



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Bereishit

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October 18, 2014

Bereishit

Are You Afraid of the Dark?



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

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ABSTRACT

Life can often feel so desolate and lonely. And existential loneliness brings on a darkness which we all fear. How do we deal with such dark times? How do we bring warmth into cold experiences?

The High Holidays end (in the Northern Hemisphere, at least) at the cusp of winter, when the nights are dark and long, and when the days are cold and dreary. How do we carry their light and warmth into the cold and dark of the rest of the year?

This concern troubled the first man and woman.

On the first Saturday night – *Motzei Shabbat* – of existence, Adam and Eve did not go on a date, or to a movie, or to get pizza. On the first Saturday night of existence, Adam and Eve huddled in utter fear.

Why? Because for the first time ever the sun had set and darkness had begun to set in. “Is this the end of the world?” they asked, “Did our sin destroy the universe?”

Then, at day break, they realized that this was the natural order of existence.

The only question: Is this a good or bad thing? Is darkness the natural order, or is the sunrise?

Two powerful stories – of a Chassid in a cellar and a man in a concentration camp beseeching the sun not to rise – teach us that darkness is but an anomaly and light is the norm. And how we can not only overcome the fear of night but vanquish it and illuminate it.

Discover an ancient method for carrying over the warmth and light of the holidays into the cold, wintry, dark months of the year. How is it done?

As God showed Adam: just rub two sticks together and, voila, fire!

ARE YOU AFRAID OF THE DARK?

The Birth of Fear and Its Antidote

1. Hard Winter (Joke)

As the end of autumn was approaching, the Indians asked their Chief if the winter was going to be cold or not. Not really knowing an answer, the Chief decided to play it safe; he replied that the winter was going to be cold and that the members of the village were to collect wood to be prepared.

Being a good leader, he then picked up the single iPhone 6 on the reservation, called the National Weather Service and asked, "Is this winter going to be cold?" The man on the phone responded, "This winter is going to be quite cold indeed."

So the Chief encouraged his people to collect even more wood to be prepared for the cold winter.

A week later he called the National Weather Service again, "Is it going to be a very cold winter?" "Yes," the man replied, "it's going to be the coldest winter we have had in a century!"

So the Chief went back to his people and ordered them to go and collect every scrap of wood they could find. Two weeks later he called the National Weather Service again: "Are you absolutely sure that the winter is going to be freezing?"

“Absolutely,” the man replied. “The National Weather Service guarantees it!”

“How could you be so sure?” asked the Indian Chief.

“Well,” said the weather expert, “the Indians are collecting wood like crazy!”

2. Cold and Dark

There are times in life when it is warm and light, and there are times in life when it is cold and dark. What can we do to warm up the cold parts of life? What proverbial firewood can we collect to ensure that the darkness that inevitably descends will be dispelled?

The darkness could be the loss of a job, a serious illness, a death in the family. May God shield and protect us from anything like that. But if something bad does happen, when we feel cold and dark, how do we light up the night and warm up the frost?

3. The Challenge

The same question may be applied to this time of year. The holiday season is coming to an end. The new energy of Rosh Hashanah has past, as has the soulful inspiration of Yom Kippur, as has the joyous celebration of Sukkot and Simchat Torah. Now it is *Shabbat Bereishit*, the gateway to the whole Jewish year. The challenge is – how do we channel the energy, inspiration, and joy of the holidays into the rest of the coming year?

We are at the cusp of winter, when the nights are dark and long, and when the days are cold and dreary. How do we carry the light and warmth of the holidays into the cold and dark of the year? How do we ensure that we will make this year warm and inspiring?

This is not the first time man has been presented with this dilemma. Man has been faced with this dilemma every year at the conclusion of the holidays and the beginning of the wintry year.

Indeed, this dilemma goes back to the beginning of creation itself.

4. The First Night

Adam and Eve, as we know, were created on the sixth day of creation. That day all was beautiful and all was light. The Midrash and the Talmud tell us how it all came to an end.

The Midrash¹ says that Adam and Eve enjoyed thirty-six hours of light before the first night set in. For the first thirty-six hours after their creation, the world was completely light and the sun never set. This is how they passed the twelve hours of Friday day, the twelve hours of Friday night, and the twelve hours of Shabbat day. But then Shabbat ended, and suddenly, for the first time in history, the sun began to sink behind the horizon and the sky began to darken. After a short while, it was utterly dark.

The Talmud² describes Adam's reaction:

When Adam ... saw the setting of the sun he said, "Oy, it is because I have sinned that the world around me is becoming dark. The universe will now become again void and without form – this then is the death to which I have been sentenced by Heaven!" So he sat up all night fasting and weeping, and Eve was weeping with him. However, when dawn broke, he realized: "This is merely the natural course of the world!"

The Midrash continues the story:³

¹ Midrash Rabbah, Bereishit 11:2.

² Avodah Zoreh 8a.

³ Midrash Rabbah, Bereishit 11:2.

When the sun began to set, the darkness started to set and Adam became scared, as it is written [in the Psalms], “*Darkness will darken me, and the night will be as light about me.*”⁴ What did the Holy One do? He took two sticks,⁵ rubbed them together and out came fire, and he [Adam] made a blessing upon it ... What blessing did he make? *Borei m’orai ha’esh* – “*Blessed be He who creates the lights of fire.*” This accords with Shmuel who said: “Why do we make the blessing *borei m’orai ha’esh* on light? Because this was the beginning of its creation.”

Now – what can we learn from Adam’s fear of darkness, and how he responded to it?

5. Two Approaches

Let us look more closely at Adam’s initial response:

He and Eve huddled all night in fear, in prayer, in self-reflection. Finally, in the morning, dawn broke and the sun began to rise once again. It was light! At seeing the cycle of night and day, Adam realized, “This is merely the natural course of the world!”

But, “this is merely the natural course of the world,” could imply two opposite approaches to understanding existence:

- 1) Darkness, nighttime, is merely the natural course of the world.
Or:
- 2) Even in the darkest night, the natural course of the world is that the sun will rise once again.

If we accept the former interpretation, darkness won’t really bother us, because darkness is simply part of life. We can go to sleep and just accept the darkness of night for what it is. We can say, sure the sun sets and it is dark and there’s pain, but that’s life – all we can do is be resigned to it.

⁴ Tehilim 139:11.

⁵ Some say stones.

But if we accept the latter interpretation, we understand Adam to be saying that even in the darkest of times, even when all seems hopeless, the natural way of things is that very soon the sun will rise up once again and dispel the darkness from the world. The darkness is *not* the natural way of the world, the sun is! And when, for whatever reason, it does get dark, we have to do all we can to light up the night and make the sun shine once again.

6. Chassidic Story

I'd like to tell you a powerful Chassidic story that captures these two approaches to darkness in a definitive way:

On a sweltering summer day in pre-war Russia, an elderly Chassid went down into a cool cellar for some relief. The moment he entered, he felt like he was blind – he couldn't see anything; it was utter blackness.

Suddenly, he heard a voice coming from somewhere within the darkness: "Don't worry, it is natural – when you go from the light into the darkness, you're unable to see. But soon enough, your eyes will grow accustomed to the dark, and you will hardly notice it."

"My dear friend," replied the Chassid, turning to leave, "getting used to the darkness is exactly what I am afraid of. Darkness is darkness; the danger is hanging around it too long and convincing yourself that it is light."

7. Which One Is It?

These two approaches – whether to accept the darkness, or to make certain that we never allow ourselves to become accustomed to it – can both be derived from Adam's exclamation: "This is merely the natural course of the world!" But we are still left with a question:

Which one is it? Is darkness the natural state and all we have to do is become accustomed to? Or is the rising of the sun the natural way, and we must never allow darkness to become our status quo?

This is a question all of us face all the time. And it is especially highlighted today, on *Shabbat Bereishit*, the bridge between the illuminated holiday season and the upcoming dark and cold months of winter. Do we say that winter is natural and all we have to do is buy a warm coat and become accustomed to its deep freeze and overcast bleakness? Or do we do everything in our power to harness the light and warmth of the holidays and carry them over into the rest of the year?

And if the latter is true, *how* do we harness the light? How do we bring the light of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, and Simchat Torah to the dark recesses of winter?

8. Adam's Example

For this we have Adam's example.

What did Adam do when he saw darkness? Did he sit by doing nothing, or worse yet, did he embrace the darkness?

No! Adam and Eve spent all night analyzing their actions, self-reflecting. Perhaps there is something that caused this darkness and perhaps there is something we can do to remove this darkness. Adam and Eve wept and prayed throughout the night, seeing how they themselves could bring more light and be more warm, thus making the world around them lighter and warmer as well.

Were they scared? For sure.

Adam was afraid that, as it states in the Psalms, "*Darkness will darken me, and the night will be as light about me.*"

Adam's fear wasn't merely of darkness; Adam's fear went much deeper: Adam was afraid that darkness would darken him to the extent that he would become so used to the darkness that he would mistake it for light.

This was Adam's fear – that as time passes and darkness becomes the new normal, he would begin to believe that darkness is actually light, that coldness is actually warmth, that mundane existence is actually reality, that earth is where it's at and heaven is but a bygone thing of the past.

9. God's Response

So what did God do to assuage Adam's fear? He took two sticks, rubbed them together, and out came fire. God showed Adam how to make, of mundane matter, a blazing fire. Seeing this miracle – that, no matter how deep the darkness man, can always make light – Adam made a blessing.

And now Adam understood that man must do everything in his power to make the night light, to transform the darkness into luminance, to rub two sticks together, or bang two stones together to make a fire, to take dark matter and turn it into light spirit.

This is truly worthy of a blessing.

What blessing did Adam make? *Borei m'orai ha'esh* – “Blessed is He Who creates the lights of fire.” And this was the beginning of its creation.

Though light was created before, on the first day of the six days of creation, that light was a light that shines when it is light. But when it turned dark and God showed Adam that he can create light by turning matter into spirit, that's when it really began, and that's the reason for the blessing, *Borei m'orai ha'esh* – “Blessed is He Who creates the lights of fire.”

10. Why The Sun Shines (Optional Story)

This is illustrated by a sad, but inspiring story:

The bright sun would rise every morning over the beautiful Bavarian mountains, shining with a big smile from a blue sky over green fields, illuminating the world. Birds were chirping and grass was growing. Every morning, the young man in the hell that was the concentration camp would wake up with this beautiful sun shining in his eyes through the window of the barracks, and for a moment forget where he was.

Until... he would remember.

And then his body would convulse. Shaking with rage, rattling with anger, trembling with pain – he would cry out to the sun: how could you, the sun, possibly shine so beautifully amidst such suffering? How could you rise and shine brightly in the morning when we are perishing in this dark purgatory? How can you sparkle and smile every morning as if all is fine, when we are screaming in pain and crying in desperation? Why do you, sun, not refrain from shining at least one day to protest what is happening on earth? Why are you – and all of nature – so indifferent?!

After he was freed from the camps, his memories continued to haunt him everywhere he went. His entire family had perished. He was all alone.

Years passed, and all the while he despised nature's indifference. The man has left the darkness of concentration camp but the darkness of the horror had stayed with him. The man could not relate to a world that was indifferent to pain ... that smiled in the face of sadness ... that allowed a sun to shine when it was always night.

And who could blame him? Indeed, how *was* it possible for the sun to shine brightly when God's children were shuddering in darkness, huddled in fear?

The man had moved to London and had given up on life. He barely went through the motions. He was living in harsh and utter bleakness, with a tortured psyche, with a hole right through his heart.

But then, one early morning, this tormented soul awoke in his London apartment at day break. Sunny rays were shining in his eyes – and for a moment he forgot all his pain. And then a new thought dawned upon him.

He turned and said to the sun: “I forgive you. Indeed, I want to thank you: I want to thank you for teaching me that no matter how dark and long the night, the sun will ultimately rise.”

The broken man now understood: When the sun rose over the Bavarian mountains while he was a prisoner inside the barbwire of hell, it wasn’t ever to mock him – it was to give him hope.

11. Entering the New Year

As we enter the new year, we can do so thinking that the coming darkness is the norm and we just have to prepare for it ... stock up on chicken soup, warm gloves, scarves, boots, shovels, and four-wheel drive. Or we can do so thinking that the rising sun is the norm, that light is the norm, that warmth is the norm ... and we have to do all in our power to bring the natural light that lives inside us all to the dark recesses of the year.

If we choose the former, we will be prisoners of the darkness. If we choose the latter, we will be liberators of the light.

How do we do this? We each have two sticks, or two stones, elements of matter – be it our work, our hobbies, our expertise, our possessions – all we have to do is use them as a means to a greater light.

In this coming year, turn your office into a warming fireplace by hosting a monthly Torah class there, or turn your miserably dark day into an illuminating moment by saying a prayer, or by hosting a Shabbat dinner, or by learning a bit of Jewish wisdom.

We enter the dark and cold year to light and warm it up.

As we recite “Let there be light,” here today on *Shabbat Bereishit*, let us resolve that there be light for the entire year, for all of Israel.

12. Where the Light Shines (Conclusion)

A fellow was once looking for his keys. They had fallen out of his pocket in the pitch of night, and he couldn't find them. A passerby saw the desperate man and offered to help.

“Where did you lose the key?” asked the passerby. The fellow pointed to a spot fifty feet away.

“Why then are you looking here?” inquired the passerby.

“Because,” replied the fellow, “here is where the light of the streetlamp is shining.”

Often times, we try to “solve” our problems, not by addressing the darkness, but by living only where there is light. Instead of addressing our problems, we either ignore them, get used to them, or, worse still, embrace them. That would be like living in that dark cellar in Russia.

This is what Adam was afraid of – he did not want to embrace the darkness and forget the light. And so he taught us that life can only be truly lived and problems truly solved by confronting the dark and illuminating it.

As the winter approaches, we must tackle it head on with warm and illuminating torches. We must keep in mind that the only way to turn the dark of night into the light of day, is not by ignoring the dark or trying to get accustomed to it – the only way to dispel darkness by confronting it head on, and illuminating it with light.

This Shabbat, let us embrace the light of the holidays, of the past month, and know that when this Shabbat ends and the sun sets, the light will always be with us, the sun will rise and shine once again.

Let us always remember this fact: darkness is an anomaly, never the norm. Light is the norm, and we are the bearers of the light. With God's help, we will forever transform all darkness into the light of heaven.

This is truly a *Shabbat Bereishit*, a Shabbat of illuminated and illuminating beginnings.