

The Most Amazing Holocaust Rescue Story You Never Heard

After reading that God had told Noah that he was going to cause a great flood to obliterate all that He had created and that Noah did everything God told him to do, the Torah says: “Noah came, with his sons, his wife, and his sons’ wives, into the ark *mipnei mei hamabul*: because of the waters of the flood.”

It is easy to pass over and miss the significance of this verse and read it just as a transitional clause explaining what happens next. But Rabbi Yohanan of the third century picks up on what seems to be a relatively innocuous statement and zeroes in on the meaning and implication of one word in the sentence, the word *mipnei*, which means “because”.

As recorded in the midrashic collection, Bereshit Rabbah, he reads it literally, as causative, which leads him to conclude that it was because of the waters of the flood that Noah entered the ark. In other words, it was only once the rain started to accumulate and rise up, mipnei, on account of the waters of the flood, only then did Noah go into the ark with his family.

Despite all the warning God had given him, all the time he had taken to prepare for the great deluge, despite all this, in his heart, he suggests, Noah didn’t believe it was actually going to happen. Rabbi Yohanan concludes, “Had the water not reached his ankles, Noah would not have entered the *teivah*, the ark.”

Although Noah had spent years building the ark, it wasn’t until the waters actually started to engulf him that he believed the flood was really going to happen, which leads me to ask – How often we are like Noah? How often do we see signs all around us, yet ignore them and not heed dire signs of warning?

I think about this commentary because I just returned from a 3 day meeting in Israel of the Advisory board of the Combat Anti-Semitism Movement where we convened to discuss efforts to combat the disturbing rise in anti-Semitism, of which Kanye West and his stupid remarks are just the tip of the iceberg

In meetings with Isaac Herzog, the President of Israel, Natan Sharansky and others, we discussed the rise of anti-Semitism in this country and around the world, as well as receiving security briefings on the situation Israel faces with Lebanon and the challenges posed by Iran and the terrorist network it sponsors throughout the region and the world. Focusing on the mission of the organization, we heard a fascinating lecture by cbt member David Bernstein on “How the Social Justice movement Fuels Anti-Semitism”. Dina Porat, head of the Jewish history Department at Tel Aviv University and chief historian of Yad VaShem, who served as academic adviser to the Task Force that developed IHRA, the widely accepted definition of anti-Semitism, which is going to be voted on by the Montgomery County Council on Tuesday, and which is opposed by CAIR and a few rabbis in our community, refuted the claims of its opponents and explained the need and justification for it.

With so much packed into just three days, I will share with you just one story I heard at the opening dinner as told to us by the Prime Minister of Albania, for it opened a window into a chapter of our history I was not aware of.

Albania is a small mountainous majority Muslim country of less than 2 million people in the southeast coast of the Balkan peninsula. At the time of the outbreak of World War II it was home to 200 Jews. When the war ended, with Jews from surrounding countries such as Greece, Serbia, Yugoslavia and elsewhere fleeing and finding refuge in Albania, it had 2,000 Jews -- making it the only country in Europe to have more Jews after the war than it had prior to the war.

Following the German occupation in 1943, the Muslim and Christian population joined together to defy the Nazis and refused to comply with orders to turn over lists of Jews residing in the country. Instead they helped to hide them.

Various governmental agencies provided many Jewish families with fake documents that allowed them to intermingle among the rest of the population. Jewish children were provided false names and id papers so they could continue to attend school. The Albanians not only protected their Jewish citizens, but when it was under Italian occupation, provided sanctuary to Jewish refugees who had arrived from other countries, and who faced deportation to concentration camps.

At the opening dinner, Edi Rama, the Prime Minister told us a fascinating story I had never heard before.

In one of the towns where the Nazis had demanded that the Jews be turned over to be deported to concentration and death camps, the director of the hospital ordered that all the patients of the hospital be removed. He orchestrated an operation which moved the patients to other places around the city. He then saw to it that the town's Jews be brought in and that the hospital beds be filled with Jews.

Outside and all around the hospital they posted signs which said, "Warning: Patients with highly contagious deadly disease inside. Stay out. Do not enter."

And it worked. The Nazi soldiers did not enter, and the Jews who were there were all saved.

The Prime Minister added, as amazing as this story is, what is equally remarkable is that none of the patients, nor the families of the patients who were moved, nor any of the people who worked in the hospital breathed a word about this to the occupying forces.

The Prime Minister said that if Stephen Spielberg knew about this incident, it is what he should make into a movie.

Going back to my opening comments about Noah not entering the ark until he actually saw the flood, the Kedushat Levi suggests that Noah was reluctant and hesitant to enter not because he didn't believe that the *mabul*, the flood would occur, but because he didn't believe in himself, and that is why he froze. Action such as that displayed by the courageous people of Albania requires confidence and belief in oneself. They acted on the Albanian principle of honor, known as Besa,

a cornerstone of their ethics, it is an ethical code not to violate the trust of others, to protect people in time of need. It means to keep one's word.

Indeed, words are important.

The word “*tevah*” which means ark and is so central to our Torah portion also means “word.” We read that the ark had a *tzohar*, a word which appears nowhere else in the Torah. Most of our commentators interpret it as a window, or perhaps it was a precious stone giving off light.

But according to one interpretation, the *tzohar* of the *tevah* refers not to the light in the ark, but the light of our words and teaches us: “*she'tereh lehair hateva ha yotzeh mepeecha* – See to it that you illuminate the world with the word that comes out of your mouth.”

What we say, the words we speak should contribute light to the world and be a counter force to the forces of darkness.

Tsohar ta'aseh latevah: each of us, in our own way, can add light and understanding to our world -- by speaking words of encouragement, kindness, and respectfulness. The words we speak create the society we live in, and can lead to acts of compassion, or of hatred and intolerance.

Those whose words are hateful generate darkness, mistrust, and ultimately can lead to violence, as manifested in the violent intrusion and attack yesterday on Paul Pelosi, husband of Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi. We should work towards a society that repudiates hateful words, where anti-Semitic words and anti-Semitic acts are not accepted, for as has been said so often, words have consequences. They lead to actions.

May we be among those whose words bring light to the world, for this is humanity's greatest hope.

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October 30, 2022*