

When we read Parashah Bo, we are usually just beginning to emerge from the darkest time of the year. The farther away from the equator we are, the more we relish each additional minute of daylight. I love the extremes of both the summer and the winter solstices because they remind me that creation is an ongoing process set into motion untold eons ago when the omnipotent, indescribable, unpronounceable Entity יהוה that we call HaShem penetrated the lifeless primordial darkness with lifegiving light. The last three plagues, which occur in our parashah, are increasingly lethal variations on the theme of darkness. Pharaoh has so often broken his promises to let the Israelites go, that “hardening his heart” after the remission of each plague has become a habit which he can no longer break. His addiction to adulation and validation has blinded him to the suffering of others, including his own people. His courtiers try to reason with him, but he is beyond understanding. “... How long will this one be a stumbling block to us? Let the people go and they will worship their God. Don’t you know that Egypt is lost?” (10:7) After three plagues brought about by Aaron, three by Moses, and one by Moses and Aaron together, Pharaoh has grown so implacable that only a power higher than he can ever begin to comprehend is able to reach him. The last three plagues are brought about solely by HaShem, plunging Pharaoh into an all-encompassing darkness that will finally drive him and his hapless army into the depths of the sea. The locusts, the first of these plagues, swarm so densely that they blot out the sun for a whole day and destroy everything the hail has left standing, leaving the darkness of economic ruin and famine in their wake. After Pharaoh once again breaks his promise, HaShem causes a darkness so oppressive that it imprisons the Egyptians for three days. “... Stretch out your hand toward the heavens, and there will be darkness over the land of Egypt, *and the darkness will become palpable*” (10:21), in Hebrew, *v’yamesh choshech*. As an adverb, the word ממש means really, very, precisely, specifically; and as a noun, it means reality, substance, concreteness. In other words, this is no ordinary darkness, which science defines as the absence of visible light, or as a light-absorbing surface. In its many attempts to define this darkness, Midrash Tanchuma Bo quotes Genesis 1:2: “And darkness was upon the face of the deep,” equating deep with the netherworld and asserting that it was “thick as a dinar,” to illustrate its concreteness. Indeed, this darkness seems to defy the laws of physics, like the dark matter found in the vacuum of outer space, or the primordial darkness from which HaShem separated the newly created light. The Egyptians are locked into the overwhelmingly endless, freezing chaos that existed before light enabled life and allowed us to measure time. Driving to the airport in Duluth, Minnesota one early morning, I experienced fog so thick that I completely lost orientation and began to panic. I turned on my warning lights and slowed to a crawl, praying that no vehicle would hit me from behind. Blessedly, I was able to discern the lights from the airport as I finally began to emerge from this dense patch of Lake Superior “pea soup,” as my father z’l liked to call it. It is truly a palpable darkness that even affects sound, as I experienced years later driving home around the Flensburg harbor in a similar fog, listening intently for the muffled sound of the foghorns to help me stay on the road. Both times I was literally frozen in fear, and I felt utterly alone and totally focused on my own immediate survival. Looking back at these two visceral experiences through the lens of our parashah, I realize that this darkness is not only physical; it involves every aspect of our being, reaching into the depths of our psyche, where fear, depression, and other negative emotions reside. Another midrash defines the darkness that befalls the Egyptians as a sort of cataract over their eyes, i.e., the attribute of exclusivity that made them blind to those who were unlike them. As early as the time of Joseph, the Egyptians held themselves apart, believing for example, that it was “an abomination to eat food with the Hebrews” (Genesis 43:32). This is a society so turned inward that they automatically demean anyone outside of it. No wonder our laws instruct us to love and provide for the stranger in our midst, continually reminding us that we too, were strangers in Egypt. But our Egyptian tormentors are also a metaphor for this persistent malignancy, today often called “dislike of the unlike,” that has affected humanity from the outset. Once again, it is metastasizing at an alarming rate throughout the world, fueled by floods of dis- and misinformation eagerly lapped up and acted upon by legions of people increasingly turning inward to blindly follow the dictates of their particular group. Penetrating the darkness of their particular brand of fundamentalism is nearly impossible. We dare not surrender to the sort of darkness that separates us from the world around us and feeds our worst fears. We need light to free us from misguided assumptions and unhealthy patterns born of self-imposed isolation, and from hopelessness based on willful ignorance. We need light in order to grow, we need light in order to penetrate the darkness that separates us from our fellow human beings, and we need light in order to see the goodness that is inherent in all of HaShem’s creation. Sometimes our world seems too dark to bear. “... but for all the children of Israel there was light in their dwellings.” (10:23) In the midst of darkness, the people dared to trust that HaShem would bring them out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. At times it was difficult for them to remember this, and they often faltered. But *baruch haShem*, we have survived, because, as we read in our evening and morning prayers, light always follows darkness. And in the words of Martin Luther King Jr., whose birthday we commemorate this week, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. ...” As the days lengthen, let us turn toward the light in renewed hope and gratitude.

Shabbat shalom!