



משנה חיימן

MISHNAS CHAYIM

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

A project of CHEVRAH LOMDEI MISHNAH • Parshas Bo 5768

A debate has raged for ages over the nature of darkness: what exactly is it? Is it the mere absence of light, or is there more to it? Most scientists take the former view, which, ostensibly, seems plausible enough. As proof of this assertion, scientists point to the fact that when the light goes on, darkness disappears. The scientists therefore conclude that apparently, darkness has no intrinsic existence, but is the mere vacuum left when light is removed.

The Vilna Gaon, however, maintains that darkness is not just “nothingness”; rather, darkness is actually a positive, existing “something”. This notion is reflected in the verse in *Yeshayah* (45:7):

יָצַר אֹור וּבָזֵר אֶחָשָׁךְ :

“He (Hashem) made the light and created the darkness.”

If darkness were merely the absence of light, then what exactly did Hashem “create”? If the *possuk* states that Hashem created darkness, it must be an actual **creation**, and not simply a lack of light! In response to the scientists’ ‘proof’—the fact that darkness disappears in the face of light—the Vilna Gaon explains that, just like all creations, darkness has properties and limitations. One of the properties of darkness is that light can overpower and dispel it.

We would like to suggest further evidence in support of the Gaon’s view. By examining an aspect of *hilchos Pesach*, a picture will emerge which sheds light on this murky subject.

In this week’s *parshah* we are introduced to the *mitzvos* surrounding the *Yom Tov* of *Pesach*. The Mishnah at the very beginning of *Pesachim* delineates the particulars of the search for *chometz*. The Mishnah states:

אור לארכעה עשר, בזקינו את ההפץ לאור הנר.

“On the night of the fourteenth of Nissan (the night before *Pesach*) we search for *chometz* by the light of a candle.” (*Pesachim* 1:1)

The Gemara (*Pesachim* 4a) explains that relying on sunlight alone is insufficient, for candlelight is much more effective in uncovering hidden *chometz*. Rabbeinu Chananel explains that the requirement for the search to be conducted at night stems from the fact that a candle is much more effective at that time. As the Talmud Yerushalmi states (*Pesachim*, ch. 1), a candle illuminates much more brightly at night than during the day.

The most probable explanation for the candle’s superior power at nighttime is its contrast with the darkness. Yet the Yerushalmi goes on to make a most remarkable statement in the name of Rav Huna:

“When we were in hiding (from our enemies who were pursuing us) in the secret underground caves (under the study halls), we were unable to discern night and day (because of the sheer darkness). To solve this problem, we lit candles. When the candlelight was dim, we knew it was day. When the candles shone brightly, we knew it was night.”

Rav Huna is telling us that even in the underground caves, where darkness is the same day and night, the candles burned more brightly at night than during the day. If the whole power of candles is in the contrast, why would they burn any differently during the night in a pitch-black cave? So much for our contrast supposition...

It could very well be that this perplexing Yerushalmi actually serves as a support for the Gaon’s opinion regarding the nature of darkness. If darkness were nothing more than the absence of light, it would be very difficult to explain Rav

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a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his Neshamah.



Huna's phenomenal subterranean candles. Whether it was day or night, the amount of light down there was the same: zero. According to scientific theory, the candlelight should have diffused the darkness equally, regardless of the time.

However, when we consider the Gaon's view, we can begin to see the light at the end of the tunnel (pun intended). The Gaon asserted that darkness is an actual creation. Perhaps we can suggest that the Gaon's intention was not to entirely reject the notion that darkness results from a mere lack of light. The point where he parts ways with the conventional wisdom is regarding the existence of a **second** type of darkness. In other words, when Hashem fashioned an actual creation of darkness, it was in **addition** to another pre-existing condition of "by default" darkness that occurs when we remove light.

A tremendous amount can be gained by making such an assertion. If our theory is correct—that the Gaon really assumes that there are two types of darkness—we can begin to understand the Yerushalmi.

It is quite plausible to say that the "new creation" of darkness was unique to the night. Therefore, if light were to be removed during the day—in an underground cave, for instance—the ensuing darkness would merely be an absence of light, as existed prior to the creation of darkness. Nighttime darkness, however, created by Hashem during the seven days of creation, comprises a different breed of darkness, complete with its own properties. Even though the difference between the two types of darkness may not be discernable by the human eye, the two are **inherently** dissimilar.

Following along this train of thought, it could very well be that one of the practical differences of nighttime darkness is that it better facilitates the spread of light. This characteristic would account for the performance of Rav Huna's candles. True, deep in a cave there is darkness during the daytime

as well; but *that* darkness is merely a lack of light. At night, there exists the added element of "live" darkness, which, possessing actual properties, could provide a better contrasting backdrop for the candlelight, enabling it to shine more brightly.

Had we assumed that darkness is just a lack of light, the Yerushalmi would have remained an enigma, as darkness would be uniform, by day or by night. In light of the Gaon's concept of darkness, however, the Yerushalmi becomes understandable. By introducing the idea that darkness is an actual creation, the Gaon provided for the possibility of differentiating between daytime and nighttime darkness.

Perhaps. One of the many beautiful things about toiling in Torah study is that even if your postulations turn out to be incorrect, you still receive abundant reward for the effort! Either way, we now can look at darkness in a totally new light.

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