

**D'var Torah, BO—February 2020**

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**Shabbat Shalom!**

**Thank you, Rabbi Steinlauf for allowing me to honor my brother Howard, olav hashalom, with this d'var torah. And thanks to family members who have travelled to be with me today, my friends, the wonderful Kol Shalom community.**

**The parsha of Bo is a rich one for the development of a d'var torah. I was tempted to talk about the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, and his refusal to reverse his policy direction with regard to releasing the children of Israel from bondage. I could have easily discussed the issue of a leader standing by a failing policy, or refusing to make midcourse corrections, and pointed to a few recent examples! I could have focused on the importance and meaning of Passover, discussed at the end of the parsha, and could easily be tied to themes of liberation and deliverance.**

**But I would like to focus my d'var instead on the ninth plague described in the parsha, the plague of darkness. You see, there are many ways to interpret the plague of darkness.**

**I consider the theme of darkness compelling, because so much of our faith celebrates the concept of light. Indeed, light is the very first thing that God created, “Vayomer alohim Yehi Ohr, Vayehi Or,” God said let there be light, and there was light, says the book of Genesis. We light shabbat candles and eight candles of Hanukah with joy to bring more light into our lives. We say Ohr zaruah l'a tsadik (a special light or aura exists for the righteous). We hang a nar tamid over the ark, which we are told, contains a spark of the divine presence.**

**Darkness, by contrast, is presented in today's torah portion as a negative, as the 9<sup>th</sup> plague that God brought on the Egyptians. The disappearance of sunlight for 3 days conveyed a powerful message to the Egyptians, because the sun was their supreme God. Its daily rising, says the Eitz Chaim was seen as a triumph over a snake demon, the embodiment of darkness.**

**The plague of darkness was psychologically devastating to the Egyptians as it revealed to them the impotence of their supreme god.**

**Indeed, today psychiatrists ascribe a form of mood disorder to the absence of sunlight among some people. They term the disease, “SAD,” or seasonal affective disorder and note the shift in moods among people as the seasons change and the hours of sunlight abate in the winter months. In fact for some who suffer from this malady the prescription is to purchase lighting devices to emulate the sunshine. The lighting companies love these people!**

**This mood disorder known as SAD brings us to a deeper interpretation of the ninth plague. As noted by the Eitz Chaim, the ninth plague presents a good question: for all the other plagues, there is little that the Egyptians could have done, but for the ninth plague, couldn't they have lit candles to mitigate the effects of the plague? At this point the Eitz Caim presents**

**the provocative idea that the plague of darkness may not have been a physical plague but a spiritual or psychological one, in short a depression. The word “melancholy” comes from a Greek root meaning “dark mood,” and so people suffering from depression or melancholy lack the energy to move about or to be concerned with anyone other than themselves. And this is exactly how the torah describes the Egyptians: “Lo raoo Ish et Achiv velo kamu ish mitachtav shloshet yamim--” (“People could not see one another, and for three days no one could get up from where he was”).**

**Perhaps the Egyptians were depressed by the series of calamities that had struck them (as the people in New Orleans and Puerto Rico have been in our own time), or by the realization that their prior feelings of confidence had depended so heavily on the enslavement of others. The person who cannot see his neighbor is seen as incapable of spiritual growth. In Jewish law, we define the time one can recite the morning**

prayers as “dawn,” and dawn in turn is described as “when one can recognize the face of a friend.” When one can see other people and recognize them as friends, the darkness has started to lift. In the words of Albert Schweitzer:

“In everyone’s life, at some time, our inner fire goes out. It is then burst into flame by an encounter with another human being. We should all be thankful for those people who rekindle the inner spirit.”

I have experienced melancholy, depression and mental illness in my family. My brother Howard, who passed away this past November 18, was a schizophrenic. He fought this crippling disease for over 45 years, and I tried to stand by his side as a supportive brother for all those years. I find the torah’s description of darkness to be so true of Howard’s state of mind. He really could not move about too easily, recognize other people, or really make any effort on their behalf. Indeed, he was plagued by darkness, a deep and profound darkness

**mitigated to some extent by drugs, and definitively lessened by the realization that there were people—shockingly very few—who still cared about him. In spite of his schizophrenia and his wandering in and out of conversations when we were together, there were occasional signs of his former jocular, intelligent and vivacious personality. There was a striving to be connected to his family and the larger world, to be held and hugged, to be loved. Mental illness does not mean the disappearance of one’s humanity or one’s n’shama (soul). And yet, we tend to treat the mentally ill as if they (like the Egyptians in the bible) have a plague. In a recent Washington Post Magazine story about the effects of schizophrenia on families, a mother of a schizophrenic son told reporters, “I used to hesitate to tell people about this disease. It would be so much easier to say my son had brain cancer, because the empathy would be immediate. When I say, “My son is mentally ill with schizophrenia, it’s as if I said leprosy.”**

**We rob the mentally ill of their dignity. We fail to understand, as I myself did for some time, that a relationship with mentally ill people is most likely one-sided, devoid of the reciprocity that we take for granted in most other relationships. But the human connection is vital to the mentally ill, just as it is to the rest of us. The social workers in Howard's building, placed there as a result of enlightened public policy in San Francisco, never gave up on him. They welcomed conversations, accompanied him to medical appointments, provided care when he was ill and helped him with paying bills. They too saw sparks of his wit, compassion, and warmth. These unsung heroes deserve credit for probably extending his life.**

**In her compelling book, *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Minds and Madness*, Johns Hopkins University Psychiatry Professor Kay Redfield Jamison, herself a victim of mood disorders, describes one of her first bouts with mental illness:**

**I was used to my mind being my best friend; of carrying**

**on endless conversations within my head; of having a built-in source of laughter or analytic thought to rescue me from boring or painful surroundings. I counted on my mind's activity, interest, and loyalty as a matter of course. Now all of a sudden my mind had turned on me: it mocked me for my vapid enthusiasms; it laughed at all my foolish plans; it no longer found anything enjoyable or worthwhile.**

**In our society, people challenged by depression or worse find a way to put on a positive public face, to carry on, for after all we are intolerant of anyone who does not have a “sunny” personality. A 2005 survey of 1,200 US adults revealed that in a race for national office when all other factors were equal, nearly one in four (24%) would vote against a candidate who had been diagnosed with clinical depression, while another 24% said they might not vote for them. Do you, like me, sometimes wonder if**

**we might be better off if more of our leaders visited a psychiatrist?**

**In this regard, consider some of the newer research on one of our greatest leaders, Mr. Abraham Lincoln, whose birthday we will celebrate soon. I study and write about presidential leadership. Most of the time, the more I read about leaders, the less I respect them. With Lincoln, it's the opposite—the more I read about him, the deeper my appreciation for his greatness and importance to our nation.**

**In the 1950's Carl Sandburg held a joint session of Congress rapt with his speech that began, "Not often in the story of mankind does a man arrive on earth who is both steel and velvet, who is hard as rock and soft as drifting fog, who holds in his heart and mind the paradox of terrible storm and peace unspeakable and perfect."**

**But Lincoln was not perfect. He suffered from depression. Consider the title of Joshua Wolf Shenk's book, Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness. Shenk details the almost constant battle that Lincoln waged against a deep-seated and profound sense of melancholy. Lincoln often wept in public and read maudlin poetry. He told jokes and stories at odd times—saying he needed to laugh for the sake of his survival.**

**According to Joshua Wolf Shenk, Lincoln's melancholy was both a burden and a gift. The burden was sadness and occasional despair, but the gift was clarity of vision unavailable to many of his contemporaries. Some people, said a contemporary, could see the world "Ornamented with beauty, life, and action; and hence more or less false and inexact" in a beautiful**

**but false way. Lincoln, on the other hand, could penetrate the world and see it in its precise shape and color.**

**What the author calls Lincoln's "depressive realism" led him to confront the issue of slavery head on. He took issue with Senator Stephen Douglas' idea of repealing the Missouri Compromise and allowing popular sovereignty to decide slavery in a large area of the Northwest. To Lincoln, the new policy was a Trojan horse, an ostensibly benign measure that would spread slavery through the nation. "Slavery," he said, "is founded in the selfishness of man's nature—opposition to it, is his love of justice." Later he would say, "If slavery is not wrong than nothing is wrong."**

**When he rose to debate Douglas, Lincoln appeared to be so overcome with sadness, in the words of a reporter on the scene, "that I thought Shakespeare's melancholy**

**Jacques had been translated from the forest of Arden to the capital of Illinois.”**

**Shenk says that the melancholy mattered, because Lincoln’s observers could sense the depth of feeling that infused his oratory. Others, like Douglas, could hit all the right notes and spark thunderous applause, but Lincoln’s eloquence produced conviction in others because of the conviction of the speaker himself.**

**And so one of our greatest leaders perhaps the greatest of our 45 presidents was given to dark moods and melancholy. Author Shenk states that “whatever greatness Lincoln achieved cannot be explained as a triumph over personal suffering. Rather it must be accounted as an outgrowth of the same system that produced the suffering.”**

**Moses, who freed the slaves of Egypt, was not perfect either. As the torah describes him, he had a slight**

**speech impediment and was given to moods of doubt and despair. Perhaps Moses also suffered bouts of “depressive realism.” The torah presents him as a flawed human being who, nonetheless, achieved remarkable things.**

**And so, I wish to remind us that, yes, it is hard to be in a condition of darkness or depression, as the Egyptians learned in their experience of the ninth plague and as my brother learned over his adult lifetime. But depression is not necessarily disabling. According to a recent study by the National Institute of Mental Health, nearly half of all Americans (46%) will develop a mental illness at some point in their lives. And even if the report exaggerates the prevalence of this condition, there is no doubt that many of our friends, many of us will fall into a depression at some time. If we do, we will need the help and support of our friends and families.**

**The hand of God and the leadership of Moses liberated us from Egypt. Let us pray for liberation from bias toward those in our community who suffer, temporarily or more permanently, from the darkness of mental illness. We need to be liberated from the darkness of the ninth plague, not only to escape the darkness caused by the absence of light, but the darkness of bigotry toward those who suffer from mental illness. In the words of Joshua Wolf Shenk, “What needs treatment is our own narrow ideas—of depression as an exclusively medical ailment that must be, and will be squashed; of therapy as a thing dispensed only by professionals and measured only by a reduction of pain; and finally, of mental trials as a flaw in character and a disqualification for leadership.”**

**And finally, from a friend who went to visit my brother with me in San Francisco, a note:**

Michael, I am wondering how you are. I just learned last evening from a colleague of Howard's passing. There are no words to let you know how truly sorry and sad I am for you and your family. I remember our time in San Francisco when I went with you to make sure Howard was okay and then the three of us went to dinner together. He greeted me with a smile and made me feel as though I had known him for a long time. Howard was very gifted and more intelligent than

others would give him credit for and, I believe, the world was a better place with Howard in it.

Rest in peace, my dear brother!

**Shabbat Shalom**