

FINDING GOD IN THE SHADOWS

HOW CAN WE FIND GOD IN MOMENTS OF DARKNESS?

TORAH BLESSING

DISCUSSING THE SERMON:

In the sermon, Rabbi Buchdahl refers to the work of a Christian theologian, Barbara Brown Taylor, who has criticized what she calls “full-on solar spirituality.” The following is an excerpt from Barbara Brown Taylor’s book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*:

“Darkness” is shorthand for anything that scares me — that I want no part of — either because I am sure that I do not have the resources to survive it or because I do not want to find out. The absence of God is in there, along with the fear of dementia and the loss of those nearest and dearest to me. So is the melting of polar ice caps, the suffering of children, and the nagging question of what it will feel like to die. If I had my way, I would eliminate everything from chronic back pain to the fear of the devil from my life and the lives of those I love — if I could just find the right night-lights to leave on.

At least I think I would. The problem is this: when, despite all my best efforts, the lights have gone off in my life (literally or figuratively, take your pick), plunging me into the kind of darkness that turns my knees to water, nonetheless I have not died. The monsters have not dragged me out of bed and taken me back to their lair. The witches have not turned me into a bat. Instead, I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is really only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light.

DISCUSSION QUESTION:

Does the idea that we need darkness as much as we need light resonate with you?
What have you learned in the dark that you could never have learned in the light?

Rabbi Buchdahl writes:

I've been thinking a lot about a recent conversation I had with a long-time member who lost her beloved husband of over 50 years. I encouraged her to come to services to say Kaddish, and she hadn't been to Friday night services in a long time. She happened to come the week of Shabbat Shira, where we had a particularly energetic service of song and even dancing. Afterwards she said to me, "I shouldn't have come. The service was very joyous, and that is great. But there was no room for my pain. I found no comfort, no sanctuary." How do we hold joy and anguish in the same moment, in the same service?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Can you relate to the experience of this congregant, who found that the focus on joy left no room for her need to mourn? Is this a community where you feel comfortable during the darker times in your life?
- (b) What makes it easier or harder to acknowledge or find meaning in these "shadow" times?

Rabbi Buchdahl quoted her sister, a professional musician who lives in Los Angeles, who said, "As much as I love the climate, it's harder to be a musician here. Relentless sunshine doesn't offer the best conditions for creative angst." Many other artists have spoken about the connection between their darker moments and their creativity. Consider the following:

"Artistic temperament sometimes seems a battleground, a dark angel of destruction and a bright angel of creativity wrestling."

-- Madeleine L'Engle

"Life beats down and crushes the soul and art reminds you that you have one."

--Stella Adler

"The urge to destroy is also a creative urge."

--Pablo Picasso.

"Anxiety is the handmaiden of creativity."

--T.S. Eliot.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Do you relate to this connection between darkness and creativity? If we see the experience of dark times as essential to human creativity, does it – or should it – change our own relationship to suffering?
- (b) Rabbi Buchdahl relates this sentiment to the name of the artisan charged with building the Mishkan, Betzalel, whose name means “in the shadow of God.” How is God implicated, or present, in these dark moments of creation?
- (c) What are the implications for how we view people with psychiatric disabilities? Or for our idea that we are made in God’s image?

VOICES FROM OUR TRADITION:

In our morning liturgy, before the *Shema*, we traditionally recite a prayer that begins as follows:

Praised are you, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the Universe

Who forms light and creates darkness, who makes peace, and fashions all things.

This prayer is adapted from Isaiah chapter 45, in which God states:

I am Adonai and there is none else

I form light and create darkness; I make peace and create trouble [or “evil”]

I, Adonai, do all these things.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What do you make of the prayerbook’s adaptation of the text of Isaiah? Which text would you prefer to pray?
- (b) To the extent that you relate to the idea of God at all, do you think of God as the creator of both light and dark, good and bad? Or does our conception of God need to be wholly positive?

In many of our ancient texts, shade is seen as a protective force, or a sign of God’s presence. For example, as Rabbi Buchdahl points out in her sermon, once the *mishkan* (portable sanctuary, or tabernacle) is built, God’s presence is made manifest in a cloud that covers the sanctuary by day, and a fire that accompanied it by night. (See Exodus 40:38). As Rabbi Buchdahl preaches: “the light of Torah was carried by [Betzalel,] a figure of darkness under a cloud. It’s such a Jewish idea: our light and darkness need each other.”

Likewise, in Psalm 121, we read:

Adonai is your guardian; Adonai is your protection at your right hand;

By day the sun will not strike you, nor the moon by night.

DISCUSSION QUESTION:

How do these images of shade as a positive, or protective force complicate or enrich our typical association of light with good and dark with bad?

Finally, in Psalm 23, the psalmist writes:

Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness, I fear no harm, for You are with me.

The words “deepest darkness” here are a translation of “*gei tzalmavet*.” *Tzalmavet* comes from the same root (meaning shadow) as the name of Betzalel. Often translated as “shadow of death,” the idea of *gei tzalmavet* epitomizes our deepest, darkest, hour. But the Psalm, which we often recite at funerals, assures us that even in those moments, God is with us.

DISCUSSION QUESTION:

Have you been able to find a source of comfort in your darkest hours? Do you associate that source of comfort with God? Or are our darkest hours the times when we feel the absence of a divine, comforting presence? If we believe that God works through people, how might we be able to create this kind of comforting presence for one another?