

Ye of Little Faith

Noach 5783

Late night TV is not the place you would expect to turn for a nuanced discussion on any subject, let alone profound religious subjects. However, if you are looking for a thoughtful, sensitive and articulate discussion about faith, this is where you will find it. One of the most compelling expositors of the challenges, opportunities and rewards of a faithful life is not a pastor, not a televangelist, but a talk show host- I refer to Stephen Colbert. On his own show, the singer Dua Lipa turned the tables and asked him about the role of faith in his comedy; in an interview with President Biden and then as the subject of an interview with Anderson Cooper on CNN, he spoke about the role of faith in confronting tragedy and loss. In all of these, he spoke about the role his faith has played in his life- as a performer, as a comedian and as someone who lost his father and two of his brothers in a plane crash at the tender age of 10. There are so many reasons clips of these interviews continue to go viral. In a world beset by cruelty, dishonesty and uncertainty, people crave uplifting inspiration; in a country increasingly polarized along religious grounds, and one in which Christian belief is accorded ever more prominence, people want to see and hear what faith means to a prominent and practicing Christian. Even for non-Christians, expressions of Christian faith often seem to map well onto what we call *emunah*. We talk a lot about faith and what it means to have it, but it seems we

talk less about *lacking* faith, and what that means. Our sages, however, were not so reticent. *Lehavdil* a million times, if Stephen Colbert is an unlikely exemplar of faith, our sages chose an unlikely exemplar of its absence.

The scene is set in this morning's Torah reading. The moment finally arrived- the deluge from which God promised to save Noah finally began. The ark was ready, yet the Torah tells us that Noah was hesitant to board. In fact, it took him seven days to finally decide to enter.

וַיָּבֹא נֹחַ וּבָנָיו וְאִשְׁתּוֹ וּנְשֵׁי־בָנָיו אִתּוֹ אֶל־הַתֵּבָה מִפְּנֵי מִי הַמַּבּוּל:

Genesis 7:7

Noah, with his sons, his wife, and his sons' wives, went into the ark because of the waters of the Flood.

Rashi paraphrases the Medrash Rabbah, and makes a startling accusation:

מִפְּנֵי מִי הַמַּבּוּל. אִם נֹחַ מְקַטְטֵי אֱמֻנָה הָיָה, מֵאַמִּין וְאִינוֹ מֵאַמִּין שְׂיָבֹא הַמַּבּוּל, וְלֹא נִכְנָס לַתֵּבָה עַד שֶׁדִּחְקוּהוּ הַמַּיִם: מִפְּנֵי מִי הַמַּבּוּל

BECAUSE OF THE WATERS OF THE FLOOD— (*מִפְּנֵי properly means “from before”*) —
Noah, also, was of those people who are wanting in faith: he believed and he did not

believe that the Flood would come, and he would not enter the Ark until the waters forced him to do so (Genesis Rabbah 32:6).

Noach lacked faith- he didn't believe that God would really bring the flood. Can you imagine? Noach gave the best centuries of his life to carrying out God's wishes. The Torah stresses that Noach did exactly as God commanded him, asking no questions and making no fusses. No doubt he looked like a priceless fool to his neighbors, building a giant ark that was going nowhere, preparing vast quantities of animal food and finding all sorts of strange animals to herd onto it. When they asked him what he was doing, and he replied that God was going to destroy the world, they must have thought him a paranoid delusional- even more so when it didn't happen for many years. Even if Noach didn't believe God at first, surely he would have changed his mind once it started raining. If Noach lacked faith, who has it?

This was a question that bothered many commentators after Rashi, including the great Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky zt"l. Rav Yaakov explained that an answer may be found in a comment of the Ramban just a few verses earlier. God tells Noach to bring his family on to the ark, because he is the sole righteous person worthy of salvation in an otherwise worthless generation. The Ramban notes that, whereas God is referred to as אֱלֹקִים, the name associated with the attribute of justice, He is introduced here as ה', the name for God's attribute of mercy. God is telling Noach

that it is through the attribute of mercy that he will be saved- through the sacrifices he will offer when the destruction is over. It was this attribute of mercy that motivated all of Noach's actions- gathering the animals, setting aside the pure ones as sacrifices and boarding the ark as well. Why, then, was Noach a person of little faith? Rav Yaakov explained that Noach witnessed so many of God's attributes, yet he only could perceive God in one way- as a God of loving kindness, mercy and compassion- never as a God of justice. Noach had no *יראת העונש*, no fear of God's punishment, because he could not comprehend a God who would exact swift and painful retribution on the world. In his mind, when God told of the world's destruction, he just meant it as a warning, designed to encourage repentance but never to be actualized, or even to be taken all that seriously. Everything that happened to him was, therefore, an expression of God's kindness. When it began to rain, Noach was certain that everyone would repent, and when they would, the rain would start being beneficial again.

I think many of us make the same mistake Noach did. As one of my Rebbeim, Rav Mendel Blachman of Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh likes to say, we "put God in a box." For some of us, God is a wrathful God of strict justice, and causal punishment. A friend of mine told me about her teenaged child's view about God: "I do believe in God- I just don't think He's very nice." It is easy to look at all the tragedy in the world and feel this way, and there are many who will harness every delusional

agenda of theirs to the angry God they believe in. For example, I recently received an email from someone who asserted that a proliferation of cancer, especially among younger people, *rachmana litzlan*, is divine punishment for receiving the COVID vaccine. Still others, especially religious leaders in the chareidi community, often attempt to link catastrophes to trespasses in their communities- owning smartphones, for example, but often the fault of women and alleged immodesty in dress.

For others, God is like the God of Noach- only love and kindness. It's that expression, *Chasdei Hashem*, popularized by the character Shulem Shtisel, but I can tell you from experience and familial relationships that it is a popular expression among Yerushalmi *yidden*. Everything that Hashem does is an expression of His love- no matter how catastrophic your life is becoming. Another version of this is the people who see *hashgacha pratis*, or divine providence, in every positive event that happens in their lives. Of course, it is wonderful to view our lives this way; I can tell you many stories about situations in which I think I experienced *siyata deshmaya*, help from above, and I know you all can, too. A study conducted at Baylor University in 2010 showed that one of the most profound predictors of mental health among religious believers is whether they view God as caring and engaged,

who provides them with the tools to cope with life's challenges.¹ But even as it is healthy to view God in this way, we have to understand that it isn't the *only* way God works in the world. Indeed, the attitude that "God is love" is emphatically not a Jewish one; it is directly from the New Testament and can take us to some bizarre theological places, as Stephen Colbert himself humorously pointed out:

"I live by syllogisms: God is love. Love is blind. Stevie Wonder is blind. Therefore, Stevie Wonder is God. I don't know what I'd believe in if it wasn't for that."

The lesson of Noach, and the challenge for us, is the challenge of being a person with robust faith. To achieve this, we need to take God, as it were, out of the box. God works in many different ways in the world, which is why He is described with 13 different attributes. Indeed, the same event may be experienced differently by, and may serve different purposes for different people. For one, it will serve as a reward, while for another, it will be a punishment. An event that seems to us to be an act of divine retribution may later prove to be the ultimate kindness, and the reverse is true as well. All we want to know is, to quote Shulem Shtisel again,

"Ribboinoi shel oylam, vos vilstu fun dein kinder?!"

Master of the universe, what do you want from your children?

¹ <https://ct.counseling.org/2021/05/working-with-clients-who-are-angry-at-god/>

It's a rhetorical question; ultimately, being a person of faith means that while we can't categorize His actions according to our limited understanding, and we can't perceive His methods or goals in the moment, we can and must trust that He has a plan- for us, for the Jewish people, for the Jewish homeland, for humanity. May the day come soon when God's ways are clear, and his kindnesses are revealed, and may we witness the fulfillment the promise of the prophet Yeshaya² we read this morning:

בְּשׂוֹצֵר לְעָזְרִי הִסְתַּרְתִּי פָנַי רָגַעַל מִפְּנֵי וּבְחֶסֶד עוֹלָם רַחֲמֶיךָ אָמַר גֹּאֲלִי ה' {ס}

In slight anger, for a moment,

I hid My face from you;

But with kindness everlasting

I will take you back in love

—said the LORD your Redeemer.

² 54:8