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Senior sermon

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Senior Sermon

Sidrah BO

(for delivery January 5, 1957)

All of us well know, both from our own experience and from reports, that there are many natural phenomena which have the capacity to impress, to frighten, even to terrify human beings. Even those of us consigned to New York City can know the effects of jagged lightning rending the very heavens themselves, of thunder ominously rumbling or more explosively asserting itself, ~~and~~ gale winds seiging ~~xx~~ and thrusting us about wilfully, yet unreasonably as it seems, are not outside our experience; and even the terror of a hurricane is within our ken. And while these occurrences may not be so dramatic as ~~the periodic mass invasion of Eastern lands by swarms of locusts~~ events in other parts of the world—the periodic mass invasion of Eastern lands by swarms of locusts which denude the countryside of all growth and lay utterly bare the face of the land; or the earthquake which grinds and tilts the very ground upon which we stand—yet they are sufficient to frighten and alarm us. And ^{their} though/~~the~~ sheer force ~~mixt~~ accounts for some of their impressiveness, at least part of it is due to their infrequency, the rarity of their occurrence.

There is, however, within the regular, recurrent order of nature one phenomenon which also has this capacity to sober, perhaps even to frighten human beings, and which does so not mightily but softly as it were. I refer to the event of nightfall, to that descent of darkness which we experience so regularly as a part of our lives. Now I do not mean to exaggerate its effect upon us. I doubt that any of us reacts to the night as did the author of the ancient Egyptian Hymn to the Aton:

"When thoug settest in the western horizon,
The land is in darkness, in the manner of death.
They sleep in a room, with heads wrapped up,
Nor sees one eye the other.

....

Darkness is a shroud, and the earth is in stillness."

Yet, having placed the text before us, certain other elements come to our attention. For the text contains not only darkness but light:

לפי דברי ישראל היה אור בבתיהם

but all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings.

Light we have also, but hardly clarity. For the rabbis noticed something puzzling about this description. The darkness and the light are not separated geographically; unlike the other plagues, the line of division is not between Egypt and the Land of Goshen, the residence of the Jews. רמב"ם remarks:

כאן לא נאמר גושן. ואם כן, איך היה אור בבתיהם? וזהו חידוש - הוא שכל ישראל היה אור, ולא רק בני ישראל. וזהו חידוש - כל ישראל היה אור, ולא רק בני ישראל.

Here is not written 'Land of Goshen,' as with the other plagues, which confirms the rabbinic statement: 'This plague differed from every other, for even when the Israelite was in the house of the Egyptian, light was with him.

Suddenly the focus is shifted. It is no longer possible to construe this passage as describing only the sunlight and shadows of the external world, for in that dimension of existence it is not possible for two men to stand next one another, the one bathed in light, the other shrouded in darkness. Clearly something deeper is suggested, and the rabbis, with their genius for using events of nature to illuminate the inner life of man, guide us in perceiving what this deeper significance is.

הכל - שהיה אור בבתיהם

darkness—that their eyes and their hearts were overcome by darkness. Not only darkness of the eyes but darkness of the heart; a lack of vision at the deepest human level; the failure of the heart, the true organ of vision, to see—this is the only possible explanation of the uncanny spectacle of two men standing beside one another, the one knowing light, the other cast in darkness.

Intriguing, and yet unsatisfying; intriguing in that all of us surely have known, very likely do know, some degree of inner darkness which cannot but be of concern to us; unsatisfying in that the nature of this inner darkness and inner light is as yet unclear. And so we must ask further, what is the ~~unknown~~ cause of the darkness and the source of the light? To these questions too the rabbis addressed themselves. The cause of darkness?

וְיֵשׁ אֵל-אֶחָד וְאֵל וְאֵל אֶחָד וְאֵל אֶחָד וְאֵל אֶחָד
כִּי אֵל אֶחָד וְאֵל אֶחָד וְאֵל אֶחָד וְאֵל אֶחָד
וְאֵל אֶחָד וְאֵל אֶחָד וְאֵל אֶחָד וְאֵל אֶחָד

Note well: The Holy One, Blessed be He, does not exact payment from the wicked except by darkness.

The path of the righteous is illumined by light, the way of the wicked is deep darkness.

That is to say, the cause of inner darkness is that way of life, that outlook which cuts one off from the sense of the Divine in the Universe. And this assertion is not merely a shallow moralizing about wickedness or badness in any conventional sense. Rather is it a realization that in the nature of things there are attitudes and ways of living which do cut off the individual from any awareness of God at work in the world. That, in the eyes of the rabbis, is the true cause of darkness, the absence of any intimation of the Divine.

וְאֵל אֶחָד וְאֵל אֶחָד וְאֵל אֶחָד וְאֵל אֶחָד
כִּי אֵל אֶחָד וְאֵל אֶחָד וְאֵל אֶחָד וְאֵל אֶחָד

Perhaps the darkness of Egypt was that very darkness which is described in Psalms: He has made darkness His hiding place.

Having followed the rabbinic analysis this far, I suspect that we can, on our own, answer the remaining question concerning the source of the light. For if the cause of darkness be the hiddenness of God, surely the source of light will be the Presence of God through Torah. And indeed the rabbis are quite explicit about this:

וְאֵל אֶחָד וְאֵל אֶחָד וְאֵל אֶחָד וְאֵל אֶחָד
כִּי אֵל אֶחָד וְאֵל אֶחָד וְאֵל אֶחָד וְאֵל אֶחָד

'but all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings' in that they were occupied with matters of Torah, as it is written: Torah is light.

So concluded the rabbinic exegesis of that brief passage in Scripture, and a beautiful exegesis it is. Beautiful, and yet——somehow not fully satisfying. For it speaks of light, but provides us none ourselves. It speaks of illumination, but seems to leave us as much in the dark as ever. For it was not only that generation in Egypt which knew darkness; ~~many~~ ~~every~~ every age has its darkness, as does every human being. Every group and every person knows a substantial measure of trouble, of fear, of ~~incomprehension~~ of desperate confusion; and for the living it is not sufficient to know that previous ages received illumination and guidance. We ourselves want illumination for our own lives. It remains, then, for us to see how, more concretely and more specifically, Torah may ^{that} grant us/light by which to see ~~even~~ in this day and age. And since our Sidrah this week is primarily occupied with a series of events largely societal in nature—a people on the move, social upheaval, the tottering of an empire, unrest, confusion, fear—we too might well turn our attention to this aspect of our lives today, the societal in the largest sense. It is not the only source of the darkness which we know in our lives, but it surely does account for some of our fears, our uncertainties.

And well it might. For our age, as we well know, ^{itself} is/a time of tremendous upheavals, ~~incomprehension~~ crises, shifts in power; and in our own time we have seen a nearly complete overturning of the political power order previously known. It seems to me we do not have to wait for ~~the~~ ^{an} atomic explosion to tilt the earth sixteen degrees on its axis, as a colorful campaigner suggested during the recent elections! The earth, if I am not mistaken, has already shifted some sixteen degrees on its axis, has shifted perceptibly and significantly eastward, toward Asia and toward Africa and the near-East. It has shifted from the abode of millions to the abode of billions in startling fashion, and I think all of us ~~know~~ at some level

are aware of this and troubled by it.

The signs are all around us. ~~In~~ A conference ~~at~~ some obscure ~~town~~ town Colombo suddenly equals, and perhaps surpasses in importance, a national political convention in this great country. For that matter, a meeting of the NATO powers, the pride of our Western civilization, is dwarfed both in spirit and in numbers by a Bandung Conference, attended almost wholly by peoples formerly subject to the commands of the NATO powers. In the UN itself, the creation largely of Western statesmanship, the European oriented powers can no longer take for granted an automatic majority; former subject peoples vote against their former masters and carry the day! Almost daily these amazing facts force themselves upon us.

individual

And look at the/leaders of these ~~numerous~~ nations. Without exaggeration we can say that most of them were formerly agitators against Western powers which controlled their peoples, and many of them have spent substantial portions of their lives ^{in jails.} Need one name more than Sukarno of Indonesia or Nehru of India to make the point? And suddenly these men, ex-convicts as it were, are world leaders, figures to be reckoned with; and one of them is almost certainly more influential than any single Western statesman, not excluding our own president.

These are but instances of what is happening in our world today, of the situation we face. ~~These are but instances of what is happening in our world today, of the situation we face.~~

~~And the great shift has hardly begun.~~ And the great shift has hardly begun.

Already we can feel it, ~~but~~ that is true. But Asia is hardly ten years old, after all, a mere child on the world scene, with much growth ahead. Africa is really not yet born, though it can be felt thrashing in the womb. And in even so brief a chronicle as this Latin America should not be omitted,

for though barely conceived, its time will come too, and is not so far off as we in the colossus of the north like to think.

It is an amazing period of history in which we live: unsettled, in turmoil, and understandably frightening. And to some it seems dark indeed.

A prominent French official voices serious misgivings about the future of the UN if certain power blocs can wield so much influence; which is perhaps a polite way of saying that democracy isn't so much fun as it used to be, now that the West is outvoted from time to time. Another important French official, less polite, stated that his country's policy will ~~surely~~ not be determined by people who have only recently achieved the cultural status of barbarians. ~~And~~ An extremely important figure in our own country responds to a question about the split in the western alliance in these terms: "the white race" undoubtedly is going to "hang together" in world affairs. These, I think, are typical voices, voices which do express part of what we feel; but we must note that they are voices which see the world as essentially in conflict, which see their own interests threatened by this upsurge of formerly subjugated peoples. In short, they are voices which speak out of darkness; which see chaos, danger, destruction, and respond accordingly.

Now not for a moment would I suggest that there is not much confronting us about which we might well be apprehensive; neither would I deny that there is a component of darkness in our situation, ~~and that the darkness is~~ But I would assert that in the world today there is infinitely more light than darkness; ^{far} ~~infinitely~~ more cause for rejoicing than for despair, and that it is precisely the light of Torah which can reveal this to us. For in our Sidrah for this week Torah is explicitly defined in one aspect:

למנוח חב"ה חורח יקוק קכ"ק
ב' ק"ג חשק מו"צ'אן יקוק מ"צ'אן

"that the Torah of the Lord may be in thy mouth: that with a strong hand hath the Lord brought thee out of Egypt."

Is it not this, after all, which is truly afoot in the world today? Those of us endowed with the tradition of Torah, which constantly reminds us of our own *פ'רצ'ן ח'ל'צ'*, of our own redemption from bondage, must surely recognize in all these catadlysms that very spirit of redemption at work in the world. Is the emergence of Asia simply a threat to Western civilization? Perhaps, though it surely need not be. But whatever the case, is it not far more profoundly another group of people experiencing the beginnings of their liberation, of their own *פ'רצ'ן ח'ל'צ'* after some 430 years of *פ'רצ'ן*, servitude? Is it not in reality the manifestation of the Lord of History extending His domain actively to the far corners of the earth? The frail man in the loin cloth who without hatred or violence led a revolution; his fellow prisoner and successor who now leads a great nation—have we a more striking example in our day of

פ'רצ'ן ח'ל'צ' , פ'רצ'ן ח'ל'צ' "
"the Lord looseth the prisoners, the Lord raiseth up them that are bowed down" from India, Indonesia, even Kenya and S.W. Africa
And what of the students who come to this country to learn, /so that they may take control of their own destinies? They will have no more of Western domination, but shall we see it then as darkness? Is it not another inspiring example of the beginnings of self-assertion toward full human dignity? Is it not another instance of the spirit of redemption abroad upon the earth? ~~And again, as in previous cases, the illustrations could be multiplied substantially.~~

~~All of which is not to say that our own position of supremacy will not be increasingly challenged. Undoubtedly it will. And it is doubtful if the peoples of the world, as they grow stronger, will be satisfied to see many of their needed resources challened to providing Americans with a new indulgence~~

Truly that is the case. If we can but see one another we shall know how to respond to the crisis ~~that~~ today; if not, we shall remain selfish, immobilized, and shall surely perish. To look at and know our fellow men---that is the one thing we cannot dispense with. But not to know them simply as people grabbing things we want; not to know them simply as ~~people~~ primitive people who haven't the capacity to appreciate the ~~finer~~ things of Western civilization; not even to know the most aggressive of them as simply evil aggressors, the position we all too often take. But rather to know them as children of God, as creatures who, like ourselves, embody the Divine image; to see in their struggles and strivings, even those directed against us, the expression of that Divine urge toward redemption which is the heart of history; that is the path and the way which yields light.

We above all peoples are blessed in inheriting a tradition of Torah which has as its central awareness God the Redeemer manifesting Himself in history. In this age as in previous ages it is our most valuable possession, for by this light we can look at the world searchingly and truly and yet see light; with this we may penetrate the darkness and live. In the words of the Psalmist:

וְעִם-כָּל-חַיִּים
וְעִם-כָּל-חַיִּים
וְעִם-כָּל-חַיִּים

For with Thee is the source of life
And it is by Thy light that we do see light.