

Dear Chavraya,

During the wind and ice storm the other night, the electricity went out on our street. It was eerily quiet and still. It was a deep darkness that lasted for some time. Using candles at first, at a certain point I brought downstairs an antique hurricane lamp, usually for decoration, now to serve its original purpose, to give light. Sitting at the kitchen table, I read this week's Torah portion in its glow, *Parashat Bo*. Moses and Aaron continue to demand of Pharaoh, "let My people go." Pharaoh continues to refuse, even in the face of the ten plagues, increasing in severity and horror. The eighth, ninth, and tenth plagues occur in this parasha, locusts, darkness, and the death of the first-born. At the Pesach Seder we pour out a drop of wine for each of the plagues, our joy upon liberation diminished for the loss of Egyptian life. The plagues remind us of human inter-connections, that suffering is a human tragedy, regardless of upon whom it falls, that all life is sacred. Reading, thinking, feeling by the glow of an oil lamp, darkness all around, there was a certain palpable reality to the ninth plague, *choshech/darkness*.

Of the ninth plague, the Torah says: ...*There was an all-enveloping darkness/choshech afeylah in all the land of Mitzrayim/Egypt. They did not see one another and no one rose up from their place for three days. But all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings.* It is a perplexing verse that draws us toward its own hidden light. The plagues are not only the misfortunes brought upon his own people by Pharaoh's hard-hearted obstinacy, they are a warning to us lest our own hearts become hardened to the suffering of others. The first question is about the nature of the darkness. The word for darkness, as in that of night, is *choshech*. Why does the Torah speak of *choshech-afeylah*? *Afeylah* can also mean darkness, but is not used in regard to the night. It has a deeper meaning, referring to darkness of the spirit, gloom, psychological darkness. In regard to the ninth plague, it is often understood to be an opaque darkness, impenetrable, all-enveloping.

The origin of such darkness that makes it impossible to see another is within ourselves, but so too the source of light. The nineteenth century Chassidic leader, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir of Rothenberg, founder of the line that becomes Gerer Chassidism, spoke to the timeless warning in the plague of darkness. "*They did not see one another and no one rose up from their place for three days:*" *This great darkness is when a person does not see their neighbor, and does not participate in the suffering of fellow human beings. It is when we do not feel the pain of our friend, when feeling becomes blunt and silent – thus, "and no one rose from their place."*

Rabbi Yitzchak Meir's timeless interpretation of the plague of darkness brought quite a bit of discussion at our Thursday morning JP Licks Torah gathering. I want to share with you some follow-up reflections of one of our long time "Scoop of Torah" participants, Daniel Verinder: "How we do not see the labor and suffering that goes into our food supply, our clothing, so much of what we buy? And just like the Egyptians, it is not just that we do not see, but that we cannot see. So many companies work hard to hide or distract us from the ugly sides of their operations -- sweatshops and slave labor, pollution, etc."

In the world around us and in our own homes, as it was for the children of Israel, the light of tenderness, of concern and caring for others, soul-light, is able to lift

the thickest darkness. It is also the way of community, of reaching out and caring for each other.

As lamplight flickered on the pages of my *chumash*, I looked up at one point to see through the curtain of darkness the flickering light of candles in my neighbors' kitchen. I smiled, and hoped that the light of my lamp brought a smile to them.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor