

SERMON

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The Egyptians had faced months of difficulty and uncertainty. The world felt more chaotic than it has ever been. They had already faced the threat of disease, and climate change with dramatic hailstorms. Now locusts were causing a food shortage by eating everything in sight. It was impossible to plan; the recent outbreak of boils were still causing children to get sent home from school. It all felt hopeless. And so a thick darkness fell, a darkness that could be felt. And nobody saw anyone else or left their home for three days.

The timing of Mental Health Awareness Shabbat, on Shabbat Bo, is inspired by the account of the ninth plague of darkness, as a metaphor for depression, but rarely has the account of the Egyptians' plight felt more relevant than this year. We know that the pandemic and lockdowns of 2020-21 took a huge toll on mental health, particularly among young people.

We are still going through the emergence from lockdown, the adjustment to a new normal, and in many ways, this is just as hard a process, because we are all emerging at different speeds. Some of us are still shielding. For others life has gone back to normal. And all of us are, I think, a little traumatised by the experience of living with extreme uncertainty. We can make plans but we know that they might have to be jettisoned if there's a new outbreak. Everything feels provisional, unsettled.

For those of us who already have a tendency to anxiety, these are anxious and difficult times. All mental health services have seen a significant increase in demand, particularly from children and young people. A recent survey by NHS Digital showed that one in six children in England in 2021 had a probable mental disorder, facing loneliness, problems eating and sleeping and missing school. The plague of darkness was particularly bad because it wasn't isolated. It came after eight other plagues wore down people's resilience, creating a climate of fear and disruption that left the Egyptians feeling paralysed.

We can't always keep the darkness at bay even in good times. Sometimes we have to learn to live with depression or other kinds of mental illness, but we can always choose how to respond, how to manage our mental health and the mental health of those around us, how to be kind to each other.

These are, however, particularly hard times and we need to look out for each other more than ever. In Parshat Bo, we hear that the Israelites, by contrast with the Egyptians, had light in their homes. They weren't stuck in suffocating darkness. What might that light look like for us?

In the Talmud (bBava Batra 14b) Rav Yosef teaches that brokenness can be holy too. Moses put the broken fragments of the first tablets of law in the ark together with the new ones that he carved. We do something similar when we break the matzah on Seder night and put one piece aside for the Afikoman to be hunted after dinner. We can't continue the seder until we have brought together the broken pieces and then eaten them. The broken fragments imply that our dark moments, our broken

selves, are no less central to our relationship with God than our best moments, that the most difficult parts of ourselves are as loved as the shiny parts.

I think that's the light that protected the Israelites. It's about accepting and acknowledging that we are all a little broken, that we can allow light through our cracks. The challenge of any relationship, whether it's with a person, with God, or with ourselves, is to acknowledge that every part of us is central to that relationship – including our depression, our anxiety, our challenges around mental health. That's the first step in moving away from the darkness and into the light. We are human, so we are not perfect - and we are complete in that imperfection.

The broken fragments are put in the ark, and the Zohar, the foundational text of Jewish mysticism, teaches that the Ark is a symbol for the human heart. And that a person's heart must be a little broken if it is going to serve as a home for the Shechinah, that part of God that lives inside us. Because, the Zohar says, the Shechinah only dwells within broken vessels.

We have all been through a very tough couple of years. For those of us who already have mental health issues it's been particularly difficult. But our task as Jews is to nurture the light within us by acknowledging that we are all vulnerable, we're all finding this hard and we all need each other. And that is how we'll get out of the darkness toward the light.