

This being the season of the Festival of Lights, I've been reflecting a lot of late on themes of darkness and light.

This first one may sound familiar:

In the beginning of the Divine creation of the heavens and the earth  
with the earth being formless and void  
and darkness upon the face of the deep  
*v'ruach Elohim merachefet al pnei hamayim*  
and the sacred spirit/winds of creation  
hovering over the face of the waters ...

Then God said:

*Yehi Or* ... "Let there be Light"

*Vayehi Or* ... and there was Light!

And God saw the Light: *Ki tov* / it was Good!

And Elohim separated the Light from the Darkness,  
and called to the Light: "Day!"  
and to the Darkness: "Night!"

And it was evening, and it was morning: *Yom Echad* / Day One.

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Darkness and Light: complementary spiritual energies  
-- interwoven into the very fabric of the universe, of all of creation  
-- found in all things ... and in each and everyone of us

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In fact, our sages teach that Torah herself is written  
-- or comprised, as it were -- of black fire and white fire ...

and also: that when we kindle the lamps of the Hanukkah menorah,  
it must not burn as a torch,  
with all lights blending into a single flame  
-- but rather --  
there must be sufficient spaces between them  
that each lamp may individually shine and be seen

The times of day we are encouraged to pray are also precisely those times of the intermingling of light and dark:

*Maariv* - the evening prayer - also called *Arvit*

Both names deriving from “*Erev*”, which at its root means a “mixture” as well as weaving, weft and woof -- pointing to the daily folding of light, into dark, into light.

And the name of the morning prayer we call *Shacharit* derives from *Shachor* - the word for the color “Black”

At the beginning of the Mishnah,

when the Rabbis of old considered what was the most fitting time to proclaim the unity of the Source of All in the morning Shema

They chose the time of the rising of

*Amud haShachar* / The Pillar of Dawn

That still-dark time defined as bringing just enough light that a person could recognize the face of one’s friend at a distance of four cubits, or about seven feet.

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In our Torah reading this morning,

Joseph’s brothers come before him,

and he recognizes them,

but they do not recognize him.

I want to read you a few lines of this scene in Hebrew - it’s striking ...

וַיֵּרָא יוֹסֵף אֶת-אֶחָיו וַיִּכְרַם וַיִּתְנַבֵּר אֲלֵיהֶם וַיְדַבֵּר אֲתָם קְשׁוֹת וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם (42:7,8)  
מֵאִין בָּאתֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ מֵאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן לְשִׁבְר־אֶכְלִי: ה וַיִּכַּר יוֹסֵף אֶת-אֶחָיו וְהֵם לֹא הִכְרָהוּ:

The root of the word “to recognize” *L’hakir*,

is also the root of “to make oneself strange”, *L’hit’nakeir*

- as well as the word for “foreigner”, *nochri*,

that Moses will famously use to describe himself

as “a stranger in a strange land”.

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There are various explanations for Joseph's actions here:

One midrash holds that what he most wanted  
was to embrace and welcome them,  
but then he heard an accusing voice  
reminding that they had once conspired to kill him  
and for all he knew, they might do so once again.

Rabbi Menachem Nachum of Chernobl,  
in his Torah commentary called *Meor Einayim*, "The Light of the Eyes"  
suggests that one hint can be found  
in Jacob's instructions to the brothers  
as he sends them down to Egypt for grain  
"Yesh shever b'mitzrayim, shuvu ..."

Literally translated as "There is grain in Egypt, go back there ..."

The *Meor Einayim* points out that the verb root of the word *Shever*,  
*Lishbor*, is to break, denoting brokenness, (shever is cracked grain)  
And *Shuvu*, of course, means to return ...  
And can also mean to make *Teshuvah* ...  
to reconnect that which has been broken ...

And what could be more broken, both then and now,  
than the connection between the brothers (and invisible sister)  
of the family of Jacob, reaching all the way back to the first siblings,  
When Cain, asks -- perhaps rhetorically, or perhaps in angst --  
"Am I my brother's keeper?"

I often think of the trajectory of entire book of Genesis / Beginnings  
as exemplifying the *Teshuvah* of family reconciliation  
- where in the beginning of the very next Torah reading of *Vayigash*,  
Judah offers an impassioned soliloquy answering the question  
"Am I my brother's keeper?" with a resounding affirmative:  
"Please, my lord, how can I leave my brother Benjamin here?"

Please! take me in his stead!”

“Go down into that place of *shever*, of brokenness”  
teaches the Meor Einayim,  
find there in the darkness the hidden sparks of healing  
- make Teshuvah ... and return to your Original Wholeness.

And one more place in our Parsha pointing to this Hidden Wholeness?

None other than Pharaoh’s very dreams!

Those beautiful healthy cows rising up out of the Nile,  
*tir’ena ba’achu* - grazing in the reed grass?  
Look again ... the Aramaic translation for achu - the reed grass -  
reads “*ach’va*” - brotherhood!

And remember those healthy, full-bodied *shibolim*, those stalks of grain,  
the good ones - unlike their divisive shadows, the goodly stalks were  
“*olot be’kaneh echad*” - they were “rising from a single base”

Picture - Seven flowering stalks - rising from a single base.

Just like the golden menorah in the mishkan,  
crafted from a single block of gold,  
in unity, in wholeness, all lights shining, and seen  
from each face.

And on our Mishnah of the Morning Shema,  
the Ba’al Shem Tov taught the following:  
To be able to say the Shema,  
it’s not just sufficient that the dawn’s light  
allows us to recognize the face of another,  
But rather - each of us is only ready to appreciate the Echad  
- the Unity of the Source of All --  
with the dawning of the light of our awareness  
that the person whose face we behold - is indeed

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also a manifestation of the Divine image in which we are all cast.  
Again from the Creation story:

It was evening, and it was morning, *Yom Echad*.

Not *yom rishon*, the first day, but rather, *Yom Echad*

The Day of One-ness, of Wholeness,

of integration of the dance of Light and Dark.

May we all be blessed, each individually, and together as a community

to see ourselves, and each other,

and all who entry the sanctuary of our homes,

our communities,

and our lives,

as shining Lights in the Menorah of All Creation

reflecting and emanating the Holy Weaving of Dark and Light

and as the word Hannukah itself means dedication,

may we each day rededicate ourselves,

to reconnection, healing, and Teshuvah

to make manifest, even in the dark and broken places,

the wholeness and love of the One - *Echad*.