



A Strong Light

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On their first day of life, Adam and Havah noticed that the sky was getting progressively darker. As light left the sky and darkness set in, they were scared. Adam cried out,

Talmud Bavli Avodah Zarah 8a

Woe is me, because I sinned, the world is becoming dark
around me, and the world will return to chaos and disorder!

תלמוד בבלי עבודה זרה ח.

אוי לי שבשביל שסרחתי עולם חשוך
בעדי ויחזור עולם לתוהו ובוהו.

Adam and Havah thought the world was ending and death was at hand. They both cried—but not together.

He spent all night fasting and crying, and Havah was crying
opposite him.

היה יושב בתענית ובוכה כל הלילה וחווה
בוכה כנגדו.

Adam and Havah were afraid of the same thing, yet rather than come together in their fear and comfort each other, they drew apart from each other: Adam in his corner and Havah in hers, their tears falling separately.



The Talmud goes on to tell a similar story about Adam's first experience of winter and the darkening of days. In that story, while Adam fasts for eight days, Havah is absent altogether. Perhaps, as in the other story, they once again each go to their own corner, so much so that we don't even see or hear of Havah's experience.

Adam and Havah's response to fear rings true to me. Sometimes when we are afraid, we turn away from each other rather than turn toward each other. Perhaps we do not want to say out loud the thing we are afraid of, lest somehow our words make it true. Perhaps we can barely handle our own anxieties, and fear that combining them with someone else's will magnify them even further. Maybe sharing the experience of fear with someone else makes it all the more real and undeniable. Whatever the reason, in turning away from each other, we isolate ourselves from one another, each of us alone in our corner.

The Talmud tells another such story in which fear separates a community rather than bringing a community together. According to the Amora Shmuel, there was once a group of people who hid in a cave to evade the decrees of religious persecution. They allowed anyone who wanted to come in, but once inside, no one may leave, lest someone betray their position to the authorities. It once happened that one of the shoes of those in hiding was reversed, so that when he walked it left a footprint as if he was leaving the cave:

Talmud Bavli Shabbat 60a

They thought that one of them left and enemies saw him and were now coming upon them. They pushed one another and killed one another in greater numbers than their enemies had killed among them.

תלמוד בבלי שבת ס.

נִהְפָּךְ סִנְדֵּלוֹ שֶׁל אֶחָד מֵהֶם, כְּסִבּוּרֵין הֵם
אֶחָד מֵהֶם יָצָא וְרָאוּהוּ אוֹיְבִים וְעָלְשׁוּ בְּאֵין
עֲלֵיהֶן. דְּחִקּוֹ זֶה בְּזֶה וְהָרְגוּ זֶה אֶת זֶה יוֹתֵר
מִמֶּה שֶׁהָרְגוּ בָּהֶם אוֹיְבִים.

So consumed were they by fear that the enemy was coming that the people turned on each other, inadvertently killing each other in their attempt to escape. They could have come together in their fear. They could have talked, they could have reasoned, they could have planned, and they could have comforted. In all of these scenarios, they would have lived. But they didn't. Their fear drove them apart.

The First Book of Maccabees describes a contrasting case in the time of the Hasmoneans, around 166 BCE. Seron, a prince of the army of Syria, heard of Judah the Maccabee's military success, and came after him with a large army. When Judah and his small company of men went out to meet them and saw the size of his army, they were afraid. They said,

1 Maccabees 3:17 (KJV)

"How shall we be able, being so few, to fight against so great a multitude and so strong, seeing we are ready to faint with fasting all this day?"

With confidence, Judah responds,

1 Maccabees 3:18-22

"It is no hard matter for many to be shut up in the hands of a few; and with the God of heaven it is all one, to deliver with a great multitude, or a small company: for the victory of battle stands not in the multitude of a host; but strength comes from heaven. They come against us in much pride and iniquity to destroy us, and our wives and children, and to spoil us: but we fight for our lives and our laws. Wherefore the Lord himself will overthrow them before our face: and as for you, do not be afraid of them."

Judah sees their fear and he tells them, don't be afraid. He says, "We fight for our lives and for our laws." In other words, we are united by values much deeper than the spoils of war that



drive their army. With God behind us and our religious lives and values at stake, we can overcome them.

The men rally to Judah's cry, and their small band defeats Seron's army of 800 hundred men. Rather than turning on each other like those in the cave evading persecution, they came together, united by a common purpose and a religious commitment.

The popular Israeli children's Hanukkah song, "We Came to Banish the Darkness," contains a deep message about the strength of joining together.

We came to banish the darkness,	באנו חושך לגרש,
In our hands light and fire,	בידינו אור ואש.
Each of us is a small light	כל אחד הוא אור קטן,
And together we are a strong light.	וכולנו אור איתן.

When we are alone, each of us with our own small candle, the darkness can overwhelm our light, much as Adam and H_{avah} were overcome by the darkness that surrounded them. But when we come together, each of our small lights join together to make one great light which has the strength to banish the darkness.

We are all plagued by fears and anxieties, both rational and irrational, founded and unfounded. Often, when we are afraid, we keep our fears to ourselves, letting our inner voices run wild as we play our worst fear on loops. What if I am sick? What if I am not good enough? What if we can't make it work? Maybe we don't want to share our fears because fear can be mixed with other complicated emotions like guilt and shame, anger and doubt. Perhaps the story of Hanukkah is teaching us that, even and especially in moments of fear, there is



strength in being in the experience of that fear together, and sharing that vulnerability with one another.

I think about Adam and Havah on that first night of darkness, each crying in their own corner, and I long for them to come together and console each other. As we prepare to kindle the lights of Hanukkah, I wish for us a winter season in which we share our fears rather than staying silent, and move toward each other rather than turning away.

