

## “The Teivah as a model for Engaging and Retreating”

Parshat Noach 5781

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I am sure by now you have seen it! An amazing video ad put out by the two gubernatorial candidates (one democrat and one republican) for the State of Utah. Instead of it being an attack ad it was a unity ad.

Republican Spencer Cox and Democrat Chris Pererson appear together in the 30 second ad. While they are competing against each other and each one wants your vote, they have come to realize that they must “disagree without hating each other” and “debate issues without degrading each other.” They say that their “common values transcend [their] political differences and the strength of the nation rests on [their] ability to see that.”

I was so inspired by this beautiful act of civility. It made me think of something from our Parshah. In this week's parshah, G-d gets very upset at the entire world. There is so much fighting and corruption. G-d literally says that He regrets creating the world in the first place. These words are some of the most shocking in the entire Torah! We just read Bereishit and learned of all of the details of creation with the inspiring climax of “And G-d saw all that He had done and it was very good.” And then in just a few chapters, things go from excellent to bad to terrible. And now G-d wants to reverse course. We are only able to read these verses because we know the end of the story. We know about the rainbow and the promise and the rest of history. But in that moment, it didn't just seem like the world was coming to its end. The world was quite literally coming to its end.

The year 1656 from creation (the year of the flood) might have even been worse than the year 2020!

And it's at that moment when G-d says to Noach - “build a Teivah (an ark)”. Does the Teivah have any meaning for us in this challenging year of 2020?

The Slonimer Rebbe (Nesivos Shalom) offers a fascinating insight about the Teivah. First, he insists that the Teivah must have spiritual resonance for all generations as the Torah is not simply a book of history.

He points out the teaching of the Zohar that the Teivah of Noach is connected to shabbat. For the word “Noach” means rest and shabbat is the day of rest (יום מנוחה). The logical conclusion is that shabbat is our Teivah from the raging destruction all around us. The Slonimer has a beautiful term to refer to the Teivah in our lives. He calls it a פינה טהורה - a pure corner. In other words, no matter what is going on outside, we all have פינות טהורות (little pure corners) where we can turn to take cover and recharge.

Sometimes the Pure Corner might be shabbat as the Slonimer suggests. Everyone knows how wonderful it is to be in the shabbat electronic device free zone for 24 hours especially when being bombarded by awful political attack ads and other terrible news all week. Shabbat would be worth it just for providing us this Teivah.

But it's not only shabbat. Maybe there is a place in the woods (which are beautiful now with all the fall foliage) or another favorite spot which is our Pinah Tehorah. We always have to know

where our Pinah Tehorah is so that we can flee to it when things are too challenging outside. (As an aside, we have to be grateful that because we are mostly upper middle class people living in the suburbs with cars, it is easy for us to access our Pinah Tehorah. But there are many people in the world, especially those who are poor or vulnerable in other ways, who have much less access to a Teivah.)

But one of the challenges of the lesson of the Pinah Tehorah is that it assumes a certain level of disengagement with the world around us. It is a certain form of escapism. We know that Noach's propensity towards escapism is criticized by the rabbis? They compare Noach to Avraham and Moshe and point out that while when the going got tough, Noach simply hid in the Teivah, Avraham (and Moshe even more so) stepped up and challenged G-d and pushed for a better result for the whole world.

So how can we have our Pinot Tehorot without falling into a place of escapism and ignoring the real challenges of life?

I think that we have to have Noach's Teivah and Avraham's Lech Lecha in front of us all of the time. At times, when the challenge is too great and when it feels like it is corrosive for our neshama, we know that we must retreat into our Teivah. But then we are recharged and perhaps have gained some perspective, it is time to once again emerge into the battleground and face our challenges.

And this is why the video of Republican Spencer Cox and Democrat Chris Pererson really came in helpful. For me it represented a Pinah Tehorah within the larger battle. It wasn't escapism but it also was not a full on fight mode. It was an opportunity to engage in a way that felt like it was a Pinah Tehorah in the midst of the challenges. It is perhaps these middle spaces where we should be occupying the majority of our time. Shabbos is the time for the Teivah. It is a holy form of escapism. Every once in a while during the week we really have to fight (very passionately for our values and beliefs). But hopefully most of the time, we can find a civil Pinah Tehorah in the middle of the mess of the challenges of life.

Wishing everyone a shabbat shalom!

Rabbi Antine