Too Dark to See

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In this week's Torah Portion, Parashat Bo, God sends the eighth and ninth plagues, locusts and darkness upon the Egyptian people. But Pharaoh still refuses to free the Israelite slaves. God tells Moses that the 10th plague will be killing all the firstborn Egyptians. God commands each Israelite home to slaughter a lamb and spread the blood on their doorposts, in order to protect their firstborns. After the death of the firstborns, Pharaoh demands that the Israelites leave.

I don't think I have ever thought about plagues as much as I have these past 22 months. For obvious reasons the noun has taken on a whole new relevancy for us in

present day, compared to our chanting of them around the seder table. Plagues are suddenly very real; no longer the stuff of folk tale and legend – but now the evening news and daily Public Health Briefings.

We read in Torah concerning the 9th plague, the plague of darkness; “And Moses stretched forth his hand toward heaven; and there was a thick darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days: They could not see one another, neither did they rise anyone from his place..." (Exodus 10:22-23)

Rabbi David Wolpe, my teacher and friend writes in this week’s Jerusalem Post, “When locusts are swarming in the sky, or hail is pelting the ground, human beings are helpless. You cannot trap every frog that infests the land. But we all know how to counter darkness – candles.

[Thus], there is an obvious question about the plague of darkness that arises with no other plague – why didn't the Egyptians just stop it?" Why didn't they just light a candle?

A deep answer comes from a famed Sephardi commentator and kabbalist. When, later in the same verse, it says that the Israelites "enjoyed light in their dwellings," the Or Hahayim says it could mean light in the Egyptians' dwellings. There was light to be seen, but the darkness was not in the atmosphere; it was in the Egyptians.

Rav Yitzchak Meir of Gur observed that the greatest darkness exists when we can't see each other - when we can't appreciate the other's pain. What author and social commentator James Baldwin termed, blind indifference.

Sadly, the plague of darkness, of blind indifference, of not seeing the other in our midst still afflicts us today.

We are working on it for sure, certainly in progressive circles, very much in Canada with our renewed awareness, sensitivity and empathy for the First Nations, people of colour, marginalized populations, and identities.

This week marked the anniversary of the attack on the US capital, in Kazakstan those protesting exorbitant fuel prices were violently put down by Russian troops, around the world on the left and the right the voices that are crying out in anger and frustration are crying out to be seen.

Here in Canada, the Federal Government announced compensations and investment in victims of residential

schools; another instance of those right before us asking to be seen.

We are trying through the important and at times awkward use of pronouns, land acknowledgments and the like to shine a light on those who our civil society has been systemically blind or indifferent to. But I fear that such linguistic hoops and hurdles pay only lip service to the greater blindness that our rabbis speak of when commenting on the plague of a darkness so bleak that human beings could not see each other.

The Rabbis comment that the blindness of the 9th plague was the "thickness of a gold dinar" – that is, a gold coin. The early 20th century commentary Torah Temima, builds on this idea that the darkness was an attribute of the Egyptians, not the atmosphere when it writes that, "the

darkness was like a cataract over the eyes of the Egyptians."

Why compare blindness to a thick gold coin? It's to remind us how easily wealth and privilege can blind us to the plight of another.

I thought about that too this past week as the storm and snow descended on our city. My family, watched through the triple pane glass picture window in awe as the snow came down in great sheets; all of us warm and comfortable in our home, blankets, a soft sofa, Netflix and hot coco to further blind us to what those without such shelter and convenience were experiencing.

"Blindness like a thick gold coin" A large body of research points to a compassion deficit in the rich that plays out in big and small ways. As reported in Scientific American,

people in big cars are more likely to ignore pedestrians, and the wealthy give a smaller percentage of their money to the poor than those with far less."

Again, Rabbi Wolpe who first pointed me to this study observes; "This is not because bad people make money, since you can even create this bias artificially with monopoly money in a game. Rather, wealth insulates people from need and from dependence. Those among us who are fortunate must battle against that tendency to allow the gold dinar to blot out the suffering of others. Judaism is designed to combat this tendency in people by mandating tzedakah." Tzedakah is the candle, the *ner tamid* that we must keep burning to fight against the darkness of indifference.

What does it say about us as individuals, let alone as a collective if we know how to and have the power and

ability to end a plague, such as darkness; but fail to do so? What will it take for us to light a candle and shine a light to illuminate the darkness that surrounds us, that blinds us to each other?

The Mishna asks, “What time do we begin praying in the morning (literally, reciting the shema)?” The answer is – when one recognizes the face of his friend. In other words, we turn to God through acknowledging the face of another human being; seeing them for who they are; all that they are; not blind, nor indifferent.

In Egypt, in a place where there was no God (though there were many “gods”), the plague of darkness dramatized the extent to which people could not see each other – not because they were strangers, but because each one could not overcome self-absorption.

The plague of darkness is one that must be overcome every day. In the immortal words of the poet Dylan Thomas:

“Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

That is the lesson of the 9th plague, that is our task as human beings, as Jews, an Or L’goyim, to light up the world and chase away the darkness. It starts with seeing each other.