

The Sky is Falling

There was a children's story I remember from my childhood called Chicken Little. In the story, an acorn falls on Chicken Little's head, which she believes means the sky is falling. Chicken Little decides she has to tell the king of the forest. She tells this to everyone she runs into the Turkey Lurkey, Duckey Lucky and eventually they run into a fox, who tells them he can show them the way to the king's house. He promptly shows them into his den, and then eats every one of them.

The lesson of Chicken Little would seem to be that being too quick to see disaster can actually be a self-fulfilling prophecy, being too ready to believe the world is going to end can lead us to do fooling things. That is of course the very opposite of the lesson of Noah.

While Chicken Little and her friends meet an untimely end because of they are too ready to believe in Chicken Little's warnings of imagined disaster. Noah by contrast spent 120 years building an ark to save himself and his family from the floodwaters. Rashi explains that Noah could have built the ark much faster, but he took 120 years, in the hopes that people would see what he was doing, find out that it was because of God's warning that He was bringing a flood, and that they would then be inspired to do teshuvah, to change their ways. Where chicken little jumps to conclusions and scares everyone around her into running into disaster headlong. Noah is patient, waiting for people to come to him, taking his time, even though his predictions of doom are based on the most reliable of evidence, the direct communication from God. Where chicken little convinced everyone she met (except the wily fox) that the world was ending, Noah was unable to convince anyone beyond his own family.

How is it that Noah's generation were so dense, so blind that they ignored his warnings? Noah is not the only unsuccessful prophet in the bible. In fact, he seems to be more of the rule than the exception. In two weeks we will read of Lot's futile attempt to convince his sons-in-law to leave

Sedom before God destroys it. In Shemot we will read how the Pharaoh ignores not only Moshe's warnings but the evidence and experience of their own eyes, bringing disaster upon himself and his nation. The prophet Jeremiah was thrown in prison for warning that Jerusalem would be destroyed while the people choose to believe false prophets offering comforting assurances that the Temple could never be destroyed. In each case, the people who ignore warnings of disaster are utterly destroyed.

We might ask, how is it that people could be so dense, so foolish, so self-destructively optimistic? Although this kind of stubbornness no longer seems so surprising to anyone seeing Americans persisting in saying that COVID-19 is “no big deal” after it has killed well over 200,000 of our fellow citizens, the equivalent of 70 9-11s.

There's an old joke about a man who is held up by a mugger at gun point. The robber shouts “Your money or your life!” The man doesn't move. The robber repeats “Your money or your life!” The man says “Hold on, I'm thinking...”

It sounds ridiculous, but as a society that has been our reaction to COVID-19. Your money or your life shout the public health officials and the rest of the country response, “hold on! We're thinking!”

In this we are not so different from the people who heard Jeremiah or Lot or Noach or any other prophet warning of impending disaster. The prophets warning required accepting that their way of life was ending. The only way to save their lives, was to accept that life as they knew it would never be the same again. And they simply weren't able to do that.

We need to believe that everything is going to be okay in the end. We believe it can't possibly be true that the world as I know it is going to come to an end. It's much easier to imagine that those who tell us we must change to survive are just hysterical Chicken Littles than it is to actually accept that we must change in order to survive. After all G-d is a merciful G-d. He will make sure

everything will work out. And it is true He will make sure everything will work out. But His definition of working out, His definition of okay might not be our definition of okay. We sooth ourselves with the false assurance that the life we know, the society we live in, the lifestyle to which we have grown accustomed is invulnerable, can never be assaulted, because it is too painful and frightening to imagine that this is not the case. But believing that any human construct can be relied on to protect us, whether with its the walls of Jerusalem or the Egyptian slave state, or our economy, or idea of Democracy itself, is the definition of idolatry. Even if we aren't don't bow down to physical statues, we believe in plenty of false gods.

But the truth is, nothing in this world, except for God, is eternal. There is no shelter in this life that is invulnerable, except for God. There are no guarantees. And the only way to save our lives, the only way to assure our survival is to accept the painful truth that the things we cling to as precious are not permanent.

This is not easy to do. The only place in Tanakh where a people ever listened to a prophecy of destruction and successfully averted it through teshuvah, was when the people Nineveh listen to Yonah's foretelling of destruction. They immediately fast and do teshuvah and aver the evil prophecy. Yonah, is the tikkun, the corrective to the evil pattern begun with Noach. The parallels between the stories are striking, beside the prophecy of destruction which is in one case ignored and in the other heeded. Both stories involve a boat, both stories involve a Yonah. Yonah's name means Dove in Hebrew, and it is no accident, that the bird that brings back evidence of dry land, and the end of the destruction is a dove, a Yonah.

The bible is telling us, don't be like the generation fo the flood, who stopped their ears for 120 years, be like the people of Nineveh, who were able to recognize the truth when they heard it.

So what of Chicken Little? Isn't the message of Chicken Little that we shouldn't listen to every prophecy of doom? Okay. Maybe we just don't give European folk tales as much moral weight as the bible. But I don't think there's a fundamental contradiction. Chicken Little is telling us not to trust everything we hear, whether it's the Chicken Little saying the sky is falling or the Fox telligns us "come in everything will be alright." It's not their perception of destruction that dooms Chicken Little and her friends, it iss that in their panic they believe the assurances of the first opportunist to come along that he will help them. We cannot believe everything we're told. But if we are to survive, we have to be as ready to disbelieve those who assure us everything is going to be alright, as we are those who warn us that things are falling apart.

May Hashem bless us with the wisdom to distinguish between falsehood and truth, with perception to recongize false assurances and false warnings alike for the dangers that they pose, with courage to respond and adapt appropriately to real dangers, and finally with faith that even if things change, even if we have to give up things we thought we needed, with G-d, we will be okay. And in the face of threats, may we be blessed with the courage to change, and adapt to new realities so that we might survive.

Shabbat Shalom