Darkness and Light

Parshat Breishit 5784

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For any of us who have spent time in Israel, or have Israeli family, we know that Israelis hate lines. And yet, this past week, Israelis stood in line for hours, sometimes 10 hours a day, in order to donate blood.

At one location, while people were standing around, a woman in a denim dress announced that she was making a siyum on *Masechet Shekalim*, a tractate of the Talmud. She began to recite the *hadran* prayer, the prayer culminating Torah study and pledging to return to the particular tractate of Talmud. Surrounding her were young and old, secular Israelis, religious and even haredi - a group who a month ago might have been shouting at each other during a protest. After the siyyum concluded, a Haredi man, who I would surmise has never heard a woman complete a tractate of Talmud study turned to the religious zionist next to him, smiled and said, *nu, where is the seudas mitzvah,* the festival meal?

There have been other cracklings of light, amidst the incredible darkness facing Israel and the Jewish people right now. As news of the unfolding massacre was hitting us here in Chicago, my dear friend Rabbi Yonatan Cohen in Berkeley experienced personal tragedy: his 19-year old nephew in Israel, Yoav Malayev, was near the border with Gaza when his military base came under attack. Yoav was a second lieutenant in the 7th Armored Brigade - חטיבה שבע in Shiryon. Yoav went to support one of the newer soldiers who was on guard duty, managing to kill 4 Hamas terrorists before he was killed.

This week, as Israel geared up for the next phase in this terrible war, people began to sit shiva throughout Israel, and in a sense, we have all been thrust into a period of mourning. Rabbinic literature has a name for this experience, the awful cocktail of loss, shock and disorientation that happens when we lose someone: it is called *aninut*.

Aninut comes from the root in the Torah *onen*, which can mean "to be under pressure." The most salient feature of *aninut* is that a person is exempt from performing many of the positive commandments, such as offering blessings before and after meals, laying tefillin, and praying.

Halacha says, when something terrible happens, you do not need to expend the extra physical or spiritual effort to do mitzvot. You don't need to say a bracha if you can't

thank God in this moment - just feed your body the food it needs to get through this time. It is an incredibly compassionate innovation with the *halachic* system.

This past week, we were all in *aninut*, as funerals began and shivas followed all over Israel. And like *aninut* itself, with all the terrible loss, there was an outpouring of compassion, and love and chesed as well.

When someone went to pick up a tray of food for Yoav's *shiva*, the restaurant owner asked who it was for. When they found out that it was for "the hero of Kiryat Ono," the name of the city near Tel Aviv where Yoav was from, no payment was accepted.

There were other touches as well: an extra apartment in the building had been made available for the family, for the entire week. In it, there was an hour-long session with an IDF trauma expert for soldiers from Yoav's unit, their parents and Yoav's parents to meet and be together.

My friend shared that while the tragedy and grief that he and his family faced were not unique, neither was the incredible chesed and kindness either. Scenes like this, with glimmers of light, were playing out in every city around Israel.

In reading Parshat Breishit, light and darkness of course take center stage. Various commentators - both rabbinic and medieval - understood the process of creation not only as a physical unfurling but a spiritual and ethical one as well.

Our sages teach us that at the dawn of creation, a fierce debate erupted in the heavens about whether or not to create humanity. There is one telling (Sanhedrin 38b) where the angels ask, almost innocently about what humanity is capable of:

אמר להם רצונכם "נעשה אדם בצלמנו"
God said to them: If you agree, "let us fashion a person in our image."

אמרו לפניו רבש"ע מה מעשיו
The angels said before him: Master of the Universe, what are the actions of this person You suggest to create?

I imagine the conversation went on longer. 'Don't you know,' screamed the angels, 'what these beings will do?! Don't you know what some of them are capable of?' God, how can you create this being?! Have you not watched the news, or scrolled through social media, or heard the stories?! Do you not know what darkness human beings can bring?!

אמר להן כך וכך מעשיו

God said to them, human beings' actions are "this" and "that".

What does it mean when God says that people do "this and that"? It is, at face value, a callous and harsh response. According to the Midrash, God effectively says to the angels, this is human nature. People can do terrible things.

The commentator Maharsha, Rabbi Shmuel Eidels in 16th century Krakow says, this can't be how God possibly responds. Rather, he says, this refers to another rabbinic text that describes the same argument. In this version (Breishit Rabba 1:8), the groups of angels have names:

> *Some of them were saying: 'Let him not be created,' and some of them were saying: 'Let him be created…'*
>
> *Kindness said: 'Let him be created, as he performs acts of kindness.'*
> *Truth said: 'Let him not be created, as he is all full of lies.'*
> *Righteousness said: 'Let him be created, as he performs acts of righteousness.'*
> *Peace said: 'Let him not be created, as he is all full of discord.'*

The Maharsha says, God's response is, "Let people be created for people do <u>this</u> and <u>that</u>: they do acts of kindness and acts of righteousness." כך וכך מעשיו - These action, kindness and righteousness are what makes someone human; it was for these acts that God created humanity.

If we take a step back and reflect on these texts, we notice that our rabbis struggled with the same questions that beset us this week: God created a world, and this is the world that He built?! How can such terrible events occur, would it not have been better for people to not have been created at all?

[In a similar vein, Rashi too intuited that God's creation was not perfect, and required fixing almost from the very beginning. Noting that the name of God Elokim is associated with strict judgment. Rashi writes,

ברא אלהים וְלֹא נֶאֱמַר בָּרָא ה', שֶׁבַּתְּחִלָּה עָלָה בְמַחֲשָׁבָה לִבְרֹאתוֹ בְּמִדַּת הַדִּין, רָאָה שֶׁאֵין הָעוֹלָם מִתְקַיֵּם, הִקְדִּים מִדַּת רַחֲמִים וְשִׁתְּפָהּ לְמִדַּת הַ"דִּ,

The Torah does not state ברא ה' "The Lord (the Merciful One) created, because at first God intended to create it (the world) to be placed under the attribute (rule) of strict judgment, but He realized that the world could not thus endure and therefore gave precedence to Divine Mercy allying it with Divine Justice.

וְהָיְיוּ דְּכְתִיב בְּיוֹם עֲשׂוֹת ה' אֱ-לֹהִים אֶרֶץ וְשָׁמָיִם:

It is to this that what is written in (Genesis 2:4) alludes — "In the day that the Lord God ה' אֱ-לֹהִים made earth and heaven".

According to Rashi, there was too much harshness in the world - creation had to be refashioned with more of the divine attribute of mercy as well.

[Let me also clarify, and this is paraphrasing the spanish commentator the Abarbanel, that "midat ha'din" did not mean God's justice. It meant the natural order, it meant the way the world can work without holiness in it, without sparks of divinity and compassion.]

Indeed, even on a primordial, level, there was first chaos and darkness:

וְהָאָ֖רֶץ הָיְתָ֣ה תֹ֑הוּ וָבֹ֗הוּ וְחֹ֙שֶׁךְ֙ עַל־פְּנֵ֣י תְה֔וֹם וְר֥וּחַ אֱלֹהִ֖ים מְרַחֶ֥פֶת עַל־פְּנֵ֖י הַמָּֽיִם׃
the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—

This week, there was *Tohu v'vohu v'choshesh*, terrible chaos and darkness. I will not recount details and figures of the massacre for the moment, but each of us have images, names and stories already seared into our minds and our hearts.

What do we do in times of darkness, when such a powerful shadow overtakes us?

Rabbi Shimon Gershom Rosenberg, popularly known as Rav Shagar explored these questions from the very personal place of his own experience in the Yom Kippur war (which I can't believe I am referencing again.) Rav Shagar, who passed away in 2007 was a philosopher and theologian, an intellectual figure deserving of much deeper exploration and learning.

During the Yom Kippur war, Rav Shagar was serving in a tank unit. My friend and colleague Rabbi Zach Truboff, who recently published a book on Rav Shagar wrote that:

> "Immediately after entering the battlefield, Rav Shagar's tank was hit and burst into flames. He was somehow able to climb free, but the moment nearly overwhelmed him. He writes, "I saw a giant blaze the height of a several story house- the association of *akeidat Yitzchak* came to mind." Almost unconsciously, Rav Shagar understood that something profoundly terrible had taken place. He was able to hide nearby for several hours until he was rescued by an Israeli tank manned by his friend and future Rosh Yeshiva, Yakov Medan. Eventually, he was brought to Rambam hospital in Haifa and treated

for his injuries. It was only there he discovered that his friends and fellow soldiers had been killed."

In the years that followed, Rav Shagar struggled to understand his experiences during the war from a religious perspective. He explained:

In many aspects my feelings towards being saved were different from those who had similar experiences during the war. After the war, people turned to me and said that I should make a seudat hodaah, a festive meal of thanksgiving. I said that I am not able to do so. Not because I am ungrateful, God forbid, but rather (Tehillim, 137:4) "How can I sing a song to God?" I am not able. I should make a seudat hodaah? What about my friends who did not merit to survive?!

The loss of his friends weighed heavily upon him. In his eyes, they were innocent, pure, and represented the very best of religious Zionist youth. Believing in Divine justice is a cornerstone of faith, and after the death of a loved one, the Jewish tradition mandates that the mourner praise God as the righteous judge. However, faith is rarely ever so easy. In the holiday of Sukkot, Rav Shagar perceived the embodiment of his spiritual dilemma.

The sukkah represents for us trust in God. It cannot protect us in this world. The sukkah is an expression of reality that exists in shade. It is the shade of faith but it is still shade. We find ourselves in the shade of the sukkah and not in its light.

The holiday of Sukkot has passed, and yet, we are still in the shade of the Sukkah. As Rabbi Truboff points out, shade is somewhere in between light and dark, containing elements of both.

I fear - and I pray that I am wrong - that we have entered into a time of darkness, shade and shadow, the shade of the sukkah in Rav Shagar's formulation. Even in this shade, there is faith.

And, I would add, from a place of shade and darkness, we can perceive some light as well. As I said earlier, there were glimmers of light throughout Israel in the days that followed the attack. Here too, we have been blessed with glimmers of light:

One Wednesday, I was in a fog when I arrived at shul, trying to wrap my head around the devastation in the land of Israel:

וְהָאָ֫רֶץ הָיְתָ֥ה תֹ֙הוּ֙ וָבֹ֔הוּ וְחֹ֖שֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵ֣י תְה֑וֹם וְר֣וּחַ אֱ-לֹהִ֔ים מְרַחֶ֖פֶת עַל־פְּנֵ֥י הַמָּֽיִם׃

The land being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—

I arrived to shul and received the following card, from someone named Olivia Hayes, whom I had never met - it is posted in our front lobby:

> *“Dear friends at Anshe Sholom,*
> *Our hearts have been broken over the news of the attacks taking place overseas. Know that you have neighbors here in this city lifting you up in prayer as spiritual and physical battles take place. We are weeping with you and will continue to cry out for the Lord’s protection, justice and provision”*

There is still light in the world. May we bring light into this world, and to our family in Israel. Even as we dwell in the shade, may there be light:

וַיֹּ֣אמֶר אֱלֹהִ֔ים יְהִ֖י אֽוֹר

God said, “Let there be light”;

וַיְהִי־אֽוֹר׃,

There was light. Let there be light.