

SERMON

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Darkness can come in many forms.

There is physical darkness – such as that which occurred in the penultimate of the Ten Plagues. For several days the Egyptians were engulfed in a reality in which they could not see even their closest surroundings. At its peak they could not even move.

And then there is a darkness which envelops the mind, even when surrounded by broad daylight. A darkness which pervades one's emotions and intellect, which precludes the ability to think clearly, a darkness that finds its expression in feelings of confusion, uncertainty and inner turmoil.

Perhaps it is precisely this latter form of darkness that the Jewish people themselves experienced through the bitterness of slavery long before the plagues began.

In last week's Torah portion we read how when Moshe first approached Bnei Yisrael with the great tidings of redemption their response was underwhelming:

וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה מִקְצָר רוּחַ וּמֵעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה

“but they did not listen to Moses due to shortness of breath and hard labor”

(Exodus 6:9)

They did not listen because they were unable to hear. They were in a state of emotional darkness that did not permit them to look to the future. One could understand that the words *kotzer ruach* refer to a literal shortness of breath due to their backbreaking labour. Or perhaps, as the great commentator Rabbi Chaim ben Attar (Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh 1696 – 1743) suggests, that they refer to a narrow and constricted mind; to an inability to process those words due to a state of mental confusion – brought about as a direct result of the impossible circumstances in which they found themselves.

Over the past 2 years so many amongst us have been shrouded in darkness once again. Continued isolation has served to exacerbate already existing mental health challenges. How can we now move from darkness back to light? How can we improve the plight of our friends, neighbours, colleagues and fellow community members as we become increasingly aware of the strains on mental health that the pandemic has wrought on us all?

In her book about facing adversity and building resilience – “Option B”, Sheryl Sandberg discusses classic experiments on stress – where people were required to perform tasks such as problem-solving that required concentration, whilst simultaneously being blasted with loud and disturbing noises. Participants began to make mistakes, and some gave up entirely. Researchers then provided a way to alleviate the stress - they gave some participants a button that they could press to make the noises stop. Predictably, those who had the button performed better on all the tasks.

A remarkable and surprising fact, however, was that not a single participant actually pressed the button. Simply knowing that it was there was what allowed them to remain calm and focussed. Sandberg concludes "When people are in pain, they need a button."

If we, as individuals and as a community, acknowledge that mental health is not taboo; if we ensure that we are there to listen - that can provide a button that so many desperately need. And if we are in need of that button, let us have the courage to press it. Initiatives such as the Mental Health Awareness Shabbat are there to make it plain for all to see that we as a society are willing to talk about mental health. That we are ready to drop the stigmas. That we have finally understood that nobody should suffer in silence.

Of course it doesn't end there - mental illness cannot cure itself. We should avail ourselves of the wonderful services within our community and encourage others to seek professional help where it is needed. But it begins with a listening ear, with a recognition that the challenges are real and with a commitment that we will do our utmost to come together to help solve them.

Going back to that plague of darkness, the Torah tells us about the Egyptians that

לֹא רָאוּ אִישׁ אֶת אָחִיו

"No man could see his brother"

(Exodus 10:23)

The Chiddushei HaRim (first Rebbe of the Ger Chassidic dynasty, 1799 - 1866) explained that far beyond a simple description of the darkness that occurred as a result of that plague, these words should be understood as a cause for the ultimate darkness in our world - when no man can see his fellow. When no one looks around at others, when each individual looks only at the "I" but is oblivious to the "you" and where all are left to fend for themselves - such an attitude can only create the darkest of places.

This Mental Health Awareness Shabbat let us pledge to banishing that darkness and replacing it with light. Let us commit to talk and to listen, to encourage and to be encouraged. Let us provide the help we are able to, and let us seek the help we need, safe in the knowledge that our community is willing and able to provide it.

Shabbat Shalom!