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The 9th plague of darkness IS LIKE NONE OTHER. What are the effects? Merely darkness according to the plain text in Exodus. Yet there is something about the darkness that is UNCANNY (unheimlich) there is something about it that is infectious...

ויהי חושך אפלה בכל ארץ מצרים שלושת ימים לא ראו איש את אחיו ולא קמו איש מתחתיו שלושת ימים ולכל בני ישראל היה אור במושבותם.

Exodus 10 :22

Yet that was enough to trigger pharaoh to say “go! Go!” What’s the plague here? What was so threatening about this penultimate plague that has “plagued” our commentators as well!

A Reb Nachman story:

A businessman, travelling by coach through a forest, was accosted by a thief.

"Your money or your life," said the thief.

"Take all that I have," said the traveler, "but please don't harm me."

The thief took the man's money and was about to leave when his victim begged, "Take pity on me! How can I return home, having spent so much time on the road, with nothing to show for my effort? I'll be the laughing stock of the community. People will say that I failed as a businessman. They won't believe that I was robbed. At least if I could prove that I put up a great struggle before surrendering my possessions, then the disgrace would be easier to bear. Please, do me a favor and shoot two bullets into my top-hat so that the robbery will be obvious."

The thief was sympathetic and obliged his victim by firing two bullets into the hat.

"While you're at it," pleaded the traveler, "maybe you could put another two holes into the coach."

Again the thief consented, and fired two more rounds into the luxurious wagon.

He was about to go when, in a voice which was hardly a whisper, his victim timidly said, "I know that this may seem silly, but perhaps you could shoot a few bullets into my overcoat so that the story will be more convincing."

The thief did as he was asked until his bullets were gone. Then the traveler overpowered his assailant and retrieved his money.

This story conveys the tragic pattern of many a person's life. Each of us has a thief (yetzer hara, thief, the trickster) lingering within us. He wishes to rob of us of our goodness and inner spirituality. Rabbeinu saw that the person is a complex organism pulling in different directions, a revolutionary thought for pre-Freudian time, this notion of a pre-conscious level. The complexity of the human soul is so situational based that it's too easy to categorize into "good guy/bad guy". Each of us has a thief in us that wants to rob us of our תמימות. No matter how righteous the "Other One" has a hold on us, it is our dark side, our unconscious desire.

There's a difference between the first seven and the last 3 plagues. The last 3 all involve darkness. Plague #8 involves locusts that invade the land "and the land was darkened". The 9th plague is the darkness. It was a paralyzing darkness. The final plague occurs בהצפי הלילה in the night. *Darkness is characteristic of the last 3 plagues.* Rabbi S.R.Hirsh explains the difference nicely.

R. Hirsch suggests that R. Yehudah's plague breakdown as noted in the *haggada* is 3 sets of 3 plagues, *Dezach adash bechab*. He suggests that this tripartite division is based on the divine foretelling to Abraham at the *brit* between the parts *בין הבתרים* when God tells Abraham that his children will be: 1. exiled, 2. enslaved, 3. persecuted for 400 years. The first plague of each trio, *blood, arov, barad* all take place at the riverside, represent 1) Exile or galut. The second triad represents 2) enslavement, always in pharaoh's palace. The final third set of the trio is 3) persecution. Interestingly then, the plague of darkness which is noted in all three of the last plagues comes under the rubric of persecution or *Galut*.

Darkness is alien to us. This darkness has a palpable quality to it, It requires not only the absence of light but also the inability to see in the darkness. Blindness is the other side of darkness. There is something about that המסין (the number 50 in Arabic), when the sandstorm is so bad that the whole sky darkens. The remnants of this fear is noted in our liturgy, השכיבנו. This prayer asks for us to survive each night of darkness before we retire. In midrash night symbolizes a time of oppression. Galut is referred to as the long night, the darkness of exile.

Midrash: ויהי חושך ואפלה, Exodus Rabba: where did this חושך come from? It is a conflict a Machloket between two giants of Talmud. R' Yehuda says this חושך is from above, it is divine, it is the very darkness that preceded creation and was not created. It was primordial! Then R. Menachem Kasher brings us a Midrash Yonah – "whatever god created in the beginning, it was all conditional. Life and reality is not absolute. Sky was created *on the condition* that it suspend the laws of nature one day in the future, when Elijah will have to leave the world and not die, in a whirlwind to the sky. Light too was to be created *on the condition* that there will come a time for it to be switched off, חושך for 3 days in the plague of darkness. This wonderful midrash evokes the idea that the Ten Plagues paralleled somehow the ten utterances of Creation. They were the 10 utterances of *decreating* the world. It's therefore a primordial darkness, it's a thick darkness, almost palpable.

Opposed to R. Yehuda comes along R' Nechemia who says the darkness comes from Hell! He says it's a plague, how could there be darkness for locals and light for the Jews? It's the darkness of hell. From the opposite spiritual end of creation and opposite of heaven. R. Nechemia suggests that the darkness was not only not divine in origin but more like satanic. He might be stating this because not all Jews survived this plague. One midrash suggests that 4 out of 5 died in the darkness. Only the satanic mills of Egypt might cause such a casualty, surely nothing divine.

One source for the importance of this plague and its critical primordial source is in the psalter. Psalm 105 retells of the plagues. In the psalmist's list the very first plague is darkness! Known as "the creation psalm" there are deep parallels noted by scholars between this psalm and the creation narrative. Everything in this psalm parallels creation. So the first thing in creation parallels the first decreation, in this psalm it is the very notion of light and darkness.

- 26 כו שֶׁלַח, מֹשֶׁה עֲבָדוּ; אַהֲרֹן, אֲשֶׁר בָּחַר-בּוֹ. He sent Moses His servant, and Aaron whom He had chosen.
- 27 כז שְׂמוֹ-בָם, דְּבָרֵי אֹתוֹתָיו; וּמִפְתֵּי, בְּאֶרֶץ חָם. They wrought among them His manifold signs, and wonders in the land of Ham.
- 28 כח שֶׁלַח חֹשֶׁךְ, וַיְחֹשֶׁךְ; וְלֹא-מָרוּ, אֶת-דְּבָרָיו (דְּבָרוֹ). He sent **darkness**, and it was dark; and they rebelled not against His word.
- 29 כט הִפְךָ אֶת-מִימֵיהֶם לְדָם; וַיָּמָת, אֶת-דְּגָתָם. He turned their waters into blood, and slew their fish.
- 30 ל שָׂרָץ אֲרָצָם צִפְרָדִיעִים; בְּחַדְרֵי, מַלְכֵיהֶם. Their land swarmed with frogs, in the chambers of their kings.

Darkness thus envelops each individual and causes death to the Israelites and paralysis to the Egyptians. This enveloping darkness is reflexive causing blindness although we are told the Israelites at least those who survived could see in the darkness as if they were surrounded by an orbit of light.

In these midrashic meditations on the text there is a fleshing out of the gravity of the darkness as palpable and paralyzing. The text failed to reveal the malignancy of the plague but the midrashic tropes fill out the gaps in the text .

As we proceed to the next phase of interpretation the plagues represent an internalizing of all our creative potential. The creation story is always followed by a decreation through life's troubles and the plagues thus represent the other side of our internal creative potential. In sickness and pain in our suffering and our anguish we too suffer progressive triads of personal exile (divorce and separation), enslavement (addictions) and persecution (illness and suffering).

In order to be free of Egypt and all it represents (the past) we too must traverse the darkness of the ninth plague and its paralysis.

In the esoteric kabbalistic literature the plagues are represented by the dark side of the sefirot or the kabbalistic Tree of Life. Each sefira or nodal point of light has a mirror image in the dark side. The ninth plague then represents the penultimate level of the highest sefira:

קושי parallels the sephira of חכמה. The flash of insight that comes with the light, takes everything you've had in memory, a flash of insight. The dark side of this sefira is then the absence and forgetting of life and light. The dark night of the soul is encompassed by this overwhelming darkness and the sefira's dark side is the darkness of lack of clarity that engulfs us in these spaces.

Each of the plagues represents the work we need to do before we can get ourselves out of exile, persecution and slavery, our own addictions, our past, our genetic prison, and preconceived ideas. How do you get free of that to realize what's inside of you? Every step you take to independence of spirit requires a descent into suffering and pain first. What does that mean for the individual? Our Torah is not just a book, or a historical narrative or even Halachin manual rather it's a manual of how I can live my life and a road map of the mythic journey each of us must take to be free, truly free. This is truly a manual of spiritual discipline. Even in the 9th plague of darkness we're not sure we'll come out the other end. Only a 20% chance! (only 1 in 5 Jews survived!) The entrance to the soul must go through the wound (C.G.Jung). We're always choosing the safe side. We're so afraid of entering that 9th level before we can get out of Egypt.

We've all been given a choice and we can either refine and repair or walk away. (See Anatomy of the Soul, by Chaim Kramer). His an analysis of the 10 sefirot. כתר (parallels the last plague)=super conscious. The penultimate plague of darkness is paralleled by חכמה=conception. (In the darkness I can't conceive of anything.) Then comes בינה=intelligence. The dark side of חכמה is a locked mind. The 9th plague in which a thick darkness of Egypt reflects the inhibited Egyptian soul of conception. Where the sun god Ra envelops all there is no room for new conception. The darkness then comes to inhibit the sunlight of Ra and reveals the primordial divinity of the creator of the universe who has power to eclipse the sun god Ra.

For me to conceive of something new I have to empty myself to let the new light in. Fear and arrogance restricts me to a narrow tunnel vision, or darkness.

The last 3 plagues of darkness represent חכמה בינה וכתר. The top triangle conceived of before the creation of the world. Each of us has to somehow deal with the darkness and there's no prescription. It's the knife-edge of the spiritual life.

R' Baruch Epstein speaks in his Torah Temima of a subjective aspect of the plague: the darkness was dependant upon the positionality of the observer. It must have been cataracts! What if the only way the ancient mind could describe what was going on was an act of god but was actually an occurrence in the soul of man? In his pure Litvishe intellectualism the rational possibility was something within the eye of the observer. I like the subjective quality of this Torah although it is too literal.

What was the 9th plague after all is said and done? Possibly that in the darkness, the curse is loneliness. *לֹא רָאוּ אִישׁ אֶת אֶחָיו* – no person could see his brother, the brother in his neighbor. All communication between man and friend ceased.

R' Nechemia says the darkness is a curse therefore comes from a place of punishment. From hell! There is no greater hell than loneliness. Ask survivors from the camps, mostly those who survived had company and intimacy.

R' Yehuda says it comes from heaven because God alone dwells in his secret darkness of loneliness. The same darkness can also be a blessing, worthy of the closest presence of God Himself, solitude then implies sanctity. *לֹא טוֹב הָיְיֹתָ אָדָם לְבָדוֹ*. Loneliness the first time in the Bible that “not good” is mentioned (Milton). There is something uniquely divine about loneliness according to R. Yehudah. Jacob is left alone across the jabok river and in his loneliness there appears the divine. There is something about Jacob and his descendants in their loneliness that has a divine quality and we are told by the prophet that in the hoiary future God alone will be left, bereft of His people *וְנִשְׁגַּב הַשֵּׁם לְבָדוֹ בְּיוֹם הַהוּא*.

The thief in Rabbi Nachman's tale, tries to rob us of the sense of the breath that's lingering in us, that holy primordial spirit that was infused into us. He tries to rob us of what is most precious and substitute organized faith and authority and systems of hierarchy. But that breath is none other than the *שְׂכִינָה*, that gives you that sense of loneliness in this world, which is so divine that it gives you a god-like quality about your loneliness. That's what separates us from the mitzrim. You take the courageous step into the darkness, not stay in safety like the thief wants. You enter the wound of darkness and loneliness and there you are ready for the exodus.