

## **Contemplating the pillar of fire that provides light & clarity in those moments of darkness & suffering**

The following teaching discusses the spiritual practice of experiencing the light inherent in the darkness, as well as cultivating a unique way of experiencing the pain and suffering that we all endure during our life journeys. This is based on a teaching by Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmish Shapiro, the Piaseczner Rebbe, from his classic book, *Aish Kodesh*, delivered in the Warsaw Ghetto on 20 JAN 1940.

*Before I share with you the Piaseczner's teaching though, I ask you, is it the darkness itself that we all experience at times that frightens us --- leaving us unsure of when and where to take the next step and confused by the lack of a well-lit clear path? Or is it the pain and suffering inherent in the darkness that we endure along our life journeys that we tend to dread? Or is it perhaps the challenge to hold on to and to sustain our belief, our faith and trust in God during these trying times that causes us the most despair? I suggest that all of these are organically intertwined with each other --- each of these contains and is contained in each other.*

*I ask further: when we are in the midst of darkness and the ensuing confusion and suffering in our lives, isn't what so many of us desire, and actually need, is to acquire the means and spiritual practice to experience this in a less severe and bitter way? In a less disconnecting and lonely way?*

The Piaseczner Rebbe provides us with an inspiring insight that guides us along the unclear map when encountering darkness and suffering. Yes, it hurts. It can hurt terribly. Yes, the pain at times is overwhelming. And yes, it can paralyze us and significantly threaten or at the very least compromise the sustainability and integrity of our belief system. How are we encouraged though to move through this space and simultaneously remain faithful to the experience and to our true authentic inner selves?

I want to caution you that this is not the absolute cure-all prescription for enduring suffering and darkness. Actually, there is no single teaching in our tradition that resonates with everyone at all times. Perhaps though some of you will feel more resourced when experiencing those moments of difficulty in your lives. For those with whom this teaching does not resonate, consider it the efforts of a compassionate and loving spiritual shepherd to provide comfort to his flock. When the Piaseczner taught this, he himself was thrust into trauma and pain, beyond what any one of us can imagine, even in

today's current world situation. Coupled with his own sense of dismay, he felt called upon to provide some type of guidance for his followers in the Warsaw Ghetto. I urge you to please view this as one way that one person, albeit a spiritual giant, suggests we live through the most difficult and dark moments in our life journeys. And while he carefully refrains from dogmatically insisting how one **should** respond, because no individual is spared these times, his teaching may in fact be of relevant value to you.

The Piaseczner's teaching is based on two verses in *Shmot* – Exodus.

Exodus 13:21 & 22: "And the Lord goes before them --- **by day**, in a pillar of cloud, to guide them along the way, **and by night**, in a pillar of fire, providing them with light --- so that they could travel day and night. He did not remove the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire at night from the people."

שמות יג - כא, כב: וַיְהוָה הֹלֵךְ לִפְנֵיהֶם יוֹמָם בְּעַמּוּד עָנָן, לְנַחֲתָם  
הַדֶּרֶךְ, וְלַיְלָה בְּעַמּוּד אֵשׁ, לְהַאֲרִיר לָהֶם--לְלֶכֶת, יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה. לֹא-יִמִּישׁ  
עַמּוּד הָעָנָן, יוֹמָם, וְעַמּוּד הָאֵשׁ, לַיְלָה--לִפְנֵי הָעָם.

Based on the translation from the original Hebrew by J. Hershey Worch:

Until this verse, all the preceding text is stated in the past tense, as in, "When Pharaoh **sent out** the people..." (Exodus 13:17); "Moses **took** Joseph's remains with him..." (ibid. 19); "They **traveled** on from Sukkoth and **encamped** in Eitam..." (ibid. 20). But this verse, "And the Lord **goes** before them...", is the first time in this section in which the text speaks in the present tense.

We learn in the Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 51:2) that the phrase "**And the Lord**" always connotes "God and His court of law." And so, we ask: What aspect of judgment was hinted at in the verse "And the Lord goes before them..."? The fire (the word connoting judgment) was for the Jewish people's own good, since it lit up the darkness for them. What then is so judgmental about the text, connoting God and His court of law?

Rashi explains that the verse "And these are the laws that you must set **before them**," (Exodus 21:1) means that the laws should be set out like a table laid before them, so that each individual should find the Torah arranged plainly and clearly for him, according to each one's capacity to understand.

*I would like to focus for a moment on the word לפניהם – "before them, in front of them". This word is connected to פנים – "face", which in turn connects to בפנים, which means "inside, within", which then develops into פנימיות – inwardness, internal, inner. Hence, we see the movement is from "before them", implying outside of the person to the state of inwardness, within the person.*

The Piaseczner continues, "This is also what is meant by the words in our text above, "And God goes **before them.**" God and His court of law are "**before them,**" adjusting and setting the judgments according to the particular needs of each individual Jew. This is why the fire --- i.e., the judgment --- is plainly and clearly beneficial, lighting the darkness for each person. Each expression of judgment is in fact for each one's benefit, as it illuminates the darkness within the person's experience.

So much so, that we must use the judgments and suffering that we endure properly; meaning to utilize them to somehow *davkah* strengthen our connection and relationship with God --- to keep going day and night. We learn this from that part of the text that speaks in the present tense and refers to the necessity for the Jewish people to keep going, day and night.

Furthermore, from what we have already said, the deeper implication becomes apparent and clear: Not only when the going is revealed to be good and easy must we go in God's ways, climbing higher and higher spiritual heights, but also when, God forbid, we are in pain and darkness. For when a person enjoys generous good fortune, it is easy for him to be in relationship with God joyously, passionately and with love. Nevertheless, when he is suffering, God forbid, he must somehow take advantage of that situation also, to be with God with his broken heart and with an outpouring of the soul.

We learn in the Talmud (Tractate Berachoth 3a), "When Rebbe Yossi entered one of the ruined houses of Yerushalayim to pray, he heard a heavenly echo." We then learn that Rebbe Yossi was told by the Prophet Eliyahu that the heavenly voice speaks not only in the ruins, but whenever Jewish people go into synagogues in order to pray. Why then did Rebbe Yossi not hear this echo when praying in his own synagogue? (*and by extension, we for that matter?*)

We do not presume to understand the essence of Rebbe Yossi's experience, but the lesson in it for us is this: It was precisely because Rebbe Yossi was praying amidst the ruins of Yerushalayim, because his heart was broken in response to the destruction around him, that he was able to hear the heavenly echo.

The Piaseczner concludes: "And so it must be with us, when our reality may indeed be very sad and bitter. Let us not waste the time or the opportunity. For example, let us recite the Psalms, learn Torah and pray. Let us keep going, day and night. And the Lord, Whom is merciful will have mercy, and will turn the judgments around so that they become entirely beneficial, "going before them," to meet each individual need."

*Surely, much to consider, ponder on and contemplate ---- each individual according to one's own personal experiences, values and sense of the true inner self.*

*Alongside this teaching I would like to share some thoughts from Viktor Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning*. Two very different individuals indeed. While they both experienced similar darkness and unimaginable suffering during the Holocaust, their positions in their respective communities and their relationships with God, the Torah and Jewish tradition differed in no small way. And yet I cannot but help see similarities in their wisdom. Actually, it is jarring and somewhat eerie how aligned some of their conclusions are with each other.*

Viktor Frankl's experience in Auschwitz actually confirmed one of his key ideas: "Life is not primarily a quest for pleasure or a quest for power but a quest for meaning. Suffering in and of itself is meaningless; we give our suffering meaning by the way in which we respond to it."

What was needed in the face of such horrific suffering that he endured and witnessed was "a fundamental change in our attitude toward life. We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that *it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life --- daily and hourly. Life ultimately means taking responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets **for each individual.***" This sentiment mamash echoes that of the Piaseczner's teaching; this is not merely coincidental or casual, but remarkable.

He writes elsewhere, "But let me make it perfectly clear that in no way is suffering *necessary* to find meaning. I only insist that meaning is possible even when suffering --- provided, certainly, that the suffering is unavoidable."

Bearing his soul in the most profound and vulnerable way possible, Viktor Frankl writes, "Let me recall that which was perhaps the deepest experience I had in the concentration camp. The odds of surviving the camp were no more than one in twenty-eight, as can easily be verified by exact statistics. It did not even seem possible, let alone probable, that the manuscript of my first book, my life's work, which I had hidden in my coat when I arrived at Auschwitz, would ever be rescued. Thus, I had to undergo and to overcome the loss of my mental child. And now it seemed as if nothing and no one would survive me; neither a physical nor a mental child of my own! So, I found myself confronted with the question whether under such circumstances my life was ultimately void of any meaning.

Not yet did I notice that an answer to this question with which I was wrestling so passionately was already in store for me, and that soon thereafter this answer would be given to me. This was the case when I had to surrender my clothes and in turn inherited the worn-out rags of an inmate who had already been sent to the gas chamber immediately after his arrival at the Auschwitz railway station. Instead of the many pages of my manuscript, I found in a pocket of the newly acquired coat one single page torn out of a Hebrew prayer book, containing the most important Jewish prayer, *Shema Yisrael*."

Viktor Frankl concludes, "How should I have interpreted such a "coincidence" other than as a challenge to *live* my thoughts instead of merely putting them on paper."

The opportunity to become free from darkness, confusion and suffering, requires remaining hopeful, demonstrating courage, and with dignity and unselfishness, believing in the God given power of seeing light in the midst of darkness.

Indeed this is incredibly difficult compassionate spiritual work --- and humbling when we ponder on the fact that the Jewish people today, those of us listening to this teaching, are the descendants of those minority who survived the enslavement in Egypt, who did not perish, and who believed their lives were meaningful in the darkest of nights. We in fact are the descendants of the first generation of *Bnei Yisrael* who saw the pillar of fire that provided light and clarity in those moments of darkness and suffering. May I suggest that perhaps even before the Torah actually records this physical phenomena --- this timeless bedrock and source of faith and trust -- - our ancestors who came out of Egypt, from whom we descend, were able to spiritually see their own pillar of fire from within, illuminating their own personal night, each according to his/her own unique authentic experience.

With the Divine's revealed presence, compassion and guidance may we, each one of us in our unique authentic way, merit to do the same.

**To benefit the most from this teaching, I encourage you** to spend some "alone" time, gazing within, in that special space of self-introspection - *hitbonenut* in Hebrew. Examine and simply observe, without judgment, your own emotional, mental and spiritual responses to, and understandings of, today's teaching.