

# FINDING GOD IN THE SHADOWS

RABBI ANGELA WARNICK BUCHDAHL, PARASHAT VAYAKHEL 5776

## FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

### BIG QUESTION: HOW CAN WE FIND MEANING IN MOMENTS OF DARKNESS?

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In this sermon, Rabbi Buchdahl explores our propensity toward what Barbara Brown Taylor has called a “full-on solar spirituality,” which envisions encounters with God as wholly “sunny,” or positive. She urges us to consider the lessons that we can learn from our time in the “shadows,” when things are more difficult. This discussion will allow participants to consider the theological and practical implications of creating a dichotomy between light and dark, and to reflect on how they might find the Divine even in moments of darkness.

### DISTRIBUTING THE SERMON:

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Links to a video recording of the sermon, as well as a copy of the written text, are available on the CORE Groups page of the Central Synagogue website. A few days before your meeting, you should contact your group members to let them know which sermon you will be discussing, so that they can watch and/or read it in preparation for the discussion. (It is helpful to include a link to the materials in your email). In order to keep the sermon fresh in everyone’s minds, you may wish to recommend that participants make a note of any questions or reactions they have immediately after watching it. Even if you saw the sermon in person, please at least review the written text before the meeting, so that you can participate fully in the discussion.

### NAME TAGS:

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For at least the first several sessions, please ask everyone in the group to wear a name tag (or, if seated around a table, to place a name card in front of them). Even if most people know one another, it is important that no one feel uncomfortable for not remembering everyone else’s name.

### INTRODUCTION AND ICE-BREAKER:

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Ask each person to introduce themselves, and to share with the group:

- (a) their name; and
- (b) the first memory that comes to mind of being in shade or darkness

## OPENING ACTIVITY

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### *Materials:*

Pens; 2 different colors of Post-its.

This activity will allow participants to become more conscious of their tendency to assign positive or negative value to images of light and dark.

### **Option #1:**

Pass out Post-its of the same color to each person. Ask everyone to take 2 minutes to use the post-its to write as many images or associations that come to mind when they hear the words “light” or “sunshine.” (One association per post-it).

When the 2 minutes are up, pass out Post-It’s in the second color, and ask participants to take another 2 minutes to come up with images or associations for the words “dark” or “shadow.”

When they are done, ask everyone to arrange their post-its on a table or wall, along a spectrum from “very negative” to very positive.”

Stand back and look. What is the distribution of colors representing “light” and “dark” along this spectrum? Are there more “light” associations on the positive end? More negative associations with dark? Ask: How challenging would it be to come up with associations for either image that would balance out the picture?

### **Option #2:**

Ask each person to think of one association they have with the image of “light” or “sunshine,” and one association they have with the image of “dark” or “shadow.” Have them jot down their answers. Then go around the room, and invite everyone to share their answer, first with respect to light, then with respect to darkness. Reflect on the extent to which the associations for each of these images is mostly positive, negative, or mixed. If the associations with light are mostly positive, you may wish to ask go around again, and ask people to come up with a negative association for light, and vice versa for dark.

## TEXT STUDY

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Attached is a text-study sheet that you may use to facilitate a discussion of the themes and issues raised by the sermon. Please make sure to either make a copy for each member or ask everyone to bring it themselves, in paper or electronic form. If you choose the latter course, you may still wish to print a few extra copies for those who may forget to bring theirs.

Here are some things to consider:

- (a) It is customary to recite a blessing before studying Torah.

**BARUCH** atah, Adonai  
Eloheinu, Melech haolam,  
asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav  
v'tzivanu laasok b'divrei Torah.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יי  
אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו  
וְצִוָּנוּ לְעִסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה.

**BLESSED ARE YOU**, Adonai our God,  
Sovereign of the universe,  
who hallows us with mitzvot,  
commanding us to engage with words of Torah.

- (b) Our tradition teaches us that Torah study can be a source of healing and blessing. You may want to ask members of the group if they would like to dedicate their study to anyone in particular. This is a nice way to help the group get to know one another, and to learn about significant events in each other's lives.
- (c) Depending on the preferences of your group, you may choose to distribute this sheet the week before the meeting, so that participants will be familiar with the texts, and can begin to think about their own responses.
- (d) You can choose to either work through the texts as one group, or to break up into pairs ("hevruta") for an initial period of discussion, and then allow the pairs to share something they learned with the group.
- (e) The ultimate goal of these groups is not for participants to master a particular number of Jewish texts, but to connect with one another. If group members are sharing their own stories and experiences in a way that seems fruitful, there is no need to cut off that conversation in order to make sure you "finish" the text sheet. If you are unsure, you can always poll the group to decide whether it is time to move on.

## CONCLUSION

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We recommend that you wind down the text study about 15 minutes before the end of the session, to allow for a meaningful conclusion. This conclusion may take any shape you wish. Some possibilities are:

- (a) Ask each person to name one insight they have gained, or one question that they are taking with them.  
(b) Ask each person to offer a blessing to the group, drawn from your learning together.  
(c) Ask each person to say one word to represent how they are feeling coming out of your discussion.