



Parashat Noach



English version

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YOU ARE NOT EXCUSED

After the flood, Noah first attempted to send the raven to verify that the land had dried up, but the raven refused to go on this mission. He had two claims. "Your Master hates me, and you hate me! Your master hates me, for He allowed seven kosher animals and birds in the Ark, but only 2 of non-kosher species! You hate me, because you chose to send from a species with only two on a dangerous mission, instead of selecting a species that has seven! If I dehydrate, or if I die from frostbite, my species will go extinct! ... Maybe you are after my wife, Mrs. Raven?!?"

Noah answered Raven, "רשע! Wicked one! With my wife, whom I am allowed to be with, it is forbidden to have marital relations during these days of Flood, ...for sure, with a species that is not permitted to me, it is prohibited during the Flood!" (Sanhedrin 108b)

Let us break this down. Raven had two claims on Noah. 1. If there is no other Raven in the world, why risk its extinction? You can easily send Dove, who, if he doesn't return, can be replaced by others! 2. It seems that you are sending me out to die, because you have feelings for my wife!

One second. Why was Raven referred to as a Rasha, a wicked one? Noah only answered claim two with a good answer. But claim one was never addressed or answered!

This is a lesson for all of us. Noah asked a favor from Raven, and Raven had two claims. Once Noah proved that the second claim was bogus, the

first claim becomes an "excuse." Raven, you just don't want to do for me the favor I asked of you. Noah did not have to answer question one, because question one was not a question. It was an excuse.

When Avraham was faced with three angels on the day of his greatest pain, he had a million valid excuses not to accept these "guests". *נִרְצָן לְקִרְאָתָם*. Avraham did not approach them, ... *he ran towards them!* *וַיִּמָּקֵר אַבְרָהָם הָאֱלֹהִים אֶל־שָׂרָה וַיֹּאמֶר מִהֲרִי נָשְׁלֵשׁ וַיִּמָּקֵר אַבְרָהָם הָאֱלֹהִים הָאֱלֹהִים קָמָה סֵלֶת לְוֹשֵׁי וַעֲשֵׂי עֲגוּת:* And Avraham hurried to the tent, to Sarah, and he said, Rush, three Se'ah fine flour, kneed it, and make cakes! *וְאֶל־הַבָּקָר רָצָן* *אֶבְרָהָם* And to the cattle, Avraham ran! When G-d asked Avraham to bring Isaac up on to the altar, when G-d commanded Avraham to listen to his wife and send away Hagar and Yishmael, when Abraham set up Shaharit prayer and prayed that G-d save Lot from the destruction of Sedom... Abraham set his alarm clock for 4 am! The words *וַיִּשְׁלָם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר*, that Abraham got up early in the morning, are used in the instance of all three episodes!!

When Eliezer searches for a wife for Yitzhak and sees Rivka, he doesn't approach her. He runs! *וַיִּרְצָן* *הָעֶבֶד לְקִרְאָתָהּ*. When Rivka gives the camels to drink, she rushes and runs *וַתָּמָר וַתַּעַר כֶּדָּה אֶל־הַשִּׁקָּת* And, when she goes home to ask her parents if they can host Eliezer and his camels, she doesn't walk... She runs! *וַתֵּרֶץ הַנַּעֲרָה וַתִּגַּד לְבֵית אִמָּהּ!*

One second. Doesn't haste make waste? Isn't it better to be calm? Do everything with a calm attitude? The answer is that each time Avraham,



Eliezer, or Rivka ran, they had a seemingly valid excuse not to do anything at all. They ran, so that they wouldn't give the excuse a chance to stop them from doing what they knew, deep down, that they were supposed to do. They knew, that in all life areas, urgency is the key to greatness. Because excuses come in the form of questions, answers, stories, news, statistics. Once you start with excuses, you can't stop. The way to get past excuses is to classify the important as urgent. Avraham knew to wake up and start your day before the excuses wake up and start your day. I misread the clock, my sock had a hole in it, I can't find my shoe, I ran out of toilet paper, the car could not start, the garage door did not open, ... the excuses are endless. Excuses can get you fired when you have a boss, and if you are the boss, can put you out of business.

The secret to success in business, sales, time management, happiness, health, fitness, marriage, children, friendship, peace of mind is self-discipline. We all want all of these, but, first, we want a vacation. Someday, I will build my business to its potential. Someday, I will muster up the courage to make the sale. Someday, I will plan my life two weeks in advance. Someday, I will let go of everything that bothers me. Someday, I will eat well and exercise. Someday, I will respect, be loyal to, and value my spouse and children.

It's a depressing fact of life that eventually, time expires; eventually, the hourglass' sand runs out. This has been an issue since Adam HaRishon. G-d showed Adam each generation and its leaders. When they got to King David's era, Adam saw that David did not have any years to live! All David had from Heaven was 3 hours! Adam heard that G-d was going to allow him one thousand years of life. So Adam asked G-d to give David 70 years. Adam wrote and signed a document, and G-d had angels sign it. The Shlah brings a Midrash, that when Adam reached his 930th birthday and saw that his end was near, he regretted giving 70 years to David, and he begged G-d to take back his years. G-d told Adam, Don't do that! Keep your promise! Right away, Adam kept his word.

When do all the excuses stop? When a person musters enough courage to be honest with himself and admit, "*this is my life*", and take responsibility for it. When a person realizes that this life is not a rehearsal for something else. When the person becomes aware that there are always a thousand valid excuses for failure, but never a good reason. When a person can be honest with himself and say, "It won't help me anymore to blame my situation on someone else, on my mistakes, on my childhood. To criticize, complain, or make excuses. I need to accept total responsibility for my life, my future, and pray to G-d, begging Him for assistance." Only then can one access the power of self-discipline.

Self-discipline means that today is the best day to start and rise above your excuses. Today is the best day to determine, in advance, the "price" that it costs to live the life of your dreams and pay that price in full, and in advance. The price could mean setting an alarm clock or acquiring a skill. It could mean reading a book, taking a seminar, getting a coach, facing your fear, doubt or insecurity. To become someone you have never been before, you need to do something that you have never done before. Always remember the rule of success in life: The elevator to success is out of order, but the stairs are always open.

Why do people come up with excuses, push off the important things, and not reach their goals, and ultimately not live the life of their dreams? It takes emotional intelligence to recognize the emotion behind the excuses and lack of motivation. 1. Fear of the unknown, fear of what you don't understand, fear that you will never understand, fear of getting out of your comfort zone. 2. Fear of failure, fear that you won't reach your expectation, fear of making a mistake. 3. Uncertainty, making assumptions or jumping to conclusions about possible outcomes that could negatively impact you. 4. No SMART goal. No Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time-bound goal. 5. You believe that you can't change, but in truth, you do not want to change. 6. You are protecting your identity and your version of your life story. 7. Fear



that you lack the resources. 8. Looking around, comparing yourself to others. Being like others.

Be stronger than your excuses. Someone good at making excuses is usually not good at anything else.

Selfie steps to a no excuses mindset:

1. Excuses are poison. Excuses are at the center point of almost all failure. If you fail, and blame others, you don't have anything to change. If you blame yourself, it is not fun, it is not cool, but it is empowering, because you hold yourself accountable. If you blame others, it doesn't hurt as much, it is not defeating, but it is paralyzing, makes you stagnant, and doesn't get you anywhere. If you take away the excuse, if you *own* your failure, then you take away the paralysis of the mistake.
2. The definition of greatness is rising above your expectations of yourself, and rising above your excuses. It is your choice to either look at difficult circumstances as excuses or as inspiration.
3. The definition of an excuse is the rationalization of a mistake. If you did not make a mistake, there is no purpose for the excuse. Admit your mistakes, own your mistakes, so that you can make sure you do not that mistake again.

LEAD LIKE A LION

Alexander the Great once said, *I am not afraid of an army of lions led by a sheep; I am afraid of an army of sheep led by a lion.* What are the qualities of lion-leadership, and what type of leaders are “sheep” leaders?

A lion-hearted leader instills in you his fearless beliefs, the determination to lead others and be responsible for them, while a sheep-hearted leader instills within you fear, the complacency of being a follower and the expectation that others will be responsible for you.

גַּם אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדוֹרָתוֹ As great as Noach was, he was great only in *his* generation. But had Noach lived in Avraham's generation, Noach would not be considered great. (See Rashi) Why? What was the difference between them? The passuk explains, at its end: אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים הִתְהַלְכָה־גַם: The difference between Noach and Avraham was that Avraham was a leader, but Noach needed G-d to lead him. (See Rashi)

Noach, as nice a guy as he was, was not Noach Avinu. Only Avraham Avinu was called Avinu, and the Father of the Jewish Nation. Why is that so? Why is it important for us that our leader is

Avraham, and not Noach? After all, you and I are here today in Noach's merit! The answer is because we follow only leaders who are lion-hearted. Noach just did not fit the bill. How so?

The hint is in the Haftarah. The Haftarah refers to the flood as מַי נֹחַ, Noach's Flood, because Noach could have changed the people of his generation, or at least have taken responsibility for the wicked of his day by praying for them. (See Zohar page 42a;2) Noach could have been more influential, by not just saying, while building the Ark for 120 years, “I am building this to save myself and my family from the flood.” (See P'DRE) Noach could have prayed for the wicked to return, no matter how low, immoral, cruel, or addicted they were, just as Avraham felt it was his responsibility at least to pray for the people of Sodom. And because Noach did not rise to the challenge, because Noach did not fill G-d's expectations of responsibility, he was held somewhat responsible.

The question of the whole story of Noach and his Ark almost jumps out at you. G-d has so many ways to save Noach, i.e., bring him to the Land of Israel, which was not affected by the Flood.



(Zevachim 113) According to Google Maps, it is only a 340-hour walk from Mt. Ararat to Israel, and a 260 hours' walk from Babylon to Israel! Why, then, did G-d ask Noach to be so busy for 120 years building an Ark, when there were seemingly more simple solutions?! The answer is... because G-d wanted Noach to change the world and make it a better place! (See Rashi) G-d wanted Noach to make a BIG statement with his BIG Ark - Hey, guys! Something scary is going to happen!!!

But scaring people in order to lead them just does not work. A leader is great only if he truly leads. If he can be there for the sheep when they need him most, and make them into lions. The only way you can truly lead people is Avraham Avinu's way. Just like Avraham Avinu figured out the tricks of the trade of Kiruv, going out of his zone to be there for people when they would need him the most, from whichever direction they came, with his iconic 4-entrance tent in the desert. Noach was given a 120-year assignment of kiruv outreach, but he failed.

This is a lesson relevant to anyone who is in a position of power to persuade, influence, or educate. The Rambam begins the laws of Talmud Torah – about the **Mitzvah of teaching... before the Mitzvah of learning!!** The Mitzvah of teaching is at the root of the Mitzvah of Torah. This is the most important part of the Mitzvah. וְשִׁנְנֶתֶם לְבָבְכֶם. The meat and potatoes. The Rambam is teaching us that the greatest Torah-learning aspiration should be to be the best teacher possible. The most meaningful and affective time in a person's life is in his youth. That's when a teacher or mentor can engrave a deep impression that lasts. *When young people work on their Middot and personality and conquer their Yetzer Hara while still young, it is much easier for them to stay strong throughout their life.* As the passuk says, כִּי יֵצֵר לֵב הָעֶבֶר רָע. (- see Baal Haturim Breshit 8 ; 21) And as the Imrei Emet quoted the Arizal, that *the main spiritual energy a person has is from the Mitzvot and good deeds that he did while in his youth, before tasting the taste of sin.* As the passuk in Yirmiyah says, זָכַרְתִּי לָךְ חֶסֶד נְעוּרַיִךְ. (2;2) Helping a student in whatever level they are on is the greatest

level of learning Torah! It could be that this is why Hashem gave you your 120 years, to help this one kid to be able to understand this one passuk!

R' Chaim Friedlander has a whole essay on this fundamental principle of Judaism: that life is not about you, but about into what type of utensil G-d made you, what talents, abilities and tools G-d gave you in order to bring about His Honor in some way. (See Siftei Chaim- Emunah A, page 33) In his essay, he quotes the Rambam. The Rambam writes that it could be that G-d gave a rich man his wealth to build a huge building, for the sole purpose that just one time, a tzaddik would sit in its shade. (Intro to Zeraim) G-d could have you busy with a family project for 120 years, so you could affect just one person, one time!

This is the perception of the lion-hearted spiritual leader. He perceives that his whole role in this world is to be G-d's tool to change the people he leads from sheep into lions. To produce more leaders, not more followers.

This lesson is sourced in the Talmud. *Tornusrofus the Wicked challenged R' Akiva: If your G-d loves the poor people, why doesn't He support them, Himself? R' Akiva answered him: In order for us to be saved from Gehinom, in the merit of the Mitzvah of Tzeddaka.* (Bava Batra 10)

What?!?!?!?! How could this be? This poor guy needs to live a life of poverty, a life of pulling out his hair, of struggles, of embarrassment, in order to save you and me from hell?

As unfair as it sounds, this is that fundamental tenet of Judaism. We are not here for this world; we are here for the next world. The merit the poor person has for saving another from Gehinom is so great, it is worth it to live 120 years of poverty!!!!

Your Tafkid, your life's purpose and mission, is not about you: it is about everyone that is in your world that you have a chance to affect. G-d put you in this world, and He is keeping you here, to make it a better place.

So, how does one lead like a lion?



Here are the Selfie- Steps. The self-help steps that can make you a great leader.

1. Notice where there is a great need that only you can fulfill, how can you lead the “sheep”, and help them face their fears by bringing them optimism and hope.
2. Know yourself. Know that you, just one man, can change humanity. You, with your unique position, knowledge, strengths, ambitions, ideals and background, can help those who lack or are in need, in your unique way.
3. Always be a giver.
4. Ask your Rabbi for direction in how to balance helping others, while protecting yourself and your family.
5. If you cannot change your world, pray for it. If you cannot help, at least show that you care.

MR. IFONLY

Mr. Ifonly sat down and he sighed, “I could have done more, if only I had tried. If only I had followed my true intent. If only I had done the things that I meant. If only I had done the things that I could. And not simply done the things that I should. If only a day had lasted a year. And I had not lived in constant fear.”

Mr. Ifonly sat down and he cried: “I could really have lived, if only I had tried! Now life has past me by and it’s such a crime”, said Mr. Ifonly, who had run out of time.

This poem was written by Brian Patten, February 7, 1946, Liverpool, England.

But Mr. Ifonly is more advanced today. He has Whatsapp. He has an electric car. And he cries to a different tune. *If only I had more in life, I would be happier, better, or even... holier.*

Mr. Ifonly sat down and cried. If only I had more money, I would be happy and give more charity. If only I had a better wife, my home would know no strife. If only I had more strength, wit and courage, my life would begin to flourish. If only I would get more respect, my life would be perfect. If only I had more financial security, I would once and for all, stop to worry. If only I had more wealth, I would not only think of myself. If only I had another app on my phone, I would be more focused and in the zone.

This poem was written by Yosef Farhi, October 10, 2018, Jerusalem.

How many of us feel that if only we got better grades growing up, if only we were natural valedictorians, we would be ahead of life. But after her 14 year study of achievement and life choices of valedictorians, Karen Arnold wrote in her book, *Lives of Promise: What Becomes Of High School Valedictorians*, the following conclusion: *Even though most of the valedictorians are strong occupational achievers- accountants, physicians, lawyers, engineers, physical therapists, nurses and teachers – the great majority of former high school toppers do not appear headed for the very top of adult achievement arenas. They typically settle into the system, instead of shaking it up.* It seems that those who actually made it, have been successful without the valedictorian IQ.

How many of us feel that we need money to make money. It is so interesting that in the Syrian community where I came from, the people that I know who had become wealthy started from below zero! Those who become great did so without resources, some even without an American education. They own one of the most important elements to become successful. The trait of resourcefulness. And resourcefulness comes from accepting, humbly, that from what you have, from where you are, is where G-d wants you to win the game. So why is the Mr. Ifonly of 2018 so stuck in



life? Because he believes that if he only had more, the resources that G-d decided *not to give him*, life would be better...

Mr. Ifonly cannot change, until he humbles himself to G-d. That the place and the circumstance and the financial state he is in, the wife, kids and family that he has or does not have, is exactly what G-d packed in his suitcase for life, for him to make things work. From exactly where you are, and with what you've got. To live within your means. And make the best of "it".

People ask me, "Rabbi Farhi. Humility is out of style in the Self-Help world for ages. The Novardoks were the Last of the Mohicans. Why do you keep bringing humility into 2019? How does it apply to the fast-track millennials, or to the selfie Generation Z? And how does humility give us a better life? What more can humility help me, than the philosophy that if you are humble, you can never fall? That "the man who sleeps on the floor can never fall out of bed"? The answer is that humility detonates the If-only thinking. It destroys the false belief that if I had more, I would be better. Humility teaches us that what you got is what you were supposed to get. Having more will not help you *be* more. That thought, that I deserve more, comes from haughtiness.

The Flood was the worst punishment G-d ever brought on mankind. Why did G-d punish mankind so severely? The Torah tells us, ותמלא הארץ חמס (Bereshit 6;11) Rashi interprets this to mean that what sealed the decree was the sin of stealing. Although they served idols. Although they had improper relations. Thievery is what sealed the decree (Sanhedrin 108).

How does this make sense, that a decree of such measure should be enacted for thievery? For the sin of the Golden Calf, for idol worship, 3000 men died. For the sin of promiscuous relations of the Midianite women, 24,000 perished. But for the sin of stealing, which is not even one of the cardinal sins, the whole world needs to be destroyed?!? Also, how, in any way, was the Flood considered

an exact punishment, measure-for-measure for stealing?

The Yalkut Shimoni teaches, that the Torah tells us the reason why they were punished this way. It was because they were not only evil, but their wickedness was about "more". *כי רבה רעת האדם*. *The generation of the Flood became haughty because of the good that HKBH bestowed on them. "Do we need the drops of rain from G-d?! We have rivers and springs that suffice! HKBH said, In the good waters that I bestowed on them, they anger Me? With the water, I will punish them!* That is one opinion. Here is the other. *R Yochanan said, the generation of the Flood became corrupt due to abundance. So, they were judged with abundance.* (Yalkut Shimoni 58)

What does the Y. Shimoni mean, due to abundance? Or haughtiness? I thought the punishment was for חמס, stealing?!

The answer is that someone who steals needs to be haughty enough to think, "I deserve more. What G-d has given me, is not enough. The little that G-d has given me prevents me from achieving all that I can. I am bigger than what G-d decided I am. I should be richer than G-d decided I should be. And that is how I will become a better person. Once I have more. Once I have רבה. A lot more than what G-d lets me have". All the Mr. Ifonly's in the time of the Flood believed that Ifonly I could have more in life than G-d gives me, I would be happy. More money. More desires. More power... Why did they think so haughtily? G-d gave them everything. So, they did not "need" G-d. A person who has no bed, a person who has no food needs G-d more, so he is more humble. The haughtiness of the mistaken thought that one does not need G-d is the root of all sin. When Moshe reprimanded the Jews for serving the Golden Calf, he hinted at it in his words ודי זהב (Devraim 1;1). Rashi comments that the reason why they served the Golden Calf was because they had רוב זהב, so much, gold! We sometimes think that if only we had more money, respect, power, etc..., we would be better parents, better Rosh Yeshivas, better teachers, better kollel guys.



Wrong!!!! The “more” is what brought about one of the greatest sins in history.

This was the measure-for-measure. G-d said to the people of the Flood, you don't want My boundaries? I will take away the boundaries of the seashore. I will take away the boundaries of the clouds, and the boundaries of the springs. I will plague them with My blessing to humanity: rain, but with no limits. With רבה, plagued with plenty.

How much Hishtadlut to make in life is one of the hardest questions we all need to answer. How hard should we try to make money, versus relying on G-d? I once had a business idea, so I discussed it with one of my Rabbis. He told me that the fine line

between proper Hishtadlut and too much of it is the difference between “making” money and “taking” money. Overworking, trying *too* hard, is like trying to get more than what G-d has allotted to you. And there is no Beracha in the money that you “take”. Some commentators believed that the only lesson we can learn from Parashat Noach, for our generation, is to learn from the episode of the drinking of Noach, how dangerous it is to get drunk, how it happens unexpectedly, and how it splits families.

But I believe that we can learn from the Flood a lot about humility. And that whatever we have from G-d is all we really need.

SECRET (OF) CHARM

Some people have charm. Wherever life takes them, people are drawn to them like a magnet. I used to believe that charm is something that you either got from Heaven or you didn't. Time has taught me that some people who have charm can lose it, while others who did not have it suddenly figure out how to turn it on, consciously or subconsciously. Charm is important, for it is the secret recipe for getting people to like you. It can get people to want to have you around. There are a few ingredients in the recipe for gaining charm. Many people who have charm did not break it down to a science. They do not know that they naturally stumbled onto the secret recipe. They just naturally put into play the behavior that creates it. Not being aware of just what it is that they are doing right can sometimes result in trying other modes of behavior and losing the charm.

There is a Hebrew word consisting of only two letters that, despite its brevity, can take you very far in life, if you really know what it means. חן. The translation of the Hebrew word חן is grace or favor. Grace is so important that we pray to G-d three times a day in ששים שלום at the end of the Amidah, asking him to grant us grace. We pray for it immediately upon awakening in Birkot Hashachar. People know, at least subconsciously,

what grace is. But most people do not or cannot define it in cognitive terms. Once you know what grace is and you implement it, you have what we call charm. Charm and grace are really dependent on a few factors. We are going to focus on the most important one, the one that has to do with our ancestor, Noach.

There are two main characters in the תנ”ך that won this title of חן, two people that had grace. Noach is the first one. In Havdallah, Sefardim say the last passuk in parashat Bereshit ונה מצא חן בעיני ה', *And Noach found favor in G-d's eyes*. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 105) writes that the decree of the Flood applied to Noach, as well as to the other people in his time אף על נח נחתם גזר דין אלא שמצא חן בעיני ה'. Noach was spared from the outcome of the decree because he had this favor, this grace. Grace saved his life! The power of grace is so great that one who possesses it can be rewarded royally, without even deserving it. Moshe Rabbeinu beseeched G-d to forgive the Jewish Nation of the sin of Golden Calf in the merit of grace. And G-d answered him והננתי את אשר אהון – I will act with grace to those in whom I find grace. Rashi comments (Berachot 7a) “[I will act graciously with him] Even though the one who possesses grace is not worthy of My grace.



It is obvious, then, that one who has grace gets much more out of life than he deserves. And, people forgive such individuals much faster. But what is this grace thing, and how does one get it?

The next person who won the title of חן was Queen Esther. From all of the girls that were candidates to be Achashverosh's queen, Esther was chosen. And here are the words of the psukkim ותהי אסתר נשאת חן בעיני כל ראייה *And Esther found favor in the eyes of all who saw her.* Then the passuk says, ויאהב המלך את אסתר *And, of all the women, the king loved Esther, and she found favor and kindness before him more than all the virgins.* What did Esther do to get this חן, specifically in the בית הנשים, the place where all the female candidates were busy with jewelry, perfumed oils and beauty treatments? And another point. It seems that חן and חסד go together, both in the case of Esther and in the Amidah, in שים שלום. What is the connection?

There are two approaches to life, exemplified by the way people relate to others. When joining company, some will walk into a room and say, "Well, here I am!" There are others who walk in and say, "Ahh, there you are." The first person shines the spotlight of the conversation on his own life's interests, while the other shows genuine concern for what is important to his fellow. You have two tracks of thinking that you can run in any given relationship: *What can I do to that will make it more enjoyable for me when I have this person around?* Or, *What can I do to make things enjoyable for the other person to have me around?* What is the difference between the two? חן. Grace. Favor.

Noach's father gave him the name נח saying, זה יבחמנו ממעשנו ומעצבון ידינו מן האדמה אשר אררה ה' This (son) will make things easier for us to deal with the land that was cursed by G-d. The Hebrew word נח means "comfortable". Noach lived up to his name, making things comfortable for the people he shared the world with. The Midrash tells us that Noach invented the plow, the spick, and all other tools for working. Until then, people would just

plow with their hands, cut wheat with their hands – and everything was very difficult. קוץ ודרדר Thorns and thistles were in abundance, due to the curse that G-d gave the land when Adam ate from the Tree of Knowledge. But Noach invented the solution to a global problem. Noach did not become rich from this. There was no way to patent a shovel or a rake. But he thought how to make life easier for the people in his generation. Everyone else was just busy solving his own life's problems. No one invested time designing things that could help mankind. Noach, however, genuinely cared for other people. This is what gave him grace and favor. And, this is what saved his life. G-d knew that the right man for the job to care for the animals in the Ark had to be Noach. This explains why Noach got punished severely the one time he brought food late to the lion. The lion slashed his leg, making Noach limp and bleed heavily- וישאר *אך נח* (see Rashi 8;23). Why was Noach punished so severely for just a little delay? But, now we understand that Noach was, in fact, not worthy of being saved. He was actually part of the decree of annihilation in the flood. The only thing that kept him alive was grace: caring for others, showing interest in others. When he slacked off in that even a bit, he lost his merit for a minute; he lost his grace, and was now punished as part of the original decree.

Esther's חן had the same basis as Noach's: caring for others. The Talmud (Meggillah 13a) tells us that the source of Esther's חן was in her making each person feel that she was from his nation. How did Esther make people from so many varied backgrounds feel that she was a "landsman" – a fellow compatriot? She showed them that she loved them and cared about what was going on in their lives, with such warmth that they felt she was part of them. Despite her being queen, she behaved with humbleness, treating each person as a צלם *אלקים*. (see Me'am Loez 2; 15) This is what brings a person grace. And it can take a person very far in life. It seems that this is the connection between חן and חסד, kindness and grace.

King Solomon teaches in Mishlei the main variable for this charm. וְלַעֲנוּיִם יִתֵּן חֵן (Mishlei 3 ;33) *And G-d gives favor (or grace) to those who are humble.* Humbleness means putting yourself on hold for a bit. All sensible etiquette is connected to recognizing that there is someone else in the picture. There are infinite details of how to express this recognition: the way one acts, talks, and even

one's body language. All these bring about the grace, the favor, the charm. Respecting that there is someone else, and caring that he is there. We ask G-d that we merit this humbleness, have that charm, and show that we care that there are people in our world other than "me".

TO BE AN IVRI

"Street-smart" people know how to deal with sticky situations. Not all of us are blessed with their talents. Indeed, even *they* may not be aware of how they naturally behave. I would like to examine one of the techniques used by the "street-smart personality," and suggest that it may also serve the rest of us in certain situations. I will call it "defensive-to-offensive positioning." Ironically, we can learn the technique from none other than Nimrod, King of Ur Kasdim, and sworn enemy of our Patriarch Avraham. As we study the famous Midrash about Avraham smashing the idols – and its aftermath – we will notice the centrality of this technique in the first disputation Judaism ever experienced.

Let's consider a situation almost all of us encounter at one time or another: having to defend our religion, beliefs, and/or identity against the attacks of an anti-religious Jew. More often than not, the questions or attack of the critic are not rooted in a search for truth as much as they are rooted in self-defense. At some point in the argument, we usually have the following challenge thrown at us: "*Prove to me that G-d exists.*" And many people foolishly attempt to do so.

The attempt is foolish because a Jew who is in denial of G-d's existence – and is not looking to change as much as he is looking to defend himself – will not be willing to accept our beliefs unless he can feel, see, and hear G-d. The facts and phenomena that point clearly in the direction of a Creator will be ignored. The harmony of creation will never be enough for such a person. Even if the religious Jew succeeds in defending his beliefs and his religion, the anti-religious critic will often

avoid giving the subject any serious thought, and simply proclaim that he simply does not "buy it."

This is the place for the offense/defense technique. Every athlete or person who enjoys sports knows that it is better to be on the offense rather than on the defense. When on the offense, you never lose. You either gain a point or you do not. On the defense, however, you either lose a goal or save yourself from losing one. In every debate as well, one will always find himself either in the offensive or defensive position.

When you are defending Judaism against someone who is not really seeking the truth, he or she will never let you feel that you defended your religion or beliefs successfully.

What should you do? Stop defending, and go on the offensive. Turn the tables and say something like this: "*I challenge you to prove to me that G-d does not exist.*" This usually scares them off because this was something they attempted unsuccessfully throughout their lives. Such people may have convinced *themselves* about their proof against G-d's existence in order to avoid responsibilities. The non-believer defends his own weak position by attacking you instead. The best way to deal with such a person is to defend yourself by quickly and smoothly shifting position and putting him on defense. By doing so you are in the "no-loss" position in this debate. The only defense the attacker has is to put *you* back into defense mode. Never let him do it.

In the following famous Midrash (Rabba 38), the "defensive-to-offensive positioning" technique is clearly seen throughout the debate between



Avraham and Nimrod. Avraham Avinu's father Terach was an idol manufacturer and retailer. Terach asked Avraham to manage the business while he was away. When the first customer walked in, Avraham asked him how old he was. The man responded that he was sixty, and immediately realized how foolish he was to bow to a one-day old idol. Needless to say, he left the shop with an empty shopping bag.

Later, a woman walked in with a bowl of soup which she left as an offering to the idols. When Terach returned, he was taken aback by the wreck in his shop. Avraham pointed an accusing finger at the big idol with a sword in his hand, and explained that the idols quarreled over the sacrifice. The big one had destroyed all the other smaller idols. Terach told Avraham that he does not believe the story because the idols cannot move. Avraham took this opportunity to question his father about believing in and promoting such a "god."

Now, news of this episode reached the ears of the ruler of Ur Kasdim, Nimrod, and he was hardly willing to close his eyes to Avraham's "apostasy." He commanded Avraham to bow down to fire, his god. Nimrod believed in fire as almighty because fire can destroy anything on earth. Avraham responded by bravely pointing out to Nimrod that water is more powerful than fire because water extinguishes fire. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to bow down to rain clouds? Nimrod proceeded to command Avraham to bow down to the clouds. But Avraham challenged him again: Isn't wind more powerful since it can push around the clouds? Perhaps it would be more appropriate to bow down to the wind? Nimrod then commanded Avraham to bow to the wind. This went on a few more rounds until Avraham made it crystal clear to Nimrod that the most powerful force in the universe – and the Creator of fire, rain, wind, etc. – is an immortal Almighty G-d .

What was Nimrod's response? Denial. Nimrod forced Avraham *to prove* the existence of his G-d.

"I bow only to fire, and I will throw you into it! Let us see your G-d come and save you!"

At first glance, Nimrod's response is rather hard to fathom. Didn't Avraham prove to him that fire cannot be all-powerful? How did Nimrod stick to his belief in this public debate without first defending his position? The answer is that Nimrod just switched from defense to offense. By turning the tables and having Avraham and his G-d prove themselves, Nimrod avoided having to defend himself. This is what street-smart people do. They just go on the offensive instead of defending their shaky positions.

Of course, we *can* defend Judaism against any and all attacks, but we do not feel obliged to do so when challenged by people who are not seeking the truth.

Now, Avraham's brother Haran was not sure if Avraham was right about his belief in G-d. As Avraham was thrown into the fire, Nimrod asked Haran if he agreed with his brother. After witnessing Avraham's success in his disputation with Nimrod – capped by his brother's miraculous salvation from the fire – he decided to answer in the affirmative, and was promptly tossed into the fire. But G-d did not make a miracle for Haran. Why not?

G-d was not willing to make a miracle because Judaism is not based on successfully defending ourselves in a debate or successfully exposing the fallacies of other religions. Judaism is about realizing – through the Book of Torah and the Book of Nature – that there is a Creator who wants us to serve Him and perform His Mitzvot. Judaism is about being an *Ivri* – one from the "other side." The whole world may disagree with us, and stand on the other side of the "river," yet the authentic Jew, like our great Patriarch Avraham, will stand alone with his belief even if it looks like no one bought into his side of the debate. Haran was not willing to be that "lonely man" of faith. This essentially meant that Haran was not willing to be Jewish. And this is a lesson for all of us about Judaism: We should develop our faith in G-d and



His Torah to the point where we live as Jews even idols of money, pleasure, or anything else.
if everyone around us is telling us to worship the

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IN LOVING MEMORY OF SONNY AND IRENE GINDI A”H

And Refuah Shelema

For

Avraham Ben Mazal

