

# From Darkness to Light

Rabbi Kenneth Auman

Judaic Studies Faculty, Stern College for Women • Rabbi, Young Israel of Flatbush

The *Medrash Rabba* at the beginning of *Parshat Miketz*, the *parsha* that is read on Shabbat Chanukah this year (and in most years), speaks about a Chanukah-appropriate theme—light and darkness:

*“It was at the end of two years.” The verse (Iyov 28:3) states “An end was set for darkness,” [The Almighty] set a time limit on how many years the world will operate in darkness because as long as the evil inclination is in the world, darkness and the shadow of death are in the world as is stated (ibid) “the stones of darkness and the shadow of death.” Once the evil inclination is uprooted from the world, there is no darkness and shadow of death. Another explanation, “An end was set for darkness,” a time was set for Yosef how many years he would remain in the darkness in prison. When that time ended, Pharaoh had a dream.*

**Bereishit Rabbah, Parshat Miketz no. 89**

ויהי מקץ שנתיים ימים, (איוב כח) קץ שם לחשך, זמן נתן לעולם כמה שנים יעשה באפילה, ומאי טעם קץ שם לחושך שכל זמן שיצר הרע בעולם אופל וצלמות בעולם, דכתיב אבן אופל וצלמות, נעקר יצר הרע מן העולם אין אופל וצלמות בעולם, דבר אחר קץ שם לחשך, זמן נתן ליוסף כמה שנים יעשה באפילה בבית האסורים, כיון שהגיע הקץ חלם פרעה חלום.

**בראשית רבה פרשת מקץ פר' פט**

The Medrash provides two interpretations of darkness. In the first, it represents the *yetzer harah*, the evil inclination. What does the Medrash mean when it states that there is an end to this type of darkness? Must we wait until Messianic times, or can we hope for it to be earlier?

The events that occurred on Chanukah teach us that we do not have to wait until Messianic times to do away with darkness. At the time when the Chanukah story took place, there was a great deal of darkness foisted on Klal Yisrael. It was not only religious coercion that threatened Torah life, but it was the allure of Greek culture that captivated the hearts and minds of many Jews without any coercion as well. There were certain elements of Greek culture that were capable of enhancing and even glorifying Judaism:

*The verse (Bereishit 9:27) states, “God shall beautify Yefet and he will dwell in the tents of Shem” . . . the beautiful aspects of Yefet (i.e. of Greek culture) will be in the tents of Shem (i.e. the Jewish people).*

**Megillah 9b**

אמר קרא יפת אלהים ליפת וישכן באהלי שם . . . יפיותו של יפת יהא באהלי שם.  
**מגילה ט:**

But there were other elements, such as Greek paganism and philosophy that were incompatible with Torah ideology. And those ideas had a certain attraction to many Jews at the time.

Nevertheless, the Torah ultimately triumphed. Perhaps this is why the miracle occurred specifically with the *nerot* (candles) and not with some other aspect of the Beit Hamikdash—to demonstrate that it is the light of Torah that eventually shines through and dispels the darkness.

Throughout the ages, different types of evil inclinations have appeared and challenged us. But they've all gone away, once the light of Torah was able to shine on them and dispel them. The ideas of Aristotle, Plato and other Greek philosophers once posed serious threats to Torah Judaism; today they are not credible threats at all. They may today be significant as subjects of academic study, but they do not provide attractive alternatives for living one's life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In more modern times, there were many other "isms" that were, for relatively short periods, potent evil inclinations, but today are no longer dangerous—communism and socialism today no longer pose the challenges to our faith that they did in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

"An end was set for darkness." Today's difficulties are different from those of yesteryear, and tomorrow's will be again different. What Chanukah teaches us is that the Torah has the power of light—the ability to dispel whatever challenge is posed by the particular darkness of the time.

Ironically, however, we today are faced with challenges that in certain ways resemble the old threat presented by elements of the ancient Greek culture. What was the basis of the Greek outlook? If one reads Greek mythology, one reads the stories of their gods. The gods were described as powerful beings, but with all the foibles of humans. They lied, cheated, and stole. They were jealous and selfish. The Greeks created gods who resembled them; they were basically worshipping themselves.

On the other hand, the whole idea of the Torah is to put G-d at the center of our universe, and thereby aim for perfection:

*Whenever one benefits from this world, one's intent should not be for personal pleasure but for the service of G-d as it states (Mishlei 3:6) "know G-d in all of your ways," and our rabbis taught, all of your actions should be for the sake of heaven, even matters that are optional such as eating, drinking, walking, sitting, standing, marital relations, conversations, and all physical matters should be geared towards the service of G-d or something that enables service of Him.*

**Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 231:1**

בכל מה שיהנה בעולם הזה, לא יכוין להנאתו, אלא לעבודת הבורא יתברך, כדכתיב: בכל דרכיך דעהו (משלי ג, 1) ואמרו חכמים: כל מעשיך יהיו לשם שמים, שאפילו דברים של רשות, כגון האכילה והשתיה וההליכה והשיבה והקימה והתשמיש והשיחה וכל צרכי גופך, יהיו כולם לעבודת בוראך, או לדבר הגורם עבודתו  
**שלחן ערוך, אורח חיים רלא:א**

One might argue that a central tenet of American society is also the concept of worship of self, albeit in a different fashion. Our society, too, emphasizes the notion that **we** are the most important thing there is. "You deserve this and this," "Treat yourself to this." And self-fulfillment is the most important thing one should seek. And many of the ills of our society—the rampant sexual freedom, the unbridled materialism, are all symptoms of this notion.

The light that triumphed **ההם** בימים **ההם** was only able to shine because of the great dedication and sacrifices of the Chashmonaim. And today as well, the Torah will only overcome the problems of our society with great dedication to it on our part...

The Medrash has another interpretation of darkness as well, symbolized by Yosef's stay in prison. This represents physical danger and the threat of annihilation. And this danger too has

an end, as is seen in the story of Chanukah and in the countless threats to our survival that we've experienced in our millennia of existence.

*In every generation, [nations] stand over us to destroy us and the Holy One Blessed be He saves us from their hand.*

**Passover Haggadah**

שבכל דור ודור עומדים עלינו לכלותינו  
והקדוש ברוך הוא מצילנו מידם.  
הגדה של פסח

The world certainly appears very dangerous to us at the current time as well. Chanukah, though, gives us encouragement because it testifies to the power of *me'atim* (outnumbered), *chalashim* (weak) and *tzaddikim* (righteous) against what appeared to be far greater might.

May we merit both types of light—the spiritual light of the Torah and the physical light of redemption.