

Much of the NYTimes from December 19, 1988 feels like it could have been written and sold on the newstand today. Headline: “emergency rooms overwhelmed as New York’s poor get sicker.” Headline: “Cutting Los Angeles Smog will impose unwelcome fetters on a way of life.” Headline (real New York Times headline!): “Jewish intellectuals, calling established Jewish organizations too uncritical of Israel’s policies, gather to mobilize an alternative network.” (there is, truly, nothing new under the sun...)

And then there was this. Headline: “Why Primo Levy Need Not Have Died,” by William Styron. This piece, to modern eyes, still feels distinctly and poignantly honest - refreshingly, or perhaps surprisingly, or some may say invasively so. It would not, though - in the age of Naomi Osaka and Simone Biles, on the heels of Megan Markle and Prince Harry, and so many others - it would not, in this moment, I don’t think, feel revolutionary.

But 1988 is not today. So when William Styron wrote in the New York Times in explicit, personal and graphic terms about his struggles with mental health, his suffering from depression, his proximity to suicide, it opened up - it released - waters from a dam that few could have identified was even standing, so tucked beneath the surface were these taboos. Styron later reflected in his memoir “Darkness Visible” - “It had taken, I speculated, no particular originality or boldness on my part to speak out frankly..., but I had apparently underestimated the number of people for whom the subject had been...a matter of secrecy and shame.

The overwhelming reaction made me feel inadvertently [that] I had helped unlock a closet from which many souls were eager to come out and proclaim that they, too, had experienced the feelings I had described.”

Decades later, William's daughter Alexandra shared this - "It was like the #MeToo movement. Somebody comes out and says: this happened. This is real. This is what it feels like. And it just unleashed the floodgates."

Earlier in his book, Styron used a familiar metaphor to talk about his depression. Actually, it wasn't a metaphor - or not just. It was a fact pattern. Quote: "while I was able to rise and function almost normally during the earlier part of the day, I began to sense the onset of symptoms at midafternoon or a little later - *gloom* crowding in on me, a sense of dread and alienation." Gloom. Darkness. Descent into night.

I feel William. While I do not resonate exactly with the particularities of his mental health experience, I too have always hated the night. I was the kid - and then the teen, and now the adult - who insists on leaving a nightlight on in the bathroom. Who dreads being awake in the wee morning hours, the lone soul whose racing mind estranges me from my sleeping peers. Who feels that the date on which we "fall back" and switch our clocks in the winter, depriving ourselves of an extra hour of daylight (yes, I know, that's not exactly how it works, but it is how it feels) - who feels that that is definitively the worst day of the year. I just don't like night.

This is at least part of why I have often been grateful to have not been Adam nor Eve. In addition to all of the other inconveniences of being the first people alive (for example - if you thought COVID household socializing limitations were bad, imagine there being *literally no other humans who had*

*ever been created on the planet* who you could talk to. Also, did they have shoes and if not was the ground hot or spikey, were there mosquitos and if so was there bug spray, did God account for any sort of plumbing, could they grow coffee, you can tell I don't go camping much) - on top of all of this, they also had to endure a traumatic experience of night. The first night. Or at least - their first night. Our, humanity's, first darkness.

You see, Adam and Eve were created during the day. Don't ask me which day, unless you want an additional sermon on biblical criticism, Adam 1 and Adam 2. What the Genesis narratives *do* agree on is that the creation of humanity happened in sunlight hours. And then, and we remember this pattern, וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר - night came, and then morning. And then God did some more creating the next day.

The midrash asks, or wonders - what if we paused that refrain? Vayehi erev - and night came. Then what?

In the Talmud's telling, when Adam and Eve first saw the sun setting, they began to cry. Woe is me, Adam bemoaned. What if *because I sinned*, the world is becoming dark around me? What if we are returning to that primordial state of tohu va'vohu, of chaos and disorder? What if this is death, sentenced upon me from heaven? The pair spent the night together weeping.

To be honest with you - I have a hard time reading this story without crying myself. It tugs at my heart strings in a potent, almost overwhelming way. Because that feeling is so *familiar*. An encroaching darkness. An impending

doom. Dread. Fear. Self-blame. Despair. What if I caused this? What if it never gets better? What if this never ends?

This story is familiar. I feel it now, all the time - and imagine you might too. How many times in the last eighteen months did we wonder, do we still, - will this pandemic ever end? Will I ever travel freely, see my loved ones again? Will I, or my kids, ever leave the house, ever return to what we loved about what was?

How many times have you asked yourself, in *any* moment of frustration, or pain, or grief - will this feeling, or this situation, last forever? I am stuck in this job. I am trapped in this relationship, or this lack of relationship. I am immobilized by these circumstances, imprisoned by what I'm going through, convinced that it may just never end. These worries, these trembles, are often not our logical minds at play. They are the devils of darkness, the midnight fears that get sanitized, vanquished, by sunlight but that monstrously rule the witching hours. Perhaps not sensible, but amidst those tosses and turns still oh so very real.

This, in our tradition, is night. Not the time of day, or not only. But this emotional cascade. This fear. This hopelessness. The little voice that says things like "it's never going to get better" (or that says things like "you should probably get up one more time to make sure the front door is locked") that you somehow always succumb to.

In the light of day, we don't necessarily believe the fallacies of night, but in the disorientation of the depths, we can't help but be captured by its catastrophizing, we can't help but think - *this might all be true*. Things *might*

never change. I *might* really be powerless. There *might* be something wrong with me, this *might* be my fault.

This is night. But night is not where our story ends. Vayehi erev - vayehi boker. After evening, there was morning. The Talmud concludes its story - “Adam spent all night fasting and crying, with Eve crying opposite him. *And then dawn broke*. And Adam said - מנהגו של עולם הוא - this is the order of the world.”

Night. And then dawn.

So what is dawn? Other than the technical astronomical presence of indirect sunlight being scattered in Earth's atmosphere (obviously Wikipedia's words, not mine), what characterizes the movement out of that dark place into something different?

The ancient Rabbis answer this question. But they do it in their characteristically legalistic (or so it seems) kind of way. On Rosh Hashanah, I brought texts that asked - when is it that night starts? Now, we ask the complement - when does day begin?

In Talmud speak, this translates to - “מַאימְתִי קוֹרִין אֶת שְׁמַע בְּשַׁחֲרִית,” from when (meaning “starting at what time”) can a person begin reciting the sh'ma prayer? We know, generally, that the answer is “morning.” But how much morning? At what point can we declare “dawn has broken?” Is “morning” amud hashachar, when the first light appears in the eastern sky? Is “morning” netz hachama, when sun's first beams peak across the

horizon? In halakhic literature, the answer - of course - is yes and yes. Some for some, other for others.

But here in the Talmud, the discussion takes a different turn, gives an experiential - rather than a celestial - kind of answer. “מַאימְתֵי קוֹרִין אֶת שְׁמַע.” “בְּשַׁחֲרִית,” from when can a person begin reciting the sh’ma prayer?

Rebbi Meir says: מְשִׁיפִיר בֵּין זָאֵב לְכֶלֶב. - only once there is enough light that you can distinguish between a wolf and a dog. “רַבִּי עֵקִיבָא אוֹמֵר”, Rebbi Akiva says: בֵּין חֲמוֹר לְעֵרוֹד. Only once you can distinguish between a regular donkey and a wild donkey. (Meaning if we go with Rebbi Akiva, I will likely never recite the sh’ma). And then the majority opinion:

“מִשִּׁירְאָה אֶת חֲבֵרוֹ רְחוֹק אַרְבַּע אַמּוֹת, וַיִּכְרַחוּ” when you see a person from a distance and can tell that they are your *chaver*, your friend. That moment when someone’s fuzzy features become clear, and the faceless shape approaching is revealed as your fellow.

I think, once again, that our Sages were not teaching about sunrise. Or about literal sight. They were not advising on light, or on halakhic hours, or even on the sh’ma. They were telling us how to come out of darkness. How to crawl our way to dawn. And their wisdom? Find a fellow traveler, someone else roaming about in the strange wilderness of night, and come close enough to them to notice - oh. You are here too. We are together. I must not be alone.

A few months ago, soon after my beloved summer solstice, I lost a pregnancy. And then, some weeks later, another one. They were both early,

but crushing nonetheless - emotionally, spiritually, physically (those hormones are no joke).

Now - I am nervous to talk about this here. Nervous because this is so personal, and also pretty raw. Nervous because I know it can be triggering for others whose own fertility journeys are or have been so fraught, or so ongoing (and if, by the way, that's you and you want to talk, please know I am here - to talk, to vent, to commiserate, to cry or rage). Nervous because young women are already so disproportionately (and often inappropriately) asked or pressured about having children or starting families - I know this because my marriage has a built in control with my same-aged rabbinic husband, and trust us, women get this worse.

But also nervous because conventional wisdom, and much of what I encountered in those early days on the Internet, says that miscarriage is one of those things that you just don't talk about. Like William Styron's depression. Like other mental illness. Like addiction. Like death.

But I'm telling you this anyway, despite my nerves, because it felt just so much like the Talmud's night. Or at least, it did at first. Did I make this happen? Is this my fault? Will this be our whole future? Will this never work? Will this state, will these feelings, last forever?

But then - dawn. A text to a sister, to those closest loved ones. A FaceTime with unconditionally supportive and boundlessly empathetic parents. A phone call with a senior rabbi who is also one of the world's best friends. A

frantic whisper to another senior rabbi mid co-officiating a service, very poorly timed on my part (I told you - nighttime is not ruled by logic) but so compassionately, so lovingly, received. Those who said “this happened to me too” (and there were so many of those!). Those who said “I am here. You’re not alone. I love you,” in words or sometimes in Jeni’s ice cream. Even an instagram account where others shared their stories, their grief. Glimmers of light. Those scattered particles. Not fixing, not conquering, but “וַיִּפְרְנוּ” - seeing a friend and knowing that they’re there.

הוא מנהגו של עולם הוא - this is the order of the world - or at least it can be. A night, that is pierced - punctuated - by those moments of connection, coaxing us more and more into the light. The virtual happy hours. The distanced run-ins with masked acquaintances on the street, reminders that we live in neighborhoods, in communities, surrounded by others. The Facebook comments of “shabbat shalom,” “shavua tov,” “sending love.” The pre-Shabbat check-ins and Sunday afternoon phone calls and new baby food drops and condolence e-cards and daily text messages and nightly Facetimes and emojis and paperless posts and edible arrangements and pen pals and Zooms and Zooms and how-do-we-work-Microsoft-Teams and then more Zooms. These are flickers of light. They didn’t solve COVID. Zoom can’t cure hardship. But they just may have saved our souls.

To be clear, this is not really a sermon about things getting better. Much about the world does not feel like it is improving, like it is moving exclusively toward goodness, and I can’t and won’t pretend to perceive or



discern otherwise. It *is* a message about how things might come to *feel* just that bit more okay even while still surrounded by blackness. About how the darkness can come to feel just that bit less lonely. Less pervasive. Less inescapable, less everywhere, less all the time. “וַיִּרְאֶה אֶת חֲבֵרוֹ וַיִּכְרְנוּ” - I see you. You’re my friend. I know you. I’m with you. Dawn.

Which brings us, then, to day. וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאֹר כִּי-טוֹב. “God saw that the light was good.” Genesis 1:4. A conundrum, textually. The moon and sun - or, in Torah speak, “מְאֹרֹת בְּרַקִּיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם” - lights in the expanse of sky - won’t be created until day 4. So what, in this first breath - on this first day, this moment of birth of our nascent universe - what was made in that famed moment of “וַיְהִי אֹר” - let there be light?

The Rabbis say that *this* light is not the glowing orb that we now call “sun.” It was something different - something that remains in our world, but that is so often hidden to us. This was “*or haganuz*,” God’s first light.

How did it work? “The Holy One of Blessing enveloped Godself in this light as one does a cloak.” And then (and this part, the Talmud says, is told in a whisper) - then Rabbi Yehuda bar Shimon said - “regarding the light that the Holy One Blessed be God created on the first day - with it, Adam could look and see all the way from one end of the world to the other.”

*This is day.* Not taking our fears, and our insecurities, and our doubts, and our troubles, and hiding them away. No - this is a light that sees, that exposes, all. Every nook. Every crevice. The whole wide world. A light that doesn’t make our troubles disappear, but that reminds us that we need not

face them by ourselves. That we are not alone. That this will not last forever. Vayehi erev vayehi voker, vayehi erev vayehi voker. Night will come, but so will dawn. And so can day.

*These days* - this period stretching from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur - they are, in our tradition, two things. They are the anniversary of creation, with Rosh Hashanah as the day on which we said “hayom harat olam,” today the world was conceived, was first created, setting into motion the story of Adam and Eve’s week, making *our week* a memorial to, a reenactment or recollection of, that day that humanity first came into existence - that first sunny day that led to that first dark night.

And - Yom Kippur is understood as a day of light. Just look at our bright white clothes. Midrash Tehilim looks at Psalm 27, the one we say throughout the period of Elul and the Yamim Nora’im, the one that begins “לְדָוִד | יְהוָה | אֱנֹכִי וְיִשְׁעִי” - Adonai is my light and my salvation and asks “*what*, precisely, are light and salvation?” Where in *our world* can we find them? Their answer: “Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.” How? Through teshuva, through repentance. And not just teshuva writ large, but vidui, the *collective* liturgical confession, more specifically. The saying *out loud and together*: this is what *we* did. This is who *we* are. None of us are in this alone. Today, we are all fully seen, the light is shining from one end of our soul to the other, revealing all, and we are in that vulnerable space together. So for today, we have a script. A pre-planned accounting of the acts, the deeds, the feelings and experiences that unite us. But the thing about a *metaphoric* night, as opposed to an astronomical one, is that in truth, we don’t all experience these waves of darkness at the same time. It’s more

like being on one of those international flights where the world map shows you where the sun is up and where the moon has risen. Some are in light, others in night.

In this tent, at this moment, we are in dawn and dusk and pitch black midnight and blinding noon. Some of us are deep in the depths; others soaring in sunny skies. Most of us are all of the above. Erev *va* boker - betwixt *and* between, all at the self same time.

And so I want to say: if you are in night, you are not alone. This will not last forever. We are with you here. And if you are in day, this is the moment to ask: who in your life could bask in your glow? Who could you reach out to with a call, with a hug, with love, with a pint (of ice cream, obviously)? Whose path could you travel on? Who could you intersect with and say: I'm your friend. I'm your fellow. I'm here.

מנהגו של עולם הוא - this is the order of the world - or it can be. We can make it so. We can move together toward day. Because regarding day - regarding that place of being seen, of reveling in radiating sunlight as your full, complete self; that place of companionship; that place of living amongst and between the expanse of the entire universe itself - regarding *day*, the Torah and we are very clear - וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאֹר כִּי-טוֹב. God saw this light. The light of day. And it is very good.