

PARSHAT BO 2021 – SOURCE SHEET

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**Sponsored by Ed & Cecile Gromis in memory of Ed's mother Chana Gromis
Chana bat Moshe Yehudah ha Cohen a"h, whose yahrtzeit is on 7 Shevat.**

1. SHEMOT 10:21-23 – THE PLAGUE OF DARKNESS

כא) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה נָטֵה יָדְךָ עַל הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיְהִי חֹשֶׁךְ עַל אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וַיִּמָּשׁ חֹשֶׁךְ
כב) וַיֵּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת יָדוֹ עַל הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיְהִי חֹשֶׁךְ אֲפֹלָה בְּכָל אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים
כג) לֹא רָאוּ אִישׁ אֶת אָחִיו וְלֹא קָמוּ אִישׁ מִמְּוֹתוֹ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים וְלֹכַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הָיָה אוֹר בְּמוֹשְׁבֵיהֶם

(21) And God said to Moses: 'Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, darkness that can be felt.' (22) And Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven; and there was a thick darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days; (23) They could not see one another, nor could a person get up from his place for three days; but all the Children of Israel had light in their dwellings.

2. PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA – BLINDNESS CAUSED THEM TO BE CATATONIC

They couldn't use candles, because a stormy wind would blow them out. Besides, the darkness was so dense that no candle could stay lit. They had eyes but could not see; their vision was gone. And when their sense of sight was taken, their other senses were taken too! They couldn't speak. Their ears went deaf. They lost their sense of taste. Everyone was catatonic. Hunger seized them and made them suffer.

3. JOSEPHUS FLAVIUS – A THICK, BLINDING FOG

[D]ense darkness, without a particle of light, enveloped the Egyptians – darkness so thick that their eyes were blinded by it and their breath choked, and they either met with a miserable end or lived in terror of being swallowed up by the fog.

4. THE ABSENCE OF LIGHT IS DARKNESS

(The student in the following anecdote is often misidentified as a young Albert Einstein. It wasn't him, and it is unclear whether this idealized story ever really happened, but the *Mashal* and the *Nimshal* are too good to be passed up.)

One day, a university professor challenged his students with the following question. Did God create everything that exists? A student replied: "Yes, he did!" "God created everything? Are you sure?" the professor asked. "Yes sir," the student answered. The professor looked at him and smiled. "If God created everything, then God created evil - since evil exists, and according to the principal that what we do defines who we are, then it must be true that God is evil." The student was stunned into silence by this seemingly irrefutable logic. The professor was quite pleased with himself and boasted to the students that he had proven once more that faith in God and religious belief were wrong.

Then, another student raised his hand and said: "Can I ask you a question professor?" "Of course," replied the professor. "Professor, does cold exist?" "What kind of question is this? Of course cold exists. Have you never been cold?" The other students all laughed at their friend's silly question. The young man was unfazed. "In fact sir," he said, "cold does not exist. According to the laws of physics, what we consider cold is in reality the absence of heat. Every body or object is susceptible to study when it has or transmits energy, and heat is what makes a body or matter have or transmit energy. Absolute zero (-460 degrees Fahrenheit) is the total absence of heat; all matter becomes inert and incapable of reaction at that temperature. Cold does not exist. We have created the word 'cold' to describe how we feel if we have no heat."

The student continued, "Professor, does darkness exist?" The professor responded, "Of course it does." Once again the student answered his own question and dismissed the professor's reply. "You are wrong sir," he said, "darkness does not exist either. Darkness is in reality the absence of light. Light we can study, but not darkness. In fact, we can use Isaac Newton's prism to break white light into many colors and study the various wavelengths of each color. But you cannot measure darkness. A simple ray of light can break into a world of darkness and illuminate it. How can you know how dark a certain space is? You measure the amount of light present. Correct? Darkness is a word invented by man to describe what happens when there is no light."

The professor nodded. Now the student came to the point. "Sir, does evil exist?" The professor responded, "Of course, as I have already said – we see it every day. It is in the daily example of man's inhumanity to man. It is in the proliferation of crime and violence everywhere in the world. These manifestations are nothing else but evil."

The student shook his head. "You are wrong, sir," he said, "or at least it does not exist in-and-of-itself. Evil is simply the absence of God. It is just like darkness and cold, a word that man has created to describe the absence of God. God did not create evil. Evil is not like faith, or love, that exist just as does light and heat. Evil is the result of what happens when man does not have God's love present in his heart. It's like the cold that comes when there is no heat, or the darkness that comes when there is no light."

5. RASHI – WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN 'MAKAT CHOSHECH' AND ORDINARY DARKNESS

וימש חשך. וַיִּחְשֹׁךְ עֲלֵיהֶם חֹשֶׁךְ יוֹתֵר מִחֹשְׁכוֹ שֶׁל לַיְלָה, חֹשֶׁךְ שֶׁל לַיְלָה יֵאָמֵשׁ וַיִּחְשֹׁךְ עוֹד

וימש חשך – "it (the darkness) shall darken for them the natural darkness to a higher degree than the darkness of night: i.e. the darkness of night shall become even more black and dark.

6. KEDUSHAS LEVI – DARKNESS IS NOT JUST THE ABSENCE OF LIGHT, IT CAN BE TOO MUCH LIGHT

נטה ידך על השמים ויהי חושך על ארץ מצרים וימש חשך ויט משה כו' ולכל בני ישראל היה אור במושבבותם (י, כא - כג). ועיין ברש"י שמדקדק על לשון 'וימש' חושך. וגם יש לדקדק שכתוב 'ולכל בני ישראל היה אור במושבבותם', הוי ליה לומר ולכל בני ישראל לא היה החושך. ויבאר על פי המדרש (שמ"ר יד, ב), מהיכן החושך מחושך של מעלה, שנאמר 'ישת חושך סתרו' (תהלים יח, יב), ויש להבין שיהיה החושך של מצרים מהחושך שכתוב בו 'ישת חושך סתרו', שזה רומז על האור הנעלם

ונראה להבין, על פי הגמרא (ברכות נח, א) נתן עיניו בו ונעשה גל של עצמות, מאי זה הלשון 'נתן עיניו בו', וגם יש להבין הלא 'ענוש לצדיק לא טוב' (משלי יז, כו). ונראה, דהנה בהירות הבורא ברוך הוא הוא אין סוף, וכשעלה ברצונו לברוא עולמו בגין דיתקרי רחום כו' (עי' זוה"ק ח"ג רנז, ב), צמצם בהירותו כפי איכות המקבלים, לעולם השרפים כפי בחינתם, וכן לעולם החיות ולעולם המלאכים, וכן לכל העולמות עליונים, והם תמיד במדריגה אחד כפי איכות קבלתם ביום הבראם, לא יביט למעלה ממדריגתו כדי שלא יבוטל לו במציאות בהירותו אין סוף, ולא למטה ממדריגתו. וזהו הרמז בפסוק (ישעיה ו, ב) 'בשתים יכסה פניו ובשתים יכסה רגליו', 'פניו' שלא יביט למעלה ויתבטל במציאות, 'רגליו' שלא יביט למטה ממדריגתו. אבל ישראל עם קדושו על ידי התורה והמצות עושים לבושים, ועולים ממדריגה למדריגה על ידי התורה והמצות שיש להם

והנה הרשעים אומות העולם שאין להם תורה ומצות הם תמיד על מעמד אחד, וכשרוצים לשבור את הרשעים אז מראים להם בהירות העליון, והם שאין להם תורה ומצות לעשות על ידם לבושים לעשות ממדריגה למדריגה, וזה המפלה שלהם. וזהו הרמז בגמרא 'נתן עיניו בו', הופיע עליו הבהירות העליון, וזה שאינו מדבק עצמו בתורה ובמצות אינו יכול לעשות לבושים לסבול בהירות העליון השופע עליו הבהירות, ועל ידי זה נעשה גל של עצמות

ובזה יבואר הפסוק 'וימש חושך', כי מלת 'ימש' הוא לשון הסרה (עי' רש"י בשם האונקלוס), וחושך מורה על הצמצום (עי' ס' הפרדס להרמ"ק שער ערכי הכינויים פ"א; שם פ"ו; שם פ"ח), וזהו 'וימש חושך', שיסיר הצמצום כדי להשפיע עליהם בהירות העליון, והם שאין להם התורה והמצות זה בעצמו היה להם מפלה שלהם. וזה הרמז 'ולכל בני ישראל', שישראל שיש להם תורה ומצות לעשות לבושים לעלות ממדריגה למדריגה, 'היה אור במושבותם', היה יותר אור ובזה יובן הגמרא (נדרים ח, ב) לעתיד לבוא יוציא הקב"ה חמה מנרתיקה, צדיקים מתרפאין בה ורשעים נדונין בה, כי 'חמה' מורה על בהירות העליון, ו'נרתיקה' מורה על הצמצום. הרמז, יגלה הבהירות העליון ויסיר הצמצום, ואז צדיקים כו'. ויובן

Rashi focuses on the meaning of the words *וימש חושך*: "the darkness was tangible." But we also need to understand why the Torah emphasized that all the dwellings of the Israelites continued to have light. The Torah could just as easily have said that the Israelites were not struck by the plague of darkness. In order to understand why the Torah put it this way, we need to refer to the Midrash (Shemot Rabbah 14:2) that talks about where the darkness actually came from. Rabbi Yehuda says that the "darkness" of Makat Choshech originated in the Heavens, and quotes Tehillim (18:12) as proof that such a phenomenon exists. The pasuk in Tehillim says [referring to God] *ישת חשך סתרו סביבותיו* -- "He makes darkness to be His screen." We need to understand why the darkness decreed in Egypt must be the same as the one mentioned in psalms. This "darkness" seems to be alluding to a hidden kind of light [which requires a screen so that it can't be seen].

We must now understand the concept underlying this "concealed light." The Talmud in Masechet Shabbat (34) describes an incident when a great Talmudic scholar killed an outstanding student for having violated a basic house-rule of not revealing discussions that had occurred within the walls of academy to anyone not part of the study group. The method of killing that student is described as "he – the rabbi – set his eye upon him and the student turned into a heap of bones."

What precisely does the Talmud mean when it says *נתן עיניו בו* - "He set his eyes on him?" Also, in light of Mishlei (Proverbs) 17:26 - *גם ענוש לצדיק לא טוב להכות נדיבים על ישר* - "also it is not good to punish the righteous" [which means that when a judge takes an especially harsh line with a person who is or is thought to be a tzaddik, as he should have served as a model for the community, this, in Shlomo Hamelech's view is not an appropriate approach], how could the teacher of the student in the gemara in Shabbat 34 have been so harsh? It seems like the yeshiva student was being more harshly treated because he was a Ben Torah. That goes against the pasuk in Mishlei.

In order to understand all of this we must remember that the brightness that surrounds the Creator is so overpowering, that in order to create a universe in which physical and even spiritual creatures can live without dying from exposure to so much light, God had to impose limitations not only on Himself, but also on the brightness surrounding Him. This “light” had to be adjusted in accordance with the ability of the creatures in the universe to tolerate it without it causing them any harm. Different regions of the universe – not just the physical universe – were therefore provided with light of differing degrees of intensity, tolerable for different beings, spiritual and physical – and even in the regions populated by angels, the light there is not as intense as the light that surrounded God before He created the universe.

Different categories of angels live in different celestial regions, each of which is illuminated in a manner that corresponds to their ability to tolerate that light’s intensity. These angels cannot see the light of the “higher” regions in the celestial spheres than those they inhabit, so that they are not blinded through exposure to overpowering brightness. Similarly, they are not allowed to look into regions that are less brightly lit. These details of what goes on in the Heavenly spheres are referred to in Isaiah’s vision (Isaiah 6:2) where the prophet describes the angels as using two of their six wings to cover their faces with the words: **בְּשָׁתַיִם יִכְסֶה פָּנָיו וּבְשָׁתַיִם יִכְסֶה רַגְלָיו וּבְשָׁתַיִם יְעוֹפֵף** -- “and with two he covers his face, with two he covers his feet, and with two he will fly.” Covering his face in this context means not looking into the region above him, with more intense light than his. Covering his feet alludes to this idea of not looking into lower regions, beneath his habitat. But the Jewish people are not like the angels, as they have the Torah and the Mitzvot, and are able to use these as protective “clothing” so that they can be at home and comfortable in different regions, exposed to different intensities of light.

On the other hand, the wicked people on this earth, namely – the overwhelming majority of the gentile nations who reject God, if and when they ever become exposed to an intensity of light that they are not accustomed to, they will be blinded by it and will ultimately die. The Talmud hints this idea in that story in Shabbat, when it says that the rabbi “set his eyes on him” – exposing the student to an intense spiritual light that he couldn’t handle, as a result of which he died from overexposure to an intensity of light for which he was not prepared.

When the Torah describes the impact of the plague of darkness on the Egyptians and says **וַיִּמַּשׁ חֹשֶׁךְ** -- the word **יָמַשׁ** is being used in the sense of “removal” or “withdrawal” of the protective screen we humans enjoy against overpowering brilliant light. [The word **יָמַשׁ** will be familiar to the reader in that sense from Shemot 33:11 where it says that Yehoshua did not depart from Moshe’s tent by saying: **יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן נֹון נָעַר לֹא יִמַּשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הָאוֹהֶל**; and also from Joshua 1:8 where Yehoshua is commanded never to be without a Torah scroll with the words: **לֹא יִמַּשׁ סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת מִפִּיךָ וְהָגִיתָ בּוֹ יוֹמָם וּלְיָלָלָה** -- “this Book of the Torah must never be removed from your lips, you shall recite from it day and night.”]

We can now understand why the Talmud describes the result of the protective screen consisting of his Torah knowledge, etc. being withdrawn from the student mentioned in the Talmud, being that this student turned into a heap of bones, his body having been burned in a flash from the excessive brightness to which he had become exposed. And based on what we have just said it is also easy to understand why the Torah chose to describe the situation of the Israelites during the period of this plague as being one that enjoyed light in their dwellings. They continued being protected by the screen against excessive light that a people that deserves the name **בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל** are entitled to by their

birthright, by being descended from the Avot Hakedoshim – the holy patriarchs. These considerations also help us understand a statement in Nedarim (8): לעתיד לבא יוציא הקב"ה את חמה מנרתיקה צדיקים -- "in the Messianic era God will take the sun out of its usual orbit, as a result of which the righteous will be healed, whereas the wicked will be judged by this (in other words, destroyed by the light). The word נרתיק in the Talmud means the protective screening against excess light that God provided when He first created the universe.