

DARKNESS AND LIGHT

THEODORE STEINBERG

Years ago, our children took us on a walk through the Siloam Tunnel in Jerusalem's City of David. It is a water-tunnel that was dug through solid rock about 2700 years ago, to connect a natural spring just outside the city walls with an artificial pool inside the city. This would ensure a supply of water for Jerusalem if it were besieged by an enemy. The water still flows through it.

The walk through the tunnel, especially on a hot day, is a memorable experience. The temperature that day was in the 90s, but it was almost chilly in the tunnel, and the water lapping at our feet felt icy. There was no electric light in the tunnel, and though we forgot to bring a flashlight we found some candles to light our way. About half-way through, our guide told us to blow out the candles! We did, and suddenly it was dark. Heavy, pitch-black darkness. As I fumbled for matches, I thought that once my eyes became used to the darkness I would be able to see something. But that did not happen. There was not the faintest glimmer of light. I held up my fingers a couple of inches from my face but could not see them. It was eerie. Scary.

I wondered whether this is what it is like to be blind. A sightless person eventually comes to terms with his sightlessness. He does not expect to see and learns how to cope with the darkness by training other senses, especially touch. But standing in that pitch-black tunnel, we felt the terror of knowing that we were able to see, and yet we could not see. Finally, one of us found a dry match and we managed to re-light the candles. *Vayehee Or* – at last we had some light again.

I remembered that experience this week as I looked through the passage in Exodus about the Ninth Plague: *hoshech afelah*, a thick, almost touchable darkness descended on the land of Egypt.

There is nothing so terrible about darkness. One can get used to it and learn to cope. So what made this darkness unique? The description in the Torah suggests an answer: *Thick darkness descended, and people could not see one another; for three days no one could get up from his place* (Ex. 10:22-23).

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The Sages understood this darkness in moral terms. People could not see one another. When it is so dark that people, even brothers, cannot see one another, or do not want to see one another, that is when trouble comes. That was the moral darkness that plagued Egypt then, and, continues to plague the world.

Martin Buber related an old story about two peasants who sit down together to share a drink. One asks the other: "Tell me, Ivan, do you love me?" "Of course, I do," says Ivan. "Do you really love me?" "Yes sir, absolutely!" "Then, Ivan, tell me. Do you know what hurts me?" "No, friend, I'm sorry but I don't know what hurt's you." "Well, if you don't know what hurts me, how can you say you really love me?"

That is a big truth. That is the terror of darkness. When people do not see or do not know how to see, or do not want to see the troubles and pains of their neighbors, friends, or even their brothers and sisters, that is darkness. Darkness and light are powerful symbols. The first thing God created out of the blackness of primeval chaos was "light." One of the Dead Sea Scrolls, written by the Essenes, long ago, describes the world as a place of war, an eternal battle between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness. The Psalmist uses this metaphor several times: *The wicked walk in darkness* (Ps. 82:5). There is no shortage of darkness in the world. Call it "homelessness," or "poverty," or "narcotics addiction," or "war," or "terrorism," they are all variations of that moral *hoshech*.

But the Torah also says, *lechol bnai yisroel haya or bemoshvotam* [all Israel enjoyed light in their dwellings]. If there is light in Jewish homes it must be because we struggle for faith in the God who creates light, and who has given us a Torah *Orah*, a Torah of light that has the power to illumine our lives, and the life of the world.

What does it teach? Things like: The light of freedom for the oppressed. The light of learning to displace ignorance. The light of prosperity for those in need. The light of unity for the Jewish people. The light of faith, and the light of good deeds, and the light of love.

That's our profound hope for this day. More light to displace the dark. As the Siddur says: "Oh Lord, *or hadash al tziyon ta'ir*, [cause a new light to shine upon Zion] and may we all be worthy to delight in its splendor."