



Plague of Darkness

Grade Level(s)

4th Grade and up

Goals for the Lesson/Activity

Students will

- Explore and understand the Torah text and commentaries regarding the Plague of Darkness
- Explain why the Plague of Darkness was so horrible
- Gain insight that can be shared at students' own Seders
- Make connections between what the Darkness might have been like for Egyptians and how students experience darkness

Materials needed

- Copies of the attached commentaries from Rashi and Ramban for each group of students
- Ask students to bring in a blanket or bath towel on the day you will be doing this activity

Based on the Sharing Options that you offer to students (see Description of Activities), you might also need:

- iPads or laptops
- Paper, markers, crayons
- Black and white paint
- Construction paper

Background for Teachers

Review the Ten Plagues:

Blood	דָּם
Frogs	צְפַרְדֵּי
Lice	כִּנִּים
Wild Beasts	עֲרֹב
Cattle plague	דָּבָר
Boil	שָׁחִין
Hail	בָּרָד
Locust	אַרְבֶּה
Darkness	חֹשֶׁךְ
Death of the Firstborn	מָכַת בְּכֹרֹת



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Some might say that the plagues increase in cruelty; if so, why is Darkness almost at the end, right before Death of the Firstborn? Why is Darkness so bad? Unlike the other plagues, this plague did not seem to cause any physical pain or death to the Egyptians. Review the Torah text in Exodus 10:21-23 and the Rashi and Ramban commentary quoted below.

Description of Activities

1. Make your room as dark as possible: draw the blinds, turn off the lights, etc. Ask students to walk around the room and suddenly ask them to stop. Call out the names of half the students; ask these students to close their eyes and to stop moving. (If they are older you can provide blindfolds.) The other half of the students can continue to walk around. Do not tell students how long the simulation will take. Make it last for 1 or 2 minutes and then switch roles.

OPTION: You may choose to ask students to carry the towel/blanket that they brought with them as they walk. When you ask them to stop and close their eyes, also ask them to wrap the blanket/towel around themselves so that their eyes are further covered. This allows students to “feel the darkness” in preparation for your discussion of the text.

2. Bring the class together and talk about any emotions/thoughts that students had while in “darkness.”
 - a. What does it feel like to be in total darkness?
 - b. Are you more/less comfortable in the dark?
 - c. What are some things that are harder to do in darkness?
 - d. Are there times that you might be more comfortable in the dark?
3. Explain that the goal of this exercise is to consider the darkness the Egyptians experienced during the Ten Plagues. Just as some students were in the dark and some in the light, the same happened to the Egyptians and Israelites, respectively.
4. Ask students to recall the Ten Plagues and sort them in the correct order. Reflect on the order of the Plagues:
 - a. Why do you think God chose this order?
 - b. What might be the significance of the order of the Plagues?
 - c. One idea is that the Plagues are in order from the easiest to the hardest to endure. Do you agree? Why or why not? Justify your answer.



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5. Share Exodus 10:21-23, highlighting the words that are underlined here:

“Then Adonai said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand toward the sky so that darkness will spread over Egypt—that one may feel the darkness.” So Moses stretched out his hand toward the sky, and total darkness covered all Egypt for three days. No one could see anyone else or leave his place for three days. And there was light for all of B’nei Yisrael in their dwelling-place”

*Note: Commentators debate the precise meaning of the Hebrew. We have chosen to translate it as “that one may feel the darkness” in accordance with Ibn Ezra and the Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon.

6. Continue the discussion:
- How is the darkness described here different than typical darkness? How is the darkness of the Plague different from the darkness you experienced at the beginning of this activity?
 - What is meant by darkness that “one may feel?”
 - Why is darkness so terrible, terrible enough to be one of the Ten Plagues?
 - What might be the relationship between *darkness* and *death of the firstborn* since they occur one after the other?
7. Divide students into *hevruta* (pairs) and provide each pair with a copy of either the Rashi or Ramban commentary, or both. Ask each pair to read the commentary and choose a way to share what they learned from it with the class. Ask students to emphasize:
- The intensity of the darkness that the Egyptians experienced
 - How the commentaries speak to the intense darkness and the reasons for the darkness
 - If you choose to provide students with both commentaries, ask that they address the similarities and differences of the 2 commentaries
8. Refer to the *Differentiation Options* section below for ideas on sharing.



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Differentiation Options

Knowing that students learn and interact with information in a variety of ways and modalities, the following options are provided to adjust the above lesson to meet the unique needs of your learners.

Multiple Ways to Share (and some Tech Tools that correspond!)

- Hold a press conference or newscast. (Try [AudioBoom](#).)
- Hold a debate between Rashi and Ramban about the Darkness.
- Write a survey with questions that you might ask an Egyptian or Israelite who experienced the Darkness. Imagine what their answers would have been. Record this information and share results in a graph. (Try [Google Forms](#) or [Google Sheets](#).)
- Highlight major ideas in a comic strip or graphic novel. (Try [Strip Designer](#) on the iPad.)
- Represent themes using song and/or dance.
- Craft a paper or digital scrapbook page to emphasize themes, ideas, and personal connections on Darkness. (Try [Popplet](#) on the iPad or [Padlet](#) on any browser.)
- Represent the Plague of Darkness using a variety of art materials; consider using varying shades of black in unique ways.
- Consider Darkness from the perspective of nature. How did the Darkness affect what was happening in the natural world around the Egyptians and Israelites? Think in terms of crops, animals, etc.



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Rashi Commentary

Read:

Exodus 10:22 **There was total darkness... three days:** *Thick darkness in which they did not see each other for those three days, and another three days of darkness twice as dark as this, so that no one rose from his place. If he was sitting, he was unable to stand, and if he was standing, he was unable to sit. Now why did He bring darkness upon them [the Egyptians]? Because there were among the Israelites in that generation wicked people who did not want to leave [Egypt]. They died during the three days of darkness, so that the Egyptians would not see their downfall and say, "They too are being smitten like us." Also, the Israelites searched [the Egyptians' dwellings during the darkness] and saw their vessels. When they were leaving [Egypt] and asked for them, and they [the Egyptians] said, "We have nothing," [each Israelite] would say to him, "I saw it in your house, and it is in such and such a place."*

Think & Share:

According to Rashi, what is the reason for the plague of darkness? How does Rashi explain darkness being near the end of the Ten Plagues?

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Ramban Commentary

Read:

Exodus 10:23 **No one could see anyone else or leave his place:** *"... [T]here was total darkness, which is to say a thick calamity that came down from the heavens, which is why it said, 'He stretched out his hand to the heavens' (Exodus 10:21) to bring down a great darkness which would descend upon them and which would extinguish every light, just as in all deep caverns and in all extremely dark places light cannot exist [as it is swallowed up in the density of thick darkness.]..."*

Think & Share:

How does Ramban describe the darkness? Where/when might you experience this level of darkness or something close to it?

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