

Glow in the Dark

Finding Hashem in the Difficult Times

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Thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to share a few words with such a wonderful group of students today. I was told that the theme of this Shabbaton is “Glowing in the Dark.” This is such a beautiful concept with incredible associative imagery and, to be honest, I really wasn’t sure which angle to approach this from—this idea of finding the light Hashem in dark times. So, I want to begin with a story. You might have heard this before, but it’s beautiful and worth retelling.

A Story of Reb Zusha and Reb Elimelech

The story is about two great Chasidic masters, Reb Zusha and Reb Elimelech of Lizensk. Anyone heard of them? The *heiligh* Reb Zusha and his older brother, Reb Elimelech—they were fascinating characters in Jewish history, traveling throughout Eastern Europe in the late 1700s, trying to find the lost sparks of Jewish souls that were meshed into the countryside and bring them back to Judaism. They would travel as nomads; nobody knew who they were. They were like undercover agents.

They ended up in one town doing their work, networking, trying to find people. Somebody reported them to the government and said, “I don’t know who these guys are, but they look kind of sketchy; no one around here recognizes them, and they’ve been seen around town chatting with folk in back alleys.” So, the government grabs them and throws them in jail. It’s the afternoon, and our two brothers wind up in a jail cell.

Now, these aren’t the jails of America in the 21st century, where you you’re served mac-and-cheese and every inmate has his own TV. This is a pit in the ground with a bucket—that’s it.

Reb Zusha and Reb Elimelech take in their surroundings, and obviously it’s not looking too great. Reb Zusha looks over at his brother and sees that Reb Elimelech is starting to cry. He asks, “Listen, I’m not too happy about this either, but what’s the cause for your tears?”

Reb Elimelech says, “Don’t you see? We’re stuck in this tiny room, it smells awful, and there’s just a bucket—and the bucket is supposed to be the lavatory, the restroom, and it’s gross! We’re not going to be able to *daven* Mincha. The sun is about to set, the time of Mincha is approaching, and we’re not going to have a chance to pray. I’m in tears—for I’ve never missed a Mincha in my life.”

Reb Zusha turns to his brother and says, “Did you just hear what you said?”

“Yeah, I said it’s time for Mincha, I can’t *daven* Mincha, and I’m upset.”

“No, no, no, listen to what you’re saying. You’re saying that you’re in a situation right now where the *halachah* is that you’re not meant to *daven* Mincha, because you can’t *daven* in this circumstance. So, in this moment, while you’re busy

not davening Mincha, you are actively *fulfilling* the will of Hashem by fulfilling the *halachah* of not *davening* Mincha in such a situation.”

“All right, Zusha, I hear your point, but I’m still pretty dejected about it.”

“No, no, Elimelech, you don’t understand! How many times in your life are you going to have the opportunity to fulfill this unique *mitzvah* of *not* being allowed to *daven* because you’re forced to be in the proximity of a bathroom which you can’t do anything about? This is such a special opportunity! We have to *dance*!”

Reb Zusha grabs his brother’s hands and they begin to dance wildly, round and round, around this filthy bucket in the middle of their jail cell. The commotion starts to spread, and the guards in the hallway come running, saying: “What is going on with these Jews?”

They go down there and see the two brothers dancing around a bucket in the middle of a jail cell. The guards rush in and say, “I don’t know what’s wrong with you guys, but this bucket is giving you way too much joy.” They grab it, they leave the cell—and Reb Elimelech begins to *daven* Mincha. So he gets to fulfill his greatest desire and celebrate that place of darkness that he was in.

I love this story because it teaches you about the ability to see the exact same scenario from two completely different angles. Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk looked at that situation and saw that he was missing everything he wanted in life—to be able to *daven* and connect to Hashem. And Reb Zusha saw that exact same situation yet was able to bring out the positive, and to see that this is a unique opportunity for a type of connection with Hashem that I would have never had the opportunity to have if I wasn’t in this situation right now.

So, the question for me is: how do we become like Reb Zusha? How do we embody that mindset where we see the positive, where we can see the light even in the darkest place?

The Darkness of Tragedy

There are two different types of darkness that I want to talk about from this perspective. One is the darkness of human tragedy: mass suffering, Holocaust, October 7th, and so on. Our Jewish nation has no shortage of difficult times, dark scenarios that we've endured. And, of course, the question has always troubled the greatest minds. No less than Moshe Rabbeinu himself asked Hashem, why is it that *tzaddik v'ra lo, rasha v'tov lo*—Why do good people suffer while the evil prosper (Berachos 7a)? Why is there so much darkness in this world?

That is an important question, and in every generation, they have a different way of grappling with that.

But one of the things that the Torah tells us about this type of darkness is best distilled in a *pasuk* in Mishlei (3:12):

”כִּי אֶת־אֲשֶׁר יֶאֱהָב ה' יוֹכִיחַ וּבָאֵב אֶת־בֶּן יִרְצֶה.”

For whom Hashem loves, He rebukes, and as a father with the son in whom he delights.

We have to understand that behind every difficulty, behind every trauma that there is for the Jewish people as a nation, is stemming from a place of love.

The Ramchal, Reb Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, is one of the great Jewish philosophers, thought leaders, *mekubalim*, who lived in the 1700s in Italy. He describes in a sefer of his called *Daas Tevunos* (138; cf. 154) about how Hashem runs the world. It's a deep sefer. But one of the things that he points out is that every act of instruction, of guidance, of discipline

that Hashem brings into the world, anytime that there is darkness, it actually stems directly from a place of love.

”קָרָא בְּתִיב (דברים ח, ה), “בְּאֲשֶׁר יִיטֵר אִישׁ אֶת בְּנוֹ ה’ אֶלְקֶיךָ מִיִּסְרָךְ,” וְהִינֵנוּ כִּי אֵין הַמוֹסֵר שֶׁהַקב”ה מִיִּסֵּר אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל מוֹסֵר נָקָם וּמַכַּת אוֹיֵב, אֲלָא מֵאַהֲבָה שֶׁהוּא אוֹהֵב אוֹתָם כָּאֵב אֶת בְּנוֹ, שֶׁכֵּן בְּתִיב (משלי יג, כד), “חוֹשֵׁף שִׁבְטוֹ שׁוֹנֵא בְנוֹ וְאַהֲבוֹ שִׁחֲרוּ מוֹסֵר,” הָרִי שֶׁהַמוֹסֵר נוֹלָד מִן הָאַהֲבָה מִמֶּשׁ...”

The verse states (Devarim 8:5): ‘As a man disciplines his son, so Hashem your God disciplines you.’ This teaches that the discipline with which the Holy One, blessed be He, chastises Israel is not a punishment of vengeance or the blow of an enemy, but rather one that comes from love — for He loves them as a father loves his son. As it is written (Mishlei 13:24): ‘He who withholds his rod hates his son, but one who loves him seeks his discipline.’ Thus, discipline truly emerges from love itself..

He quotes the *pasuk* (Devarim 8:5) where Hashem tells us that: “וְיִדְעַתָּ עִם לִבְכָּךְ כִּי בְּאֲשֶׁר יִיטֵר אִישׁ אֶת בְּנוֹ ה’ אֶלְקֶיךָ מִיִּסְרָךְ.” We must know that HaKadosh Baruch Hu only chastises in the way of a loving parent. And the key words of the Ramchal’s explanation here are: “הַמוֹסֵר נוֹלָד מִן הָאַהֲבָה מִמֶּשׁ” —every form of *mussar*, instruction or discipline that Hashem gives to the Jewish people is literally an act of love. And if it isn’t an act of love, Hashem isn’t going to do it. Hashem gives us *yissurim* from a place of love, of trying to help bring out our better potential. That isn’t always so easy to see, granted; and we still need some strategies on how to see that light in those dark places

By the way: this is true even *halachah l’ma’aseh*. As a parent, a teacher, or as any sort of mentor, there are *halachos* that pertain to how and when we give *tochachah*, rebuke. Under what circumstances are we supposed to tell a person that what they’re doing is incorrect? While these *halachos* are

substantive, one thing for our purposes is clear (see Rambam, Hilchos De'os 6:6): you can only give *mussar* to somebody and guide them if you are able to channel it directly from a place of love. If it's coming from any other place—either your own pride, your ego, or if you're embarrassed to see your student, child or friend acting in a certain way—then *tochachah* is already out of bounds. We are meant to be “וְהִלַּכְתָּ בְּדֶרֶכָיו” (Devarim 28:9) – we're supposed to walk in Hashem's ways, which means modeling ourselves after HaKadosh Baruch Hu – and, just as Hashem guides the world with love, we are meant to do the same.

The Darkness of Sadness

But there is another type of darkness I want to touch on, which is the darkness of sadness: the darkness of depression, of feeling alone, alienated and isolated. That's also a darkness of which we have no shortage: everybody in one way or another struggles with bouts of darkness in their life. Whether it's in terms of not feeling like you have people who truly understand you, people who can see you for who you truly are, or having a supportive network, or your family not 'getting' you, or just experiencing a general malaise about life—whatever the area is, everybody has areas where they feel that darkness. Finding a way to bring light into those places, or to find the glow in that darkness, is also a critical thing for us to figure out how to do.

Nobody wants to live in the dark. We don't want to live in the shadows. We want to feel the light. We may understand intellectually that God is with us, but how do we come to *experience* that?

Finding the Pearl in the Depths

There are many beautiful teachings about this, particularly amongst the Chasidic masters across recent

centuries. We'll just scratch the surface in our time together today. Consider, for example, the words of Rebbi Nachman of Breslov (Likutei Moharan II:78):

”וְהִבָּלָל, כִּי אָסוּר לֵיָאֵשׁ עֲצָמוֹ.... וְאִפְלוּ מִי שְׁהוּא, חֵס וְשְׁלוֹם, בְּמִדְרָגָה
הַתַּחְתּוֹנָה לְגַמְרִי, חֵס וְשְׁלוֹם, רַחֲמָנָא לְצִלָּן, אִפְלוּ אִם מָנַח בְּשִׂאוֹל
תַּחְתּוֹנִיּוֹת, רַחֲמָנָא לְצִלָּן, אִף־עַל־פִּי־כֵן אֵל יִתְיָאֵשׁ עֲצָמוֹ, וְיִקְיָם: מְבֻטָּן
שִׂאוֹל שְׁוַעְתִּי (יוֹנָה ב':ג'), וְיַחְזִיק עֲצָמוֹ בְּמָה שְׁיֻכַּל, כִּי גַם הוּא יִכּוֹל
לְחֻזֹּר וּלְשׁוּב וּלְקַבֵּל חַיּוֹת מִהַתּוֹרָה עַל־יְדֵי הַצָּדִיק הַגָּדוֹל.”

The general principle is that one is forbidden to despair of oneself... Even one who is, Heaven forbid, on the very lowest level — Heaven forbid, may the Merciful One protect us — even if he finds himself placed in the lowest depths of Sheol, Heaven forbid, nevertheless he must not despair of himself. Rather, he should fulfill what is written: ‘From the belly of the depths I cried out’ (Yonah 2:3), and strengthen himself in whatever way he is able. For even he is able to return and repent, and to receive renewed vitality from the Torah, through the righteous one mentioned above.

One way to begin is to think: why are we in dark situations in the first place? Yes, I understand that even the darkness is coming from God's love. But still, I don't know—when I think about the people that I love, I don't think: *how can I put them into darkness? How can I make things more miserable or more depressing for them?* In other words: What are we meant to be *doing* in this dark situation? At the end of the day, is this just a ticking clock trying to wait how much time we can endure the darkness before we can see the light? Or is there something I'm supposed to *accomplish* when I find myself in dark places?

There's a beautiful teaching which means a lot to me that I found in the writings of Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook zt”l. Rav Kook was the chief rabbi of pre-state Israel; he passed away in 1935. He was a Latvian

mekubal, a massive genius and master of Jewish thought born who ultimately moved to Israel.

On an aside: People like to assign labels and boxes on people. Rav Kook is often thought about as a Zionist rabbi or something of that nature, though he passed away before the Zionist movement ever came to any major prominence. In fact, Rav Kook really didn't write much about Israel at all during the first half of his life. Even once arriving in Eretz Yisrael, his literary output encompassed far more than most people can fathom: *halacha*, *aggadah*, contemporary issues, and the inner life.

Rav Kook was a prolific writer, and he kept very detailed spiritual diaries for decades. During his lifetime, excerpts of these journals were arranged and published into multiple volumes. But decades after he passed away, the complete diaries were published. In truth, he indicates in the journals that he somewhat intended that to happen. Nonetheless, often Rav Kook is very personal and raw in these entries. He expresses a lot of his own feelings, the struggles that his soul endured, the periods of darkness he traversed – and, always, how Torah forms an illuminating lens for navigating life's complexities. It's really remarkable to be able to read the thoughts of a world-class giant like Rav Kook.

Rav Kook writes the following (Shemonah Kevatzim 8:104):

”בַּעֲת אֲשֶׁר יִרְגִישׁ הָאָדָם נְפִילָה, מִפְּנֵי חֲלָשֶׁת רוּחַ וְהִמְעָדָה מוֹסְרִית, יֵשִׁים אֶל לְבוֹ שֶׁמֶמְעַמְקֵי הַתְּהוֹמִים הוּא צָרִיךְ לְדַלּוֹת מְרָגְלִיּוֹת יָקָרוֹת, וַיָּשׁוּב וַיַּעֲלֶה, וַיַּחֲדֹשׁ כְּחוֹ בְּגִבּוּרָה וְשִׁלּוֹה, לְאוֹר עוֹלָם, עוֹד בִּיתֵר שְׂאֵת מִיָּמֵי קֶדֶם. וְכֵן הוּא הָדִין בְּדוֹר שְׁלָם, וּבִתְקוּפָה עוֹלָמִית.”

At a time when a person feels a descent, due to weakness of spirit or a moral stumbling, let him take to heart that from the depths of the abyss he is meant to draw up precious pearls. Then he shall

*rise again, renewing his strength with might and tranquility,
toward the eternal light—greater than ever before.*

Sometimes a person feels crestfallen. We feel a lowness, a negativity, a certain bitter energy overcoming us. Says Rav Kook: “יְשִׁים אֶל לְבוּ שְׂמִמָּעֲמָקֵי הַתְּהוֹמִים הוּא צָרִיךְ לְדַלּוֹת מִרְגְּלִיּוֹת” —you have to imagine yourself in those moments as a deep sea diver who’s descending to the darkest places where the sun’s rays cannot reach, in order to retrieve the most valuable, most precious pearls that the human eye has yet to perceive. It is only in those places where you can draw out those precious jewels to bring them back up to the light of the surface. “וַיָּשׁוּב וַיַּעֲלֶה, וַיַּחֲדֹשׁ כְּחוֹ בְּגִבּוֹרָה וְשִׁלּוּה, לְאוֹר עוֹלָם” —you can then ascend, bringing pearls back up to the world with you, and renew the vitality of your life with a whole new level of vigor.

Rav Kook explains that the point of being in those dark places is not just to suffer. It’s not just to test your endurance. It’s not to see how faithful or how true you can be to the cause when things get tough. There *is* something for you to accomplish down there. There’s something for you to *find*. There’s some precious gem that you never would have found in any other place. Ever heard the saying, “no pain, no gain”? If you’re exercising and you’re not feeling the burn—if you’re not sweating or feeling that you’re exerting yourself to the limit—then you’re not really walking away with any real growth at the end of it.

Rav Kook is explaining that even when we are in a low emotional place, when we’re feeling down or negative about ourselves, there is something in that place, some lesson we can learn. There’s some new reservoir of energy, of hope and of a deeper self-understanding that you can tap into there that you’ll never be able to tap into somewhere else.

This is something that people who go through traumas—and none of us should ever have to go through anything too difficult, or difficult at all for that matter—but people who go through really tough life situations: losses of family members, intense personal harm, loss of all of their family fortunes, or other major calamities in life, find themselves at a place where you can only move upwards from there. And that somehow brings out this level of potential that from within yourself that you might not have ever uncovered—or a skill, or an interpersonal relationship that you have that you never would have been able to tap into—had you not been in that low place.

Of course, it's easier said than done. And we should never be afraid of working through our issues as individuals, or working with mentors and guides, when we ever have such a situation in life—to find out: how can I draw out the precious gem from this struggle? So, this is an important framing for those moments. When we find ourselves in those dark places, where either emotionally, personally, or collectively as a nation, we have to understand: *there's something to accomplish here.*

The Gemara tells us that this is true about why the Jewish people are in *galus* in the first place. Of course, there are many reasons found in the Gemara as to why we're in *galus*. But it's certainly not just to pass the time. We're here to accomplish something!

One explanation the Gemara says (Sanhedrin 97b) is that we're here to do *Teshuva* and repair our ways. “וְשִׁבְתָּ עַד” —we're here, going through what we are going through, so that Klal Yisrael will wake up! When will we finally realize we're not where we're meant to be? We're not living the life that we're supposed to live. We're not in the place that we're supposed to be.

Another explanation the Gemara says (Pesachim 87b) is “כְּדֵי שְׂתוּסְפוּ עֲלֵיהֶם גְּרִים”—so that we can gather up all the lost sparks of Jews who have been assimilated throughout the thousands of years, bring back our people to the nation of Israel within the proper halachic framework, and reunite the Jewish people together with our lost brothers and sisters.

I only bring these teachings to illustrate the point: we’re not just here to pass the time. If we’re in a dark place—as a community, as a nation, or as individuals—we’re there to accomplish something. There is some precious diamond that we’re supposed to draw forth from that place.

Manifesting Light While in Darkness

There is another important way of dealing with the darkness. We find this idea applied by many of the great Jewish leaders: the idea of living in the darkness *as if* the light is already there, even though you can’t yet see it.

Rashi makes an amazing comment in his commentary to Tehillim (18:4). I actually just learned this a couple weeks ago—and it changed my life. Dovid HaMelech writes:

”מְהֵלֶל אֶקְרָא ה' וּמִן-אֹיְבֵי אֲנִישֶׁע.”

I call out in praise to You, Hashem, and from my enemies I will be saved.

Rashi is bothered that the verse seems to be out of order. I would expect Dovid to say: “Hashem, You saved me from my enemies, and then I praised You.” Instead, he first says, “*I call out in praise to You, Hashem,*” and only then writes “*and from my enemies I will be saved.*”

To explain this *pasuk*, Rashi says something unbelievable. Dovid HaMelech would write some of his songs praising Hashem *before* he was actually saved! While he was running away for his life from Shaul HaMelech,

hiding out in Gat, escaping his son Avshalom's treasonous rebellion—and Dovid is praising Hashem for the redemption which *hasn't yet happened*. "Thank You for saving me from this darkness", said Dovid—even though he was still in the darkness. Rashi's words:

"אף לפני התשועה אני מהללו לפי שאני בטוח שאנשע מאויבי."

Even before I was saved from my enemies, I already start to praise Hashem – for I trust that I will be saved from my enemies.

To me, this is an unbelievable concept. It changes your whole life! If you can be in a difficult situation and already be thanking Hashem for the salvation that's going to come right around the corner—wow! I mean, you don't even know what that salvation looks like yet! You know, hindsight is 20/20. We know that Dovid HaMelech is saved at the end of the day. We know he's able to kill Goliath. We know that he ends up becoming the king of the Jewish people. But *he* didn't know that in the way that we do! He had *bitachon*. And his *bitachon* was so prominent that he was able to manifest that freedom. He was able to manifest that light "עד שתהא ער שלהבת עולה מאליה" – until the flame of redemption burst forth on its own from within (cf. Rashi to Bamidbar 8:2). He brought it out of himself in the moment, even while he was still in the throes of suffering.

This may sound like something beyond our ability, but it really is within reach for each of us.

We find the same clarity by the *Nashim Tzidkaniyos*, the righteous Jewish women at the time of the Exodus. We know that after *Krias Yam Suf*, Klal Yisrael breaks out in song, and then Miriam leads the women in a song:

"ותקח מרים הנביאה אחות אהרן את התוף בידה ותצאנה כל הנשים אחריה בתפים ובמחלות. ותען להם מרים שירו לה' כי גאה גאה סוס ורכבו רמה בים."

And Miriam the prophetess, sister of Aharon, took the timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. And Miriam called out to them: 'Sing to Hashem, for He is exalted beyond all; horse and rider He has cast into the sea.'

Rashi on the spot (Shemos 15:20) cites the Midrash (Mechilta D'Rabbi Yishmael) which wonders: where did Miriam and all the Jewish women get musical instruments from? Explains Rashi:

”מִבְּטָחוֹת הָיָו צִדְקָנִיּוֹת שְׂבָדוֹר שְׁהֶקֶב”ה עוֹשָׂה לָהֶם נִסִּים וְהוֹצִיאוּ תַפִּים מִמִּצְרַיִם.”

The righteous women in that generation were confident that God would perform miracles for them and they accordingly had brought timbrels with them from Egypt.

The righteous women of that generation knew that HaKadosh Baruch Hu was going to do miracles for them—so they brought their musical instruments along with them when they left Egypt. They had such clarity about the immanence of the redemption, that they were already prepared to sing thanks to HaKadosh Baruch Hu, even while they were suffering in the darkness of Egypt!

So this ability to live in a future state while you're still stuck in a dark present is a transformative way of living your life. Because if you can get out of the stuckness—out of the muck and the mire of the current moment—and realize that there is a life beyond this moment, then entire new worlds open up before you.

I'll admit it: sometimes it's very hard to see. I'm not saying that this is an easy thing to do. A lot of times when we're feeling depressed, down, and negative, it's very hard to imagine what tomorrow feels like – let alone five years down the road, when this moment is the least significant thing of your entire high school career. This moment where

you're feeling embarrassed, unworthy, or whatever it is—in five years from now, it's hardly a blip on the map. It has nothing to do with anything. But it can be hard to see that from the present.

But we can work on expanding our horizons to think differently. We can try to train ourselves to open ourselves to the possibility of imagining: what is this moment going to feel like to me in five years from now? What is it going to mean to me in ten years from now?—and to begin to feel like I already can live a life where I'm unchained, I'm unrestricted by this moment, even right now. The same way Dovid HaMelech was able to, the same way Miriam and all the righteous women of that generation were able to bring their musical instruments to sing songs to HaKadosh Baruch Hu while they were still enslaved, ready to go, living in that future mindset—we can do that as well. And that changes the entire game.

The Light of Darkness Itself

With your permission, I want to take us a little bit deeper. Until now, we've discussed finding that glow in the dark. We've been looking for ways to uncover the presence of Hashem even while we're in the throes of darkness, to recognize that Hashem loves us and that's why where this difficulty stems from; to recognize there is a purpose to our pain—and ultimately, to draw out some precious gem from the darkness, and to sense the salvation even while we're in that difficult place.

But there's one deeper layer for us to explore, which requires flipping the entire script on its head.

Typically, we think about darkness as the absence of God's presence, and light as Hashem shining His countenance and presence upon us. And that obviously speaks to our experiences. In darkness, you can't see; in

light, you can. So, we kind of associate Hashem with light. After all: Hashem creates the world, and He creates light. We know that storyline, we know that metaphor. The Kabbalists use it, too, when speaking about the אור אין סוף, *the Light of the Limitless One*.

However, there's a fascinating theme we find throughout Tanach about the place of the *greatest* presence of HaKadosh Baruch Hu's influence. There are two places that are connected: Har Sinai, the place of Hashem's greatest revelation, and Har HaBayis, the place of Hashem's most enduring revelation in the Beis HaMikdash. Regarding both of these places, the Torah uses a very interesting word to describe the most dense, the most compact essence of Hashem's presence being there. That word is "עֲרַפֶּל", *Arafel*—a dark cloud!

Surprising, isn't it? Dark clouds are our go-to metaphor for feeling sad and depressed. We will say things like, "She's walking around with dark clouds over her head"—that means she's in a terrible mood. It's not sunny and beautiful outside with birds chirping: it's dark and cloudy. Dark clouds imply that it's dull, somber and not so happy out right now. That's dark clouds in our vernacular.

And yet, we find that when Hashem's presence descended on Har Sinai, the Torah describes (Shemos 20:18) how there was an *Arafel*—a deep, dark cloud that was represented there at the apex of the mountain.

"וַיַּעַמְדוּ הָעָם מֵרָחוֹק וּמֹשֶׁה נִגַּשׁ אֶל־הָעֲרַפֶּל אֲשֶׁר־שָׁם הָאֱלֹהִים."

And the people stood from afar, and Moshe approached the Arafel where God was.

Similarly, when Shlomo HaMelech builds the first Beis HaMikdash, the *pasuk* (Melachim I 8:12) records Shlomo's

beautiful tefillah he uttered at the inauguration ceremony. And the *pasuk* says:

”אָז אָמַר שְׁלֹמֹה ד' אָמַר לִשְׁכֵּן בְּעֶרְפֶּל.”

Then Shlomo said: Hashem said, 'I will dwell in the Arafel.'

Isn't that remarkable? The *very word* that means dark, depressing clouds hanging over your head is the same word that indicates the place where Hashem's presence is most found.

Yet again, we find another *pasuk* bearing the same message. Dovid HaMelech writes (Tehillim 97:2) about the potency of being in Hashem's presence. When you go up to *Shamayim* and you get closer to the place where Hashem, *k'viyachol*, is most palpable, Dovid proclaims:

”עָנָן וְעֶרְפֶּל סְבִיבוֹ צֶדֶק וּמִשְׁפָּט מְכֹן בְּסֻאוֹ.”

Clouds and dark clouds surround Him; righteousness and justice set His throne.

There are dark clouds surrounding Hashem? I don't understand, where is our misalignment? How can we make sense of this *Arafel*?

Here is where we need to flip the script. The Chasidic masters point out that the word *הָעֶרְפֶּל*, the *Arafel* is the same *gematria*, numerical value as *שְׁכִינָה*, the Divine Presence – 385. The truth is that darkness is actually an indication of *how close* HaKadosh Baruch Hu is. The place where there's the greatest darkness is the place where God is *most* to be found. The darker the place is, the more an expression of how connected Hashem is to that place.

The prophet Yeshaya describes (Yeshaya 57:15) how HaKadosh Baruch Hu rests His presence amidst the lowliest of spirits:

”כִּי כֹה אָמַר יְיָ וְנִשְׂא שֵׁכֶן עַד וְקָדוֹשׁ שְׁמוֹ מְרוֹם וְקָדוֹשׁ אֲשֶׁכּוֹן וְאֵת־
דָּבָא וּשְׁפַל־רוּחַ לְהַחְיֹת רוּחַ שְׁפָלִים וּלְהַחְיֹת לֵב נִדְבָּאִים.”

For thus says the High and Exalted One, Who dwells forever, and whose Name is holy: ‘I dwell on high and in sanctity — yet also with the crushed and lowly of spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the crushed.’

Chazal tell us that Hashem resides specifically with the downtrodden. HaKadosh Baruch Hu dwells with the those of trampled spirits, those who don’t have strong support systems, and with people who are in a lowly place in life—that is where HaKadosh Baruch Hu is found.

When Eliyahu HaNavi awaited Hashem’s revelation, he knew it was immanent not when wind shattered mountains or when the earth shook, but when he heard the “קוֹל דְּמָמָה” – a still, thin voice (Melachim I 19:12). Hashem’s greatest presence is can be heard in the quietest moment (see Berachos 58a).

The Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 19:7) says, “עֶקֶר שְׁכִינָה” – *the primary residence of the Shechinah is in the lower realms*. The Gemara (Megillah 29a) teaches:

”בּוֹא וּרְאֵה בָּמָה חֲבִיבִין יִשְׂרָאֵל לִפְנֵי הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא: שֶׁבָּכְל מָקוֹם
שָׁגְלוּ, שְׁכִינָה עִמָּהֶן.”

Come and see, how precious is Israel before the Holy One: For, every place they were exiled, the Divine Presence went with them.

Rebbe Nosson of Breslov explains (Likutei Halachos, Hilchos Tefillah 1) that it is specifically at night, in the dark times, when a person is in tears, that they suddenly find themselves in a face-to-face audience with Hashem:

”הַשְּׁכִינָה הִיא סְמוּכָה לְהָאָדָם הַלַּיְלָה וּמִקְשָׁבָת לְקוּלוֹ, כִּמוֹ
שְׁכָתוֹב (אֵיכָה ב) ‘קוּמִי רֵנִי בַּלַּיְלָה לְרֹאשׁ אֲשֶׁמּוּרוֹת שְׁכָכִי בַּמָּיִם לִבֶּן

נוֹכַח פְּנֵי ה' – 'נוֹכַח פְּנֵי ה' דִּיקָא, כִּי הַשְׁכִּינָה קְרוֹבָה אֵלָיו וְהוּא נֹכַח
פְּנֵי ה' מְמַשׁ, כִּי בְלִילָה הַשְׁכִּינָה הִיא בְּעוֹלָמוֹת הַתַּחְתּוֹנִים.

The Shechinah is close to one who studies at night and she listens to his voice, as it says (Eicha 2): 'Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the watches; pour out your heart like water before the face of Hashem.' 'Before the face of Hashem' — precisely so, for the Shechinah is close to him, and he truly stands before the face of Hashem. For at night, the Shechinah is found within the lower worlds.

For me, this flips the whole script. Because instead of saying, “Where can we find a little bit of light in the darkness?”, this approach says: the dark places *themselves* are the very places that I can be most close to HaKadosh Baruch Hu. It's specifically in those dark places that I can connect with Hashem the most.

How is it that I can connect to Hashem *most* in those moments? After all, those moments usually make me feel the most alienated: more distant from myself, from my family, from Hashem. How can the place of darkness, the place where I can't see, be the place where I can connect to Hashem more? It sounds like a contradiction – but that's the pattern we're seeing emerge here. How do we connect with this?

Pre-Creation: The Infinite in the Dark

On one level, we can explain this by pivoting our thought to a Shabbos concept for a moment. Consider this: Hashem begins creating with the creation of light. Inasmuch as Hashem is creating light, we get to know Him through that light – but we're also getting a *limited* understanding of who Hashem is, right? Because Hashem is far more than what He creates. HaKadosh Baruch Hu is infinite. As He creates a world, as He creates a finite

existence, He's also limiting or filtering out the infinite essence of who He is to give us one limited yet accessible perspective of Him—what the Kabbalists call *tzimtzum*. For six days, HaKadosh Baruch Hu creates—and on the seventh day, HaKadosh Baruch Hu rests and sanctifies the seventh day. And, on the seventh day, Hashem's presence is greater manifest amongst us.

So, consider this: shouldn't it be the other way around? If Hashem is actively working on creating the world for six days, and then He stops working on the seventh day, shouldn't that make Shabbos a time when we know *less* of Hashem? After all, He isn't doing anything to make Himself known! Imagine you're having an animated conversation with your friends and they're getting to know you and your personality during that conversation. If, all of a sudden, you go mute and you cover your face and stop interacting—then your friends are no longer getting to know you in that moment. So, in what way is Shabbos a time of Hashem's greater revelation, if He is less expressive on that day?

But the truth is that the analogy I gave only holds up when it comes to us finite beings. When it comes to Hashem, *less* is *more*. As Dovid HaMelech wrote (Tehillim 65:2), “לֵךְ דְּמִיָּה תְהִלָּה” —*for You Hashem, silence is praise*; for, any words that we use in our attempt to describe Hashem's greatness are simply a limitation (see also Berachos 33b). In the same way, when Hashem begins to create the world, that first creation of light itself is a limitation. Because to say that Hashem's presence is shining over here is to say that He's not found, *chas v'shalom*, somewhere else.

So, inasmuch as Hashem creates the world with light, light in a sense expresses the notion that yes, Hashem is interacting, but there's also now some limitation to how you can get to know Him.

But the pre-creation space is a space of darkness. “וְהָאָרֶץ
הָיְתָה תוֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ וְחָשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם” – *and the world was
astonishingly empty, and darkness upon the depth* (Bereishis 1:2).
That’s the place where Hashem hasn’t yet reduced the scope
of His expression of how we can get to know Him. There, in
the darkness, you can know Him in His fullness. You are
with His infinite essence. That is the type of Godliness that’s
accessible in a place of darkness.

That’s why Har Sinai, Har HaBayis, and the Shechinah
are all referred to as *Arafel*. Because it is the very places
where Hashem’s presence is most palpable, where there’s no
room for any light. There’s no room for any of the finite
creations that Hashem made. There is nothing but God
Himself in that place of darkness.

Dark Clouds as Blessing

In our culture, where we live in a post-industrial
revolution world, dark rainy clouds are associated with
unhappiness, because it makes it harder to go outside and
enjoy. But if you look at earlier civilization, or you look at
third world countries even today—you can see how, when it
starts to rain, people are thrilled. They’re jumping for joy
and dancing in the streets, because rain is a sign of blessing.

So those darkest of clouds are actually the symbol of the
greatest blessing that could be coming into your life. Those
thin, wispy white clouds have nothing to offer you: there’s
no *hashpa’ah*, no flow. But when you have those nice, *gezunt*
dark clouds that come rolling into the sky, that’s when you
know that the *shefa* from Hashem is really going to be
coming through. The darker the cloud—the greater the
downpour of blessing.

So it comes out that the darker the place is, the more precious those pearls are to be able to be found there, and the more palpable Hashem's presence can actually be.

The Story of Jacques Stroumsa

I came across an amazing story about a Jew in the Holocaust that truly illustrates this idea.

Jacques Stroumsa, a Greek Jew from Thessaloniki, was a talented electrical engineer and accomplished violinist when he was deported to Auschwitz in 1943. Upon arrival, as prisoners were being sorted for immediate death or slave labor, a Nazi officer asked if anyone was a musician. Though terrified, Jacques stepped forward.

You might be familiar that when the Nazis would let in Jews into the camps, a lot of times they would ask them: do you play an instrument? Because one of the coping mechanisms that the Nazis had established to be able to live with themselves after murdering people all day was to play music and get drunk the whole night so that they could get up and do it all over again. So they actually had these large dining halls on the German side of the camps where the soldiers would feast and so forth, and they would have Jewish prisoners come and play music for them – which, you can imagine, is perhaps the worst psychological torture. So, Jacques admitted that he was a violinist, and they drafted him to play in the music in the dinner halls. That's how he survived the war.

One freezing winter day, Jacques was walking through the camp when he saw an SS guard brutally beating an elderly prisoner who had collapsed from exhaustion. Without thinking, Jacques began humming a niggun—a wordless Jewish spiritual melody—just loudly enough for the fallen man to hear.

The elderly man's eyes found Jacques', and something passed between them. The man began to mouth the melody along with Jacques. The guard, irritated by this unexpected moment of humanity, struck Jacques and ordered him away.

That night in the barracks, Jacques was approached by the elderly man, who had somehow survived the day. The man whispered, "How did you know that niggun? It was my grandfather's melody, one he composed for moments of deepest sorrow."

Jacques reflected on this in an interview, and he said the following words:

"In that moment," Jacques later recalled, "I understood that even in Auschwitz, where humanity was stripped away layer by layer, Hashem preserved these invisible threads between us. Our tradition and melodies carried divine sparks that even the Nazis couldn't extinguish."

I found this story so moving because it reveals this idea that specifically in the darkest place—the most horrific, unimaginable thing none of us should ever have to dream of—that this incredible connection that every single Jew has to one another became revealed; such that a song which nobody else in the world would know except for this other individual could be revealed in the heart of Jacques and bring this fellow back from the brink to life. It was specifically from that darkest place that a song of sorrow could issue forth – and ultimately save a man's life.

This is such a critical way of thinking about dark times. Trying to see the glow of the darkness *itself* means not merely reframing our struggle towards a hidden solution but actually revealing that it's the very darkness itself where we connect most to HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

The Power of Emunah in Darkness

I want to close with one more idea, a teaching from the great Komarna Rebbe, Rabbi Yitzchak Eizik Yehuda Yechiel Safrin, from one of his *seforim* called *Nesiv Mitzvosecha* (*Nesiv HaEmunah*, Shevil 1:6). The Komarna Rebbe describes the experience where a person can be on the lowest level and feel completely disassociated from Hashem's light. He writes as follows:

דע אחי, שגם בני עליה אי אפשר להם שיעמדו במדרגה אחת, כי 'החיות רצוא ושוב' (יחזקאל א, יד), ומסתלקין המוחין והאור והחיות והדבקות, וכל אחד מ'ישראל' לפום דרגא דליה יש לו עליה וירידה, ובפרט מי שעדין לא טהר נפשו מזהמת הנפש, ורוצה לעבד השם בפרישות מתענוגי עולם הזה, כנצרך לנפש ישראל בהתחלות עבודה, שיפריש עצמו מכל וכל משום הנאות של עולם הזה, ומצוי הוא שמתגרה בו היצר ומפיל עליו עצבות ומרה שחרה, עד שממטמטם לבו באבן ואינו יכול לפתח לשום דבר קדשה, וטועם בזה כמעט טעם מיתה, וכן הוא לעתים רחוקים אף לגדולי ישראל.

עצה היעוצה: שלא ליאש עצמו, ויקים צפית לישועה, כי כמו שיש גאלה כללית בימות המשיח "יהי אור ויהי אור" ומקודם ביאתו מתגברין החשך והיסורין, בן הוא לכל אדם פרטי שמקדם התגלות הגאלה קרבה אל נפשי גאלה, וכן קדם שבת יום טוב מתגברין החשכות וחלישות דעת ובטול, עד שנחשב בעיני עצמו בזוי ונבזה נמאס, וסובר שאין לו חלק לא בעולם הזה ולא בעולם הבא חלילה.

ובזכות האמונה שאינו מיאש עצמו, ומאמין ויודע שגם בהסתרה ובחשך זה שם כבוד אלהותו יתברך, אלא שהוא בהסתרה גדולה, ויקים וחיבתי לה' המסתיר פניו מבית יעקב, כי הוא הנותן לב להבין ולדעת כי בכל המדרגות אינו נפרד חלילה ממנו יתברך, אלא שהוא בהסתרה ואז עושה יחוד וכו', ופתאום יבוא האדון, וברגע יבוא לו גאלה ואור וחיות, עד שיכול להתבטל ממציאות, וכל זה על ידי אמונה שמאמין ומצפה לישועה, ויודע שגם שם בחשכות השם יתברך אתו, עם ובזכות אמונה יגאל ויצא מחשך לאור, וזהו מצות עשה 'אנכי ה' אלוקיך אשר

הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם דִּיקָא מִמְקוֹר הַטְּמָאָה גַם שֶׁם הָיָה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ
עִמָּךְ, וּבִרְגַע בָּא לָךְ אוֹר הַגָּאֻלָּה.

In short, says the Komarna Rebbe: Just as the collective redemption from Egypt was preceded by the harshest period of slavery, and just as every Erev Shabbos brings an intensification of confusion, difficulty, and doubt right before the light of Shabbos descends, so too each individual experiences this pattern in their own life. The darkest moments—when a person feels utterly cut off, when the heart feels like stone—these are often the very threshold of redemption.

And what is the key that unlocks the door? *Emunah*. Not just a belief that the darkness will eventually end, but the recognition that even now, even in this moment of total concealment, Hashem's presence is here. When a person knows—truly knows—that “גַּם בְּהִסְתָּרָה וּבְחֹשֶׁךְ זֶה שֵׁם כְּבוֹד” — *even in the hiddenness and darkness, there Hashem's glory is with him*, then suddenly, in an instant, the light breaks through. These words echo the famous words of personal prayer that Rebbe Nachman of Breslov uttered (Likutei Tefillos 1:57):

”נִזְכָּה לְדַעַת שְׂאֵתָה נִמְצָא תָּמִיד בְּכָל זְמַן וּבְכָל אָדָם וּבְכָל מְקוֹם, וְאִפְלוּ
בְּתִקְוַת הַהִסְתָּרָה שְׁבִתוֹךְ הַסְתָּרָה גַּם שֵׁם אֵתָה נִמְצָא, כִּי אֵתָה בְּעֶצְמָךְ
נִסְתָּר בְּתוֹךְ כָּל הַהִסְתָּרוֹת שְׁבָעוּלָם, וְאִפְלוּ בְּהִסְתָּרָה שְׁבִתוֹךְ הַסְתָּרָה,
וְאִפְלוּ בְּאִלְפֵי אֱלָפִים וְרַבֵּי רַבּוֹת הַסְתָּרוֹת עַד אֵין קֵץ, גַּם שֵׁם אֵתָה
נִמְצָא, כִּי לִית אֵתָר פְּנוּי מִנֶּךָ.”

May we merit to know that You are always present — at every moment, within every person, and in every place. And even within the most intense concealment, within concealment itself, You are there as well. For You Yourself are hidden within all the concealments of the world — even within concealment inside concealment, and even within thousands upon thousands and

*myriads upon myriads of concealments without end — even there,
You are present. For there is no place devoid of You.*

And the Komarna Rebbe explains that this is the inner meaning of “I am Hashem your God who took you out of Egypt”: even in *Mitzrayim* itself, the source of impurity, Hashem was already with us.

We need to realize that we each have our own *Yetzias Mitzrayim* moments in our life: times where we must leave the *meitzarim*, the confinements and constrictions of darkness and difficulty. The *koach* that we need to tap into in those moments is that very *koach* that Jacques was able to channel, which is the same *koach* the *Nashim Tzidkaniyos* channeled. The Komarna Rebbe describes this *koach* as being the *zechus* of *emunah*—to believe with this rock-solid faith that it is indeed the case, that in those moments of darkness, we can connect to HaKadosh Baruch Hu in this way.

You know, the Klausenberger Rebbe was a legendary Jewish leader of the 20th century and is also one of my personal heroes. The Klausenberger Rebbe is probably best known for his superhuman heroism both during and after the Holocaust. He was one of the rebbes about whom they tell stories how he kept *kosher* in the camps, didn’t work on Shabbos in Auschwitz, gave shiurim in the bunkers, and so forth. It’s mind-boggling to imagine how he was able to pull off any of the things that he did during those crushing years.

Two quick anecdotal stories, just to illustrate the type of tzaddik he was: when the Americans liberated Auschwitz, the soldiers were shocked to find the emaciated state of the Jewish inmates. The American troops threw open the food supplies, and the newly-freed Jews stumbled their way towards the piles of rations. Sadly, due to their famished figures, many overate and became deathly ill as a result. But

the Klausenberger Rebbe screams everyone to a halt and says, “Chevra, we’re free now. Don’t forget, we’re Jews! We have to keep *kosher* now. Any exemptions that we’re in play beforehand are now off the table. We must all begin to thrive as Jews once again!” The Rebbe then proceeded to the front of the line and said, “We’re Jewish, and we require *kosher* food.” Within days, *kosher* soup kitchens were running, chadarim had been opened, and the Rebbe was running from DP camp to DP camp making shidduchim and building Jewish life anew. Meanwhile, he was mourning the loss of his wife and eleven children. But that’s the type of mindset that he had.

Another quick anecdote from that same liberation day: as everyone was swarming towards the food, the Klausenberger Rebbe approached one of the guards and asked, “Can you please open the gate to the camp? I need to leave the camp immediately.”

The officers were caught off-guard. “All the food, medical supplies, and resources are right here. We don’t want you to go wandering off anywhere. We’re going to transport you all to a secure location.”

The Rebbe replies, “You don’t understand. There’s a river, the Sola river, just beyond the gates of the camp, and I’ve been staring at that river for the last six months, thinking: when will I have the opportunity to dive into that river, to purify myself in that pristine *mikvah*, and to make a *shehakol* on that pure, clean water? Please, I’m begging you, I need to be there!”

They opened the gate for him and he dashed forward, throwing himself into the cool waters. Years later, he would say: “Never in my life did I ever make a *shehakol* like the *shehakol* I said on that water.” That’s the type of person we’re talking about.

So, here's the main story I wanted to share, and we will end with this. The Klausenberger Rebbe spent Yom Kippur of 1944 in Auschwitz, and so of course he led a small minyan despite the severe consequences should they be caught. As they reached the section of the *tefillos* about the Asara Harugei Malchus, the ten great martyrs of Jewish history, someone cries out: "Rebbe, how can you possibly still believe? How can you possibly refer to Hashem as *Avinu Malkein*, our loving father? Where is Hashem in this hell?"

The Klausenberger Rebbe turned to him without missing a beat and he said:

"If Hashem wasn't here with us in this darkness, none of us would have the strength to continue for even one day. It is precisely in this place of ultimate darkness that His presence sustains us, even when we cannot see it."

In other words: It's the very fact that you're troubled by that question that shows that you, too, believe! Because, if you didn't believe that there was a meaning and a plan to this life, you would simply throw up your hands in despair. The very fact that you're bothered—that you're asking the question, 'Where is Hashem here?'—means that you *know* and you're certain that He *can* and *must* be found in this situation. Therefore, take that very frustration that you have and turn it around, and as the angel told Gidon (Shoftim 6:14), "לֵךְ בַּכְּחָךְ זֶה יְהוָה שֹׁעֵת אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל"—take that very passion that you have, that frustration, that search for meaning, realize that it's rooted in the deepest *emunah* burning in the heart of every single Jew, and use it to save Klal Yisrael.

Even Darkness Is Not Dark From You

So, this is what we need to try and accomplish for ourselves. Even when we feel HaKadosh Baruch Hu is absent from our side, we must realize that the feeling of

struggling with the distance *itself* indicates how close Hashem is to us.

Dovid HaMelech writes in Tehillim (139:12):

”גַּם חֹשֶׁךְ לֹא יַחְשִׁיךְ מִמֶּנִּי וְלַיְלָה כִּיּוֹם יֵאִיר בְּחֹשֶׁכָּה בְּאוֹרָה.”

Even the darkness is not dark for You, and the night shines like the day; darkness and light are alike.

The *pshat* commentators translate these words to mean: even the darkness is not dark for You, Hashem. But perhaps we can offer a beautiful twist on the *pasuk* (cf. Tanya Ch. 46), and we will close with this: “גַּם חֹשֶׁךְ לֹא יַחְשִׁיךְ מִמֶּנִּי” – *even the darkness isn’t dark —when it’s from You.*

So long as I know that the darkness is from You, Hashem, then I know that this is not a real darkness. It’s not a darkness of negativity, nor one of distance. It’s a darkness where Your presence is so palpable, where You are so accessible to me, that it overshadows the existence of any limited light. Therefore, even that darkness isn’t dark to me, since I know “מִמֶּנִּי”, that *it’s from You.*

So, my friends: I hope these thoughts could strengthen all of us as we’re dealing with our dark times and situations, both as a nation and as individuals, and help us find a way to see Hashem’s glow in the dark. *B’ezeras Hashem*, we should be *zocheh* to actualize each of our own potential, to see the Jewish people come into light once again, and to see the Beis HaMikdash descend in a fiery light to greet a world flooded with the light of Hashem, very soon in our days.

Thank you.