Darkness that Leads to Enlightenment: Thoughts for Parashat Bo

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Bo

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Rabbi Yitzhak Shemuel Reggio, a 19th century Italian Torah commentator, offers an interesting insight concerning the plague of darkness. The Torah states that Egyptians spent three days in deep darkness while “all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings.”

Rabbi Reggio opines that the plague of darkness did not befall the land of Egypt—but rather the eyes of the Egyptians. Egypt itself was full of light; but while the Israelites continued to enjoy that light, the eyes of the Egyptians were blanketed in darkness. If an Egyptian stood right next to an Israelite, the Egyptian would be unable to see--but the Israelite would see clearly.

Rabbi Reggio notes that after the plague of darkness, the Torah reports that “the man Moses was very great in the land of Egypt, in the eyes of Pharaoh’s servants and in the eyes of the people.” It seems that the Egyptians did not recognize the greatness of Moses until after they had experienced darkness. This plague somehow caused a transformation within them. They started to see things differently, more clearly. It took darkness to make them see the light!

For many years, the Egyptians did not think twice about their enslavement of the Israelites. This was a “normal” fact of life, not to be questioned. They did not see that anything was morally wrong with the status quo. They had grown so accustomed to their pattern of thinking, that they did not question the validity of

their assumptions and their lifestyle.
When they were plunged into absolute darkness, they began to realize how wrong they had been. They came to understand that their assumptions and patterns of behavior were immoral. When they “saw the light”, they then recognized the greatness of Moses. He was, after all, telling the truth! He—not Pharaoh—was the agent of truth.

The transformation within the minds of the Egyptians may also be evidenced by the Torah’s later statement that the children of Israel found favor in the eyes of the Egyptians, so that the Egyptians gave them presents. The Egyptians no longer saw the Israelites as slaves, as objects to be exploited; rather, they saw the Israelites as fellow human beings who had been cruelly mistreated. Egyptians felt empathy toward the Israelites, whom they had previously treated so callously and viciously. They wanted to give them presents, to demonstrate human solidarity.

Rabbi Reggio’s insight might be extended to relate to human life in general. People live with assumptions, values, and patterns of behavior typical of their societies. They do not necessarily self-reflect: are these assumptions true? Are these values moral? Are these patterns of behavior ethical? It is highly difficult to rise above one’s milieu and judge one’s reality in a dispassionate, honest manner.

Professor Daniel Kahneman, the Israeli Nobel Prize winner in Economics, has coined the phrase “illusion of validity.” He points out that we tend to think that our own opinions and intuitions are correct. We tend to overlook hard data that contradict our worldview and to dismiss arguments that don’t coincide with our own conception of things. We operate under the illusion that our ideas, insights, intuitions are valid; we don’t let facts or opposing views get in our way.

The illusion of validity leads to innumerable errors, to wrong judgments, to unnecessary confrontations. If we could be more open and honest, self-reflective, willing to entertain new ideas and to correct erroneous assumptions—we would find ourselves in a better, happier and more humane world.

The ancient Egyptians had the illusion of validity, believing that their murderous, slavery-ridden society was fine. They did not question their lifestyle, opinions or worldview. It took the plague of darkness to make them think more carefully about the nature of their society—and the nature of their own humanity. Once they “saw the light”, they were able to make positive adjustments. Although Pharaoh and his army continued to foster the pre-darkness views, the people as a whole seem to have re-oriented their way of thinking and acting.

The plague of darkness might symbolize the need for each of us to periodically clear our minds, re-evaluate our assumptions, and see where we might have fallen victim to the illusion of validity. In the darkness and quiet of our inner selves, we can try to shed light on our opinions, values, attitudes and behaviors. We can try to rise above ourselves, as honestly and objectively as we can.

An old proverb has it that “no one is so blind as the one who refuses to see.” We might offer an addendum to this proverb: “no one sees so clearly as the one who has first experienced darkness.”