

PARSHAT BO
January 19, 2013
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Some of you may recall – that it was just about a year ago – we had just returned from our most recent Temple Beth Sholom trip to Israel and I shared with you one of the most interesting experiences we had. We visited a place called *na l'gaat* in the old city of Yafo, just south of Tel Aviv. It is a non-profit organization dedicated to educating and sensitizing people to the challenges of those who go through life without the ability to see, to hear or to speak. It has a theater and promotes productions by actors who are deaf and blind and has two restaurants, one where all the waiters are deaf and one which is pitch black, totally devoid of any light and all the waiters are blind and as a customer you are completely and totally dependant on these waiters to get to your seats, to guide you, as you enter their world and experience eating dinner as they experience every day and every moment of their lives.

I think most of the people on our trip will quickly recount this evening as one of the highlights of our trip. Well, I have wonderful news for you – you don't have to wait until you go to Israel to have this experience. For a very limited time – Na L'gaat is here in New York – they brought their entire cast and you can see their show – “Not by bread alone” at the NYU Skirball Center for the Performing Arts off Washington Square and they are here for a limited time through February 3 and they have even brought along the dining experience – the Blackout Café where you eat in total, absolute darkness, served by blind waiters or Café Capish where you are served by the hearing impaired and you communicate without speaking. The food is being organized by Danny Meyer's Union Square events but I could not ascertain if it was kosher – as it is in Israel.

I recommend this – and I assume it will be as memorable an evening here in New York as it was for our group in Tel Aviv – for more information you can go online for tickets at NYUSkirball.org or just Google: “Not by bread alone” and it comes up.

It is more than appropriate that this group is appearing and I am recommending it this Shabbat as we read *parshat Bo* that contains the ninth plague in the series of ten plagues that God and Moses brought against Pharaoh and Egypt in today's torah portion” the plague of *choshech*, Darkness.

The Torah tells us: *Vayehi choshech-afeyla b'chol eretz mitzrayim shloshet yamim* that, “there was a thick darkness in the Land of Egypt for three days.” *U'lchol b'nei yisrael haya or b'moshvotom*, “But, all the Children of Israel had light in their dwellings.

Some rationalists have put forth natural explanations for this particular plague. They say that there may have been a solar eclipse, which might explain the plague of *choshech*. And while I find that an interesting possibility I think the rabbis of old had a better handle on the meaning of this plague. They sought its relevance, not in nature but in human nature and not in science but in its symbolism.

I find it interesting that the Bible chooses to use the following expression to characterize the darkness, it says that the darkness was so great: *Lo rau ish et achiv*, the darkness was so great

that: “a man could not see his own brother...” Don’t you find that an interesting way to describe the darkness? It didn’t say, it was so dark, you couldn’t see your own hand, or two feet in front of you! No it was a darkness that was so thick, so total that - you could not see your fellow man!

If you decide to go have this experience, at the Skirball Center near Washington Square, I suspect that you will find, as we did, that the notion of eating in complete and total darkness is unsettling to say the least. What would it be like, we wondered, to spend the next hour or so in complete and total darkness? Sounded fun, exciting – but would we freak out, would we panic and embarrass ourselves in front of our friends – this is what gave a bit of nervous energy to our group as we prepared to enter. And as the blind waiter was leading us to our tables he told us to place our hands on the shoulder of the person in front of us – and no matter what do not let go –and then follow closely behind him.

Now I don’t know what they set up here in New York – I suspect it is similar to the room we experienced in Tel Aviv – but ours was much more than a room with the lights out. It was truly a black out room where every possible source of light or its reflection had been eliminated. Now many of us experienced living in darkness for many nights back when Hurricane Sandy took out our power. But, this was a very different kind of darkness. It was total and complete. So dark we could not see our hand right in front of our face? Well – I decided to test that old aphorism out – and I got a little freaked out when I placed my hand right in front of my eyes – and I saw nothing. Nothing.

But I began to understand the torah’s description of such total darkness when it describes it – not as a place where you can’t see your hand before your face – but rather as a place where you could not see your neighbor. Some of you may recall my telling of this story after our trip last year – and I emphasized that sitting at a table, surrounded by people you knew and loved and not being able to see them at all was so much more disorienting than not being able to see your own hand and that is what for me – and I suspect for many of us, became the key defining aspect of the whole experience – to be with people and not see them – was, well really weird. It was in that Black Out restaurant that I learned and came to understand why the Bible describes the 9th plague of darkness – by stating *Lo rau ish et achiv*, the darkness was so great that: “a man could not see his own brother...” because that was the essence of what we were experiencing as well.

And so what we did was we began talking to each other. We connected in the only way we could. We couldn’t see each other but we could hear each other and we needed to know we were not alone – that we were still there with each other. The banter became the key mode of interaction. We joked and laughed and sang – anything to reassure ourselves that we were not alone in the darkness – anything to feel the presence of those around us – anything to counteract the isolation of the darkness—the talk, the conversation, the joking and singing became our lifeline – our eyes could not penetrate the darkness, but our voices still could – and as long as we were not alone – we would be ok. I thought about the waiters’ instructions as we entered and left the restaurant – “put your hand on the shoulder of the person in front of you and follow them – no matter what, do not let go!” “No matter what, do not let go” – because if you let go, you will be left in the dark, alone – and then you *will* freak out. My take away from this remarkable experience: Darkness is tolerable, as long as you are not alone.

I think the rabbis came to the same conclusion when they studied our torah portion for this morning. Why, the rabbis ask, did the bible describe the darkness in terms of not being able to see your neighbor?

These words suggested that the plague of darkness might have been much more than a natural event; it may have been a plague of a wholly different nature. When a person so lives and acts that he is blind to his neighbor, than he has been struck by the worst kind of darkness. As the saying goes, “there is none so blind as he who will not see...”

If a man cannot face his brother, if he cannot extend his hand in affection, then indeed he suffers from a dread affliction. And this great darkness is placed ninth in the series of the ten plagues, for in terms of severity, only the tenth plague of death is harsher than the darkness that prevents one from seeing his fellow man or woman.

In some ways the 10 Plagues sound so - well, Biblical. Blood, Frogs Lice - are so - well Old Testament. But a plague of Darkness - a plague of not being able to see your fellow man - well that one seems very now; very 21st Century. This is a plague we can all relate to. We flip through our television channels and we catch snippets of one disaster after another. How is it possible for a young man to enter a schoolroom and murder 26 people, mostly pre-schoolers. How can you look on those faces, those innocent children and not see them – not have compassion and *rachmanus* on them? What has happened to our world?

The plague of Darkness - certainly as the rabbis understood it - the inability to see and feel the needs of our fellow man - this is a plague that is still very much with us. Insensitivity is truly the plague of our time.

On Monday President Obama will be inaugurated – four years ago there was so much hope and excitement associated with his election but now somehow we get the feeling that something has changed in Washington. Animosity between the political parties is not something new – but it does seem to have reached a point where civil discourse is becoming nearly impossible. In the old days Republicans and Democrats would debate each other in the strongest possible words on the floor of the Senate or the house – but then they would retire to the cloakroom and hammer out their differences, they would go out to dinner together, have a drink together. Today the debates are as vehement – but there is little or no collegiality, little effort to work out differences – as each party plays to its base. As if they no longer even see each other. Positions have so hardened that *Lo rau ish et achiv*, that, “no man sees his brother any more.” No one can see beyond his own position and opinion.

It is a plague that that seems to have struck our own Jewish community. The lines between the Movements seem so much harsher. Orthodox Jews don't interact with Reform or Conservative and vice versa – our communities have little to do with each other and even less opportunity to interact with each other - but it wasn't always that way and we are not the better for the change. .

Lo rau ish et achiv, “no man could see his brother”, describes too much of our contemporary

American culture and too much of our contemporary Jewish culture – we make little effort to see each other, to reach beyond our narrow interests and concerns.

And nowhere is this lack of sensitivity; nowhere is the darkness more of a plague than in the Middle East. Palestinians no longer talk to Israelis and Israelis no longer talk to Palestinians. The apathy approaching the election in Israel that will be held this coming Tuesday is unprecedented. Here is yesterday's headline in *Haaretz*: "Netanyahu owes bright poll ratings to apathetic, demoralized average Israeli."

The President of Egypt – Mohammed Morsi calls Jews descendants of pigs and apes and bloodsuckers – and the world barely yawns. No outrage, no protests – this has become standard operating procedure – the ways we demean each other and dismiss each other, the ways we choose not to see each other. How did we get in this sad state of affairs? We can and must ask why? Why the darkness? What is it that erases from a person's heart the love of his neighbor, the ability to see his neighbor, to feel their pain? There is a Hebrew song, *Hakotel*, sung by Ofra Haza which has a refrain - *-yesih anashim im lev shel even – yeish avanim im leiv adam – "There are people with hearts of stone and there are stones with human hearts..."* I am not sure if there are stones that have heart – but I have experienced too many people who seem to have hearts of stone and when I see hatred being expressed from so many even from religious contorted in rage against young Israeli soldiers, or a woman who wears a tallit – people who have such deep feeling for the land and for a wall – but who cannot find any compassion for other people -- we are forced to ask what is the source of such blinding hatred?

U'lchol b'nei yisrael haya or b'moshvotom – "But, there was light in all the dwellings of the children of Israel." Once upon a time, darkness was an Egyptian plague – insensitivity and a lack of caring was an affliction of our enemies alone – today it is a bit more complicated and much more widespread.

In the morning prayers which we recite every day, which we recited earlier this morning, there is a *bracha*, a praise of God who: *pokeyach ivrim* - "Who opens the eyes of the blind." For the same God who creates darkness has the power to dispel the darkness. I think we are going to need God's help to get out of our current mess. Darkness is overtaking too much of the world in which we live.

For our happy band of travelers, we made a remarkable discovery as we sat in that blackout restaurant in Yaffo, as I suspect you will if you make the journey to Washington Park to see it here in the States – we discovered that it was not so dark as long as we had each other. We could eat and drink and laugh and sing – as long as we knew we were not there alone – as long as we felt the presence of others – as long as we could see them with our hearts it did not matter that we could not see them with our eyes. As long as we could feel their presence the darkness no longer felt so dark.

May the blessing of this kind of sight and this kind of vision be granted to us and to our generation. May God open our eyes and the eyes of our enemies to see the face of our brother and sister in every man and woman.

We are as in need of a miracle today as our ancestors were so long ago in ancient Egypt; as Moses stood before mighty Pharaoh – but if our sacred torah teaches us anything, it is that miracles happen: *U'lichol b'nei yisrael haya or b'moshvotom* – “There was light in all the dwellings of the children of Israel.” It happened then – maybe it will happen again in our time as well. *Keyn yehi ratzon*