

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



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Hello Darkness, My Old Fiend

Perhaps, the most breathtaking narrative in our entire Bible is the sprawling account of the Ten Plagues. This chronicle has everything; good guys, villains, suspense, emotions, and mystical scenarios. This week I'd like to focus on the penultimate plague of CHOSHECH, Darkness, apparently the most commented upon plague. There is little agreement on the nature of this frightening plague.

To begin with, let's be honest, before Thomas Edison, people found the night spooky. There were many historical accounts of people believing darkness and the night were dangerous and unhealthy. Night time held many scary secrets. So, to see so many ideas concerning the unsettling phenomenon of extended darkness is to be expected.

Before we begin to discuss the nature of this plague, it's fascinating to see the two major reasons given by our Sages about the reason for this specific phenomenon within the framework of the plagues. There are two prominent ideas for why the

Egyptians had to endure this particular plague.

The first is that the majority of B'nei Yisrael in Egypt didn't deserve redemption. The most popular statistic adopted by our commentaries is based on a Midrash from next week's parsha, S'hmot 13:18, 'The Jews went up CHAMUSHIM'. This could be translated as 'one fifth'. Only 20% of the Israelites were redeemed. So, what happened during the darkness? Eighty percent of the Jews died, and the Egyptians never noticed because of the darkness. It's still hard to believe that the Egyptians couldn't see that the Israelites were so few after the lights came back on, not to mention the millions of graves.

The other famous rationale for having a plague in which the Egyptians couldn't see what was happening around them, is based on the original prediction that there would be an exile experience, namely the Brit Bein HaBetarim (Covenant Between the Parts, B'reishit 15:13-14). In this famous incident, God promises Avraham that after this difficult experience his descendants would return home 'with great wealth.' As a result of that requirement, many commentaries explain that part of the purpose of the darkness was so that Jews could visit Egyptian homes unnoticed to sort of 'shop' for the items they would demand from the Egyptians upon departing.

This last point brings us to one of the most perplexing aspects of the plague: But all the Israelites enjoyed light... (19:23). There are many commentaries who want to find scientific or historical explanations for the plagues, and darkness is no exception. Many have suggested that a major volcanic eruption in the Mediterranean Sea spewed enough material into the atmosphere causing a number of days of darkness (perhaps Santorini, then called Thera). But such a natural phenomenon would strike all people equally.

So, the vast majority of our Sages see miraculous darkness, rather than a natural event. Many see the phenomenon as more than our normal darkness, an absence or blocking of light. They see this event, instead, as a physical presence called darkness, which could be felt (verse 21: VA'YAMEISH). This was a darkness which couldn't be penetrated by light sources. A candle wouldn't pierce the darkness.

This most enigmatic of plagues has a number of layers to it. It was an event which struck the Egyptians but left the Israelites untouched. As Rav Frand noted it was less of a punishment than a pedagogic event: CHOSHECH was not the punishment. It was the warning! The warning was, "Pharaoh, you are blind! You cannot see what is happening before your

very eyes. You should see what is happening to you and your people." The Plague of Darkness was a symbolic message. There are none so blind as those who will not see.

The Netivot Shalom (the Slonimer Rebbe), perhaps, is adding to that idea when he makes a curious observation: When Moshe raised his hand to heaven to bring down the Darkness, he was really bringing the most spiritual atmosphere down to the earth. As a result it was 'darkness' for Egyptians. If a villain enters Paradise, for him it is 'darkness' because he can find no physical pleasure. Therefore, God told Moshe to bring down the heavenly 'light' for Yisrael; it was simultaneously profound darkness for Egypt... That's why it says that there was light in the dwellings of Yisrael. When the Jews are together in KEDUSHA, a great light descends upon them.

The Darkness was a spiritual phenomenon experienced differently by people on different spiritual levels. Clearly, this was a major level of miraculous engineering. One phenomenon experienced entirely differently by individuals on disparate spiritual levels. It's important to understand that our senses are connected to our spirituality.

This view into the Dark Side clearly is viewed differently by different

authorities. Two Sages in our Midrash see the very essence of this plague emanating from totally different sources: Rabbi Yehuda claims that this darkness originated in the highest realms of heaven, in absolute purity. It was the darkness which existed before Creation, and God's declaration: Let there be light! On the other hand, Rav Nechemiah claims that the darkness emanated from the regions of Gehinom. It was an evil manifestation.

For me the most important aspect to figure out is: What is the message of this plague for me, in my life? Ultimately, everyone's goal should be 'to see the light'. The way various Sages explain this plague all point to the critical message: Follow the light. If the great failing of the Egyptians was their inability to see the light. We must make it our prime objective to, indeed, follow the light.

It's not a coincidence that our Sages called our Torah ORAITA, the light. All too often, we allow physical impediments to blur our vision, darken our light. I hope we can learn the lesson that the plague of darkness taught our ancestors: the Redemption can only come when we notice that we are the true possessors of the Light. Let's eschew those distractions from the world around us; and focus on the Light! 🙏