

Noach and the Faith That Moves Us to Act

Parshas Noach 5787 — Shabbos Morning Class

Developed and Presented by Rabbi Yossi Michalowicz

Based on Rav Shimshon Dovid Pinkus, Tiferes Shimshon, Bereishis, pp. 107-113

The Man Who Built An Ark

I want to begin with a question about a man whose entire life seems to testify to his אמונה — faith.

Noach lives in a generation that has corrupted itself. He stands apart. The Torah calls him a righteous person. Hashem speaks to him, tells him that a Flood is coming, and commands him to build an ark.

Noach spends 120 years building the ark. Think about what that means. This is not a private resolution that nobody else sees. He is constructing an enormous ark because Hashem has told him that the world around him will be destroyed.

Other people continue with their lives. Noach continues with his ark. The years pass, and he continues. Whatever the people around him think, his actions announce that the word of Hashem is more real to him than their opinions.

Then the Torah tells us that Noach entered the ark because of the waters of the Flood. Look at Source 1, and at Rashi's comment.

1. Bereishis 7:7 and Rashi — Noach's faith

ויבא נח ובניו ואשתו ונשי בניו אתו אל התבה מפני מי המבול.

רש"י, ד"ה מפני מי המבול: אף נח מקטני אמנה היה, מאמין ואינו מאמין שיבא המבול, ולא נכנס לתבה עד שדחקהו המים.

Noach, his sons, his wife, and his sons' wives with him entered the ark because of the waters of the Flood.

Rashi, on 'because of the waters of the Flood': Even Noach was of little faith. He believed and did not believe that the Flood would come, and did not enter the ark until the waters forced him in.

How can we understand that?

If he did not believe, why did he build the ark? Why devote all those years to obeying Hashem? Why gather the animals and prepare for a catastrophe that he did not expect?

And if he did believe, why did the water have to force him inside?

We are not speaking about a person who casually says that he believes in Hashem. We are speaking about Noach, who reorganized his life around a Divine command. What was missing in his faith?

The answer Rav Pinkus gives is surprising, because the problem arose within Noach's understanding of Hashem's goodness.

When Our Understanding Of Mercy Becomes An Assumption

Noach knew that Hashem had decreed the Flood. That is why he built the ark. But Noach also knew that Hashem is merciful and compassionate. He knew that Hashem is slow to anger and abundant in kindness.

He held those truths together in a particular way. Yes, there was a decree. Yes, he had to prepare. But surely, at the final moment, Hashem's mercy would prevail. Surely the terrible destruction would be averted.

Rav Pinkus compares Noach's expectation to the reversal that would later take place in the days of Mordechai. At Purim, a terrible decree was overturned. Noach expected a reversal too: the decree was real, but surely Hashem's mercy would prevail before it was carried out.

Look at Rav Pinkus's own words in Source 2.

2. Rav Pinkus, Tiferes Shimshon, p. 107 — Expecting mercy

הוא ודאי ידע שנגזרה גזירה, הקב"ה קבע שיהיה מבול, ומחמת כן נח בונה את התיבה. הכל נכון. אלא, שכל הזמן הוא חי עם ההרגשה שבסופו של דבר המבול לא יבוא. בסוף תתגבר המידה העליונה של חסד ושל רחמים אצל הקב"ה, וברגע האחרון יתרחש נס גדול והכל יסתדר לטובה.

He certainly knew that a decree had been issued: Hashem had determined that there would be a Flood, and therefore Noach was building the ark. All that was true. Yet throughout, he lived with the feeling that ultimately the Flood would not come. In the end, Hashem's supreme attribute of kindness and mercy would prevail; at the last moment a great miracle would occur, and everything would turn out well.

Even when the rain began, he still expected a different ending.

Rav Pinkus explains that Noach's difficulty was accepting a Divine action that did not fit what he understood about Hashem. He knew Hashem's mercy. He could not fully take in the possibility that Hashem's judgment would actually destroy the world.

There is a subtle but important distinction here. We are entitled to hope for mercy. We are commanded to turn to Hashem. The difficulty begins when our expectation becomes so certain that we fail to respond to what Hashem has told us.

"I hope that Hashem will have mercy" opens the heart to prayer.

"I am sure that this will never happen" can leave the heart asleep.

Those sentences may sound similar, but they can produce entirely different lives. One person pleads, changes, prepares, and acts. The other waits for events to resolve themselves.

Noach had done an enormous amount. He was building the ark. What was missing was not all action, but the full response that taking the danger seriously should have awakened—especially prayer. And at the final moment, when he had to enter the ark, something in his understanding still held him back. The danger had to become physically unavoidable before he acted on it fully.

That is what makes the criticism so searching. A person can be sincere, devoted, and observant, and still have an area in which his convictions have not fully entered his practical response.

It is possible to believe a truth intellectually while living as though there is an exception reserved for oneself.

Believing In What We Cannot Understand

Rav Pinkus brings a question attributed to the Brisker Rav. In the future, when the world is filled with knowledge of Hashem, what place will remain for the mitzvah of faith?

The answer is that we will understand far more than we understand today, but there will still be that which is beyond our understanding. There will still be room for faith.

Faith is particularly necessary where our own understanding reaches its boundary.

One such boundary is Divine judgment. We know that Hashem's kindness is infinite. How, then, do we understand suffering, judgment, and punishment? We cannot claim to have resolved every question. Yet our inability to understand does not make the Torah's account of judgment unreal.

The Rambam's wording in Sefer Hamitzvos is striking. In describing the mitzvah of יִרְאַה — fear of Hashem — he includes the word “להאמין,” to believe or affirm. Look at the opening of the commandment in Source 3.

3. Rambam, Sefer Hamitzvos, positive commandment 4 — Fear of Hashem (opening excerpt)

הֵיא שְׁצוֹנוּ לְהֵאֱמִין יִרְאָתוֹ יִתְעַלָּה וְלִהְפַּחַד מִמֶּנּוּ, וְלֹא נִהְיָ כְּכּוֹפְרִים הַהוּלָכִים בְּשִׁרְיוֹת לִבָּם וּבִקְרִי אֲבֵל נִירָא בִּירְאָת עֲנָשׁוֹ בְּכָל עֵת וְזֶהוּ אָמְרוּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ תִירָא.

This is the commandment that we affirm the fear of Him, exalted be He, and be afraid of Him. We must not be like those who deny Him, following their stubborn hearts and acting heedlessly; rather, we must fear His punishment at all times. This is His statement: 'You shall fear Hashem your God.'

Rav Pinkus draws our attention to that word: before fear can affect us, we have to believe that the consequences are real.

Why bring belief into a mitzvah of fear? A person cannot truly fear consequences that he does not believe will actually occur. Before the warning can influence his choices, he has to believe that it is real.

Rav Pinkus explains that there is something we must first take seriously: the consequences the Torah describes can actually occur. They are not merely impressive language to be recited and then set aside.

We know how this works in ordinary life. A person may understand that a particular action has consequences, but still feel that somehow the consequence will not arrive. He knows the warning, but the warning has not become real to him.

In service of Hashem, too, there is a difference between acknowledging a teaching and allowing it to influence our choices.

Noach's difficulty was not that he knew nothing about Hashem. He knew a great deal. The difficulty was accepting that Hashem's conduct could extend beyond the picture Noach had formed of Him.

Avraham Avinu faced a different challenge at the Akeidah. Hashem had told him that his future would continue through Yitzchak. Now he was commanded to bring Yitzchak as an offering. To Avraham's understanding, those statements appeared to contradict one another.

Yet he did not make his own understanding the condition of his obedience. He followed Hashem's command while the question remained unresolved.

The outcome ultimately revealed that Yitzchak was not to be slaughtered. But Avraham did not possess that explanation when he set out.

That is the depth of the contrast. Noach expected the ending that made sense to him. Avraham proceeded faithfully before he could understand the ending.

Look at Source 4: the Torah's words at the Akeidah, and Rashi's explanation of the command.

4. Bereishis 22:12 and Rashi — The Akeidah (excerpts)

כי עתה ידעתי כי ירא אלהים אתה ולא חשכת את בנך את יחידך ממני.

רש"י, ד"ה כי עתה ידעתי: לא אמרתי לך שחטוהו אלא העלהו, אסקתיה, אחתיה.

‘For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only one, from Me.’

Rashi, on ‘for now I know’: ‘I did not tell you to slaughter him, but to bring him up. You have brought him up; bring him down.’

Avraham eventually received the explanation: bring Yitzchak up, and then bring him down. But he had proceeded before that explanation was given. Rav Pinkus connects this fear of Hashem to Avraham’s willingness to accept His command beyond his own understanding.

Our understanding of Hashem must remain humble. We know what He has taught us, and we keep learning. But we do not know everything about His ways.

Mordechai Took The Decree Seriously

Now let us return to Mordechai, because here the distinction becomes practical.

Rav Pinkus points out that Noach’s failure to pray for his generation is connected to this understanding. If he expected that the destruction would ultimately be cancelled, he did not feel the full urgency of pleading to prevent it.

Mordechai responded differently. He took the threat to the Jewish people seriously. That recognition produced an urgent response.

Rav Pinkus explains that even the knowledge that the decree had been sealed did not lead Mordechai to say that prayer was pointless. He responded with fervent prayer. The Jewish people were summoned to fasting and prayer. Esther was directed to undertake her part in the effort to save them.

Source 5 shows the combination: fasting, and Esther’s practical intervention. Rav Pinkus explains the recognition that lay behind that response.

5. Esther 4:16; Rav Pinkus, p. 108 — Responding to the decree (excerpts)

לך כנוס את כל היהודים הנמצאים בשושן וצומו עלי ואל תאכלו ואל תשתו שלשת ימים לילה ויום גם אני ונערתי אצום כן ובכן אבוא אל המלך אשר לא כדת וכאשר אבדתי אבדתי.

רב פינקוס: אבל מרדכי האמין שהדבר יתכן, אף שלא הבין את שכלו, והוא הפך עולמות לבטל את הגזירה.

‘Go, gather all the Jews who are in Shushan, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night and day. My attendants and I will also fast. Then I will go to the king, although it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.’

Rav Pinkus: But Mordechai believed that it could happen, even though he did not understand its rationale; and he moved heaven and earth to annul the decree.

Taking the decree seriously did not mean surrendering to it. It meant understanding that this was a time for an extraordinary response.

We must be very clear about this distinction. Hashem’s mercy remains the foundation of our hope. A serious danger is a reason to cry out for that mercy, to do repentance, and to act.

The person who says, “Hashem can save us,” has a reason to daven.

The person who says, “There is no real danger because Hashem will certainly save us,” may convince himself that there is nothing urgent to daven about.

Mordechai’s faith was active. His recognition of the danger brought him closer to Hashem and moved him to take responsibility.

This gives us a question to ask ourselves: when we encounter a warning, does our faith awaken us?

We should not wait until the water is pressing against us before we discover the urgency of prayer.

Antisemitism And The Temptation To Say It Cannot Happen

That question speaks to our lives as Jews when we confront antisemitism and threats to Jewish life.

There is a comforting sentence that human beings are tempted to say: “It cannot become that serious.” We may say it because we are frightened. We may say it because our daily routine still looks familiar. We may even wrap the sentence in religious language: “Surely Hashem would never allow such a thing.”

But our history does not allow us to turn hope into a guarantee that catastrophe is impossible.

Hashem’s love for the Jewish people is real. Our need to turn to Him is also real. We must recognize that hatred can grow and threats can develop. What people dismiss can become overwhelming.

We are not predicting another catastrophe. We are asking what kind of response a serious danger should awaken in us.

The answer is Mordechai’s response: a deeper return to Hashem, more earnest prayer, greater unity, and responsible action to protect life.

Let us begin with one question: where has my davening become automatic? Each person can identify one part of his prayer and return to it with attention and urgency. We are asking Hashem for life, protection, forgiveness, and help. Let us stop for a moment and mean what we are saying.

And let us ask: are we more careful with one another’s dignity? Are we repairing a quarrel, strengthening Torah, or helping a Jew who is frightened or isolated?

These are questions about our responsibility. They do not entitle us to explain another person’s suffering or to assign blame to the victims of hatred. The perpetrators are responsible for their evil. Our work is to ask what Hashem requires of us in the circumstances we face.

And alongside repentance and prayer, there must be appropriate practical effort. Mordechai did not treat Esther’s practical intervention as a contradiction to prayer. The response included both.

The response is not to live frightened. It is to pray seriously, act responsibly, and stop assuming that our response does not matter.

We can hope deeply and still recognize urgency. We can trust Hashem and still take precautions. We can believe in His mercy and still understand that we need to ask for it.

Noach teaches us the danger of waiting for the water. Mordechai teaches us how to respond while there is still something to do.

The Question Now Turns Toward Us

Rav Pinkus now brings that same mistake closer to home. Noach could not quite believe that the destruction would actually happen. We can make a similar mistake about ourselves: “I could never fall that far,” or, on the other side, “My choices could never accomplish that much.” In both cases, we underestimate what is possible.

We can believe in *בְּחִירָה* — freedom of choice — and still underestimate its reach. The same freedom that makes vigilance necessary also makes extraordinary good possible.

We believe that a human being has freedom of choice. Every day we make choices. We can learn or neglect learning, speak thoughtfully or speak hurtfully, restrain our anger or release it.

But how far do we believe that freedom extends?

Rav Pinkus gives a simple illustration. If someone is told that he can move two centimetres to the right or two centimetres to the left, the choice is hardly significant. Real freedom of choice means that the possible directions reach much further.

The capacity for choice is part of what makes a human being human. Its consequences can be immense, in both directions.

A person can bring remarkable good into the world. A person can also cause terrible harm. Rav Pinkus insists that this is a truth we must take seriously, even when it is uncomfortable.

Most of us readily recognize the power of other people’s choices. We know that one irresponsible person can injure a family, a community, or an institution. Yet when we think about ourselves, we sometimes quietly assume that certain failures are beyond the range of possibility.

“I have been learning for years.”

“I have built a Torah home.”

“I have worked on myself.”

All of that matters enormously. Those years have built habits, understanding, and spiritual strength. But they have not removed the need to choose today.

Yesterday's mitzvos do not make today's decision on our behalf.

The Danger Of Saying That Could Never Be Me

Rav Pinkus compares this assumption to a remark attributed to Rav Yisrael Salanter. People behave as though those who die belong to a particular society, and since they have never joined it, its fate does not concern them.

The point is the human tendency to put an uncomfortable possibility outside the circle of one's own life.

We can do something similar in our spiritual lives. We hear about someone's moral collapse, spiritual decline, or destructive behavior and regard it as belonging to a different category of people.

But our freedom of choice remains with us. We do not graduate from the need for humility and help from Hashem. Do we pray to protect what we have built? Do we recognize where our own vulnerability appears?

For one person it is anger. For another it is the need to win an argument. For another it is the temptation to speak about someone when the conversation becomes entertaining. For another it is a gradual weakening of a commitment to learning.

Often the issue appears in a small moment. We are tired. We feel slighted. Everyone around us is participating. We tell ourselves that this one occasion does not matter.

That is precisely where choice takes place.

Here is an ordinary example. A person may have spent years being generous and considerate. Then someone says something hurtful to him, and he wants to answer with the sentence that will do the most damage.

His good history is real. His present choice is also real. He can stop, ask Hashem for help, and preserve someone's dignity. He can also cause a wound whose effects last long after the conversation ends.

The seriousness of freedom of choice belongs to ordinary life. We do not have to search for a spectacular crisis to discover it.

Davening To Protect What We Have Built

Rav Pinkus says that if we fully believed in the scope of this possibility, we would pray with far greater urgency and do what we could to avoid being drawn into failure. Look at Source 6.

6. Rav Pinkus, pp. 111-112 — The reach of our choices (excerpts)

אך האמת היא שזה אחד מיסודות הבחירה — כל ימיו, אדם עומד על פרשת דרכים!
כאן טמונה הנפילה הגדולה של רבים מאתנו, כי אם אדם היה מאמין באפשרות הזו —
היה נזהר, היה גועש ורועש בתפילה, ובמקביל עושה את כל המאמצים לברוח מפני
היצר המנסה להכשילו.

But the truth is that this is one of the foundations of freedom of choice: throughout his life, a person stands at a crossroads!

Here lies the great stumbling of many of us. If a person believed in this possibility, he would be careful; he would pour himself into prayer and, at the same time, make every effort to escape the inclination that seeks to make him stumble.

That brings us back to the beginning of the class.

Noach's assumption about what could not happen diminished the urgency of his response. Our assumption about what could not happen to us can do the same.

“I would never become that kind of person” may feel reassuring. But a better foundation is: “Hashem, help me continue becoming the person I should be.”

There is room for confidence in service of Hashem. We should recognize our strengths and use them. Confidence becomes healthier when it includes dependence on Hashem.

We can take one vulnerable area and bring it consciously into our prayer.

“Help me guard my mouth today.”

“Help me speak to my family with patience.”

“Help me keep my commitment to learning.”

“Help me act honestly when the choice becomes difficult.”

A valuable relationship needs continuing attention. So does a Torah life. We bring that need to Hashem because we value what we have built.

And the same seriousness that makes us daven for protection should awaken us to the good that we can still accomplish.

One Person Can Change An Entire Atmosphere

Rav Pinkus describes something he saw in yeshivos: the influence of a single student.

One young man can introduce a spirit of slackness. A small delay in starting the learning session becomes acceptable. Leaving early becomes normal. Time that could have been used for Torah slips away. Other people begin to follow his example.

An atmosphere is built through repeated choices, and one person can help set those choices in motion.

Now look at the opposite direction in Source 7.

7. Rav Pinkus, p. 112 — One person's influence (excerpt)

והוא הדין לצד הטוב. אין לשער את כמות שעות הלימוד, את התועלת האדירה שבחור אחד מסוגל להכניס לתוך ישיבה! לפעמים בחור אחד עם חשק, ממשיך את ה'סדר' בלילה משעה תשע עד תשע־וחצי. חברו רואה זאת וגם הם ממשיכים ללמוד חצי שעה נוספת, וכן ממשיך בישיבה שה'סדר' מסתיים בתשע. אותו בחור עוזב את הישיבה, חולפות עשרות שנים, ואלפי שעות לימוד נזקפות לזכותו.

The same is true on the side of good. There is no estimating the number of hours of learning, the tremendous benefit that one young man can bring into a yeshivah! Sometimes an enthusiastic student continues the evening learning session from nine until nine-thirty. His friend sees this, and others also continue learning for an additional half-hour. The practice continues in a yeshivah whose session ends at nine. That student leaves the yeshivah; decades pass, and thousands of hours of learning are credited to him.

One student learns with enthusiasm and continues beyond the expected time. Others join him. The effect can continue long after he has left the yeshivah.

The setting in his essay is a yeshiva, but we all understand the principle.

One person comes into a shiur prepared to engage. He listens, asks a thoughtful question, and helps everyone feel that the learning matters.

One person notices someone standing alone at kiddush and invites him into the conversation. The newcomer's experience of the shul changes.

One person refuses to pass on an insulting comment. Others discover that they can stop the conversation too.

One person in a family apologizes without demanding that everyone else apologize first. A quarrel begins to loosen.

We sometimes wait for an entire group to change before we believe our own action will have an effect. But groups are made of people who influence one another.

We cannot determine every outcome. We can take responsibility for what we introduce into the atmosphere around us.

This is the positive half of freedom of choice. If our choices can have serious consequences, then our good choices deserve to be taken seriously as well.

We underestimate our vulnerability. We also underestimate our influence.

The first calls us to prayer and vigilance. The second calls us to courage and generosity. Both call us to act.

Two Choices For The Coming Week

Before the closing story, let us make the teaching practical.

First, identify one area that needs protection, and daven for help with it. Make the request specific enough that it is alive in your mind when the moment of choice arrives. One vulnerable area. One earnest request. And when the choice comes, act on that request.

Second, choose one way to strengthen another person or improve the atmosphere around you. Welcome someone. Keep a learning commitment. Repair a relationship. Offer practical help. Give another person reason to feel that he can take his next good step.

We are beginning a new cycle of Torah reading. We need humility about our continuing dependence on Hashem, and confidence that He has given us the ability to accomplish good. Both belong in the same Torah life.

Now I want to tell you a story about the strength one person can give another. We have spoken about changing an atmosphere. Sometimes, our influence is even more personal: another human being draws strength from us.

The Bluzhever Rebbe At The Edge Of The Pit

This account appears in Yaffa Eliach's Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust. It is based on a conversation between the Bluzhever Rebbe, Rav Yisrael Spira, and Baruch Singer in 1975.

We hear it with reverence for all who suffered. Survival was never a measure of righteousness. Its lesson here is the strength one Jew can give another in a terrible moment.

It was a cold, dark night in the Janowska camp. Suddenly, the prisoners were ordered out of the barracks. Anyone who remained inside would be shot.

The prisoners hurried out. There was panic as people struggled to reach the doors and called for friends and relatives. They were driven toward an open field.

When they reached it, they saw two enormous pits.

Then came the command: anyone who wanted to live had to jump across one of the pits and reach the other side. Anyone who failed would be killed.

Think about the people being ordered to jump. They had been starved. They were sick, exhausted from forced labor, and deprived of sleep. Their bodies had been weakened day after day. Now they were being told that their lives depended on a leap across a vast opening in the earth.

For the prisoners, it was life and death. For the guards, it was a cruel spectacle.

Among those approaching the pits was the Bluzhever Rebbe. Beside him stood a friend, a Jew from Poland who did not share his religious beliefs. They had met in the camp and developed a close friendship.

The friend looked at what lay ahead and saw no reason to attempt the jump. He urged the Rebbe to give up. They would only be entertaining their tormentors. Better to stop and let the bullets end it.

The Rebbe answered that they had to make the attempt. He understood that they could fall. He understood what would happen if they did. Yet they still had to try to live, accepting that the outcome was in Hashem's hands.

They moved closer.

The pits were filling with bodies.

The Rebbe looked down at his feet. He was fifty-three years old. His feet were swollen; his body was weakened by hunger and illness. Then he looked at his companion, also terribly emaciated.

They reached the edge.

The Rebbe closed his eyes. In a forceful whisper he said, “We are jumping!”

They jumped.

When they opened their eyes, both were standing on the other side.

His friend began to weep. He kept telling the Rebbe that they were alive, that they had made it. He credited the Rebbe with his survival and acknowledged the presence of God. Then he asked how the Rebbe had managed to cross.

The Rebbe explained that he had drawn on the merit of his ancestors. He pictured himself holding onto his father, his grandfather, and his great-grandfather—the generations who had come before him.

Then the Rebbe turned the question around. How had his friend reached the other side?

“I was holding on to you.”

Someone May Be Holding On To You

The Rebbe drew strength from the generations behind him. His friend drew strength from the man beside him.

Who is drawing strength from us?

We may not know. A child watches whether we keep our word. A friend notices that we continue coming to learn when life is difficult. A frightened person hears the steadiness and sincerity of our prayer. Someone who feels alone discovers, through our concern, that he still belongs.

The Rebbe faced the danger honestly. He did not promise his friend a miracle. He found the strength to attempt to live, and that strength helped his friend make the attempt too.

Our circumstances are different. But the responsibility to strengthen one another is very real. We receive strength from Hashem, from Torah, and from the generations before us. Then someone beside us may receive strength from us.

Take the danger seriously. Daven with your whole heart. Keep choosing good. And remember that your choice may matter to someone who has never told you how much he needs it.

Someone may be holding on to you.

We may never know who is holding on to us. This week, choose one person whom you can strengthen—and do something concrete for that person.

May Hashem protect our people, awaken us to heartfelt repentance, and help us hold firmly to Him. And may the strength we receive become strength that we give to one another.

Sources and Further Reading

Rav Shimshon Dovid Pinkus, Tiferes Shimshon, Bereishis, pp. 107–113 (ק"ז–ק"ח), "שצונו להאמין יראתו יתעלה." Sources 2, 5–7 are excerpts from this essay. The Brisker Rav's question and Rav Yisrael Salanter's illustration are cited as reported there.

The accompanying numbered source sheet contains the texts quoted in the class. English translations have been prepared for this class. Rambam's wording in Source 3 is followed by Rav Pinkus's interpretation in the discussion.

Yaffa Eliach, Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust, "Hovering above the Pit," based on the January 3, 1975 conversation of Rav Yisrael Spira, the Bluzhever Rebbe, with Baruch Singer.

The contemporary applications and concluding story illustrate the teaching; they are separate from Rav Pinkus's essay.

Bluzhever story: Ministry of Education teaching adaptation