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Avrohom *ben* Mordechai *a”h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Darkness Revisited

PARSHAS BEREISHIS 5777

One of the very first articles of the entire *Mishnas Chayim* series (*Parshas Bo*, 5768) dealt with a subject relating to the events of Creation’s first day וַיִּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ, וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לָאֹר יוֹם וְלַחֹשֶׁךְ קִרְיָ לַיְלָה וַיְהִי עֶרֶב וַיְהִי בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד – “And G-d said: ‘Let there be light.’ And there was light... And G-d separated between the light and the darkness. And G-d called the light ‘day,’ and the darkness He called ‘night’; and there was evening and morning, one day” (*Bereishis 1:3-5*).

The issue involved the central question about the nature of this creation called “darkness” – or was it even a creation? In other words, is darkness simply the absence of light, or is it, like light, an actual entity in and of itself?

As stated, this issue was featured around the time of *Mishnas Chayim*’s inception and, for one reason or another, the coverage sparked a significant measure of reaction from the readership. In any event, as even more information on the subject has recently come to “light,” we have taken the liberty here to bring these nuances to the audience’s attention.

Shining in the Dark

But first, a brief recap. A *halachah* quite central to this discussion is related by the Mishnah in *Pesachim (1:1)*, which states:

אֹר לְאַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר, בּוֹדְקִין אֶת הַחֶמֶץ לְאֹר הַיָּר.

“On the night of the fourteenth (of Nisan), we search for the *chametz* (leavened products) by the light of a candle.”

As to why the search is scheduled specifically at night and not in the daytime, Rabbeinu Chananel (*Pesachim 4a*) explains this as due to the inclusion of a candle in the ritual. As the Yerushalmi states (*Pesachim, ch. 1*), a candle illuminates much more brightly at night than during the day.

This assertion of the Yerushalmi is key to resolving the greater issue of the nature of darkness. Why, indeed, does a candle “work” better at night than during the day? One would have supposed that it is the greater darkness that exists at this time that is the responsible factor. That is, some light will inevitably be present during the daytime, thereby weakening the candle’s efficiency. It is during the nighttime that we can be reasonably certain of the absence of light, thereby ensuring that the candle’s illumination will be better highlighted.

However, there would seem to be a way to experiment and test this theory – an indoor chamber completely impervious to the light of day would be most handy in this regard. Then, we could light a candle there both by day and by night and compare their illumination. If they produce equal brightness, that would seem to be proof positive that the absence of light is the sole determining factor. Lo and behold, such an experiment was actually conducted! To be sure, it wasn’t undertaken just to study a scientific hypothesis but was actually the result of some horrid conditions of persecution. Nonetheless, as regards the subject of our discussion, it appears that the purpose was served.

The Yerushalmi quotes the account of Rav Huna, who reported the following: “When we

were in hiding in the secret underground caves (below the study halls), we were unable to discern night and day. To solve this problem, we lit candles. When the candlelight was dim, we knew it was day. When the candles shone brightly, we knew it was night.” In Rav Huna’s caves, there was no visible distinction between night and day; the absence of light seems to have been of equal measure. And still, the candles shone more brightly and night than by day. Thus we see that there is apparently an **inherent difference** between actual nighttime darkness and just a “plain” lack of light. This would seem to bolster the notion that (at least as far as night is concerned) darkness is an actual created entity with specific properties – one of which is that it provides greater contrast than a mere absence of light, thereby affecting the magnitude of a candle’s light.

One of the matters that has subsequently come to light is the fact that the Netziv explicitly makes this very point. As he writes: “...The light of fire illuminates more brightly in the darkness of the night than in a darkened area during the day” (*Meromei Sadeh, Pesachim 2a*).

Resolution of the Future

Also quite noteworthy is the intensity with which some of the Sages regarded this issue. There were, to be sure, some who held that the darkness of night is, after all, no more than a mere absence of light. No less a personage than the venerated R’ Sa’adya Ga’on maintains this position in his *sefer Emunos V’Dei’os*. However, the Maharsha (*Tamid 32a*) holds the opposite; in fact, so strongly does he feel that darkness is an actual creation that he calls the dissenting side “the opinion of the *minim* (heretics).” (The Maharsha does not name R’ Sa’adya Ga’on, and the latter would obviously dispute both the actual opinion, as well as the designation.)

In any event, it is worthwhile as well to cite the very fascinating proof that the Brisker Rav derives from one of the *piyutim* (hymns) of the Pesach Seder. The final verse of the composition, “*Va’yehi Bachatzi Ha’laylah*” states: קָרַב יוֹם אֲשֶׁר הוּא לֹא יוֹם וְלֹא לַיְלָה – “Bring near the day which (in essence) is neither day nor night.” This is a reference to *Acharis Hayamim* (the End of Days), which will feature a period of time that apparently will be neither day nor night. Now, such a contingency would be impossible if the darkness of nighttime is merely the absence of light. According to this school of thought, nighttime darkness results automatically from a lack of daylight; as such, whenever there is no daylight, there perforce is darkness. How, then, could the *piyut* speak of a situation that is “neither day nor night”? It must be, then, that the darkness of night is more than just the absence of light, thus allowing for the existence of a “third” type of day that is neither day nor night.

This thought is borne out by the very next line of the *piyut*, which states: רַם הוֹדַע כִּי לָךְ הַיּוֹם אַף לַיְלָה – “O Exalted One! Make known that the day is Yours; even night is Yours.” This will be the effect of the new, third type of day. It will demonstrate – as per the derivation of the Brisker Rav – that night’s darkness was not just an automatic result of lack of daylight, but rather, “*af lecha laylah*” – even darkness, like light, is one of Your created entities (*K’motzei Shalal Rav*).

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