

From Darkness to Great Light

Parshas Beshalach

by Rabbi Menachem Rokeach

In the first benediction of the daily morning prayers we praise the Almighty for the intelligence accorded the cock to distinguish between day and night. The wisdom of the cock apparently lies not only in its recognition of the distinction, but in knowing to appreciate daylight and getting all excited over it and heralding its overflow of joy to all who can hear its crowing, awakening them to the daily duties. The Talmud (Airubin 100b) tells of certain admirable traits of particular animals that are worthy of being emulated. The wisdom of the cock, mentioned in the beginning of Shacharis, surely has significant implications for man.

Another "first" in connection with daylight is the benediction "Yotzer Ohr" preceding the morning SHEMA, which speaks of the creation of light. Its relevance to the SHEMA is worthy of deliberation. Basically it is the change of season from night to day (and from day to night) that evokes the new obligation to recite the SHEMA. Hence this change, this daily manifestation of G-d's wondrous deeds, is expressed through a poetic hymn of praise, as the basis for the daily recital of SHEMA, which is the daily renewal of acceptance of the Heavenly yoke.

Upon further study, however, it becomes obvious that light in this benediction refers not only to the sun, moon and stars, but also the light created on the first day of creation. This is the first creation about which the Al-mighty said that it was good. "And G-d said 'let there be light,' and there was light. And G-d saw the light that it was good.." (Braishis 1:34). It is obvious that this light is not the light of the sun and the moon, which were created later on the fourth day of creation. "This original light, created on the first day of creation, the al-mighty hid for those who delve in Torah sheBaal Peh (oral law) day and night" (Midrash Tanchuma Parshas Noach 3). "That light is hidden in the Torah" (Aitz Joseph, ibid). And could be revealed today only through assiduous study of Torah (see Bnai Yisoschor, Kislev 2:13)

The daily benediction Yotzer Ohr is thus a harbinger to the second benediction, Ahava Raba, in which we supplicate for wisdom to understand Torah. Both benedictions, furthermore, are appropriately

regarded as blessings of the Shema, since the subject of Torah study is one of the fundamental principles of the Shema - "and thou shalt teach them diligently to thy children and thou shalt speak in them".

The phrase "enlighten our eyes in Thy Torah," in the second blessing is the key to the connection between the two benedictions. Through toil in Torah study we gain a glimpse of the "Ohr Hagonuz," that hidden spiritual light; and vice versa, through that light we gain deeper vision in Torah insight. "For by the light of Thy countenance, Thou hast given us a Torah of life" (Sim Sholom prayer).

The radiance of the sun and the moon, one ventures to suggest, are reflections of that spiritual light created on the first day of creation and given form into separate entities on the fourth day. This may explain why the sun and the moon are called "the greater light and the lesser light" (Braishis 1:16), which at first glance presents a difficulty. Since the moon is only a reflection of the sun, it would have been more proper to call the sun "the original light" and the moon "the reflection light". According to the above, however, the light of the sun is not an original light either, but a reflection of the special light of the first day. Thus the sun, which absorbs a greater measure from the spiritual light, and taking shape into a greater force, is called "the greater light," and the moon, which absorbs less, and only through the media of the sun, is called "the lesser light."

The plague of darkness, the ninth of the ten plagues, was a phenomenon in which the Egyptians suffered more than merely the loss of daylight. The commentators point out that the plague of darkness was a "touchable" darkness, coming from the darkness of the abyss, mentioned in Braishis 1:2, (see Midrash Rabba Shemos 14:2). At the same time, the Israelites experienced a light which came from the "Ohr Hagonuz," that hidden splendid radiance of light reflected from the spiritual light of the first day of creation, which, as mentioned (Bnai Yisoschor loc., cit.) can be discovered only through the light of Torah. It was a reflection of this marvelous light that shone upon the Israelites already during Mitzrayim's ninth plague.

So it seems from the Midrash (Braishis Rabba 3:5) which states: "The passage (Let there be light) "and there was light" is a reference to the second book of the Chumosh, Shemos, which speaks of the redemption of

the Israelites from Egypt." Rabeinu Bachaya adds: "For there the Torah testifies (10:23) that "to all the children of Israel there was light in their dwellings."

Following the ninth plague and this miraculous light in Israeli dwellings, comes the portion of HACHODESH HAZEH (12:2) concerning the month of Nissan and the new moon, and the instruction to follow the lunar calendar. The juxtaposition suggests the conception of an original hidden light from which both the sun and the moon are reflection, the sun thus being not preferable to the moon.

Rashi's statement (Beraishis1:1) furthermore, that the Torah could have begun with HACHODESH HAZEH, is an indication that the actual beginning, Beraishis, relating the creation of light on the first day, is a factor in the command to follow the lunar cycle.

At the Seder table, with cup in hand, the Hallel is introduced thus: "Thou hast brought us out from slavery to freedom, from darkness to great light..."

In the Shira, too, Moshe and the Israelites exclaim: "Who is like Thee, NORAH THEHILOTH" According to Haketov V'hakabala the word NORAH, as in Menorah, means: "lights and sparkles" with praise, "scintillates and radiates" with laudation.

Mechilta (Shemos 15) teaches that this passage was the beginning of SHIRAH. For this reason "Mi Chomocho" (who is like Thee) is mentioned following the SHEMA, recited morning and evening, as a reference to the whole SHIRAH.

Considering the above, the two benedictions prior to SHEMA and its central theme, focusing on the radiance of Torah, it is most befitting to conclude the third benediction following the SHEMA (Ezras), likewise, with NORAH THEHILOTH from the SHIRAH.