

Shabbat Chol HaMoed Pesach – Rabbi David Mahler

I'm rather confident we've all had this thought. I've never read it or seen a source for it. I've searched through the classical commentaries on the *Chumash* but to no avail. I'd be ecstatic if someone could alert me to this theory in any of the writings of the great *Rishonim* or *Acharonim*.

As we've studied and delved into the *Eser Makkot* – the 10 plagues – it's clear that they are not a haphazard list but rather a thoughtful one, intent on accomplishing a goal or a few different goals. The plagues were to be educational to all of *Bnei Yisrael*, were meant to be both educational and punitive to the wicked Egyptians as well as their cruel leader, *Paroh*. They also needed to break *Paroh's* resolve.

It's for this reason that I've always thought they must also need to be in ascending degrees of severity – one more oppressive than the one before. One more intense than the one preceding it. I believe many have had this thought at one time or another – yet I've never seen it recorded anywhere.

One reason we might have is because it's clear that *Makas Bechoros* – the killing of the firstborn – is clearly the most severe. Simply put, it's the only plague where people died. The killing of the firstborn is clearly the crescendo of all the 10. It's the harshest of them all.

However, when you look at the penultimate plague – darkness – this theory seems to fall by the wayside. Darkness is a nuisance. It's inconvenient and definitely a little scary but it can't compare to lions, tigers and bears roaming the streets, sitting on your porch and greeting you in your driveways. Darkness seems rather benign!

Many *Mefarshim* address this issue. What was it about *Makkat Choshech* that made it so awful? Why was it terrible? Why was it so intolerable that, though the first 8 plagues lasted one week each, darkness lasted only six days.

Rashi argues that the darkness was so heavy, thick and palpable, that it could be touched—something that was frightening beyond all comparison. A characteristic of fear is that it paralyzes people, therefore whoever was sitting could not stand, and whoever was standing could not sit down or move. Therefore, it was impossible for them to light candles. This was truly frightful. Egypt was paralyzed by terrifying fear and enveloped in thick darkness.

Rabbi Baruch Epstein, in his commentary *Torah Temimah*, offers an amazingly original way of understanding what was meant by darkness so thick that it could be touched. He explains that it wasn't physical but it was a plague that struck the eyes of the Egyptians. They all were stricken some type of horrible ophthalmological disease and they couldn't see anything. All of Egypt went blind simultaneously but nothing else changed.

However, none of these approaches address the truly devastating nature of darkness.

This past week, for unfortunately obvious reasons, *The New Yorker* posted an article titled, “The History of Loneliness”, on their website. The author, Jill Lepore, makes many interesting points.

The article begins with a study conducted with chimpanzees at the Philadelphia Zoological Garden, the country's first zoo, which found that even primates' feelings of terror, apprehension, fear and anxiety are all heightened by their sense of loneliness. Many of Lepore's ideas are intuitive and not much of a *chiddush* – but are very relevant to our discussion of *Choshech*. She writes that “loneliness is grief, distended. People are primates and even more sociable than chimpanzees. We hunger for intimacy. We wither without it. Loneliness is a painful, frightening experience that people will do absolutely anything to avoid.”

Along these similar lines, Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch addresses the horrifying nature of the plague of darkness.

In our legal and judicial systems, one of the more severe punishments is putting a person in solitary confinement, in isolation. Even Jewish law has a punishment of ostracism, by which a person is excluded from society, may not be counted in a *minyán*, may not come in contact with others, may not be visited, studied with, or the like. This was an incomparably severe punishment. *Chazal* expressed its gravity in the phrase, *O' Chavruta 'o Mitusa*—either be in society, or die.

The secular ancient world recognized the value of the social construct as well. This is attested, for one, by architectural style: the houses were built in clusters around a common courtyard, so that highly developed neighborly relations emerged.

Rav Hirsch argues that darkness was a personal solitary confinement. The Egyptians were isolated. They were helpless, lonely and hopeless. If you've ever been to the Blind Museum in Israel – it's a very powerful experience. They had no one to turn to, no one lean on – to give or receive support. They could neither seek or receive companionship. It was like being dead while still alive. What a plague!

And perhaps that is why when *Am Yisrael* were on the precipice of redemption, we were commanded to take the *Korban Pesach*. The *Torah* enumerates the laws of this sacrifice following the 9th plague. There is a unique *halacha* with respect to the *Korban Pesach*. The *korban* needed to be eaten *b'chabura* – in a group, with a community – *seh l'beit avot seh l'bayit*.

There is even one opinion in the *gemara* that it was *assur*, forbidden, to be consumed alone.

It was if *Hashem* wanted each Jew to make a statement, to declare, that we are not alone. Families ate together. Some joined with others. No Jew was ever alone when we were redeemed.

I pray that this is the case this year as well. What do I mean?

Lepore makes a distinction between loneliness and being alone, in solitude or seclusion. Loneliness is a state of being which is anathema to *Yiddishkeit*. While at times a person may choose to be alone, that is purely a choice to physically distance oneself from others. During this period of forced isolation we are being told to do so. However, that does not mean we need to be lonely. Loneliness is a plague.

As a community it is incumbent upon us all to make sure that no one who is secluded or isolated feel lonely. We must make phone calls and reach out daily to those we might feel are suffering from not being together with our community. Physical distance does not mean that we need to be socially or *Chas V'shalom*, emotionally distant.

As we all pray for *Moshiach's* arrival and yearn to offer the *Korban Pesach* once again, may we merit doing it together as a shul, a community, a nation, *b'chabura*.