removed and kept in *Gan Eden*. At the time of *Yetzias Mitzrayim* and *Kabbolas HaTorah*, that exalted *neshomah* was returned.

While that *neshomah* was again forfeited at the time of the *chet ha'Eigel*, there are times and *mitzvos* that allow it to return. There are certain *mitzvos* that cause the *neshomah* and its strengths to be apparent.

This is what is meant when the Torah says that *tefillin* is an *os*. When we are wearing *tefillin*, the *hashpa'os* that were apparent at *Yetzias Mitzrayim* are in force if we properly prepare ourselves and make ourselves worthy.

On *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov*, the *neshomah yeseirah* returns and we are on a higher level than during the rest of the week. They are an *os*, a sign to the greatness that we are capable of and the levels we were on at the time of *Yetzias Mitzrayim*. Thus, when we recite *Kiddush* and proclaim that the day is *zeicher I'Yetzias Mitzrayim*, we are asking for Hashem to return us to that exalted state.

It is possible for us to attain those levels if we properly prepare ourselves and work towards the goal of being an *am kadosh*.

Shabbos is a day that transports us to a different world and allows us to perceive things we didn't understand all week, raising our levels not only of *havonah*, but also of *kedusha*, every week.

It is fascinating to consider that every morning, when we put on *tefillin*, we can raise ourselves to the level of the Jews after *Yetzias Mitzrayim*. Imagine the heights we could reach daily if instead of putting on *tefillin* lackadaisically, we would give thought to what we are doing and recognize that we are about to be given an opportunity to see great light and to be on a lofty level of *kedusha*.

We would *daven* better, our *tefillos* would reach higher, and our day would be that much more successful and gratifying. Our pursuits would be more enduring. We wouldn't have any dark days.

Torah and *mitzvos* are light – the light that drives out the darkness of today’s *makkas choshech*. *Shabbos*, *Yom Tov* and *tefillin* remind us of our greatness and allow the light to shine through.

The *novi* Yeshayahu (60:1-3) tells of the time when *Moshiach* will arrive. The world will be covered with darkness, and the nations will be enveloped in fog, but Hashem will shine his light upon us.

Just as in Mitzrayim, there will be darkness everywhere and the nations will be enveloped in it, but *Klal Yisroel* will be blessed with Hashem’s light, as the *ohr haganuz* will shine again and forever. The darkness is omnipresent, pervading everywhere. It’s time for Hashem to bring His light upon His rising nation, reaching heights of Torah and *gedulah* as it awaits the great day. May it come soon.