



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

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October 1, 2010

ABSTRACT

The story of our life’s struggles and achievements reflects the manner in which God created the world, as the Book of Genesis testifies: “In the beginning... the earth was without form and empty, and darkness covered the face of the abyss...”

One of the greatest of recent scientific breakthroughs is the discovery that “dark energy” or “dark matter” is the stuff that makes up the overwhelming majority of our universe. Fascinatingly, this confirms what every mystic, and for that matter, every Torah reader, always knew – the universe is first and foremost a dark place.

What science may not yet know is the purpose of this dark universe. But we find it in Genesis, which follows the description of a dark world with God’s pronouncement: “Let there be light.”

Even though it’s a dark world, God has given us power to illuminate it – which is why His first act of creation was to create a new light. But to access it – for ourselves, for our children, and for everyone we come in contact with – we need to attach ourselves above, so to speak, so as not to fall below. This means connecting with and committing to follow divine guidelines of morality and ethics that illuminate the shadows of existence.

Bereishit

Bereishit

Light

LET THERE BE LIGHT: YOUR POWER TO ILLUMINATE

1. In the Beginning... It Was Dark

The story of our life's struggles and achievements reflects the manner in which God created the world, as the Book of Genesis testifies:

In the beginning... the earth was without form and empty, and darkness covered the face of the abyss...¹

We all enter life “in the dark,” confronting a veiled world, overcoming the ignorance of infancy to grow up... and in doing so, we attempt to uncover the hidden and illuminate the obscure.

All the paths of life are shrouded in the unknown. “All the roads are potentially dangerous,” says the Talmud. We do not know what lies ahead of us.

As Yogi Berra advised the confused: “When you come to a fork in the road – take it...”

The twists and turns, rises and dips and all the strange places we will travel to in life – are obscured from our view. Finding the right direction, knowing which way to go and which way not to go – is a great blessing and does not come easy.

One of the greatest of recent scientific breakthroughs is the discovery that “dark energy” or “dark matter” is the stuff that makes up the overwhelming majority of our universe. This is a major development in physics, and quite a surprising one at that. Because until this discovery, all the objects scientists knew about shared one attribute – they gave off light. Now we know that the particles that we're all familiar with – like electrons and protons – make up only as little as four percent of known matter.

¹ Genesis 1:1-2.

By the way, do you know what the atom said to his friend when he crossed the road?

“I think I lost an electron!”

“Really?” his friend asked. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m positive.”

Or, do you know what a neutron said when he walked into a bar?

“How much for a drink?”

The bartender replied, “For you, no charge.”

Yeah, okay, physics jokes are nothing like Jewish jokes.

But going back to this latest discovery ...

Before this, it was believed that these light-giving particles merely floated in empty space. Atoms were thought to be largely empty, containing a tiny nucleus composed of minute particles (the aforementioned protons, neutrons and electrons).

But this nucleus of substance was considered so small compared to the vastness of the empty space around it, that the turn-of-the-century physicist, Sir Ernest Rutherford, famously compared it to “a fly buzzing around a cathedral.”

Now, we know that the empty space is not empty at all. It is composed of either “dark matter” or “dark energy,” called by that name because it represents the bulk of the universe that cannot be seen.

2. Mystical Knowledge

Fascinatingly, this confirms what every mystic, and for that matter, every Torah reader, always knew – the universe is first and foremost a dark place.

The first description of the universe in the opening verses of Genesis states that the earth was empty and darkness prevailed over existence.

On its own, this opening of Genesis is cryptic. But that's nothing compared to the cryptic opening of the Zohar, the chief work of Kabbalah. The Zohar paraphrases Genesis with this less-than-illuminating passage:

In the beginning of the King's authority, the lamp of darkness engraved a hollow in the supernal luminescence.

Fortunately, we have an explanation from the great 16th century Kabbalist known as the Ari.² As the Ari tells it, in the beginning (that is, before the existence of time) the brilliant light of God, known as the *Ohr Ein Sof* ("Endless Light"), filled all of existence. God then concealed this light and darkness ensued.

And against the backdrop of this darkness, our world – with its weak, earthly lights – was created.

The Ari identifies this darkness as the great primordial contraction (called *tzimtzum*) which resulted in the withdrawal of the Divine Presence so that an independent other could exist – and so that this other could have some degree of free choice without being obliterated by the omnipotent divine light.

This other is us – all of humanity.

3. It's a Dark World

Morally, spiritually and psychologically, we live in a dark world. As we travel through life, our roads and paths are not illuminated, and we cannot know which path is healthy and which not. Through education, knowledge, experience, trial and error – we can try to discern which path to follow.

This week's Torah reading – the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis – teaches us a tremendous lesson:

² In his classic work *Etz Chaim* ("Tree of Life") which was actually authored by the Ari's student, Rabbi Chaim Vital.

Following the verse that describes the dark void of the universe, we read: “Let there be light.”

Science has discovered the dark nature of existence; but it has not yet uncovered the purpose of this dark universe – to illuminate the darkness.

We are told about God’s first act of creation – the creation of light – so that we emulate it. “Follow His [God’s] ways,” the Torah instructs us. Even though it’s a dark world, God has given us power to illuminate it – which is why His first act of creation was to create a new light. But to access it – for ourselves, for our children, and for everyone we come in contact with – we need to attach ourselves above, so to speak, so as not to fall below. This means connecting with and committing to follow divine guidelines of morality and ethics that illuminate the shadows of existence.

Selfishness, self-interest, self-focus – anything focused on the self is dark. Reaching out to others is light.

4. **Mirror, Mirror on the Wall**

This is the difference between looking in a mirror and looking through a glass. And yet they are not so very different – both are made from glass. But the mirror is glass smeared with silver. (It is interesting to note here that silver in Hebrew, kesef is the same word as money.) The mirror allows us to see only a reflection of ourselves, reinforcing our self-image.

As the saying goes: “Mirror, mirror on the wall, do you have to tell it all?”

But a clear glass allows us to see outside of ourselves – it allows us to see others. And to discern the divine unity that connects all the pieces. A mirror does not allow light to escape outward; it only reflects your own image back to you. But clear glass is transparent; it permits light to radiate out, and it permits light to enter in.

It would be interesting to know how our world would change, if for every minute we spent looking at ourselves in a mirror, we spent two looking at others through our windows, considering how we are all connected.

5. We Are All Connected

We may seem to be separate from one another – each of us with our own range of experiences, different exposures and life trajectories. But when we begin to communicate with each other, we discover common threads, shared reactions, mutual interests, which transcend our differences. As diverse as we may be, we learn that we celebrate similar milestones, smile at similar experiences, shed the same tears, suffer the same pains. Indeed, we are all connected at the source.

And, in this very fact, we see traces of the two dimensions of reality – the higher reality when the divine light shone, and the lower reality when the divine light was concealed. The higher reality is a divine “light” consciousness that is all encompassing. The lower reality is an existential “dark” consciousness that sees its own existence as primary and can barely sense anything outside itself.

The fact that the Torah opens with a description of a dark place tells us that this information is fundamental to understanding the nature of existence. We cannot understand our universe and our lives if we don’t know that, at its beginning, the universe is rooted in a state of primordial darkness.

This understanding is crucial. For, ironically, we can never overcome the darkness of our lives if we don’t face and respect the fact that the essential stuff of our existence is rooted in darkness. Awareness, they say, is half the cure of an illness.

However, there is more to it. Darkness is not the goal nor the ultimate essence of existence. It is only a means to allow existence to come into being. Beneath – or within – the darkness lies light... indeed, the brightest light of all.

In other words – darkness is just another form of energy, and its purpose is to reveal light. But in order to uncover the light we must first recognize the darkness for what it is. This very recognition allows us to illuminate the darkness with light.

6. The Story of One Child

Let me tell you, briefly, the story of one life to dramatically illustrate these philosophical concepts.

Several years ago, darkness descended on a colleague of mine and his wonderful wife – let’s call them Danny and Judy. A nicer couple you could not find; their lives were dedicated to their community and they were beloved by all who knew them. They were also wonderful parents, with several healthy children. And then they had a little girl with Down’s Syndrome. They were devastated. Used to helping others, they were now the ones lost and broken, not knowing how to cope with an unexpected blow. They shed many tears during the first few days after the baby’s birth.

But then a fascinating transformation took place, as they later related. When Judy cradled her little baby, she suddenly felt a deep warmth and love coming from her child – such as she had not experienced from any of her previous healthy children. In fact, what she felt was a special radiance emanating from her little daughter – a light that basked and embraced her with tenderness. She called over her husband, and they both sat there staring at “our gift from heaven” – as they described it.

At that point they decided to name their baby girl Bracha – “Blessing” – as she was indeed a blessing from God.

From then on, wherever they went they would proudly present Bracha to anyone they met. Initially, even close family members would feel quite awkward and uncomfortable when they saw Bracha with her unmistakable Down’s Syndrome symptoms. They did not know what to say or how to react. Some tried to avoid them. But Danny and Judy took it all in stride.

They would present Bracha to everyone with delight and joy: “Here, let us introduce you to our special blessing – Bracha.” Often, Judy would pass the child to an unwitting and surprised uncle or aunt, “Please hug this sweetest soul. She will hug you in return with the deepest love.”

And indeed, as Bracha grows older – despite the challenges – she has become a source of blessing and light to her parents and siblings, and to all who meet her. “The love, the kindness, the warmth, that she exudes – is like no other,” says Judy with tears in her eyes. “It has changed me as a human being. I am a more sensitive human being today – all due to Bracha. I thank God for her every day.”

7. The Essential Truth

Life can indeed be dark and cruel. We do not know what hand we will be dealt – and sometimes it can be a daunting one. But through our ordeals, we come to understand this essential truth – though we cannot control the difficult and dark experiences that may come our way, we can control how we react. We can either succumb to the darkness or see it as an opportunity to bring in new light.

We cannot control the fact that God created the world as a dark place. Life is not cruel because bad things happen to you. Life is cruel because God created a universe that shrouds its true purpose. But we have the power to declare “let there be light” and illuminate the surrounding darkness.

Faced with their personal darkness, Bracha’s parents, declared “let there be light” – and there was light!

The true challenge of life is about dealing with the darkness of existence, regardless whether our life is working out or not, regardless whether we feel the darkness or not. God created the dark world so that we would illuminate it – so that we would transform our personal darkness into a source of sustenance and life for the entire world.

8. The Cycle of Life

This discussion of the nature of darkness is not an academic exercise, but actually an attempt to dissect the essential stuff that makes up our very existence and make it relevant to our everyday problems.

And here is another insight:

In the Genesis story of creation, first the earth was covered in darkness, then there was light. At first darkness and light were mixed together in one gray snowball. Then God divided between them, and named light “day” and darkness “night.”

And then we read, “And there was evening and there was morning...”

This cycle of night and day, evening and morning is repeated in Genesis for every day of the week. And it is the cycle of life.

We must learn about this cycle, assimilate it and align every aspect of our daily lives with its ebb and flow. This is called learning how to swim. To navigate the waves of our lives we must learn to recognize their cycles.

Have you ever tried to swim against the waves? When you do, your energy gets drained faster than your flailing arms. If you keep fighting, the waves can bring you down. But when you swim with the waves and allow them to carry you, their energy propels you forward, like the air that lifts the flapping wings of a bird.

Well, when it comes to our everyday life we always seem to be fighting the waves. That may be the reason so many of us are exhausted and overcome by fatigue.

9. A Weary Battle

Two primary reasons are the cause for this futile and weary battle:

One, we are not aware or familiar with the cycles of life. They are like unexpected waves that catch us by surprise, and by the time we are struck by them it is often too late to begin swimming.

Second, human nature gravitates toward the comfortable and the static. We therefore don't want to learn how to swim. We'd rather just be left alone in peace.

But the Torah insists on giving us swimming lessons.

In effect, this is what we learn when we read and reread the Torah stories of our ancestors. We read about the inspirational way our Patriarchs and Matriarchs dealt with darkness and illuminated the world. We read about the Egyptian bondage and genocide that would last for a bitter 210 years. And we read about the light of the redemption, the birth of the Nation of Israel, and the encounter with God at Mount Sinai.

The Torah's account of what happened to the children of Israel – their descent into Egypt and their eventual redemption – is essentially the story of our own lives. Life is all about riding the waves, a journey of descents and ascents. Beginning from the descent of the soul into this material world, we go through many more descents. Yet, every descent has a corresponding ascent. Indeed, the purpose of the descent is to reach a place higher than the one that preceded it. That's riding the waves.

10. Like a Ferris Wheel

The Talmudic sages have another metaphor for it; they say: "There is a wheel that turns in the world."

Life is like a Ferris Wheel. Human nature is such that when we are on the top of the wheel, we are in good spirits. But in truth only a fool feels

content, for the wheel of life is constantly turning. One who is on the bottom of the wheel and cries about his plight is also a fool, for he too is on the turning wheel.

Light and dark, day and night, joy and pain, ups and downs – this is the nature of existence. Life is all about cycles that orbit a broad spectrum spanning from the brightest light to the darkest gloom, and back again.

Life is not static. As much as we would like to just stop moving, the fact remains that the time and space we occupy is always in motion, no less than the spinning earth beneath our feet. The secret to success in this world is to make our peace with the cycles of light and dark in our lives and in the world around us. We must learn to swim and not fight the waves.

Two words describe the basic structure of existence: Light and dark. If we master these two words, search for them in all our experiences – recognize the waves – they will become our friends instead of unknown, unexpected forces that flood our lives.

It may appear like we are living in a tunnel, and we await the light at the bitter end. But, in truth, that is not the case. We are not living in a tunnel; we are living inside a wave, inside a wheel, if you prefer. A spinning wheel that may appear motionless on the surface, but is actually turning all the time. That wheel is made up of darkness and light.

We have two choices: Resist the movement, or ride it. Avoid or ignore the darkness, or see the Bracha – the blessing – within it all.

May we all be blessed with the smallest and shortest downturns and the longest and greatest upturns – revealed and obvious blessings of health, prosperity and peace. Amen.

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