

The Plague of Indifference
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Last Wednesday night Jews around the world had a brief reprieve from our “shelter at home orders.” No, I don’t mean that we got to go out, or that we physically went someplace. No what we got to do was what we do every Passover, for a few hours we left the 21st century and travelled back to the time of Moses.

As we learn from the tale of the four children, when we sit at the Seder table, we tell the story not as though this is what God did for our ancestors, but it is what God did for us, personally, when we were slaves in Egypt.

So why do we do this? Why do we relive the story every year? Why is simply talking about the Exodus not enough? Why do we have to eat the Bread of affliction for a week year after year, and not just talk about our ancestors had to eat it? Because the Rabbis understood that experiential learning is how we learn best.

When we lay down memory tracks, when we smell, taste, see, feel, hear something, when something is experienced as personal, it becomes ingrained in who we are and how we see the world, and how we then respond because of it.

Right now we are going through what feels like a plague of Biblical proportions. If there was a modern day equivalent of putting blood on our doorposts so that the Angel of Death would pass over our homes, I’m sure most of us would be more than happy to do it.

On Thursday morning, I was scrolling through Facebook looking at everyone’s posts and pictures of their seders, and I was struck by something one of our congregants, Gordon Dean wrote. He said “I have never really understood the plague of darkness since darkness is commonplace, a nightly occurrence. But today I realized it might be a way of naming the illusion of separation. If there ever is a time to realize that separation is an illusion it is now.”

What he said made me stop and really think. It actually made me go back and study the commentaries on the plague of Darkness, because like Gordon, I had never really understood why that plague was seen as so terrible.

In the Book of Exodus it is written that a “thick darkness descended upon all the land of Egypt for three days. People could not see one another, and for three days no one could get up from where he was but all the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings.” (Ex. 10:22-23)

The medieval Italian scholar, Rabbi Ovadia Sforno observed that “generally, darkness is merely the absence of light and can be dispelled by lighting a fire. But this darkness was so thick it could be touched. It was a darkness of a deeper nature.”

So what type of darkness is the Torah talking about? According to the Gerer Rebbi it was “the worst of all darknesses; when people are unable to “see” their neighbors, that is they cannot see their distress and help them.”

And that stopped me cold. Yes, we are in the middle of a pandemic right now, and it is hard staying in our homes and being isolated from one another. But many of us are so focused on our own fears and discomfort that it is easy to only pay attention and to see what is happening inside our own homes, and

forget to look outside and to really see the distress of our neighbors.

Our society was suffering from plagues long before Covid-19 struck.

Homelessness and income inequality were not created by this current situation, but they have been greatly exacerbated by it, just as the fear and suffering of refugees and immigrants has also grown more profound and urgent in recent months. And Covid-19 didn't create a healthcare crisis in our country, it just revealed a new problem with it.

The plague of darkness is perhaps the most insidious of all of the plagues.

The Torah says that while there was darkness throughout the land, there was light in the Israelites dwellings. And why did we have light, because our eyes were already open to the suffering that was all around us. Light in the Torah is always about more than something we can see from the sun or a candle. Light is about insight, wisdom, and most of all, understanding.

No matter how bright and sunny the day is, when there is indifference, willful blindness, and the closing of our eyes to the pain of others, we are in dark times.

Even as we take care of our own needs and health during this stressful time, we can not lose sight of what else is happening. So many people, our friends and loved ones, our neighbors and acquaintances, are scared right now, not just about getting sick, but also afraid of losing their jobs and their homes. And there are others who fear being scapegoated or physically attacked.

Right now we are all going through a massive, communal, experiential learning moment. We are realizing that the whole world is interconnected and interdependent, and that we are all part of the same human family.

And we each have a choice of how we will respond in this moment. Will we close our eyes? Or will we do something and change the way we behave towards others?

When we stay in our homes, when we follow the guidelines of social distancing, we are standing with the rest of humanity, we are saying we are our brothers, and our sisters, keepers.

When we reach out to those who are isolated, offer to get them groceries or medicine – we are performing the Mitzvah of loving our neighbor as our ourselves.

When those of us who are not in fear of losing our homes or our jobs donate to organizations that are helping those who are without the ability to care for their families, we have learned the lesson of Passover, by demonstrating in a tangible way why it is important to remember what it feels like to be vulnerable.

Each of the 10 plagues was a warning, and with each plague, the consequences became more severe. Each plague demanded that Pharaoh and the ancient Egyptians pay attention and change their ways before it was too late.

There are so many plagues right now. Climate change. Income inequality. Racism, bigotry and anti-Semitism. There is an international refugee crisis, and on and on and on. Plagues of truly biblical proportions.

The plague of Darkness is the 9th of the 10 plagues, the final warning before the most horrendous of the

plagues, the plague of death. Perhaps we should pay more attention to the seriousness of the plague of indifference. Because that is what the plague of Darkness really is, it is the Plague of Indifference. And indifference to others is what paves the way for the destruction of a society.

Elie Wiesel taught that “the opposite of love is not hate, it is indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it is indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it is indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it is indifference.”

At Passover we are reminded that is not enough to reject being like Pharaoh and go through life with a hardened heart, indifferent to the suffering that is all around us, but rather we should actively strive to be like Moses, willing to speak out and work for redemption, not just for ourselves, and for our people, but for all who are need of liberation from their suffering.

And how do we do that? We begin by opening our eyes, and really seeing what is happening with our fellow humans, and then we take the lights that have illuminated our homes into the darkness and we use them so that we can see what we can do to help those who are suffering all around us. And by doing this we are telling those who are suffering, that they are not alone, and that even as we stay 6ft or more away from them, we are standing with them.

May the Holy One who liberated our ancestors at this time in years past, liberate us as well, liberate us from ignorance and illness, poverty and fear, and most of all liberate us from indifference. Ken yehi ratzon. May this be God’s will.