

Bitten By a Lion

BY DON JARASHOW

We've just come through the spiritual highs of Elul and Tishrei, and this past week, we returned to our regular routines. Before routine, a close cousin of *hergel*, takes hold of us, I believe there's a reason Hashem wants us to read Parshas Noach at precisely this time, and not simply because it follows Bereishis.

At the end of the Mabul, the Torah tells us (Bereishis 7:23):

וַיִּמַח אֶת כָּל הַחַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר עַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה

Everything was wiped away. Man, animal, everything that existed on the face of the earth was obliterated.

וַיִּשָּׂאֵר אִךְ נֹחַ וְאֲשֶׁר אִתּוֹ בַּתְּיָוָה

Only Noach remained, together with those who were with him in the Teivah.

Rashi quotes a well-known Medrash:

ויש אומרים שאיחר מזונות לארי והכישו.

There are those who say that Noach was late feeding the lion, and the lion bit him.

If you actually think about the Medrash and play out the story in your mind, it is quite jarring.

Noach spent an entire year taking care of the animals in the Teivah. Every animal needed to be fed according to its own schedule and needs, and Noach was responsible for everything. He was the CEO, the CFO, the operations manager, the caretaker. Everything, all in one.

Can you imagine what that Teivah looked like? The noise. The smell. The garbage. The constant movement. The terrifying waters outside. It wasn't exactly a peaceful cruise.

And remember, Noach was an old man. He had spent years building the Teivah, being ridiculed and mocked by his generation, following every last instruction Hashem gave him. Now he was working day and

night, making sure every last animal was taken care of.

And one time, one *seudah*, he came late to feed the lion.

And the lion bit him!

HOW COULD NOACH DESERVE SUCH A PUNISHMENT?

Here's a man who dedicated himself entirely to fulfilling the Ratzon Hashem. A tremendous tzaddik, an *Ish Tzaddik Tamim*. He did everything he possibly could. He was tired. He was old. He was overwhelmed. And because he was late one time, Hashem allowed a lion to bite him?

We know that Hashem oversees everything and that sometimes He must punish. But we also know that He is gracious and compassionate, the נוצר חסד לאלפים. How can we understand the punishment of Noach?

Rav Avraham Kalmanowitz, the founding Rosh Yeshiva of Mir in America, once addressed this very question at a gathering of the Vaad Hatzalah, the organization dedicated to rescuing Yidden from the horrors of the Holocaust.

Rav Kalmanowitz offered an incredible explanation (הובא בספר פנינים) (משלחן גבוה).

The world had just been destroyed. Not a city, not a country, but the entire world. Everything that Hashem had created had to be packed into one wooden ark. These weren't ordinary animals. They were the last remaining members of their species, the sole survivors of a world that no longer existed. Every creature in that Teivah was irreplaceable,

"Hashem has entrusted us with another year, and He's counting on us."

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In honor and gratitude for my wonderful *chavrusa*, R' Gene Weinberg, and all that we've achieved together. — M.C. (Minneapolis, MN)

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representing the future of an entire species and a vital piece in rebuilding the world after the Mabul.

Noach wasn't merely an animal caretaker. He was a survivor himself, entrusted with preserving the little that remained.

Says Rav Kalmanowitz: Under ordinary circumstances, arriving a little late to feed an animal might be understandable. But these weren't ordinary circumstances, and this wasn't simply another lion waiting for supper. This was the last lion on earth. At such a moment, even a seemingly minor oversight carried enormous significance, and Hashem held Noach to an exceptionally high standard.

Rav Kalmanowitz applied this lesson to the Churban unfolding in Europe. Entire communities, yeshivos, and generations of Torah and Yiddishkeit were being destroyed. Every Yid rescued was not only a precious life saved, but potentially an irreplaceable link to the *mesorah* and traditions of the *alte heim*. Those who had escaped carried an extraordinary responsibility to save whatever they could and help rebuild Klal Yisrael. Every life and every opportunity mattered.

WHEN EVERY ACTION CARRIES EXTRAORDINARY WEIGHT

I believe the lesson extends far beyond the Dor HaMabul and the Churban in Europe. There's an incredible *yesod* here: The significance of our actions depends not only on what we do, but on the circumstances in which we find ourselves. At certain times, when Hashem entrusts us with extraordinary responsibilities, even the smallest actions carry enormous weight.

Imagine, so to speak, the pain in Shamayim following the Mabul, when Hashem's entire creation had been destroyed. It's as though Hashem turned to Noach and said, "I'm counting on you. I've entrusted you with what remains of My world, and I'm relying on you to rebuild it and make it a bigger, better, and brighter place."

And I think this speaks directly to every single one of us, especially now, just after the Yomim Noraim.

What really just happened? There was Din in Shamayim. ומלאכים יתפזזו. The ministering angels were trembling, the entire world was being judged, and our entire year was being determined. And here we are, alive, breathing, surrounded by our families, going about our lives as though nothing happened.

WE'VE ALL JUST COME OUT OF THE TEIVAH

In a certain sense, we've all just come out of our own Teivah. Hashem carried us through the Din, protected us, sustained us, and entrusted us with another year of life. Just as Noach's survival came with an extraordinary responsibility, so does ours.

It's as though Hashem is turning to each of us and saying, "I'm

counting on you. I gave you another year, another opportunity, and what are you going to do with it? Are you going to learn more Torah, do more mitzvos, make a Kiddush Hashem, and make My world a better place, or are you going straight back to your old habits?"

Some put away the machzorim and lulav and esrog and return to their regular routines. But others rightfully ask: What happened to our *kabbalos* at Neilah, to those moments when we genuinely wanted to become better Yidden? Are we really going to leave all that behind?

And when the excuses begin to march in, we remind ourselves of Noach and the lion. Noach had excellent excuses for being late, and so do we. We're tired, busy, overwhelmed, and before we know it, another day passes without learning or davening as we had hoped. Yet Noach was held accountable because Hashem was counting on him.

We all have our responsibilities, families, and *parnasah*, but what's our focus? What's our *matarah*? Hashem carried us through the Din and entrusted us with another year. Those aspirations we had at Neilah are still very much alive, and Hashem is counting on us to make something of them.

WE'RE NOT CHESHVAN YIDDEN

As Reb Ephraim Wachsman often says, we're not Cheshvan Yidden, we're Neilah Yidden! The person we were at Neilah, when we felt so close to Hashem and wanted to do anything for Him, that's who we really are.

Yes, we fall, we get distracted, and we return to our routines, but those moments of closeness to Hashem were real, and every year we have the opportunity to build upon them.

And when we feel that we've drifted away from those aspirations, we need to remember that we're still in Hashem's Teivah. He's still carrying us through the waves of life, sustaining us, protecting us and our families, and giving us another day, another opportunity to accomplish something.

The lesson of Noach and the lion's bite reminds us that being carried through the storm comes with responsibility. Hashem has entrusted us with another year, and He's counting on us.

Just think how much He does for us, how lovingly He carries us, even when we don't realize it. He's given us so much, and all He asks is that we use what He's given us to come closer to Him and make His world a better place.

**"We're not
Cheshvan
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