

# Darkness

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

It is almost a year since we first got an inclining of the disastrous Covid19. No one, not even the holy World Health Organization had any idea of how serious it was or how it would spread with it so much death, pain, and gloom. There has been a lot of talk of darkness. If it were just uncertainty, one might say that all of life is uncertain. We have always faced challenges of one sort or another

Why do we assume, historically and culturally, that dark or black is negative or bad? We still talk about the Dark Ages (even if it was not all dark). Many of my favorite modern artists love the color black; Kazimir Malevich, Franz Kline, and Pierre Soulages, to name just a few I really like. Fans of the Rolling Stones will remember the popular song "Paint it Black." "I wanna see it painted, painted black, black as night, black as coal."

Typically, in Biblical Hebrew, many words can mean opposites. Holy, *Kadosh*, can mean something sacred or something profane. *Shameyn*, fat can mean something good and bad. *Cheyt*, can mean sin. But it can also mean to purify. Dark can be bad if you can't see. It can also be a time of quiet reflection and dreams. Nothing, no person is intrinsically good or bad. It depends entirely on how we see things or how we act.

You can find different Biblical sources for both darkness and black. Choshech, dark (ness), and Shachor, black, share similar roots SH and CH. The first mention of light and dark comes in the Biblical story of creation. "There was darkness over the deep and God said let there be light." As the Zohar says, these were not physical features, but mystical ones. They are representations of and contrast between material and spiritual. Both were created or facilitated by God.

But if light and dark, day and night, are meant to be the way that we understand them physically, as having to do with the sun, then how come the sun wasn't created till the fourth day? What was light before then? I doubt this would have seemed a problem three and a half thousand years ago. Nowadays we might say the pre-sun light was energy. Or poetically, that light and enlightenment were conditions of life on earth.

The Hebrew word for darkness is used only eight times in the Torah, either in

the context of creation or the Divine Revelation on Sinai. And light only five times, also in the same contexts ( but naturally many more times in the poetic books of the prophets who saw so much human evil around them, yet still saw light at the end of the tunnel). The Torah itself, is much more concerned with the way that human beings behave at all times, regardless of day or night.

The poetry of our morning prayers, says that God “ forms light and creates darkness.” And in the evenings it says that God “brings day and night and rolls up light before darkness and darkness before the light.” There is no hint that day or light is necessarily superior to night and darkness. Quite the contrary, darkness, say the mystics, is the ideal condition for encountering God. God’s promises to Abraham (Gen 15:12)and Jacobs dream (Gen 28:10-22), come in the darkness

Throughout our mystical tradition midnight is the ideal time to encounter the spiritual. Hence the esoteric *Tikkun Chatzot*, the Midnight Prayer of Reconciliation that the kabbalists created because it was supposed to be the moment when God was closest to human beings.

It is true that children are often scared of the dark, and of bogeymen. Adults, too, are occasionally frightened of the dark, the unseen. But that is their deficiency, not inherent in the state of darkness.

The only indication of negativity comes with the plague in Egypt of darkness that lasted for three days. But that did not necessarily mean it was bad. Like all the other plagues, the normal function of the natural world and the predictable was disrupted. Anyway, it could not have been the darkness as we know it that affects all creatures together. Egyptians spent three days in deep darkness while “all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings.” So that it becomes a way of differentiating morally as much as physically.

Egyptians did not recognize Moses or understand the state of slavery the Israelites suffered under, until after they had experienced the loss of seeing things they were used to. This plague got them to see things differently, more clearly. It took darkness to make them see the light!

So that in Judaism light and dark are partners. Neither intrinsically good nor bad. There is a role for both.

We see a similar juxtaposition if we switch to the word *Shachor* often translated as black. In English, black used to have negative if not racial connotations, a black mood for example. But in The Song of Songs, it can mean beauty. The young maiden cries out in the pangs of unrequited love "I am black ( Shechora ) and beautiful." Shachar with an identical root also means dawn. With its negative and positive connotations. Negatively presaging the destruction of Sodom (Gen 19) and positively with Jacob's triumph (Gen 32:23 ).

Similarly, the word *Kushi* which in Modern Hebrew is used to describe someone African or black. But in the Bible, it is both an honorable first name and a word for beautiful or special. Moses's wife is a *Kushit* in Numbers 12. And the Children of Israel are described by the prophet Amos as being *Benei Kushiim* (Amos 9:7) special, and beloved by God,

At this moment I am challenged, to bring light to my community when there is so much sickness, financial, political, and racial darkness swirling around us. Prophets of doom are overwhelming. How do we face the future with resolve and hope? It is of course by focusing on the other side of the coin. The amazing amount of charity and help. The human spirit can be as kind as it is selfish and cruel.

People live with assumptions, values, and patterns of behavior typical of their societies. They do not necessarily examine their ideas or wonder if their assumptions are valid. Professors Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman used the phrase the "illusion of validity" to describe how we tend to think that our own opinions are correct. We often overlook hard data that contradict our view of the world and to dismiss anything that does not coincide with our own preconceptions.

There is in the Talmud an amazing euphemism for a blind person, Sagi Nahor, which is Aramaic for a lot of light! You might think it is cruel humor. But it could also mean that a blind person has to use other forms of light, other senses to find the right way. To make the most of what other faculties he or she has.

Just as we can use our Jewishness, or our color, as a badge of pride, not shame. We can use it to spur onwards or to hold us back. We tend to worry and see everything in its worst light when we lie awake at night unable to see. But darkness is also an opportunity for imagination, to look again, differently, with hope.

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