

## Darkness Deciphered

One of the most enigmatic of all the plagues was the plague of darkness. The Torah tells us that the darkness “was tangible” (יָמִיּוֹת). As properly understood, the plague lasted a total of six days, three days of a thick darkness and three additional days during which the darkness was so “tangible” that no one could move from whatever position he was in. This was indeed a strange plague whose purpose needs to be examined.

What was the source of this darkness? Two of our great *Tannaim* pose contradictory theories as to its origin. Rabbi Yehuda claims it originated in the highest realms of heaven, in absolute purity. On the other hand, Rav Nechemia claims it emanated from the regions of *Gehennom*. According to Rabbi Yehuda, this darkness was parallel to the state of nothingness before Creation, when only G-d existed. But since the wicked are unworthy of witnessing such purity, Rav Nechemia claims, this darkness must be a part of death, punishment and destruction.

Rav Gedaliah Schorr observes that the 10 plagues run parallel to the 10 utterances of Creation in reverse order. The purpose of the plagues, as noted multiple times in G-d’s messages through Moshe, was to know that G-d exists within the world and runs the world, albeit in concealment. The 10th plague, when G-d personally (so to speak) comes down to smite the firstborn Egyptians, parallels “In the beginning,” when all that existed was G-d’s presence, without a world of concealment.

Certainly G-d could have created the world with one utterance, just as He could have redeemed Israel with one plague. But G-d wanted mankind to choose to recognize G-d in each element of Creation rather than through

one massive unconcealed truth. In this way, G-d could create merits for the righteous to earn rewards. Similarly, G-d could have redeemed *Bnei Yisrael* with one plague, but the message would have been lost, as each plague revealed another facet of G-d’s immanence on earth.

The ninth plague, darkness, parallels the utterance, “Let there be light.” When G-d created light, He also created its opposite, darkness. He can create a system in which the two can exist simultaneously, irrespective of their contradictory nature, even though we, as humans, cannot grasp this dual existence.

In writing about *Bnei Yisrael*, the Torah does not say they had no darkness. It states, “For all of *Bnei Yisrael* there was light in their dwellings.” The Malbim explains that the plague was not darkness or an absence of light, but rather an original, completely spiritual bright light that Egyptian eyes could not tolerate and found blinding. The light shone for everyone, yet each individual perceived it differently. While the Israelites gained clarity with this light, the Egyptians were blinded by its intensity as one is blinded by looking directly at the sun.

The verb יָמַשׁ often means “remove.” The *Kedushat Levi* explains that יָמַשׁ חֹשֶׁךְ, “the darkness was palpable,” includes within its meaning the removal of the veils and shields that hid the original light. The Torah states that when the plague of darkness came, the Israelites had light in their dwelling places instead of saying they did not suffer from the darkness.

What the Torah refers to as light is not the daytime light, but actually a manifestation of the spiritual essence

known as Truth. Truth itself was concealed during the process of Creation. But if light is truth and clarity, darkness is confusion and a distorted view of reality. It was this confusion, inner doubt and turmoil that paralyzed the Egyptians and prevented them from moving forward. In contrast, the Jews experienced heightened awareness. Seeing the light is not only literal, but also metaphorical, for one who “can’t see the light” has no understanding.

The time before the great light of redemption is revealed is the darkest time. 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. May we soon merit the light of full redemption.

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