

SERMON

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'Let my people go', said Moses to Pharaoh. 'Let them be free to worship our God and to find their true calling by leaving these narrow places (*hb. metzarim*) of Egypt (*hb. Mitzrayim*)'. The story goes, Pharaoh hardened his heart - and when his resolve weakened, God intervened and hardened Pharaoh's heart further -, leaving no other option for God than inflicting plagues that grew harder and harder. The penultimate plague, darkness upon the Land of Egypt, opened the door to the climax, the death of the firstborns, as if the authors of Torah wanted to hide this crime behind a cloud of night. Our Talmudic Sages felt unease about this treatment of the Egyptians because of the sin of one person, and they decreed that in future generations, we should take a drop of wine out of our glasses when we retell the story of the Exodus during the Seder of Pesach.

God said to Moses, 'Stretch out your arm toward the sky that there may be darkness upon the Land of Egypt, a darkness that cannot be touched'. And Moses did as God commanded him, and 'a thick darkness descended upon all the land of Egypt for three days' (from Ex. 10: 21 - 22). This darkness cannot be touched; it is a darkness that lasts some time. It is not the simple cycle of night and day, of darkness and light that was set in motion in the first verses of the Book of Genesis. It is a darkness that comes almost by surprise when our inner light is dimmed.

Abraham ibn Ezra, one of the most distinguished scholars of the 12th century Spain, wrote, "there are times when a thick darkness comes over the Atlantic Ocean during which time it is impossible for a person to distinguish between day and night. And this lasted sometimes for five days. I myself have been there many times" (commentary *ad. loc.*). Abraham Ibn Ezra was a keen traveller, and he went as far as Baghdad. Surely, he spent some time on the shores of the Atlantic and may have witnessed a thick fog over the waters. But when he said, "I've been there myself many times", what phenomenon is he alluding to? Is it a window open into his inner life?

Let us pause a moment and reflect on this sentence, "I've been there many times". Many of us say, "I've been there many times"? Darkness is an integral part of the human experience. Being human is not easy. We grow, we change, we age. We face many challenges during our life: how to make a livelihood, relationships, losses. When she lost Prince Philip, her lifelong partner, the Queen said, "grief is the price we pay for love". We cannot avoid the sufferings of life. However, we can choose how we respond to it. As the Persian poet Rumi once said, "this being human is a guest house, every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary comes as an unexpected visitor". Life is a long learning curve that comes with many challenges.

But sometimes, these emotions overwhelm the mind. We cannot escape the impenetrable darkness that can linger for a long time. And sometimes, external circumstances add to the daily struggles, and reveal all that is fragile in us as individuals, but also us as a community.

The Covid crisis has unveiled many flaws and cracks in our societies, among them the lack of mental health support for those who need it the most, the huge division between those who can afford private mental health care and those who have to wait for help from a largely underfunded public system. Mental Health has come to the forefront as a major issue for our country.

What can we do?

The answer is both personal and collective. Pharaoh's stubbornness led to the ultimate plague, the death of the firstborns of Egypt. He was blinkered, lost sight of any other possible solution. He resembled the oak of the fable "The Oak and the Reed" by Jean de la Fontaine: overconfident and unable to measure the magnitude of the incoming storm. The reed showed adaptability, resilience, and when the storm came, the reed bent, but did not break. Pharaoh should have been like the reed and been open enough to see the darkness coming. This would have allowed him to avoid this overwhelming darkness.

When we are in the dark, the first step is to have the courage to say like Ibn Ezra, "I've been there many times". But for that, we need safe spaces, like Jami for the Jewish community, where we can find the strength to look at our frailty and to start the process of lifting the darkness that is upon us. It is our collective responsibility to help those in need, and our personal duty to be brave enough to admit, "I need help". Words can free us when they are received with a compassionate heart.