

## Mishnat Hashavua': *Shekalim 1:1*

Rabbi Daniel Nevins, Pearl Resnick Dean, The Rabbinical School, JTS.

What preparations are needed for the Jewish community to begin a new year?

On the first of Adar [i.e., the last Hebrew month] they make proclamations regarding the *shekel* tax and *kilayim* [the prohibition of mixed vegetable gardens]. On the fifteenth [of Adar, i.e., Shushan Purim] they read the Megillah in [walled] cities and begin to repair the roads, plazas, and *mikva'ot* [ritual baths], and attend to all public works, and mark the graves, and send forth inspectors regarding *kilayim*.

### Comments

The Torah (Exod. 30:12) commands the collection of a half-*shekel* poll tax from every male over twenty. While this may have been a one-time tax, later generations mandated its collection every year by the first of Nisan for the maintenance of the temple, and to pay for the daily sacrifices on behalf of the nation. One month prior to the due date, the government reminded people to pay the tax, and also adjured farmers to inspect their fields to remove forbidden mixtures that might have grown together over the winter. By Purim the raining season was over, and only a month remained until Pesah. Thus, it was important to clear the paths and plazas that would be used by pilgrims, and to help them be ritually pure by refilling ritual baths and refreshing the lime markers that indicated the presence of a grave. Stepping over a grave would render a person impure, and thus unable to enter the temple or eat the paschal lamb.

### Questions

1. Even today, when there is no temple, nor pilgrimage rite, it takes great effort to prepare for Passover. What are the responsibilities of the Jewish community to help people prepare for the holiday?
2. Who has assumed responsibility for the ritual needs of the public?
3. Is the synagogue responsible for the observance of the Jewish public, even beyond its membership?
4. In ancient times they collected a poll tax from every male adult. Should our Jewish community have a token membership fee for every adult? What would be the consequences, good or bad, of such a system?

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### Rabbi Marc Wolf

Senior Director of Community Development

(212) 678-8933

[mawolf@jtsa.edu](mailto:mawolf@jtsa.edu)

בְּאֶחָד בְּאֶדְרָר מִשְׁמִיעִין עַל הַשְּׁקָלִים  
וְעַל הַכְּלָאִים. בְּחִמּוּשָׁה עֶשֶׂר בּוֹ קוֹרִין  
אֶת הַמְּגִלָּה בְּבִרְיָן, וּמְתַקְּנִין אֶת  
הַדְּרָכִים וְאֶת הַרְחוּבוֹת וְאֶת מְקוֹאוֹת  
הַמַּיִם, וְעוֹשִׂין כָּל צְרָכֵי הָרַבִּים.  
וּמְצִינִין אֶת הַקְּבָרוֹת, וְיֹצְאִין אֹהֶל עַל  
הַכְּלָאִים:



# Torah from JTS

Parashat Bo

January 12, 2008

5 Sh'vat 5768

## Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Lisa Gelber, Associate Dean of the Rabbinical School, JTS.

It's difficult not to notice darkness at this time of year; so many of us set out for work in the dark and leave our places of business long after the sun has set. In these cold and potentially dreary winter months, the dark may feel heavy, and we long for a few rays of light.

But darkness is a part of the natural order of things. Our Torah tells us we emerged from darkness: "the earth was unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep . . . (*ve-ha'aretz hayta tohu va-vohu, ve-hoshekh al p'nai t'hom . . .*)" (Gen. 1:2); "and God separated the light from the darkness (*va-yavdayl Eloheem bayn ha'or u-vayn ha'hoshekh*)" (Gen. 1:4). Notice, God does not destroy the darkness; rather, it is pulled back, separated to expose the light and the dark, each in its own time and place.

The absence of light, in its literal sense, may designate a time for rest. Dark is a time to be—without the glare of computer screens, television sets, the Wii. We close our eyes, notice our breath, and bring things down a notch (or more). In these moments, darkness may bring awareness, even comfort. Yet almost all of us can think of a time when we were afraid of the dark. We imagined monsters under our beds and in our closets, we heard noises and footsteps in the house. Whatever grounded us, whatever made us feel safe, secure, and protected, disappeared within the dark. Darkness signaled fear, uncertainty, and a loss of control, not a way in which we wanted to live.

*Parashat Bo* introduces darkness, the penultimate plague to afflict the Egyptians before the Israelites are freed from slavery, as something that could not be mitigated. This *hoshekh*, an extreme darkness, not only highlights the potentially terrifying nature of the dark but also demonstrates the capacity for darkness to become a plague, affecting physical and spiritual well-being.

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Hold out your arm toward the sky that there may be darkness upon the land of Egypt, a darkness that can be touched." Moses held out his arm toward the sky and thick darkness descended upon all the land

of Egypt for three days. People could not see one another, and for three days no one could get up from where he was; but all the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings. (Exod. 10:21-23)

The darkness for the Egyptians in Egypt is not merely an absence of light; it has substance that remains for an extended period of time. In his commentary, Ramban (1194-1270) suggests that the darkness was composed of such a thick, foglike substance that it extinguished all of the lamps; there was no fire at all. No light. No way to see up or down; no means of telling day from night. No opportunity to see oneself in relation to others.

The Torah reminds us that the Israelites were afflicted with hard labor and spiritual strain. The Egyptians did not see the despair of the people of Israel. They could not look into the eyes of their fellow human beings and acknowledge their pain. They stumbled about in the darkness, tripping over the core institutions of respect and freedom. “No one could see the other. And no one could rise from his or her place for three days (*Lo ra’u ish et ahiv. V’lo kamu ish mitachtav shloshet yamim*)” (Exod. 10:23). These were a people blind and rooted to the ground, a people engulfed by spiritual and emotional darkness. How does darkness become a plague? By blocking the light, turning off our awareness, shutting down relationships, and preventing us from becoming agents of change.

Think back, for a moment, to those times when you were truly afraid of the dark. What brought you back to the safety of your surroundings? Calling out for a loved one, turning on a light, checking under the bed and in the closet, thinking outside of yourself, finding the spiritual and intellectual proof that you were not alone. What prevents our own experiences of the dark from filling us with terror and cutting us off from one another? *Honesty, about how and where we are. Ongoing awareness of God. Commitment as a people to remain in relationship with one another and our Creator.*

Honesty with self: We remain mindful of our vulnerability in the dark each evening when we recite the second blessing after the Shema’. *Hashkeevainu (Siddur Sim Shalom, 292)* offers the space and context in which to articulate our fears, both personal and communal, and to call upon God’s presence in our lives as companion and protector. We need not do this alone. God may help mitigate our fears and our demons.

Ongoing awareness of God: In his negotiations with Pharaoh, Moses insists, in verses twenty-five and twenty-six, not only that the people go up to worship the Lord, but that the flocks and herds accompany the men, women, and children as well. He maintains that “not a hoof shall remain behind; for we must select from it for the worship of the Lord our God.” Why must they take the animals as well? “We will not know with what we are to worship the Lord until we arrive there (*va-anachnu lo-nayda mah na’avod et Adonai ad boaynu sha’mah*).”

Rashi, our eleventh-century commentator, suggests we understand these words in a literal manner—we don’t know how many animals we will need. Thinking more broadly and, for our purposes, somewhat anachronistically, one might say there is no way to know if their service to God will be different or not when they get to where they are going. The *Etz Hayyim* Humash notes that we cannot know what God wants of us until we encounter God in each new stage of our lives. More than that, *we don’t know with what we will serve God until we are in that place* calls on us to be mindful, as a people and as individuals, of how God resides in our world (whether that be a communal or a personal space), so that moment to moment, as our journey unfolds, we may have the wisdom and the

energy to engage.

Commitment to relationship: How do we end Shabbat each week? We light a braided candle to illuminate the night. The torchlike flame helps us to see through the dark, to identify the people who fill our celebrations with life, and to help guide us into another week, another opportunity to elevate ourselves and our world through acts that express kindness and motivate justice. In order to survive, in order to move forward and grow, one must see the other not as other but as *another*: another being critical to our society and our world.

In the book of Proverbs we learn, “*ner Adonai nishmat adam*”—“the lamp of God is the soul of the individual” (20:27). Each of us carries God’s spark. May we have the courage and the wisdom to illuminate the dark, shining light on the blessings we have to offer the world.

*The publication and distribution of the JTS Commentary are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee and Harold (z”l) Hassenfeld.*

## A Taste of Torah

### A Comment on Rashi by Rabbi Marc Wolf

Moses held out his arm toward the sky and a thick darkness descended upon all the land of Egypt for three days (Exod. 10:22).

#### Rashi

“A thick darkness descended for three days”: A thick darkness where people could not see one another lasted for three days—for an additional three days the darkness doubled—where people could not move from where they were: Someone sitting could not stand, someone standing could not sit.

#### Comment

As the plagues progress, we reach plague nine, darkness. However, darkness does not seem to be a logical progression. We expect the ninth plague to be wrath of God—of truly biblical proportions.

Rashi, using Midrash Rabbah as his guide, extends the darkness to six days. As Rashi understands, during the first three days people could not see one another—but they knew they were there—they could possibly hear each other fumbling around in the dark. But during the second set of days, the darkness grew more oppressive, it paralyzed.

We can imagine the mental impact that this would have—for our first days in darkness we still search for light, fumbling around seeking some human contact. But subsequently, the darkness begins to affect us even more—we give up looking for light—we give up looking for the contact.

Rashi continues and shares that there were Israelites who died during the plague of darkness. Those who did not want to participate in the Exodus—those who did not want to engage the Divine—were overcome by the darkness.

The hint then, is that darkness is not the penultimate blow in this war on Egypt, but the chance for them to engage the Divine. Those first three days, they are stumbling, reaching out for something, but still unwilling to engage the Divine. It is our choice, in our times of darkness, whether we choose to engage the Divine or not.

*The publication and distribution of A Taste of Torah are made possible by a generous grant from Sam and Marilee Susi.*