

DARK TREASURES

Rosh Hashanah Morning / 5768

It's the way for most people that light is good and dark is bad. In fact, it's pervasive throughout our culture. The good cowboy wears white, the bad cowboy wears black. Darth Vader and Obi-Wan Kenobi. Grey skies imply gloom, while sunshine suggests good tidings. The illustrations abound. The point is clear.

But so was that September morning six years ago. Blue skies. No clouds. Sunshine everywhere. As clear as clear could be. September 11 of 2001 was a Hollywood recipe for a perfect day. Most of us will remember it that way for the rest of our lives. Especially on days just like that one. We can't help ourselves. The contrast was simply too dramatic. It was the most oxymoronic moment any of us had ever experienced.

But of late I've started to wonder if that moment of cognitive dissonance is not at the heart of September 11th's pathology for us. And it is, on some level, a pathology—because it still makes us ill. Of course it's normal and healthy to grieve and mourn the enormity of that tragic day. Even six years later. That day will remain with us just as November 22nd will be for me or December 7th will be for my parents' generation. Days that will live “in infamy”, burned into our minds and our hearts, because of how dramatically they shattered our sense of order. Yet therein lies the problem—because we had a sense of “order” that was as imaginary and erroneous as the preconception that sunshine equals good days.

You know most of the days that suicide bombers are detonating themselves in Baghdad, the sun is shining warmly through a cloudless sky. And that fateful December day when we all learned the word *Tsunami* was also a picture-perfect morning in Thailand. Just as the weather is indifferent to the children who wake up each day in Newark's crack-houses or refugee camps in Chad. And not to diminish in any way the enormity of 9/11's pain, but for us it was just one day—for the people of Darfur it's every day and every night, a seemingly endless stream of sunrises blending into sunsets. For them, every day—regardless of meteorological influences—is dark.

So as we come here on this day of light, this day of hope, this New Year filled with dreams and promise—and we still bear the burden of the darkness that shattered our light six Septembers ago—maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea to try and get some perspective. And by “perspective” I mean not so much that we need to appreciate that there are so many others who have endured (and continue to endure) darkness far greater than we will ever know (God-willing), but “perspective” in the sense that maybe there's a better and healthier way to embrace the moments of our lives that so often seem to overwhelm us. Maybe there's another way to think of darkness?

A few weeks back I was coming home from Newark's Penn Station. As I was coming off of Route 21 and weaving through those side streets that bring you back toward Montclair, I had to stop at the light at the base of Bloomfield Avenue. Sitting at the light I looked across the street and noticed one of these storefront churches. It was the *Victory Outreach Church*. And just beneath this 2nd story sign proclaiming the name of the church was a Biblical quote from Isaiah. It read: “...reaching treasures out of darkness...” (45:3).

I immediately called home and left a message for myself on my answering machine (feeling quite confident that Hannah wasn't going to pick up the phone anyway) with the name of the church, the chapter and verse, and the specific translation. There was something about that text that was compelling. And captivating. (I confess, I was unfamiliar with it.) I tried to imagine why the pastor or the community leaders chose *that* verse. Was it because it was such a beautiful expression of hope? Was it because it articulated what most of the church's members felt about their lives? Living in darkness? And that even in darkness there are treasures to be found? And the name of the church—*Victory Outreach Church*. That the identity of the congregation was they felt defeated but through faith they would discover *victory*?

At some point in our lives we all feel defeated, as if we're living in darkness. And while we may pray and hope to emerge from the abyss, how comforting to even suggest that one can find treasures *in* that darkness!

Of course I knew the author of Isaiah 45. Not personally, but I knew where he lived. And when. I knew that he was speaking to a community of exiles, living in an alien land, with virtually no reason to believe they would ever see Jerusalem again. *They* knew darkness. *They* knew pain and suffering and anguish. *They* had seen their loved ones killed, their homes destroyed, their Temple burned. *They* had been taken off through the mountains and across the deserts in chains to a strange and threatening world. I knew what Isaiah was trying to do, to bolster their spirits. Even there, along the shores of the river Euphrates, in Babylon, even there they could find treasures in darkness.

But when I got home I examined the text in the original Hebrew. To be sure the translation does justice to the intent of the author. "Reaching treasures out of darkness" was—to be sure—a paraphrase, but the idea was the same. The *Jewish Publication Society* renders it, "I will give you treasures concealed in the dark..." Same idea. But as I began to examine the Hebrew closer, I realized that even the *JPS* translation was engaging in a bit of poetic license. In fact, the Hebrew *V'natati l'kha otzrot choshekh* literally translates as: "I will give you the treasures of darkness..." And that, to my mind, is a subtle but significantly different message. What makes it such a "treasure" is that it can be found only *in* "darkness".

This past year one of our *bat mitzvah* students wrote her *d'var Torah* on the dualities of the creation story, how it is that each day ends with both night and day. Why does Torah frame the world this way? she wondered. Why do there have to be such dualities? Why does there have to be darkness? Why can't it always be light? Why does there have to be evil? Wouldn't the world be so much better if there were no pain or evil? But then again, what would life be like if everything was good? Indeed, how would we know what *good* is if we didn't have evil against which to contrast it?

It's an old argument, but it still holds up. If there were no evil, how would we know what is good? Even more, what purpose would there be were we to live in a perfect world? There's a reason Paradise was lost. Because it makes no sense to live in such a world. Like the *midrash* that Marc Gellman tells about Adam in the Garden of Eden. Peering through the fence at the edge of the garden, Adam notices a plant that is dying for lack of nurturing. But the only way to save the plant is for Adam to leave the Garden—and once he's out he can't go back in. So Gellman writes that Adam surrenders his perfect world for the opportunity to repair that which is broken, and in so doing he gives his life meaning.

Darkness is a prerequisite to the balance of our world. Our world *begins* in darkness. We calculate time not with the emergence of light but with the onset of darkness. Even this day—*Rosh Hashanah*, the New Year—begins in darkness. Last night, the first of *Tishri*, is also *Rosh Chodesh*, the new month, the new moon, the one time during the month when it is completely dark at night. We must begin with darkness. We must begin from the abyss. We must start our search for discovery from the place of nothingness. This is how God created the world. This is how we begin our lives. And this is how we re-create ourselves.

Enduring darkness therefore becomes a necessary part of living. Sooner or later we all must traverse the Valley of *Tzalmavet*—the Shadow of Death. Of course we will all die. But this is not, I think, what walking through that valley means. Rather, there are any number of times in our lives when we must face the darkness of life's fragility. Whether it's our own mortality, or the life of a loved one, whether it's struggling with the burdens that makes us question the meaning of our lives, we all must leave the "still waters" and the "green pastures" and endure the place of shadows.

Gei Tzalmavet is a place of fear and disquiet. It's a place we dread. It's Abraham taking his son up the mountain. It's Isaac carrying the wood on his back. It's Sarah wondering and worrying what is going on? When they will come back? It's the not knowing, the lack of surety. And it's not just about matters of life and death. It's the times we wish we were dead. It's the times we wonder why go on living. It's the places and the moments that haunt us forever. Nobody gets to pass through this world without having to stand in line for the Valley—and usually more than once.

It's not a bad thing, though. You see that's where God can be found. God's presence may fill the world, but it's in the darkness where God's presence can be felt. It's the place where faith is discovered.

Yaffa Eliach tells the true story of the rabbi of Bluzhov, Rabbi Israel Spira who celebrated the first night of Hanukkah in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1944. That morning there had been an *aktion*, a special "action" where several children had been publicly executed, so the welcoming of Hanukkah was particularly bitter. Using a makeshift menorah carved from a wooden shoe, Rabbi Spira lit the first candle and—as is customary with the first night—recited all three blessings: the *berakhah* for lighting the candles, the *berakhah* for affirming miracles at this season in ages past, and the *Shehecheyanu*. After the brief ceremony the rabbi was approached by Zamietchkowski, known as a free-thinker (in other words, a non-believer). Zamietchkowski says to Spira, "I understand why you recited the blessing over the candles. It's a mitzvah. And I even understand why you said the second blessing. It's about what happened in the past. But Rabbi, how—especially after what we all saw this morning—could you thank God for '...sustaining us and enabling us to reach *this day*'?" Spira replied, "I know. I too took pause before I said the *Shehecheyanu*. But as I considered whether or not to say it, I looked around the room and all I could see were all these faces looking at this singular light with so much hope in their eyes. And if in this place, and especially on this day, these men could still have hope—then I had no choice but to thank God for bringing *me* to this day."

I believe that the deepest secrets of holiness are to be found in the darkest places of our lives. It is a place of discovery. But even more than finding God, the darkness is the place that gives birth to our humanity.

One of my favorite movie quotes comes from the adaptation of John Carpenter's *Starman*. Speaking to the human, the alien says, "Shall I tell you what I find beautiful about you? You are at your very best when things are worst." Whether it is our sense of justice or compassion, our courage to be altruistic, or our simple love for others, the "darkness" brings out the holy that lurks within. And this may be the greatest treasure of all.

Last night I attended my wife Marilyn's opening at the New-York Historical Society, commemorating the events of September 11, 2001. The show displays over 1500 photographs capturing the horror and the love felt on that terrible day six years ago. But of all that was there to see, what I brought home (literally) from that show was a little book I found in the gift shop. Entitled "September Roses", it is written and illustrated entirely by its author Jeanette Winter. The book is so short—and yet its message is so touching—I would like to share it with you now.

As I looked down at the roses, a young man walked to where I stood and told me how they came to be there.

Far away in South Africa, he said, across the ocean, over mountains, beyond the desert, two sisters lived together and grew roses. Their greenhouse overflowed with roses of every kind—red roses, pink roses, yellow roses. Roses surrounded their little house and brightened every room. Every night the sisters worked on designs for their rose display at the flower show, far away in New York City. When the designs were finished, they carefully packed 2,400 roses. It was time for the journey.

High in the air the two sisters sat dreaming of their roses. Then the sky turned black. Their airplane landed. There were tears enough to fill an ocean. The sisters sat in the airport with their roses all day and all night. There was no place for them to go.

"Can I help?" [a stranger approached them saying].

[Then, with an image of the two sisters lying together in a bed, the caption reads:] "How can we repay this kindness?"

"Please take our roses. We have no use for them now," [they said to their host.]

[He replied,] "I know a place for your flowers."

The man drove the sisters down through the city to Union Square. "Your roses are needed here," [he said].

The sisters knew what to do. They found an empty space on the grass and set to work—placing one rose next to another, and another, their hands moving quickly. The grass was soon covered with roses. [And] when the sisters stepped back, there lay the fallen towers [neatly arrayed in two large, elongated rectangles].

My tears [writes the author] fell on their roses.

At the end of the book, the author adds a postscript:

"The two women, commercial rose growers in South Africa, came to New York to attend Agriflowers & Floritech Expo USA. The flower show was called off, the hotels were full, and all flights home were canceled. Stranded at LaGuardia Airport with over two thousand roses, the two women were given lodging by members of the First United Methodist Church of Flushing, New York, who had come to the airport to offer shelter to those in need."

And perhaps most poignant about the book—albeit subtle—is the author’s use of color. For the first half the book the pages are awash with bright vibrant colors. But midway through, as the storyline comes to September 11, the pages turn to gray. And then, as the storyline unfolds to the two women’s plan to place the flowers at Union Square, you begin to see more and more color as the pages turn—so that by book’s end the bright vibrant colors stand out against the still remaining gray background.

And that is the point. You can never erase the darkness. It is ever-present. But you can bring color to the grayscale. And that, I believe, is the *otzrot choshekh*—the treasures of darkness. And it’s the kind of treasure that can only be found in darkness. After all, otherwise those two women’s flowers—colors still the same—would never have been half as beautiful had they been displayed, as planned, at the New York flower show.

As horrific as was that beautiful September day six years ago, it opened a doorway to a flood of love and compassion the likes of which I have never seen in my life. Given the choice, would I have preferred to avoid the cause for that unprecedented outpouring? Of course. But *darkness* is a part of life. And rather than look the other way, or try to pretend it doesn’t exist, the key—the challenge—is to learn to embrace it. Only then can we truly see, what otherwise we would consider, the *hidden* treasures of darkness. Actually they’re not hidden at all. We just need to learn how to see in the dark.