

## **Bo 5781** **Out Of The Darkness**

*With thanks to Rabbi Joshua Pernick - "two are better than one" - Kohelet 4:9*

There are patterns to the plagues of Egypt. There are patterns in when and how warnings are given to Pharaoh, and who produces the plague - Moses or Aaron. There are patterns in what element the plague affects and whether it affects human bodies or not. And these patterns work by bundling the plagues into three groups of three, with the final plague standing on its own.

Last week at Havdalah Rabbi Pernick pointed out that the arrangement of last week and this week's Torah portions breaks those patterns by stopping after the seventh plague. You can watch the recording of Havdalah from last week on our facebook page for his interpretation and some initial thoughts from me that have grown into this sermon, for this momentous week both in the Torah narrative, where we read the story of the actual Exodus, and in our contemporary lives, where a new term of government has just begun.

The obvious question to ask the Torah, given the way it breaks up the patterns of the plagues, is this - is there a new pattern in our parashah, and what does it teach us if so? The final three plagues are locusts, darkness and the slaying of the firstborn. Let's take a look.

First, the locusts. The Torah and Rashi tell us that the locusts *hide all the land from view* - but the commentator Abarbanel looks more closely at the Hebrew, which says that the locusts cover *eyn ha-aretz*, 'the eye of the land' - which he interprets as being the sun. This, he explains, is why the land became darkened, not because of the innumerable locusts crawling on its surface.

Then there is the plague of darkness itself. As soon as the locusts been blown into the sea, Pharaoh's heart is once again stiffened, and without warning, in the space of a single pair of verses,<sup>1</sup> darkness descends - a darkness that erased the difference between day and night, so thick that it was tangible, that put out any light anyone attempted to kindle. Ibn Ezra recalls the fogs over the Atlantic that he saw that lasted for days at a time. And some of the commentators understand this darkness to be heavy in the sense of weight, paralyzing the Egyptians in a way that might make us think of those outlines of people from Pompeii, caught forever in whatever they were doing when the flow of lava hit them.

And finally, there is the slaying of the firstborn - *vayehi behatzi halayla*, the Torah tells us, that came to pass at the middle of the night, the darkest time of all.

So the question that came up at last week's Havdalah was this: with so much darkness happening, when is the first time that we see light? And Rabbi Pernick provided the answer:

*The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months: it shall be the first month of the year for you.*<sup>2</sup>

So it seems the first light in the darkness isn't some kind of blaze of glory. It's the slim crescent of a new moon. But it has the power to grow, and grow it does. In fact, it's that moon that leads us to the Exodus. First the Israelites see it in the sky, then on day 10 they kill the Pesach lamb and on day 14 they finally leave, by the light of the full moon.

We can enjoy the symbolism here. After slavery, freedom; after darkness, light.

...but wait. That's not quite all there is to it. Because the moon narrative stands between plagues 9 and 10. If there's increasing light after plague #9 doesn't that break up the darkness theme that we noticed before?

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<sup>1</sup> Shemot 10:21-22

<sup>2</sup> Shemot 12:1-2

Maybe not necessarily. The positioning of the moon between plague 9 and plague 10 just makes the lesson a little bit more subtle. There are two things here for us to notice.

First, the fact that what we call the 'new moon,' that crescent the Israelites will have seen, is not the true point at which the moon renews itself and the 'hodesh' really begins. The actual new moon is a 'keseh,' a covering, when we see nothing in the sky at all. The only way we human beings can see a new moon is if we're watching a solar eclipse - with suitable eye protection, of course. That black disc covering the sun? That's it. So the new moon is just as much about darkness as it is about light.

And second, the light doesn't last. The light of the moon is not certain, like the light of the stars. The moon both grows and shrinks in the sky, as if to remind us that we can't remain in one state continuously. Being human means being in flux. There is freedom, but as we know, it's always possible to be physically free but still constricted in other ways. We are constantly moving towards, and away from, freedom. So when we are in the light we must not be frightened if it gets dark again; and when it is dark, we must know that the darkness will resolve into light, a light that will grow for a while so that we can take our first steps into becoming.

Many of my colleagues this morning are referencing Amanda Gorman's extraordinary poem, *The Hill We Climb*, that she recited at the inauguration on Wednesday. If you have not yet seen it, I urge you to do so. The ending of that poem also references light:

*There is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it.  
If only we're brave enough to be it.*

Our tradition teaches that we are forever leaving Egypt. That's why we reference the Exodus not only at Pesach but at every festival, every Shabbat. Let us pray that this Shabbat, wherever we are on our respective journeys, we can sense that there will be light.

Shabbat shalom.