

SEASONS OF THE MOON

The Month of Tevet

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Times Square, New York City. Piccadilly Circus, London. Le Champs Elysée, Paris. A million watts of electricity turning night into day. We live in a society which prides itself on being 24-hour, round-the-clock. "We never

close." Our culture has blurred the distinction between the two halves of the day so that, on a social level, night has become day. In an agrarian society, the cycle of life used to be dictated by the rise and fall of the sun. The cock crowed. The fields had to be plowed. But now, battery hens burn the midnight oil — or electricity. They, like us, live in a world where we can turn night into day at will. We make night vanish in a second. Nowadays — we can kill the night.

There are two views of the world which stand eternally and implacably opposed to each other. One view seeks to place everything in the glare of day. Its understanding is bounded by that which can be dissected on the operating table of science. What cannot be seen does not exist. What cannot be brought into the light is not there.

This is a world whose symbol is the sun that never waxes or wanes. It is always the same unblinking eye of fire. This is the world that wants to murder the night — to turn it

into day.

But there is another world — and another people. A people that counts its seasons by the moon. A people who will emerge out of a deep darkness, just like the new moon that seems to renew itself out of a pitch black sky. A people

in its darkest hour just before dawn. A people who lifts its gaze above the fluorescent glare of a world that knows no night.

The month of Tevet is the darkest time of the year. Its days are the shortest of the year and its nights the longest. The tribe associated with Tevet is the tribe of Dan. When the Children of Israel traveled and camped in the desert, they encircled the Holy Ark. The tribe of Dan was the most northerly encampment. The North is a dark cold place. The long nights of Tevet are even longer in the North. The Hebrew word for North — *tzafon* — is spelled the same as *tzafun* — which means hidden. The Talmud tells us that one of the names of the *yetzer hara* — the negative drive — is *tzafuni* (Succa 52).

Beginning on the eighth of Tevet, three days of spiritual darkness descended on the world. The first darkness was the translation into Greek of the Torah. King Ptolemy took 70

NIGHT KILLER



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NIGHT KILLER *continued*

great Torah Sages and confined them in separate cubicles and instructed them to translate the Torah. Hence its name — the Septuagint. With the translation of the Torah into Greek, the "lion which had been roaming free was put into a cage." The radiance of the Torah which shines through the sentences, the words and the letters of the Holy tongue, was shuttered into a closed room, its light constricted and obfuscated. For however accurate a translation may be, the Torah's fathomless depths, its mystical secrets, become truncated and lost when it speaks in another tongue.

The second day of darkness was the passing from this world of Ezra the Sofer on the ninth of Tevet. Ezra was among the last of the prophets. It was he who gave the Torah the letters that we recognize today — Ashurit script. By employing Ashurit, Ezra made the Torah accessible to all the people. The Torah's light was able to shine out to the least scholarly of the Jewish People. It was also Ezra who instituted the public reading of the Torah on Mondays, Thursdays and at *mincha* on Shabbat. Ezra brought Torah to the people. When his light went out on the ninth of Tevet, the world became darker, and the Torah — more constrained and confined.

On the tenth of Tevet, the armies of the Babylonian emperor, Nevuchadnetzar, led by his general Nevuzaradan began the siege on Jerusalem, resulting in the destruction of the first Holy Temple and the exile of the Jewish people to Babylon.

If you think about it, on the tenth of Tevet itself, ostensibly, nothing really tragic happened. No wall was

breached. No one died. Not a shot was fired. Only the siege was begun.

You can look at a siege in two ways. A siege stops the beleaguered city from obtaining help and sustenance from the outside. Eventually the hapless inhabitants capitulate because of starvation. However, there's another aspect to siege. A siege also stops anyone or anything getting out.

The tenth of Tevet is a tragedy of such enormous proportions because ever since that day, the Torah is itself confined under siege. It is confined in a world without prophecy, a world where what-you-see-is-what-you-get, where everything has to be glaringly on show. The Torah is trapped and confined in a padded cell whose unblinking lights are never extinguished twenty-four hours a day. And all we can hear is its beautiful muffled voice. For it is from Zion that Torah emanates to the world. And Zion was put under siege on the Tenth of Tevet.

If you count the total number of candles that we light on Chanuka, you'll find it comes to thirty-six. If you count the number of days from the 25th of Kislev, the day when Chanuka begins, till the end of Tevet, that number is also 36.

Chanuka spreads its light across two months. A month of light and a month of darkness. And even after the last night of Chanuka is over

and the blaze of all its eight candles has gone out, and it seems that the night is flooded by the neon glare of artificial light, those thirty-six hidden candles burn on in the days of Tevet for the people of the moon like the thirty-six hidden *tzaddikim*, righteous people, on whose shoulders this world is standing.

THE UNSEEN HAND

*of all the worldly things
that reveal
the Unseen Hand,
love
must be
the most beautiful*

Sources:

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