

# Through the Dark, Pursuing the Light Beyond

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In many conversations with family, friends, and community members, an unusual tone has entered into our exchanges about the new year. This season is usually filled with optimism, hope, and renewed aspirations. As we approach Simḥat Torah, however, and are forced to conceptualize what it will mean to mark the first yahrtzeit of October 7, 2023, while also celebrating the Yom Tov, many of us have had an unshakeable feeling of unease, uncertainty, and a fear to hope for too much.

These feelings are entirely understandable and even appropriate given the travails in which we are currently engaged as a people. But is that it? Are we to just accept that this state of suspended hopes and dreams is just where we are now? Perhaps, with all of what feels like broken pieces that this feeling offers us, we might use them to put together the possibility of one path on which to move forward into this year.

In his introduction to his commentary on *masekhet Hullin*, “Dor Revi’i,” R. Moshe Shmuel Glasner begins with a discussion of creation. In particular, he notices early verses like, “and God separated the light from the darkness” (Bereishit 1:4), and wonders why God would go



about the work of creation in this way. Why start with dichotomies like “light” and “dark”? In a remarkable reading, the Dor Revi’i tells us that these dichotomies set the stage for a world in which human beings can define themselves based on their ability to make distinctions—light and dark, truth and falsehood, blessing and curse, what is revealed and what is hidden. The dichotomy of “hidden” and “revealed” becomes, according to the Dor Revi’i, the primary engine of the human condition:

כי זה כל האדם כל זמן שהוא חי על האדמה לרדוף ולדרוש אחר הנסתר והנעלם והרחוק והסתום ממנו.  
והשתקקתו זאת היא תכנית ותכלית ועיקר חיותו... כי עיקר חיותו המחיה את כל הנברא הוא התשוקה  
העצומה למה שמונח חוצה לו וקשה להשיגו.

For this is all of what it is to be human—all the time that a person is on the earth, to pursue, and investigate after that which is hidden, obscured, distant, and sealed from them. Further, the desire to do this is the design, purpose, and essential principle of their existence... For the essential principle which gives life to all created things is this profound longing for what lies beyond them, that which is difficult to reach.

In this passage, R. Glasner highlights that it is our role as seekers of what “lies beyond” and what is “difficult to reach” that is at the core of what it means to be human. In our lives, we experience elements of darkness, of a void in which something is sealed off from us (“difficult to reach”). But instead of rejecting or recoiling from those things, R. Glasner argues that we are supposed to reach into them, to pursue and investigate—perhaps, using terminology of Bereishit, to bring light into them. But again, to do so “is difficult to reach.”

On one hand, this sounds bleak. Are we continually locked into a cycle confronting darkness, illuminating it, only to face down the next darkness? R. Glasner boldly argues that we have to shift our perspective on what the experience of such a process is like:





ובזה ימצאו תענוג חיותם וכל זכות קיומם להתעלות מנמוך לגבוה ולשאוף בכוסך נפש להשגה גבוה מעל גבוה.

And in this, human beings shall find the delight of their living and the merit of continued thriving to rise up from a low place to a higher one, to aspire with the yearning of the soul to reach ever higher and higher.

The constant illumination of darkness—which in turn shows us the next dark passage to pursue, investigate, and illuminate—is not cyclical or circular. Rather, it is ascendant, spiraling ever upward. Each time we face the darkness, we are not doing it from the same place, we are not doing it as the same people. Each time, we are more human than ever.

In these passages, R. Glasner offers us a powerful and empowering frame for our experiences. If anything, the many vicissitudes of the last year have made so much of what we hope and dream for feel like they are beyond our grasp, absorbed into a murky darkness; however, it just may be that as opposed to creating a feeling of despondency, we might recognize that in this moment we can assert our humanity even more passionately. We can remind ourselves that where we stand now is not where we've stood before, even if elements feel tragically familiar. We are standing higher now, and we can step even higher through our individual and collective reaching for the aspirations that are currently beyond our grasp; in doing so we affirm our very essence, even as we confront situations which seem to challenge it so heavily.

For many of us, the desire for peace, safety, and tranquility has intensified as the seeming distance from these necessities has increased over the last year. In many ways, it is possible for this desire to come to define our life force. As we enter and look ahead in this new year, that is a realization we can embrace. We can let that desire permeate our thoughts, speech, prayers, and actions. As we continue to greet one another with wishes of hope mingled with uncertainty and even fear, we do not need to let that create a sense of dejection. We can





instead hold onto the possibility that such a mixture in our exchanges makes us more human, more enlivened, and more ourselves than we've ever been.

