

Light Unto the Nations  
Parashat Bo 5783  
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There is this amazing tool you can get online called the [V.I.A. test](#). The VIA Survey of Character Strengths is a free self-assessment that takes 10 minutes and provides a wealth of information to help you understand your best qualities. VIA Reports provide personalized, in-depth analysis of your free results, including actionable tips to apply your strengths to find greater well-being. Essentially the thinking behind this test is to explain that each of us has talents. Sometimes those talents are buried, and we have no idea we have them. Additionally, the approach also explains that even if we know what our talents are, we don't know exactly how to apply those strengths in our professional and personal lives. I just say, we each have a superpower.

In this week's Parasha, Parashat Bo we see the awesome, incomparable power of God.

וַיִּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת-יָדוֹ עַל-הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיְהִי חֹשֶׁךְ-אֲפֹלָה בְּכָל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים:  
“Moses held out his arm toward the sky and thick darkness descended upon all the land of Egypt for three days.” (Exodus 10:22)

Have you ever been in complete darkness when it is so dark you can't see your hand in front of you? The fear is palpable and, in that moment, you can't imagine anything else. Now we begin to understand how the Egyptians must have felt.

לֹא-רָאוּ אִישׁ אֶת-אָחִיו וְלֹא-קָמוּ אִישׁ מִמְּתוּחָיו שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים וְלֹכְל-בְּגֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הָיָה אֹר  
בְּמוֹשְׁבֵיהֶם:  
“People could not see one another, and for three days no one could move about; but all the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings.” (Exodus 10:23)

This plague lasts three days. Even before it is executed the text tells us it is going to last three days. Do the Egyptians know it is going to last that long or is it the uncertainty about the duration that adds to the trauma of the plague?

Yet, we still must ask about the three-day reference. No other plague came with a time frame. No other instructions talk about the length of time except for a single reference in this narrative to a request Moses initial makes.

וְשָׁמְעוּ לְקוֹלְךָ וּבֵאתָ אִתָּהּ וְזָקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-מִלְכּוֹ מִצְרַיִם וְאַמְרַתָּם אֵלָיו ה' אֱלֹהֵי הָעִבְרָיִים  
נִקְרְוָה עָלֵינוּ וְעַתָּה גִלְכֶה-נָּא דְרָדָה שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים בְּמִדְבָּר וּנְזַבְחָה לָּהּ אֱלֹהֵינוּ:

They will listen to you; then you shall go with the elders of Israel to the king of Egypt and you shall say to him, ‘יהוה’, the God of the Hebrews, became manifest to us. Now therefore, let us go a distance of three days

into the wilderness to sacrifice to our God ה'. (Exodus 3:18)

Or later we are reminded,

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה עוֹד אֶגַע אֶחָד אֲבִיא עַל־פְּרַעֲוֹה וְעַל־מִצְרָיִם אֲחֲרַיִךְ וְשָׁלַח אֶתְכֶם מִזֶּה:  
מִזֶּה כְּשֶׁלַּחְוֹ כְּלָה גֵרֶשׁ יִגְרַשׁ אֶתְכֶם מִזֶּה:

And ה' said to Moses, "I will bring but one more plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; after that he shall let you go from here; indeed, when he lets you go, he will drive you out of here one and all. (Exodus 11:1)

Amazingly, this is not the last plague. But the juxtaposition of the three-day plague of darkness with the request for three days to worship God forces us to recognize the power of darkness and the ability to overcome it with prayer or to even preempt the darkness with a practice of prayer. If we can't find the light the result is death.

There is a wonderful teaching about a strange text in Deuteronomy that adds so much to this formula.

וְהָיִיתָ מְמַשֵּׁשׁ בַּצֹּהֲרָיִם כַּאֲשֶׁר יִמְשָׁשׁ הָעוֹר בְּאֶפְלֹה וְלֹא תִצְלִיחַ אֶת־דְּרָכֶיךָ וְהָיִיתָ אֶף עָשׂוּק וְגִזְוֹל כָּל־הַיָּמִים וְאֵין מוֹשִׁיעַ:

You shall grope at noon as the blind grope in the dark; you shall not prosper in your ventures, but shall be constantly abused and robbed, with none to give help. (Deuteronomy 28:29)

The Talmud explains that for a blind man midday is the same as darkness. It is a bizarre phrase. Until a Rabbi tells a story that he was once walking in the absolute darkness of the night, and he saw a blind man who was walking with a torch in his hands. So he said to him: why do you need this torch if you are blind? He said to me: If I have a torch in my hand, people will see me and save me from the pits and the thorns and the thistles.

The message is profound. They can help each other. We can't go it alone. We each have unique gifts we must share with others. It is true individually and it is true nationally. (Megillah 24b)

As the Prophet Isaiah teaches,

וְנִתְתִיבָה לְאֹרֶךְ גּוֹיִם לְהִלּוֹת יְשׁוּעָתִי עַד־קִצְצָה הָאָרֶץ:

I will also make you a light of nations, That My salvation may reach the ends of the earth. (Isaiah 49:6)

And then again,

וְהָלְכוּ גּוֹיִם לְאוֹרְךָ וּמְלָכִים לְנֹגַהּ יְרֻחֶךָ:

And nations shall walk by your light, Kings, by your shining radiance. (Isaiah 60:3)

Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveichik in a sermon he gave in preparation for the High Holiday he spoke of Shelichut, which means being a messenger, to have a mission. In that sermon he explains that each person (and by extension each nation) was put on the earth for a purpose. The purpose of the Jewish people is to be a beacon of hope in a dark world. I have always understood it is our

superpower, to bring joy, love, and happiness where it is absent. Other nations have different purposes and together we can correct the ills in the world.

In the context of the congregation, I call on people to be personal messengers. I call on people to discover their purpose and then share it. Then I ask them to overlay it with hope, kindness and love. For example, if a person has a skill in technology, they must share that skill for the betterment of the world and then they must share it in a kind and loving way. If it is to teach, if it is with finances, if it is with law then do it with hope, kindness, and love.

There is tremendous darkness in the world be it through climate, crisis, conflict or illness. We must be the source of light.