



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Bo

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January 4, 2014

Bo

**How Many Light Bulbs
Does It Take To Change
A Dark Mood?**



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

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ABSTRACT

Have you ever had one of those days when, as soon as you wake up, you are in a dark mood? Or something happens at work – or home – that just gets you down? How to get out of the shadows? How to see the light when plagued by darkness?

How? In typical Talmudic fashion, the answer lies in more questions: How many Talmudic scholars does it take to change a light bulb? How many light bulbs does it take to change a Talmud scholar?

The answer: None.

You see, if one believes, as Jews believe, that darkness is created by the same Creator of Light – i.e. God – then what power can darkness ever truly hold over you?

Are you still in the dark or are you beginning to see the light?

Yes, this sermon is electric. But it's the kind of electricity emitted – indeed encouraged – on Shabbat. Plug in.

HOW MANY LIGHT BULBS DOES IT TAKE TO CHANGE A DARK MOOD?

1. Light Talmudic Logic (Joke)

The main study hall of the yeshiva was filled with serious young scholars unraveling the intricacies of the Talmud, when without warning all of the lights went out. It was suddenly pitch black, utter midnight, complete darkness.

In classic Talmudic fashion, two young men began to debate the meaning of this darkness. Asked the first scholar, "How many Talmudic scholars does it take to change a light bulb?"

Replied his study partner, "That would depend on how many light bulbs there are to change? Which depends on how big the dark room is? And also on how tall the Talmudic scholars are? Do they require ladders to reach the burnt out bulbs? How many ladders?"

Said the first scholar: "Say the room is 1,000 square feet, and the ceiling is about 12 feet high. The scholars are, on average, 5 foot 6 inches tall (these are Jewish scholars) and thus do require ladders."

"Okay. How big are the light bulbs? Are they the long florescent light bulbs or the small round Edison variety? Does the room sport chandeliers? How about wall sconces? And are there desks? If yes, do the desks have lamps? What type of bulbs do the lamps require? And what wattage does the electrical wiring support?"

At which point the first scholar stopped short. "Wait a minute," he said, "If the room is completely dark, this means every single light bulb went out at the same time. The odds of every single bulb burning out simultaneously are less than 0.1 percent. Therefore, this must be an electrical issue. But if the electricity was just updated, as I know it was, then that isn't likely either ... Consequently we must conclude that the darkness we are here referring to is a metaphorical darkness, a darkness from within, like a dark mood or a dark thought. Thus I need to rephrase my original question:

"It's not: How many Talmudic scholars does it take to change a light bulb? But: How many light bulbs does it take to change a Talmudic scholar?"

2. The Dark Ages

Thank God, we live in a time of physical illumination. Not too long ago, a certain Mr. Franklin flying his kite and an experimenting Mr. Edison discovered and harnessed this wonderful thing called Electricity and ever since we have had the ability to, literally, be in the light.

The ubiquity of light was not always so. Sure, there were torches and fires and candles for years, but darkness used to be part of everyday reality. Even with oil and gas lamps, once the sun set the streets were mostly dark. Even the greatest scholars would study only until their candle burned low; but once the wax had all melted, it was time to close the book.

Today, there is light at the touch of a fingertip. Simply flick the switch and, voila – let there be light! And if the lights ever go out, all it takes to get the light back on is to change the bulb or, at worst, to call an electrician and get the problem fixed.

But there is a different type of darkness that exists as well. A darkness that a simple Edison bulb or even a host of stadium lights will not illuminate. This is the darkness that comes from within, the darkness of a black mood or a depressing thought or a sad occurrence. It merely takes the changing of a bulb or the flick of a switch to illuminate a dark room or a dark street, but what does it take to illuminate a dark thought or a dark mood?

Put in a more whimsical way: When in a dark mood, which obviously is due to the burning out of some sort of inner light bulb, how to change that light bulb? And what type of light bulb is required to light up a dark mood – fluorescent, long, short, fat, skinny, clear, colored, 20, 30, 40 watt?

As always, when in the proverbial dark, we turn to our source of electricity for insight. We plug into the Torah.

3. The Plague Of Darkness

As we read last week, God visited the Ten Plagues upon Egypt that would force this enslaving nation into one that would allow the Jewish slaves to leave as a free people. This week (in Parshat Bo) we read about the ninth of these Ten Plagues – the plague of darkness:

The Lord said to Moses, Stretch forth your hand toward the heavens, and there will be darkness over the land of Egypt, and the darkness will become darker. So Moses stretched forth his hand toward the heavens, and there was thick darkness over the entire land of Egypt for three days. They did not see each other, and no one rose from his place for three days, but for all the children of Israel there was light in their dwellings.¹

The obvious question is: Couldn't the Egyptians light a few fires and rid themselves of this darkness?

It seems they could not. For the darkness in Egypt was not just a literal darkness. The darkness in Egypt was also a deeper darkness, the type of darkness that a mere candle cannot vanquish.

At least two things can be gleaned from the Torah description of this darkness. The first is its debilitating effects, specifically two: [a] *they did not see each other and* [b] *no one rose from his place.*

Put in contemporary terms, a dark mood debilitates us in two ways: [a] it makes us self-centered, not allowing us to see past ourselves, to see another person; [b] it does not allow us to change our position, to move, essentially freezing us in place and not allowing us to rise up, to grow, to change ourselves or our realities.

Another thing that can be gleaned from the Torah description of this darkness is that it plagued only the Egyptians and not the Jews – *but for all the children of Israel there was light in their dwellings.*

If we can understand why the darkness did not affect the Jews – essentially why the Jews were not in the dark – then we can apply this lesson to the darkness we may be confronting today in our personal lives.

¹Exodus 10:21-23.

To understand why the darkness plagued the Egyptians and not the Jews, it behooves us to analyze the origin of this darkness. And, as is usually the case, the origin of the darkness is subject to debate.

4. The Origin Of Darkness

From where did the darkness of the Ninth Plague come? The Midrash² presents two opinions regarding the origin of the darkness that enveloped Egypt.

- R. Yehudah's opinion was that it came from heaven, as it is written: *He made darkness His hiding-place about Him as His booth.*³
- R. Nechemia's opinion was that it came from hell (Gehenna), as it is written: *A land of darkness like darkness itself; the shadow of death without orders, and where the light is as darkness.*⁴

What exactly is the difference between the two sources of darkness and how can they help us deal with any dark mood or situation we find ourselves in today?

The first thing that jumps out at us is that one origin of darkness is from above, while the second origin is a darkness that comes from below.

According to Rabbi Yehudah, who was of the opinion that the darkness originated from above, this is what happened during the Ninth plague of Darkness:⁵

² Tanchuma Bo 2; Shemot Rabbah 14:2.

³ Psalms 18:12.

⁴ Job 10:22.

⁵ For a comprehensive understanding of this Kabbalistic/Chassidic interpretation of the Ninth plague, see Ohr Hatorah from the Tzemach Tzedek, Parshat Bo, pp. 250-251

God shone a very powerful light of revelation upon Egypt. As with looking directly at the sun, such a powerful light can be blinding to an eye that is not accustomed to it. The Egyptians were no appropriate receptacle for such a profound light from above and were thus blinded by it. The Jews on the other hand were completely attuned to this light and for them there was light in all of their dwellings.

By way of analogy: If an ignorant person that never learned to read is suddenly handed a work of the highest form of literature containing the deepest secrets, he can't see anything other than black globs of meaningless ink. The ignoramus is in the dark and blind to the depth that is conveyed in this book. Indeed, to him, the black ink seems to stain the white purity of the page.

But give this same exact book to a trained scholar, and he will be in complete awe of the light and brilliance that is conveyed by the drops of ink that form the letters, words, and chapters of the book.

It's the same exact book, only one person knows how to read it and the other does not.

This is how Rabbi Yehudah interpreted the Plague of Darkness. The Egyptians were unable to read the words of heaven, so they were in utter and ignorant darkness. The Jews were humble receptacles for heaven's revelations, thus they were illuminated by its rays.⁶

5. The Second Opinion

According to the second opinion presented by the Midrash, that of Rabbi Nechemia, who maintained that the darkness sprung from below – not from the deep light of heaven but from the pits of hell – this is what happened during the Ninth Plague:

⁶ This also explains why the Jews that were not in tune with heaven perished during this plague (Midrash in note 2. Rashi Exodus 10:21) – when one is not a receptacle for light one tragically becomes blinded by it.

Two forces exist in this world: the Force of Light, called in Hebrew *Kedusha*, “Holiness,” and the force of darkness, called the *Sitra Achra*, the “Other Side” or the “Dark Side.”

A simple example of these two sides of life: The birth of a beautiful and innocent child is a pure and holy experience, a manifestation of the Force of Light. Death, on the other hand, is a manifestation of the Dark Side.

There were two very different peoples living in the Land of Egypt: There were the Egyptians, a people who worshipped death and gloried in the transient superficialities of physical life. This people served the Dark Side – they murdered children, they enslaved adults, they were dark and evil.

Then, there were the Jewish people, a people who were physically enslaved by the Egyptians. But while their bodies may have been subjected to torment and their flesh to the agonies of the deepest hells, their souls served and worshipped the Light Side of life, the sanctity of life, the holiness of life.

To apply this to a more recent past: The Jews enslaved in Auschwitz, in the darkest hells and blackest pits of evil, were people of Light. Although they were forced to walk into the darkness of hell, they did not allow the darkness of hell to walk into them. And this is the difference between dark and light.

They tell the story of a Jew who was about to be mercilessly killed by a sadistic Nazi. Before the Nazi pulled the trigger the Jew asked him if he could say a prayer. With the German’s permission, the Jew whispered a few words. “What are you saying?” asked the Nazi. “I am thanking God,” answered the Jew. “What are you thanking God for?! He has forsaken you!” The Jew replied with a deep inner peace: “I am thanking God for not creating me like you” ...

The Egyptians were dark, they perpetuated darkness, they breathed darkness, and darkness was their ideal. The Jews back then, and the Jews always, perpetuated Light. The Jewish ideal was, is, and always will be Light. As such, no matter into which darkness the Jew is cast, the Jew always will look for – and ultimately find – the Light.

You and I are the proof of this. Each of us is a living witness of a light that has never been extinguished despite the dark tunnels of history our people have travelled through.

And so:

In the hellish darkness of Egypt, the question was: Which side are you on? The Dark Side or the Side of Light.

The Egyptians put their faith in the Dark Side of things, and thus they were plagued by it. The Jews, though very real and horrific darkness surrounded them, never, ever saw darkness as something that had control over them. This is why, when the darkness plagued Egypt, there was still light in all the Jewish dwellings.

6. A Dark Power

Practically speaking, however, from where did the Jews in Egypt get this fortitude, and how can we today reach the same level of confidence and certainty that light will prevail and darkness shall never overcome us?

For this we turn to a beautiful teaching from Rabbi Yeshaya Halevi Horowitz, the Holy Shalah concerning morning prayers.⁷

Every morning, directly following the *Yishtabach* and *Barchu* prayers of the *Shachrit* service, we say a very short but fundamental blessing. We actually recited this blessing right here in synagogue a short while ago. It goes like this:

Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, who forms light and creates darkness, who makes peace and creates all things.

The Shalah⁸ writes that this blessing comes to counter a fundamental mistake that some people (heretics known as the *minim*) make in interpreting existence. Their mistake is thinking there are two powers

⁷ 122a, 325a (Shalah, Amsterdam edition).

⁸ Also brought in Ohr Hatorah *ibid*.

in this world – a light power and a dark power. This duality is called heresy, and it leads to very dark consequences indeed.

In truth, says the Shalah HaKadosh, there is only one power in this world, a power that creates both Light and Dark, and this power is the One God *who forms light and creates darkness*.

Why is this such a fundamental message and why is it so heretical to think that Light and Dark are two distinct powers?

If one were to believe that darkness is a power independent of light this would attribute power to darkness itself. The only way darkness can plague someone and have power over them is if that person or society attribute power unto darkness. The Egyptians did exactly this and were, therefore, controlled by darkness.

The Jews said this prayer, *Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, who forms light and creates darkness*. Darkness, said the Jew is in no way, shape, or form a creator; darkness is but one more creation.

If darkness were a creator (God forbid) then this would imply that darkness has a power over us and perhaps we should submit to it. This is what the Egyptians believed and this is called heresy. If, as we Jews believe and know, darkness is but a creation the same way bacteria is a creation – and it is a creation of the same Creator who created light – then it has no inherent power in itself. Its power is limited by the power we give it, and if we give it nothing, it cannot control us, but we can control it.

Darkness is fed by our giving it credence. Like in psychological warfare – if you believe that your enemy is strong, even if it isn't true, that alone weakens you and empowers your enemy.

7. Fundamental Tenet

There is a fundamental tenet in all of Judaism – there is One Creator in this world Who creates all things. Yes, He creates all things light, and yes, He also creates all things dark.

Why the Creator creates darkness is a question beyond the scope of this sermon. Suffice it to say that darkness has a purpose in enabling our free will choices and in bringing out our deepest strengths. But, just knowing that *yotzer ohr u'vorei choshech*, that the Creator of light also creates darkness gives us the ability to never allow darkness to control or enslave us.

After all, we know and connect and pray to the Creator and Master of Light and Darkness – to the God Almighty.

That said, there are times in life when the darkness can seem unbearable. There is real pain and suffering in this world, and the Torah obligates us to acknowledge it and work to eradicate it ... to seek a deeper light in order to transcend and grow from our encounters with darkness.

And that brings us back to our original question: What do we do when we are in the thrall of a dark mood or thoughts?

First of all, we must ask ourselves what caused this dark mood. If it's the darkness from above then we know that it is only dark because we are looking directly at the sun, and once we acclimate ourselves, the dark will shine as light. But if it's a darkness that comes from below, then we must remember that, as Jews, we have been to that hell before, and we have come out of it alive and enlightened.

The Egyptians were plagued by darkness, because darkness and death were their tradition. It is not ours. Our tradition is to bask in the light and to illuminate the world – indeed, to be “a light unto the nations.” We do so when we acknowledge that darkness is real, but not more real than light ... when we connect to Something more real, namely the Creator of all things real: The Creator of Reality itself.

8. How Many Light Bulbs Does It Take To Change A Jew?

In closing, allow me to share this little amusing anecdote:

During a Shabbat morning sermon a rabbi once asked his congregation: How many congregants does it take to change the synagogues light bulb?

To which a very dear member of the congregation responded: CHANGE? You want we should CHANGE the light bulb? My grandmother donated that light bulb!!!

And that's God's holy truth. We Jews do not have to change our light bulbs ever! We are never plagued by darkness because we are connected to the Creator of all light and darkness.

Sure, we wake up some mornings in a very dark mood, and we sometimes have very dark thoughts, and we may even wish at times to paint the whole world black, but through it all we have a light bulb burning inside of us that never goes out and only gets stronger.

This past Tuesday night the world celebrated the conclusion of 2013 and beginning of 2014. In Times Square, the New Year's Ball dropped at 11:59 pm, counting down the final 60 seconds of the year.

The ball has more than 30,000 LED lamps built into it and can project over 16,000,000 colors. Just imagine changing all those bulbs...

The New Year's Ball is one bright bulb alright, but the ball of light that burns bright within each of us, is brighter still.

And this beacon of light is a ball that never drops, only rises, rising ever upward while illuminating everyone and everything within its vast radius.

So, how many light bulbs does it take to change a Talmudic scholar?

To which the *chavruta* replies: "Well, that would depend on what you mean by 'Talmudic scholar'? And anyway, it's Shabbat - should we really be talking about light bulbs and electricity on Shabbat?!"

Shabbat Shalom!