

Be the Light

*In the beginning
Of creating the heavens and earth,
The earth was chaos and void,
And darkness over the surface of the deep.¹*

Darkness.
A week of shadow.
Atrocities so bleak they blot out
The radiance of holiday and Shabbat.
The inhumanity so evil it stops
The splendor of celebration.
Last week, we filled this building
With music, song, and dancing,
Weaving hope with generations
Joined in joy of community.
We would then wake with horror,
And a shadow that has grown
With each passing day.
The burning of Jewish bodies
The brutality against the most vulnerable.
Massacre
Malevolence
The very monstrosity that lurks
In our most terrifying nightmares.

We enter this Shabbat forever changed,
Eyes wrenched open to a reality
Most of us denied.
Some in our community
Already mourn murdered loved ones.
Others sit in fear of the fates
Of the kidnapped.
Some of us sit in anguish
Others in anger
All in grief.

¹ Genesis 1:1-2

There is a shattering we hold this Shabbat.
So many of us devoted to the ideals of justice
Of redemption,
Find those words mutated and maligned
As some in our world have the audacity
To celebrate the most inhumane
To frame Jewish liquidation as liberation.
Some of us feel abandoned,
Halls of learning,
Instead becoming havens of hate.
Elected officials and celebrities,
Instead choosing silence over condemnation.
Allies and neighbors,
Who have stood again and again
With the victims of senseless slaughter,
But unwilling to do so,
When the bodies are Jewish.

It is from shadow
We enter this Shabbat.

*First, there was darkness.
And then God said, "Let there be light,"
And there was light.
God saw that the light was good,
And God separated the light from the darkness.²*

The early rabbis imagined
That upon Adam's expulsion from Eden,
The sun set for the first time.
Surrounded by a darkness never before experienced,
Adam trembles with fear.

אָמַר אֶךָ תִּשְׁכַּח יְשׁוּפְנִי

"Is darkness to conceal me forever?"³

And in these first moments of exile,
From the place of insecurity,
God gives Adam two flint rocks
And teaches him to kindle his own flame.
What Prometheus had to steal,
Adam received as a gift.
The beginning of darkness
sparked humanity's ability to create light. ⁴

² Genesis 1:3-4

³ Psalm 89:11

⁴ Genesis Rabbah -

כיון ששקעה החמה במ"ש התחיל החושך ממשמש ובא ונתירא אדם הראשון,
מה עשההקב"ה זימן לו שני רעפים, והקישן זה לזה ויצא מהן אור ובירך עליה

This is not the story
Of God raising the sun,
Nor obliterating the darkness,
But rather giving us the tools,
The first response,
When it all comes apart.
This is the first technology of Judaism:
To speak and spark
Light into being.

Thousands of years later,
Enslaved and afraid,
Amidst terror and affliction,
Plagues descended upon Egypt.
As the 9th plague,
The plague of darkness descended
We read:

וּלְכֹל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הָיָה אֹר בְּמוֹשְׁבֹתָם.
For all the children of Israel there was light in their dwellings.⁵

From Adam to Israelite,
In the face of a darkness
Of biblical proportions,
Our ancestors retained the secret to kindling light.

Generations later,
Haman would arise seeking the annihilation
Of the Jews of Shushan.
And in the face of their destruction,
We read:

לְיְהוּדִים הָיְתָה אֹרָה :
For the Jews, there was light.⁶

Generations still later, the great Hasidic master R. Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger witnessed the ravaging of Poland in war and pillaging. And once again, the technology of light remained. He taught, "To be a Jew is, like a star, to bring light to places of vast darkness. Thus, even and perhaps especially when Israel descends into the darkness of its Egypt, its mission is clear -- to light up the darkness of the most depraved and immoral parts of the world."⁷

*Let there be light,
And separate the light from the darkness.*

⁵ Exodus 10:23

⁶ Esther 8:16

⁷ Sefat Emet on Shemot, 1878

Against the backdrop of shadow,
This week,
We saw light blaze anew.

We witnessed a divided Israel,
Unite in shared purpose.
We witnessed a fragmented world Jewry,
Stand together in solidarity.
We witnessed millions of people,
Rush to aid, to arms,
And meet devastation with dedication.
We witnessed a call
To make a minyan for a murdered Israeli's funeral,
And 10,000 people arrived.
We witnessed our President issue
One of the strongest declarations
Of solidarity and support of Jewish people
In our history.
And within our community,
We witnessed light blazing
From so many hearts and homes.
A light that raises our hope
A light that raises our resolve.
A light that calls us out of the darkness.

Be the light of compassion. One of our members created support groups in this building for Israeli parents and their children whose partners now fight on the front lines. Others have raised phone and email trees to reach out to Israelis near and far to share words of care and concern. Others are trying to link isolated and traumatized people here and abroad to communities of support. Others are starting bake-a-thons, others sending cards, others donating plane tickets to Israelis trying to get home to their friends and family.

Be the light of generosity. Right now we have members who have raised millions of dollars just this week for emergency medical supplies, others are helping fund bulletproof vests for the IDF, others collecting for food and clothing, others looking to pair Rodeph Sholom with a devastated Israeli village, others looking to help house and support Israelis fleeing here to NYC. Rodeph Sholom School opened its classes this week to the children of such Israelis, making sure they have safety, education, and community to embrace them at this time.

Be the light of care. From all corners of this congregation, people are checking in, offering support, sharing strength, showing up. A first grader gifted me with an Israeli flag, a congregant sent Insomnia cookies to all our staff, one of our 8th Graders baked cookies for each of our clergy, leaving us this note: "Eat for the people you love." The voice of Gili, gifting us with the hope of our youth.

Be the light of advocacy. Within our community, we have parents who have challenged moral blindness in local high schools, members who are publicly decrying their alma maters to stand in support of Jewish students, members who are stepping off of boards in protest, members who are calling on representatives and CEOs to show that underscoring humanity need no equivocation.

Rabbi Yossi taught in the Talmud, "Once I was walking on a pitch black night when I saw a blind man walking with a torch in his hands. I asked him: 'As a blind man, why do you carry a torch? What purpose does it serve?' He replied, 'As long as the torch is in my hand, people can see me and walk beside me.'"⁸

For most of us,
we stumble in a time of deep darkness.
We may wish to retreat
From a world of shadow.
But there is another option:
To notice those who bear torches around us,
Those willing to kindle the spark of creation
Even in the face of it all.
And to see purpose in kindling light
Even when we cannot see the rays it casts.
For from creation until today,
We are called to be the stars,
To gather together,
And to blaze against the shadow.

Every Friday, we reenact the moment
When Adam learned to become
A Creator of Light.
We fill our homes with reminders,
That we greet shadow with illumination,
And become the stars
Against shadowed sky.
So, wherever you are,
Light candles,
Light up your room,
Light up your windows,
Light up the city,
Light up the world.
Two blazing reminders of Jewish resolve
Two dazzling displays of Jewish purpose
Two shining reminders of Jewish strength.

⁸ *Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 24b*

In the beginning,
The earth chaos and void,
Darkness was over the deep,
And God spoke
The divine response into being.
Let there be light.
Let *us* be the light.