

On the plus side, we're all getting quite a good education in the Greek alphabet. We might not be learning the order quite right – Delta after Alpha, Omicron after Delta – but we're certainly learning a lot of letters.

In a midrash on the plague of darkness that God brings down upon Egypt, the rabbis describe the darkness as *kaful u'mechupal* (Ex. Rabbah 14:3) – darkness doubled and doubled over. A darkness inside of darkness.

We are living in what is, at the very least, something of a dark time. There's been a constant back and forth – Covid, vaccines, variants, boosters, variants, masks, tests, wash, rinse, repeat. It's been a time of uncertainty – how bad is Delta? How bad is Omicron? Will things go back to normal, and if so, for how long?

In the same midrash on the plague of darkness, the rabbis say that eventually the darkness was so powerful that those who were sitting couldn't stand and those who were standing couldn't sit. They were stuck.

I don't know about you, but I'm definitely feeling a bit stuck. A few weeks ago, my friends and I spent time with a friend who turned out to have Covid. Thankfully, he was fine! But suddenly my friends and I were thrust into last year – we had to try to stay in our rooms, wear masks, get tested every other day, and could only emerge from isolation once we'd had negative test results eight days after our exposure. Even my roommates and I distanced from one another.

Thankfully, everything turned out fine, and none of us had Covid. But it was a painful reminder that we're still stuck somewhere in the long arc of Covid. Are we in the middle? The end? The middle of the end or the end of the middle?

It's convenient for people giving *divrei Torah* that in every parshah, there's always – at least if you squint – exactly the spiritual guidance necessary for the particular problem we're facing that week.

The spiritual guidance I'm thinking of this week is a little indirect – we're going to look at a *midrash* on one *pasuk*, one sentence, and then an interpretation of that *midrash*. But by the end, I'm hoping our tradition will have offered us a path through the darkness.

Our parshah describes Jacob blessing his sons – and some of his grandsons – right before he dies. The Torah describes the beginning of the scene:

And Jacob called his sons and said, “Come together that I may tell you what is to befall you in days to come. The exact Hebrew phrase the Torah uses for “days to come” is *b'acharit hayamim*. (Genesis: 49:1)

The phrase “*b'acharit hayamim*” is a strange phrase for Jacob to use. Although the JPS English Torah translates it as “days to come,” it also can be translated literally as “at the end of days,” which is how the King James Bible renders it.

Rashi, the most prominent medieval commentator on the Torah, was also struck by Jacob's unusual phrasing. In order to explain it, Rashi offers an interpretation of what "b'acharit hayamim" means based on earlier rabbinic traditions.

According to Rashi, Jacob wasn't saying that he would reveal what was going to happen in "days to come." Instead, Jacob was about to reveal the date of redemption – *acharit hayamim*, the literal end of days, as the King James Bible translated it.

Why would Jacob want to reveal the date of redemption to his sons? Why would he even be thinking about redemption as he's about to die?

Perhaps we can imagine that Jacob's sons are anxious about the future. Their father is about to die, and maybe they've also begun to get a sense that their decision to stay in Egypt might not turn out so well.

According to Rashi, Jacob knows that things will turn out all right in the end; he knows that there will be an eventual redemption of the Jewish people and of the whole world. And in this moment, perhaps Jacob notices his sons' anxieties about the future and wants to reassure them. He wants to tell them the *exact date* on which everything will be OK.

But, Rashi continues, according to rabbinic tradition, just before Jacob can reveal the date of the redemption to his sons the *shechinah*, the divine presence, leaves him. (Rashi on Genesis 49:1. See Genesis Rabbah 98:2 and the Babylonian Talmud Masechet Pesachim 56a.)

But what does that mean -- that the divine presence left him?

That, Rashi doesn't explain. At first glance, it sounds like it means that Jacob lost some sort of prophetic power. Perhaps just as he was going to reveal the date of the redemption, he suddenly couldn't remember it, or, worse, maybe he no longer believed in it.

The seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, offers a more complex explanation of what Rashi means when he says that the divine presence left Jacob. According to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Jacob still *knew* that there would be a redemption. It was just that he lost the ability to articulate it to his sons (Likutei Sichot vol.10, Vayehi 2).

The Lubavitcher Rebbe asserts that Jacob and his sons were on different spiritual levels – they were, as it were, tuned into different religious radio stations. While Jacob was tapped in to a deep well of spiritual nourishment, his sons were more focused on their earthly responsibilities.

As I understand the Lubavitcher Rebbe's words, it seems that he's saying that because of Jacob's deep relationship to God, Jacob had faith that the world could be redeemed: that all of existence could be radically transformed. His sons, by contrast, who did not enjoy that relationship with God, had trouble imagining that the world could change so drastically. Perhaps they were so focused on getting through famine and drought, ensuring they'd have enough harvest to last the year, that they didn't have the time, space, or energy to imagine a different world. They had to deal with urgent problems on a much more concrete level.

We, too, have to deal with urgent concrete problems. We have to mask up, stay distant, get tested, watch out for symptoms, keep up with the news, keep up with the protocols, check the CDC guidelines, and try to understand the very poorly worded CDC website. Like Jacob's sons, we might well find ourselves so immersed in our quotidian efforts to keep up with our lives that we don't have time to imagine a different material reality.

But the Lubavitcher Rebbe explains, we have another option. Instead of being like Jacob's sons, he says, we can be like Jacob— we can believe that a fundamentally different world is possible. The Rebbe argues that even though Jacob wasn't *able* to communicate his vision of redemption to his sons, the fact that he *tried* opened up a new spiritual pathway for all of us.

Specifically, he writes, “Jacob's desire to reveal the time of redemption to his sons gave each Jew a power. At all times, even when the divine presence has departed from them, even in the great spiritual absence and opaqueness of our time, in which the darkness is *kaful u'mechupal*, doubled and doubled over – even now, we have the eternal ability to reveal the moment of redemption.”

The phrase “the eternal ability to reveal the moment of redemption” is pretty vague. What does the Rebbe mean by this?

I think the Rebbe means that because of Jacob's efforts, all Jews – perhaps all people – can believe in the possibility of a redeemed world. As the Rebbe understands it, believing that the world can be redeemed doesn't come “naturally” to us – in fact, it's “natural” to believe that the world will always be the way it is.

What we mean by a “redeemed world” might be different from what the Rebbe means. He's talking about the actual advent of the Messianic age. For those of us for whom that language isn't compelling, we might say that Jacob's efforts offer us a model for believing that all of the tragedies, oppressions, traumas, and trials of our world might one day be healed.

But even with Jacob as our spiritual role model, it can be hard to imagine that the world could ever be other than how it is right now. It's hard to remember that there was a world before Covid – a time when we would have been shocked to walk into the supermarket to find everyone wearing masks, or a time when we'd never heard the term “social distancing” and if we did hear it, we might have assumed it meant taking some personal time.

But it isn't just Covid. We're living in a deeply broken world: a world in which so many need what so few have, a world still mired in racism, antisemitism, economic inequality, and violence.

My sixth-grade students have been learning the second prayer of the Amidah, *Atah Gibor Le'Olam*, which talks about God healing the sick, releasing the captives, and uplifting the fallen. Most of my students don't like the prayer. “How can we say God heals the sick when we're still in Covid?” “How can we say God frees the prisoners when so many people died in the Holocaust?”

One student, though, offered a different interpretation. “Maybe the people who wrote this were describing the world they wanted to live in.”

When we imagine the world we want to live in, we help make that world possible.

I think this is the deeper meaning of what the Rebbe is saying when he tells us that Jacob’s efforts give us the power to “reveal the moment of redemption.”

Not only do we have the ability to believe in a fundamentally different world, but our very *belief* that a different world is possible helps *make* a different world possible. It’s only when we believe that the world can change that we try to change it.

We’re about to daven the musaf Amidah. For many of us, as for my students, these prayers may not reflect our own theologies or beliefs about God and the world.

But even if that’s not the case, when we daven, we can still try to see the prayers through the interpretation that my student offered: we can imagine the world we want to live in and by imagining it, we can make it possible. We can help God bring redemption.

We can bring this same intention to the prayers that we might find it even harder to relate to, especially those that describe the rebuilding of the Temple and the resumption of sacrifices. Whatever our feelings about the Temple and sacrifices, we can appreciate that for the Rabbis, rebuilding the Temple and resuming sacrifices represented a redemption. For them, davening musaf was a way of stating – insisting – that redemption was possible, even in spite of all evidence to the contrary.

When we recite the description of the Temple and the sacrifices, let’s imagine a world in which these past 21 months are just a memory, a world of plenty, a world of justice, a world of equality. Let’s imagine it, and thereby bring that world one step closer. Let’s imagine it, and give ourselves the strength to go out and build it. *Bimhereh beyameinu*, soon and in our time.