Boogy - Woogie

“Stretch forth your hand toward the heavens, and there shall be a darkness on the land of Egypt, and the darkness will be tangible.”

(The 21st)

Nothing is more frightening than nothingness. As young children, our last request at bedtime is “Daddy, don’t close the door!” And what if the door accidentally closes and we find ourselves alone and in the dark? What is the fear that lurks in the darkness? Some vast and hideous monster two inches from our face? Some huge slimy insect hiding under the bed? Or worse — the remnants of last night’s midnight feast?

Maybe it’s something much more fundamental that frightens us. Even when we grow to adulthood, we never quite lose our fear of the dark. If we no longer fear it as we did when we were children, it’s because we have the means to restore the light. We know we can get out of bed and flick the switch. We’re in control. But if we were placed in a darkness over which we had no control, if we were powerless to restore the light, all those primordial youthful fears would immediately take hold.

Why is the dark so frightening? More than large furry spiders or the famous, but rarely-spotted, Boogy man, what really frightens us about the dark is that we are in a world where nothing exists outside ourselves. Nothing exists. Only the sound of our own breathing. The thump, thump of our heart. And after a few minutes of silence, the low whistling of the blood flowing in our ears. The sound of nothing. In Hebrew the word for darkness is connected to the word “to withhold.” (“And you have not withheld your son, your only son from Me.” — Bereishet 22:12)

Darkness is the absence, the withholding, of the world outside.

In this week’s Parsha, the Torah records the penultimate plague inflicted on the Egyptians — the plague of darkness. Ostensibly, this was a very benign plague. No blood turned to water. No-one suffered excruciating boils. Just darkness. A darkness that at first prevented you from seeing someone even if they were right in front of your face, and then it became even thicker until it literally froze people. How can darkness freeze someone?

The answer is that, in the dark, I perceive that there is nowhere outside of me. I have nowhere to go. If I extend my little finger, it will vanish. There is nothing there. No place, no space outside.

I often think that our present situation in Israel is rather like those Egyptians in the plague of darkness. We are paralyzed, incapable of action. We are living in a world of darkness. A world where the Boogy man wears an Arab kafia on his head and has a permanent three-day stubble on his face. A world where G-d is so hidden from us that we feel that if we move at all we will simply vanish into nothingness — like some medieval sailor’s nightmare of sailing off the edge of the world.

One of G-d’s names is Hamakom. “The Place.” The mystics teach that G-d doesn’t exist in the world — The world exists in G-d.

G-d is the place of the world. He is the place of all existence. He causes existence.

The nations of the world repeat the same message to the Jewish People down the ages: “You have no place in this world.” You are trying to Judaize the Haram el-Sharif. You don’t belong here. You stole the land. Your destiny is to wander, to be the Wandering Jew of Christian mythology.

In every lie, there is a grain of truth. It is true that the Jewish People have no place in the world — in the natural order of things. We are an anti-historical people. By all the “laws” of history and probability, the Jewish People should have faded out long ago. One of historical theory’s biggest problems is our survival. Because we shouldn’t be here. We have no place in the world. Our biggest problems start when we think that we belong here, when we want to play at being a nation just like any other nation.

G-d didn’t make us that way; we are a supernatural people. We are His “inheritance,” His “portion” in this world. Our entire existence is only in Him. It is only when we realize that our place in this world is to be in Hamakom — to be in the Place of the world — we will emerge from our paralyzing darkness to a world of light and security.
This is part of Israel’s education: We had to learn that even the great superpower, Egypt, could fall. Each plague demonstrated how the mighty empire was like putty in G-d’s hands.

This was not the last time Egypt would suffer devastation. The Prophet Yirmiyahu foretells Egypt’s fall to Babylon. Her armies will turn and flee from the invaders who will appear more numerous than locusts; they will cut her down like so many axes reducing a forest to nothingness.

Egypt gives way to Babylonia, and Babylonia later falls to Medio-Persia. All are transient. They rise to the greatest of heights, but disappear without a trace when G-d so decrees.

Israel, however, will never be wiped out. We live on to fulfill our eternal mission as the Chosen People. There is no human super-power for us to put our trust in. The higher they rise, the bigger their fall.

“At approximately midnight I will go out amidst Egypt, and every first born will die…” (11:14)

Hashem’s “clock” is set to Jerusalem time. The plague of the first-born took place at exactly midnight, Jerusalem time. But because Egypt is west of Jerusalem, midnight there occurs later. When Moshe said the plague would be at “approximately midnight,” he was referring to local Egyptian time.

• Kehillat Yitzchak; thanks to Rabbi Sholem Fishbane
The Torah Universe

by Rabbi Nosson Slifkin
(http://www.zootorah.com)

continued on page eight
BLESSING WITH LOVE

Before the kohanim bless the congregation, they say a blessing in which they praise Hashem for “sanctifying us with the holiness of Aharon and commanding us to bless His people Israel with love.”

The commentaries call attention to the closing phrase of this blessing, which seems to indicate that this mitzvah to bless the congregation must be done with love. Why, they ask, is it only regarding this mitzvah that our sages established the text of the blessing preceding it to include the prerequisite of “love?”

Two sources are cited as explanation. One is a midrash (Devarim Rabbah 11:4) which focuses on the word “amor” in the Torah passage (Bamidbar 6:23) instructing the kohanim in what to say in their blessing. This word, meaning “say” (to them), is written with a “vav” to make it “full.” The message, says the midrash, is that Hashem wanted the kohanim to know that when He delegated to them the power to bless Israel, He insisted that they not do so in a haughty and impatient, half-hearted manner, but rather with wholehearted sincerity.

The other source is a quote from the Zohar cited by Magen Avraham (Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 128:18): “Any kohen who does not love the people or is not loved by them should not lift his hands in prayer.”

Both of these sources indicate that this is not simply a mitzvah for kohanim to lift their hands and pronounce the blessing written in the Torah. There must be a genuine desire on the part of the kohanim to see the people blessed and reciprocally on the part of the people to receive the kohanim’s blessing. The kohanim must therefore prepare for this by stressing in the praise they give to Hashem for commanding this mitzvah the need to do so with love.

Two supports of this approach may be suggested. One is the custom of the kohanim saying a special prayer before ascending the podium to bless the congregation, in which they ask that they be able to perform the mitzvah without any obstacle or flaw. This unusual preparation for a mitzvah may be necessary because of the challenge it provides to human emotions. Another support for the symbiotic relation between blesser and blessed is the requirement for kohanim to lift their hands. Rabbi Yosef Elbo, in his Sefer Haikarim, explains this as a virtual placing of hands on the head which is an integral part in every blessing.

A POINT OF HONOR

Every seven years Jews fulfilled the mitzvah of hakhel. On the first day of Chol Hamoed (Intermediate Days of) Succot following the shemitta year, all men, women and children of Israel gathered in the Beit Hamikdash to hear the king read aloud selected chapters of the Torah.

Although the king had the royal prerogative of sitting while he did this reading, the mishna tells us that King Agrippas stood, a gesture which gained for him the praise of the sages. The gemara challenges the praise given to this king for waiving the honor due him from the ruling of Rabbi Ashi that a king cannot waive the honor due him from his subjects. The response to this challenge is that he may do so in regard to a mitzvah such as this in which he showed honor to the Torah he was reading.

Tosefot raises a problem with this response from two different sources. One is from an incident concerning this very same king. The gemara (Mesechta Ketubot 17a) rules that a king’s procession takes priority over that of a bride’s in regard to right of way. King Agrippas, however, once waived his royal prerogative and gave the bride’s procession right of way in order to honor her. When the gemara challenges the praise given him by the sages for this gesture on the grounds that a king may not waive the honor due him, the response given is that the two processions met at a crossroads such that the royal procession’s turning to another road was not a blatant display of forfeiting royal dignity and could be construed as a genuine need to head in that direction. Why did the gemara, asks Tosefot, not simply answer, as it does here, that in regard to the mitzvah of honoring the bride, the king may waive his honor?

The second challenge comes from a gemara (Mesechta Kiddushin 32b) about Rabban Gamliel, the head of the Sanhedrin, serving the sages who were his guests at a wedding feast for his son. Although there was initial disagreement amongst these sages as to whether it was proper to accept this service, the conclusion of the gemara is that although a king may not waive the honor due him, a nasi (Sanhedrin head) may do so. The clear inference of this conclusion is that a king in the same circumstance of honoring Torah sages would be restrained from doing so. Why, asks Tosefot, would it not be proper for a king to waive his honor to fulfill the mitzvah of honoring Torah sages?

As a solution, Tosefot distinguishes between a mitzvah which is an expression of respect for Hashem and one which is respect for humans. By reading the Torah in a standing position Agrippas was placing the honor of Hashem and His Torah above his own. (A similar example is found in Mesechta Sanhedrin 19b where Rabbi Yehuda contends that although a king is not obligated to perform yibum or chalitza with his childless brother’s widow, it is praiseworthy if he does so because by doing such a mitzvah he places the honor of Hashem above his own.) But when it comes to the mitzvah of honoring a bride or a Torah sage, the honor of the king takes precedence because of their obligation to honor him. There is therefore no mitzvah involved in the king deferring to them.
PARSHA Q&A?

1. What was Pharaoh’s excuse for not releasing the Jewish children?
2. How did the locusts in the time of Moshe differ from those in the days of Yoel?
3. How did the first three days of darkness differ from the last three?
4. When the Jews asked the Egyptians for gold and silver vessels, the Egyptians were unable to deny ownership of such vessels. Why?
5. Makat bechorot took place at exactly midnight. Why did Moshe say it would take place at approximately midnight?
6. Why did the firstborn of the animals die?
7. How did Moshe show respect to Pharaoh when he warned him about the aftermath of the plague of the firstborn?
8. Hashem told Moshe “so that my wonders will be multiplied” (11:9). What three wonders was Hashem referring to?
9. Why did Hashem command the mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh to Aharon, and not only to Moshe?
10. Up to what age is an animal fit to be a Pesach offering?
11. Prior to the Exodus from Egypt, what two mitzvot involving blood did Hashem give to the Jewish People?
12. Rashi gives two explanations of the word “Pasachti.” What are they?
13. Why were the Jews told to stay indoors during makat bechorot?
14. What was Pharaoh screaming as he ran from door to door the night of makat bechorot?
15. Why did Pharaoh ask Moshe to bless him?
16. Why did the Jewish People carry their matzah on their shoulders rather than have their animals carry it?
17. Who comprised the erev rav (mixed multitude)?
18. What three historical events occurred on the 15th of Nissan, prior to the event of the Exodus from Egypt?
19. What is the source of the “milk and honey” found in Eretz Yisrael?
20. The only non-kosher animal whose firstborn is redeemed is the donkey. What did the donkeys do to “earn” this distinction?

PARSHA Q&A!

Answers to this Week’s Questions!

All references are to the verses and Rashi’s commentary unless otherwise stated.

1. 10:11 - Since children don’t bring sacrifices there was no need for them to go.
2. 10:14 - The plague brought by Moshe was composed of one species of locust, whereas the plague in the days of Yoel was composed of many species.
3. 10:22 - During the first three days the Egyptians couldn’t see. During the last three days they couldn’t move.
4. 10:22 - During the plague of darkness the Jews could see and they searched and found the Egyptians’ vessels.
5. 11:4 - If Moshe said the plague would begin exactly at midnight, the Egyptians might miscalculate and accuse Moshe of being a fake.
6. 11:5 - Because the Egyptians worshiped them as gods, and when Hashem punishes a nation He also punishes its gods.
7. 11:8 - Moshe warned that “All these servants of yours will come down to me” when, in fact, it was Pharaoh himself who actually came running to Moshe.
8. 11:9 - The plague of the firstborn, the splitting of the sea, the drowning of the Egyptian soldiers.
9. 12:1 - As reward for his efforts in bringing about the plagues.
10. 12:5 - One year.
11. 12:6 - Circumcision and Korban Pesach.
12. 12:13 - “I had mercy” and “I skipped.”
13. 12:22 - Since it was a night of destruction, it was not safe for anyone to leave the protected premises of his home.
15. 12:32 - So he wouldn’t die, for he himself was a firstborn.
16. 12:34 - Because the commandment of matzah was dear to them.
17. 12:38 - People from other nations who became converts.
18. 12:41 - The angels came to promise that Sarah would have a son, Yitzchak was born, and the exile of the “covenant between the parts” was decreed.
19. 13:5 - Goat milk, date and fig honey.
20. 13:13 - They helped the Jews by carrying silver and gold out of Egypt.
BRISK IT IS

From: Richard Brisk in Boston, MA <rbrisk@iqnsi.com>

Dear Rabbi,

In your wonderful Ohr.edu “Torah Weekly” commentary on Parshat Vayeshev, you wrote: “Rabbi Chaim of Brisk once asked...” This caught my attention because, throughout my childhood, my father told me the story of how his father’s birthplace became our family name during his passage through Ellis Island, New York. Although I never doubted my father’s story, I was never able to objectively verify it by either locating Brisk on a map or talking to someone who knew of such a town.

Your reference to Rabbi Chaim of Brisk changed that. I would greatly appreciate it if you would tell me something about where the city of Brisk is located, and something about the city itself. I am sorry to bother you about this trivial detail, but your reference to Rabbi Chaim of Brisk is a concrete information that lends credence to that dream-like story my father used to tell me. With great respect from Boston, Mass.

Richard A. Brisk

Dear Richard A. Brisk,

Yes, Brisk in Lithuania was a famous Torah center, and home of the illustrious family of Talmudic scholars, the Soleveitchik family. Perhaps the best known of this family was Rabbi Chaim Soleveitchik, renowned for his novel and penetrating analysis of the Talmud. Today, there are several “Brisk” yeshivot in Israel and abroad.

I have been told that what we refer to as Brisk is today known as the city of Brest.

And did you say you are from Boston? Boston was home to the renowned Torah Scholar Rabbi Yosef Ber Soleveitchik who recently passed away. He was a grandson of the Rabbi Chaim of Brisk mentioned in our article.

KOHANIM

From: E. Robe <Erobe56491@aol.com>

Dear Rabbi,

What are Kohanim? Does it have any connection to the name “Cohen?”

Dear E. Robe,

Kohanim is the plural of kohen, which means “priest.” In Judaism, the kohanim are the male descendants of Aharon, Moses’ brother, and when the ancient Holy Temple stood in Jerusalem, the kohanim were the ones who performed the service.

There are still many kohanim among Jews today. They get special honors in the synagogue, such as being called up first to read from the Torah.

Many people — but not all — whose last name is “Cohen” are indeed kohanim, meaning they are direct descendants of Aharon. Amazing to be able to trace your lineage to one particular individual who was born 3,396 years ago, isn’t it?

KASHA! (KASHA MEANS “QUESTION”)

How would you answer this question on the Parsha?

Kasha: “And B’nei Yisrael did as Moshe told them, and they borrowed from the Egyptians vessels of silver, vessels of gold and clothing.” (Exodus 12:35)

How could the Israelites borrow from the Egyptians, knowing that they would not repay? Isn’t that stealing?

Answer: In Hebrew, “borrow” and “ask for” are the same word. Thus, some commentaries explain that the Jews didn’t “borrow,” but rather “asked for” these items as outright gifts. (Rashbam)

The Talmud notes that the Egyptians owed the Jews wages for centuries of unjust slavery, and that the Jews took only what was rightly theirs as partial payment. This money also partially compensated them for their lands and homes in Egypt which the Egyptians confiscated. (Sanhedrin 91, Genesis 47:27)

A third answer: The Egyptians pursued the Jews to the Red Sea, attempting to annihilate and plunder them. Egypt being the aggressor, the Jews won all property in question as spoils of war, as is the case in any war that the spoils of the pursuers belong to the pursued. (Sforno)

Do you have a KASHA? Write to kasha@ohr.org.il with your questions on any Parsha!
Re: Jump in the Lake (Ohrnet Vayigash):

I don’t wish to make anyone mad but I disagree with what you told the person who stood by while his friend almost drowned. It may have been a “test” or maybe not. I have seen this happen several times, that when a traumatic event happens a person shuts down or some call it “freezing up.” It does not mean that the person doesn’t care for the person in desperate need, nor is it a sign of not having courage. It is a physical/mental shutdown that cannot be helped or controlled. The reason I know this is that I myself was saved from harm not by my mother (who froze) but by my sister who did not freeze. No other human on earth ever loved me more than Mom and she was also the most courageous person I have ever known. Also, my brother-in-law was in Vietnam and could not “move” either, until his best friend got his head blown off sitting less then two feet from him. Out of pure terror he jumped up and killed them all, saving his whole platoon. It made him sick to his stomach and he will tell you himself it was not done out of “courage” but fear of dying. So please, do not let that young man who wrote to you think that he has no courage!!

C. <withheld@aol.com>

Re: The Rabbi With the Sense of Humor:

Just a thank you to all the rabbis — especially the one with the sense of humor — your Ask the Rabbi column is a source of interest, knowledge and even a few laughs as I continue my research on a book I’m writing, a dictionary of “Jewish” words — Hebrew Yiddish and English. Toda!

Ellen Scolnic <scolnic@erols.com>

Ohrnet Responds: Thanks for your thanks. But we’re having a bit of a problem passing along your special thanks to “the Rabbi with the sense of humor,” because all the rabbis here claim that you meant him!

Re: Solomon’s Wisdom (Ohrnet Miketz):

It was not necessarily only jealousy that made the one woman wanted the other woman’s child to be cut in half. Rabbi Mordechai Miller gave the following explanation, based on the commentaries: The two women were mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. The daughter-in-law was the mother of the dead child. Her husband had also died. As a childless widow, she was therefore bound to “yibum,” the requirement that she remain single until she either marries her deceased husband’s brother or “divorces” him. Therefore, the daughter-in-law was determined that the living child not be recognized as her mother-in-law’s child — i.e., her husband’s brother, or else she would have to wait until the child grew up when it would be possible to perform yibum or dissolve her relationship to him through chalitza with him, before she could remarry. Many thanks for your wonderful articles.

R. Geller <rgeller@netvision.net.il>

---

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

**RAMBAN**

10:14 Locusts and Crocodiles
10:23 A Different Darkness
12:2 Jewish Months
12:3 Symbolism of the Korban Pesach
12:31,51 Timetable of the Exodus

13:5 Five and Two – Seven Canaanite Nations

**SEFER HACHINUCH**

7, 16 Eating Like Kings
18 Recognizing Hashem’s Gifts

The Significance of the Exodus

---

The Ohr Somayach Web Site

WWW.OHR.EDU
Nachmanides explains that if one takes a mother bird together with its young, one destroys two generations of animal life and leaves no possibility of future descendants. Doing so indicates disregard for the perpetuation of the species.

But why is it so important to care for the perpetuation of the species? The answer is alluded to in a statement of King Solomon: “Look at the work of G-d, for who can rectify that which He has damaged.” (Ecclesiastes 7:13) The Midrash explains: “When God created Adam, He took him around the trees of the Garden of Eden, and He said to him, ‘Look at My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are! Everything that I created, I created for you; take care that you do not damage and destroy My world, for if you damage it, there is no one to repair it afterwards!’” (Midrash Kohelet Rabbah 7)

If a person is aware that the world is not some sort of random accident, but was created for a purpose, then everything in it is precious. The Midrash spells this out: “Even things which appear to you to be superfluous in the world, such as flies, fleas and mosquitoes, they are also part of the creation of the world, and G-d performs His operations through the agency of all of them, even through a snake, mosquito or frog.” (Midrash Bereishet Rabbah 10:7)

To illustrate the value of all animals, even those that may repulse us, I pulled out the boa constrictor from its sack. (I later discovered that at this point, the zoo veterinarian turned to the head keeper in horror and said, “Isn’t that the snake which bites, the one that we’re getting rid of?” The veterinarian, an Orthodox woman who lives across the road from me, told me this a few days later. I’m thinking that we need better communication.)

A particularly fascinating aspect of boas is what some theorize to be their vestigial spurs, remnants of legs they once possessed. The snake, especially in its loss of legs, is the source of many different lessons in Jewish philosophy, for example the idea of treachery and falsehood being something that doesn’t have a leg to stand on. On this evening, however, the reptile was the source of a lesson in common sense: If a snake is known to be in a bad temper, it’s not a good idea to hold it upside down andprod its rear end in an effort to show its vestigial spurs. It’s also not a good idea to do this six inches away from the face of an important dignitary, such as a Deputy Mayor. Suffice it to say that, thank G-d, when it struck, for some reason it missed all humans in the vicinity, and we quickly wrestled it back into the sack.

It seems that the only moral one can learn from this is that one should never hold an irascible boa constrictor in front of a Deputy Mayor, but there are times when this is unavoidable. Still, as I mentioned at the beginning, there may be other lessons to take from the event. At a time of national emergency, a group of religious and secular Jews gather together to celebrate the insights of the 3,300-year-old Jewish tradition into the animal kingdom. That’s a lesson of the lasting value of Jewish tradition and the remarkable nature of the Jewish people if there ever was one. It’s a shame that this wouldn’t be considered interesting enough to make it into the National Enquirer.

There are three places in Eretz Yisrael, say our Sages (Bereishet Rabbah 79:7), where the nations of the world cannot even begin to press their false claim that we “stole” the land which Hashem, the Master of the World, gave to us, because they were all actually purchased from their owners. Avraham purchased the Machpela Cave in which the Patriarchs and Matriarchs are buried, Yaakov purchased the field in Shechem where Yosef is buried, David purchased the site on which the Beit Hamikdash was built by his son.

How tragically ironic it is that it is in regard to these very areas — Hebron, Shechem and Temple Mount — we are forced to stand up against the world to defend our rights of ownership.

Seek the peace of Jerusalem

Psalms 122