



Bo: Let there Be Light!

January 2026/Shevat 5786 | Rabbi Alexander Davis

“Then God said to Moses, ‘Hold out your arm toward the sky that there may be darkness upon the land of Egypt, a darkness that can be touched.’ Moses held out his arm toward the sky and thick darkness descended upon all the land of Egypt for three days. People could not see one another, and for three days no one could move about; but all the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings.”

וַיֹּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדוֹ עַל־הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיְהִי חֹשֶׁךְ־אֲפֹלָה בְּכָל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם שְׁלֹשַׁת יָמִים:
לֹא־רָאוּ אִישׁ אֶת־אָחִיו וְלֹא־קָמוּ אִישׁ מִמַּתְחָתָיו שְׁלֹשַׁת יָמִים וּלְכָל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הָיָה אֹרֶךְ בְּמוֹשְׁבֹתָם

The plague of darkness. The punishment came from God, but it seems to me, it was, in effect, a self-inflicted punishment. It was “*middah-kneged middah*,” poetic justice. The darkness that descended over Egypt mirrored the moral blindness of the Egyptians. Just as they failed to see the humanity of the Israelites, just as they failed to see the cruelty of their oppressive measures, so too, with the ninth plague, Egypt was plunged into darkness. “People could not see one another.” So, the Egyptians went unnoticed. They were now unseen. And this was not just any darkness. It was so thick, it was paralyzing. The Egyptians couldn’t get up. They couldn’t move. Not so for the Israelites, we are told. They enjoyed light.

I hardly have to tell you about the darkness of these days, and I am not referring to sunset at 4:41pm.

This past week, I joined over 600 clergy from across the denominational spectrum—rabbis, pastors, ministers, priests, imams, monks and Zen masters, shamans and more—and from across the US—from Seattle to San Francisco, Boston to Miami, to Knoxville, TN—to learn about that darkness and to understand how we might grow a flame to push back against its encroachment. All day Thursday and part of Friday, we heard from powerful speakers who put current events in a larger historical framework. We listened to reports from observers on the ground sharing what they’ve seen during what the government calls this ICE surge. We talked theology and discussed practical strategies to strengthen communities in this period of turmoil.

For me, one of the most powerful moments was an excursion to Lake Street where we visited with a business owner, someone well-known in the Latino community. We were a small group who showed up unannounced. But standing next to the checkout counter, the owner welcomed us and generously shared his story. The store, he told us, used to gross a million dollars a month; now not even \$200,000. But the money didn’t matter, he said. “I know I am heading

toward bankruptcy. But really, it's the people I am worried about. I used to have 70 employees, now I have a skeletal crew of 12. Four who were here legally were rounded up. People are afraid to come to work so much so, that my store has become a shelter." He pointed to two aisles he had closed off with a curtain. Now, between the soda and the canned vegetables, there's a place to sleep. Of course, that means these employees are now separated from their children and have delegated to him to be their DOPA, their parental authority. Sometimes he hides the kids in his car to bring them to see their parents.

"If there are criminals among us, we don't want them here in Minnesota," he said. "But that's not most of the people being picked up. They are everyday people contributing to our community. I don't care if someone works for ICE," he continued. "But why do they have to be so cruel? Just be humane." And with tears rolling down his cheek, he told us about an older gentleman who was leaving the store, who was picked up, put in the trunk of a car and taken away.

It is not just family and neighbors who are speaking out. This week, local law enforcement saw their off-duty officers being stopped without cause. "We cannot let people in our communities think that local law enforcement leadership is okay with actions that we know are not only just wrong, but illegal," said the Hennepin County Sheriff. "We demand more from our federal government, more professionalism, more accountability, more humanity. We demand lawful policing that respects human dignity."

"Lo ra'u ish et achiv." The darkness was so deep, the Egyptians didn't see one another. *"Lo ra'u ish et achiv,"* they didn't see they were brethren. They didn't see their shared humanity. As the Gerer Rebbe taught, "The greatest darkness is when a person can't see another and therefore doesn't emphasize with his *tzuris*, his troubles, his pain. *"K'sheh ein ish ro'eh et rei'eyhu, v'eino mishtatef b'tza'ar hazulat, lo ra'u ish achiv."*

They didn't see the other. They didn't see the pain they were causing. They didn't see the dehumanizing effect of their oppression. And when darkness descended, *"lo kamu ish mitachtav."* The Egyptians couldn't get up. The darkness was so thick, it was disorienting, it was paralyzing and it was immobilizing. It was almost weighty. It kept them from standing up and from rising up, the Egyptian taskmasters and the everyday Egyptians.

One training I attended got me thinking about this description in a different light. The training explored the difference between a bystander and an upstander. A bystander and an upstander. A bystander is someone who sees harm happening and has not yet moved into any role of supporting those who are being harmed, attacked or bullied.

By contrast, an upstander is a person who speaks or acts in support of an individual or a cause, particularly someone who stands up for and deescalates on behalf of a person that is facing violence.

Undoubtedly, there were Egyptians who were not directly involved in oppressing the Israelites. They didn't own brick factories. They didn't rely on slaves for their businesses. They were neighbors with the Israelites. Their kids even played together. But they were bystanders. They weren't moved to relieve the suffering. They ignored it or maybe didn't even see it as they went about their business as normal.

The Torah doesn't report on any Egyptian upstanders. But that's a pretty good description of Moshe and God. And a compelling call to all of us.

We will not relieve the darkness of this moment, this time of pain and fear, this time of isolation and heartbreak, until everyday Minnesotans, and until your average Americans, moves from bystanders to upstanders—from ignoring to seeing. We won't know relief and ensure liberty until bystanders become upstanders, until we move from seeing to acting and speaking out. For that, we need more light.

I am proud of the ways that Beth El congregants have stood up in the past few weeks. You've joined neighborhood watches, you've organized rides, you've delivered food, you've collected tzedakah to help neighbors not working. I've seen your powerful and poignant Facebook posts. And we as clergy and as a congregation have signed on to statements that are the envy of my colleagues from around the country. "How'd you get so many rabbis to agree on something?" they ask. Because that is what our Torah calls upon us to do and what God expects of us, we answer.

Chaverim, I know some issues are fraught, are divisive, are controversial. But sometimes, it just isn't so difficult. No one here wants to see an older gentleman, an American citizen taken at gunpoint without a warrant and led outside wearing nothing but his underwear, as we saw this week. No one here wants to see a five-year-old wearing a blue bobbed winter hat arrested even though his family had entered this country legally, as we saw this week. And people of all political persuasions should be calling it what it is—cruel and outrageous. It's a moment that demands a response. And we have the words and the wherewithal.

"Ulkol bnai yisrael haya or b'moshvotam." For the Israelites there was light. And for us there is too. We felt that light as interfaith clergy who disagree on theology and politics but came together in song and what my colleagues at Westminster call fellowship.

I saw that light Friday morning volunteering with other clergy at Dios Hablo Hoy, a church-turned-food-shelf in Bloomington. In the beginning of December when this surge was just starting, they thought maybe there is a need for food. Maybe we can feed 20 people. They put out the call. 2000 showed up. Since the killing of Renée Good, the numbers have skyrocketed. Today, having turned their sanctuary and social hall into a distribution center, they are serving 1500 people a day.

It wasn't just light from feeding the hungry that I saw. It was from breaking down silos and seeing one another. Sergio, the pastor, told us that the first people to volunteer to help were from the LGBTQ community even though his church had no previous relationship with that population. It's light that came from volunteers who have come out in record numbers. It's the light from people like Pastor Sergio who is guided by his faith that God will provide and by his every expanding heart. "We are just out here loving people," he said. "I pray for ICE too. They are human. I just pray they do their job with dignity."

And the light emanating from hearty and open-hearted Minnesotans kept me warm as I marched through downtown in frigid temperatures.

I recognize that I am privileged. I am white. I live in a bubble. I don't fear for myself or my family. But I am heartbroken for our city and worried for our country. And I know others are not so lucky. They are living or hiding in the shadows.

Our job as Jews and as Minnesotans is to be a light. We have supported individuals and families, within and outside of the congregation. We have worked through Beth El and through other organizations. Kol Hakavod. But there is so much more we can and must do. We must move from protesting to organizing, from responding to this as a single immediate crisis to a sustained effort, an expanded effort not just of individuals but of the congregation.

Protesting is driven by urgency; organizing is driven by endurance. It means planning not only for the crisis in front of us, but for the ones we know will come next long after the headlines have moved on.

Protesting is showing up when the phone rings; organizing is making sure the phone doesn't have to ring every time. Mobilizing depends on a handful of heroic people who always say yes. Organizing makes it possible for many people to say yes, even in small ways, over a long period of time.

Protesting can look like writing a check or delivering a meal. Organizing looks like a relationship—showing up again and again, learning names, listening deeply, and allowing ourselves to be changed by the people and partners we walk alongside because the work of justice and chesed is not something we do for others, but something we do with others.

What does this look like at Beth El? That means growing our volunteer base, strengthening current partnerships with organizations like STEP, developing additional partnerships with other organizations and faith communities, growing the number of people taking on leadership responsibilities, and on and on. As Rabbi Goldberg said last week, not just having a chesed committee or a chesed chavurah but becoming a chesed congregation. Again, I encourage you to speak to him or to dream together.

“U’kol bnai yisrael haya or b’moshvotam.” The Israelites had light. We do too. Let’s use it for good. Let us shine a light of *Tzedek* (justice) by witnessing when legal procedures are disregarded, shine a light of compassion by increasing our support for the vulnerable and those in need, shine a light of love and solidarity on our immigrant neighbors who are scared, shine a light of appreciation on government leaders and on lawyers who are committed to upholding the constitution. Let us amplify the light emanating from community organizers and passionate volunteers who are fighting for our democracy, shine a light of gratitude on our law enforcement who are doing their utmost to keep us safe. And let us draw on the light of Torah, from the core story of our tradition to shine a light of hope that will guide our journey from degradation to dignity, from oppression to liberation, from subjugation to redemption.