

THE ESSENCE OF FAITH

Bo 5779

I.

I MADE A RESOLUTION ON January 1st to stop buying random things off Amazon. I have a tendency to get swept up in the moment at the idea of an item that seems crucial in its use to me or my family and I have to buy it. This year, I decided, I had to be more careful with what I bought.

Also on January 1st we got together with some of our closest friends in Highland Park, NJ, the community in which we used to live. My friends were telling me about a *sefer* they had begun exploring by Rabbenu Bachya, the 13th-century Spanish rabbi, entitled *kad ha-kemach*. It's a work arranged alphabetically that is literally an A–Z of Judaism from the perspective of Rabbenu Bachya. It sounded fascinating. I had to read it. There was, my friends told me, an English translation by Rabbi Dr. Charles B. Chavel – one of the great translators of medieval Jewish works – that would make *kad ha-kemach* incredibly skim-able.

Also on January 1st I broke my resolution to stop buying random things off Amazon and, this past week, the translation of *kad ha-kemach*, entitled *Encyclopaedia of Torah Thoughts*, arrived on our doorstep. Eager to discover what lay within I turned to the pages concerning Pesach to see if Rabbenu Bachya raised something interesting relating to our *parashah* this morning, which reveals the culmination of the Exodus, *yetziat mitzrayim*.

Rabbenu Bachya uses Pesach – and by extension, *parashat bo* – as an opportunity to discuss the meaning of faith. And while the direction his thinking goes in is not one I wish to follow, he makes a fascinating observation. And so, today, I want to use Rabbenu Bachya's observation as an opportunity to scratch the surface of the role of faith in our Jewish lives. Think of this not as a grand theory but more a conversation starter.

II.

Rabbenu Bachya's point is this: God's revelation through His destruction of Egypt is unprecedented in the Torah; until this point, God's mastery of the universe has solely been a tradition handed down generation-to-generation after a person (or group of people) witnessed God's power in action. As Rabbenu Bachya argues, Adam and Chava testified to God's creation of the world which they then passed down to subsequent generations until the time of Noah. Noah was the first generation for which Adam was not alive, this is all according to the *sefer olam rabbah*, a Tanaaitic 2nd-century work that calculates and charts Jewish history from creation, but Noah himself was witness to the re-creation of the world following the Flood. He, too, passed it on to subsequent generations, including Avraham, with Noah dying when Avraham was fifty-eight, again according to *sefer olam rabbah*.

Now, most of you know me well and you know by this point that *sefer olam rabbah* is not usually the type of *sefer* I'd be quoting, but it's the thrust of Rabbenu Bachya that I want to focus on: that, until the time of Avraham and then beyond, knowledge of God, belief in God, is a tradition handed

down by a small group of people to a small group of people who testify to God's existence having witnessed it themselves. While everyone else in the world is contentedly idolatrous.

All of this changes, however, with *yetziat mitzrayim*. Because *yetziat mitzrayim*, as we read this morning, has a different purpose:

כִּי בַּפְעַם הַזֹּאת אֲנִי שֹׁלֵחַ אֶת-כָּל-מַגְפָּתֵי אֱלֹהֵי-לִבָּךְ וּבְעַבְדֶיךָ וּבְעַמּוֹךְ בְּעִבּוֹר תִּדְעֵ כִּי
אֵין כָּמוֹנִי בְּכָל-הָאָרֶץ:

For this time I will send all My plagues upon your person, and your courtiers, and your people, in order that you may know that there is none like Me in all the world.

(Ex. 9:14)

God's goal is to reveal Himself on a mass scale. No longer will knowledge of Him be passed down generation to generation, oblivious to those who worship other gods, but it will be revealed to all of the people in Egypt.

And, the truth is that this insight is found in the opening verses of last week's parashah. God tells Moshe that, unlike Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, Moshe – and thus the Jewish people – will know God's true name. There is a significant difference between the knowledge of God in *Sefer Bereishit* to *Sefer Shemot*. In *Sefer Bereishit* God is known as an abstract, *kel shakkai*, the God of gods, yes, but still just a God. And knowledge of His power is something shared from generation to generation, but that's it. In contrast, *Sefer Shemot* reveals Hashem – *Hakadosh Barukh Hu* – our personal God, a God who wishes to be known on a larger scale.

III.

And this observation dovetails with another that I came across by Rabbi Joshua Goller, the Associate Rabbi of the Young Israel of West Hempstead. He notes that throughout our *parashah* this morning in its discussion of the *korban pesach*, the Pesach offering, the word *bayit*, house, is repeated. In contrast, over in *Sefer Bereishit* describing one of God's revelations to Avraham, the repeating word is *ohel*, tent.

And these words, I'd argue, can be seen as emblematic of the knowledge of God between these two books of the Torah. In *Bereishit* belief in God is an *ohel*, temporary, fleeting. Why? Because when our belief in God is based on one moment in the past that must be passed down generation to generation so that, by the tenth-generation people are believing in Him only because their great-great-great-great-great-great grandpappy did so, it's going to wear thin. Indeed, God has to keep re-revealing Himself in *Sefer Bereishit* to keep people going strong.

In contrast, God's revelation in *Sefer Shemot* is a *bayit*, it's a permanent structure. Knowledge of God is acquired on a mass scale through His miraculous intervention in Egypt. The Egyptians now know God exists because they have all seen Him. The Jewish people know God exists, not because their parents and their parents' parents said so, but because they see His wonders, and continue to do so. The leap between *Bereishit* and *Shemot* is one in which God changes the entire way through which He is known and through which He is believed in.

IV.

Here's our problem: we live in a post-*Shemot* world in which God revealed Himself on a mass scale, but we believe in Him through a *Sefer Bereishit* framework, tradition. We ourselves did not leave Egypt, we did not see God when the Torah was given, but because our ancestors did, we have passed that experience down generation-to-generation.

This is the challenge of faith we face: experiencing God ourselves, given that, in a world without prophecy, the models that existed for the Jewish people in the Torah no longer exist. Part of the answer to this challenge lies in something I've spoken about before – I spoke about it at Pesach this past year – the need to see *yad hashem*, the Hand of God in our lives. By recognizing God's handiwork in our lives, by attributing to Him those things for which we are most grateful, it helps us experience God.

But, as important as this is, it's still rooted in the model of *Sefer Bereishit*, it's an individual's experience of God. We need a *Sefer Shemot* paradigm: one in which, as a community, we are able to experience God. Obviously, we can't just summon Him down from the Heavens, so what can we do?

V.

One of the most powerful things I've ever read is Nahum Sarna's introduction to his book on *Sefer Tehillim*, imaginatively entitled *On the Book of Psalms*. Here it is:

In the Law and the Prophets, God reaches out to man. The initiative is His. The message is His. He communicates, we receive. Our God-given free will allows us to be receptive, to be accepting, to turn a deaf ear, to reject. In the Psalms, human beings reach out to God. The initiative is human. The language is human. We make an effort to communicate. He receives; He chooses to respond or not, according to His inscrutable wisdom. He gives His assent or withholds it.

Unlike the Jewish people in *Sefer Shemot*, we cannot experience a mass revelation from God. God does not clearly and obviously reach out to us as He does in the Torah. But, as a community, we, ourselves, can reach out to God.

And this, I think, is the essence of faith. It's not about passing things down from generation-to-generation as it once was. Nor is it about experiencing mass revelation, as it once was. It's about the relationship we have with *Hakadosh Barukh Hu*: that sense that we can reach out to Him and see His presence in our lives. But, even more than this, it's about our communal experience doing this. That we come together as a group – each of us with our own qualms and concerns, our own hopes and dreams – but still reach out together, sharing that experience of communicating with God. This, I think, is the key to faith.

And it continues on page 500 in the *Artscroll Siddur*.