“The Dark Times” – d’var torah for July 24, 2020

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I doubt that everyone who watched the first *Star Wars* movie in 1977 saw it through Jewish eyes. Think what you want, but I confess that I did.

When Obiwon Kenobe, portrayed by the great Alec Guiness, began to roll out the philosophy of The Force, I was hearing a cross between Isaac Luria’s kabbalah and Mordecai Kaplan’s “power that makes for salvation.” I was hooked.

But I was most struck, Jewishly speaking, by Obiwon’s explanation to young Luke about life in the Galaxy “before the dark times,” as he put it. “The dark times” is straight out of that unique combination of history and theology that characterizes this week in the Jewish calendar. This is the week called “*beyn hameytzarim*,” “between the straits,” the time leading up to the commemoration of the destruction of both ancient Jewish temples as well as a host of other calamites befalling our people over the centuries.

That commemoration comes this Wednesday night through Thursday. It is *Tish’ah b’Av*, which translates as “the ninth of the Hebrew month of Av.” That day is the Nine-Eleven of the Jewish calendar. It demarcates the difference between “before” and “after.” “Before,” we had sovereignty and independence and a chance to create an ideal society based on the radical human values embodied in the Torah. “After,” we admitted our grievous failure, licked our wounds, repented of our social irresponsibility, and vowed to do better if we ever got the chance. Again, we got the chance, and again we failed. First it was due to social neglect. Then it was due to *sin’at chinam*, or baseless hatred for one another.

“Before” meant days of light and hope. “After” meant exile, dispersal, “the dark times.” Or so goes our Rabbis’ theological way of reading Jewish history.

But those “dark times” included centuries of remarkable Jewish creativity and innovation, both spiritually and intellectually. It included great experiments in communal organization and social welfare. It included breakthroughs in educational methodology. The Jewish dark times were filled with light, though it was a light often hidden within the close confines of our Diaspora communities.

One of our greatest innovations, if you will, was the very practice we are exercising right this minute: Shabbat. Our ancestors took a simple idea of a day of rest and expanded it into a visualization of what is possible when human beings fully respect one another and our environment. Far from being a “day off,” it became the most “day on” of all our weekdays.

Now to this particular Shabbat, called the Shabbat of vision, Shabbat *Chazon*. This Shabbat comes right before Tish’ah b’Av, the darkest day of the Jewish calendar. Naturally, it would lend itself to special interpretation. Here is one take. This is from Avraham Yaakov Friedman of Sadigura (Russia, 1820-1883).

He says that this is a very great Shabbat, more so than most others, for the same reason that when a lamp is brought into a place of total darkness, its light is very precious. Likewise, during these days of lowliness, sadness, depression, and darkness, the light of this particular Shabbat is deeply appreciated and welcomed.

He goes on to say that during a period of Exile, all divine goodness seems to be secreted within the time and space of our daily lives. We know it’s there, but we strive in vain to perceive it. All seems like a great judgment being weighed against us.

Shabbat allows us to imagine something markedly better. It allows us not only to envision, but to *embody* a way of behaving that is accepting, loving, caring, hopeful.

And thus it has been with these twenty-one Shabbatot we’ve made together since we “shut down” our shuls and everything else in our world. The pandemic has enveloped us, and in many ways exposed the serious inequalities and injustices in our society. The racial unrest has forced us to confront the many inhumanities embedded in the fabric of our lives. At times our responses have been constructive. But often we have reacted with impatience, immaturity, and a judgmentalism unbecoming of responsible people.

But every Shabbat, we have given ourselves a chance to do better; to *be* better; to envision and embody the kind of community we know we should have been building all along. Shabbat has been our lamp in the darkness, and it has been oh so precious to us these many months.

May Shabbat continue to be more than a day off for us. May we use it, along with the very somber and meaningful fast day that is now upon us, to see how much better light is than darkness, and to work to bring a time when the hidden light shines forth in everything we do.