



Under the Clouds: **Torah Reflections on *Pekuday***

Exodus 21:1 – 24:18

Recently, a friend of mine was going through a very hard time and she characterized her experience as one of “darkness”. She gathered a small group of friends together and asked us if we would like to meet once a month to “explore the dark” through writing and sharing. When we arrived for our second meeting, we discovered that each of us had something very similar to say. “It was not really darkness that I recall in my life as being so hard. It’s the murk.” Another woman said, “I love the dark. And I love the light. But I have a really hard time with the gray.” A third added, “What’s really difficult for me is the clouds!”

I share this story here because the end of the *parasha* Pekuday, which also concludes the Book of Exodus, offers compelling images of dark and light and, in particular, of clouds. It reminds us that there was a cloud that covered the Tent of Meeting when God’s Presence filled the Tabernacle (Exodus 40:34-38). During that time, Moses could not enter the Tent. When the cloud lifted, it was then that the Israelites set out on their various trips. As long as the cloud remained, they would stay put. What is not stated here, but we know from elsewhere in the Torah, the cloud would move with the Israelites. A pillar of fire (light) by night (darkness) and a cloud by day would move along with the people as they carried their Tabernacle on their journey.

As one moves through the journey of life, there are many times when there is darkness and when a particular light (a loving partner, a caring community, a strong faith) makes it possible to continue. That metaphor seems easy to understand. But what is this about the “cloud by day”? Why would there be a cloud that covers the Tent of Meeting and what does it mean that it moved with the Israelites by day? What was this cloud? How did it function? What did it mean?

When you think of a cloud you might imagine something soft and white and ethereal, perhaps with an angel perched on top. Or maybe you picture a dark and stormy rain cloud, about to burst forth with precipitation. When I think of a cloudy day, I think of a day when the sun is obscured, when it is gray and murky outside. I know that there are days when it is like that *inside* as well, inside ourselves that is. Cloudy, murky, gray.

Illness, like life, is a journey. As one moves through the journey of illness, there are many cloudy times. The weeks and sometimes months of diagnosis and treatment are often most difficult precisely because they are so murky and unclear. Then there are times when healing is slowly happening, but to us it is imperceptible. Healing, too, can be experienced as a time of uncertainty—a cloudy time. At the end of life, as well, we may

find ourselves, neither here nor there, in places of great uncertainty and unclarity. We experience those clouds in our very souls and they are heavy and hard to bear.

Does it help to imagine that cloud not inside us but outside, poised over the Tent of Meeting to indicate that God's Presence is there? Or better still, to imagine that it was precisely the cloud which was seen as capable of guiding us on our journey through the wilderness? At moments of inner confusion, often related to my own or a loved ones illness, I sometimes feel that a cloud has descended into my spirit. I then try to remember that the cloud itself may be a guide. No, it is not a bright light, and it is not pure darkness either. It is sometimes the hardest state of all. Yet, our Torah portion sees it as signaling the Divine Presence. Perhaps we can remember to look for the Presence not only in the light, or even in the dark, but, perhaps most challenging of all, in the cloudy.

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This Torah Reflection was written by Rabbi Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer, the Associate Professor and Director of Multifaith Studies at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and author of *Parenting as a Spiritual Journey* (Jewish Lights). The Torah Reflections series is published by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties. More information and healing-oriented resources can be found at www.JewishHealingCenter.org.

