

"IF YOU NEED HELP -- CALL!"

The high point of the story of Noah and the Flood comes when Noah and his family enter the ark. The Torah describes it in the following words:

וַיָּבֹא נֹחַ וּבָנָיו וְאִשְׁתּוֹ וְנָשֵׁי בָנָיו
אִתּוֹ אֶל הַתֵּיבָה מִפְּנֵי הַמָּבּוּל

"And Noah and his sons and his wife and the wives of his sons came into the Ark with him from before the waters of the flood" (Gen. 7:7).

The Rabbis were somewhat taken aback by the last phrase. Did Noah enter the ark only because of the waters of the flood? Was he not "a righteous man" who should have been motivated to enter the ark by the divine command, rather than by the threat of the actual flood waters?

Rabbi Yohanan replies that the Torah means what it says quite literally.
נֹחַ מְחִסֵּר אֱמוּנָה הִיךְ ... וְאֵילֻמְלָא שֶׁהֵגִיעוּ הַמַּיִם
עַד קִיסּוּלָיו לֹא נִכְנָס לַתֵּיבָה

"Noah was lacking in faith... Were it not for the fact that the flood waters reached his ankles, he would not have entered the ark!" (Gen.R. 32:9).

Rashi gives us the same message, but uses a slightly different expression:
נֹחַ מְאֵמִין וְאֵינוֹ מְאֵמִין הִיךְ

"Noah believed and he did not believe" -- in other words, Noah was a man of shaky faith, he wavered in his belief in God's prediction that the flood would come, and that is why he entered the ark only when forced to by the waters.

However, this interpretation is quite troublesome. It does not take into consideration the fact that Noah had believed in God all along, that he had already proved his faith under far more difficult circumstances when he built an ark -- according to tradition, this lasted for 120 years -- risking the ridicule of his peers. Is it reasonable to assume that a man who had invested all this time in establishing his principles and his faith, would fail at the last moment?

I therefore suggest that the object of the emunah (faith) in this context is not God but oneself. The problem is not a religious one, whether or to what extent Noah believed in God, but the psychological one: did he believe in himself? And I take Rashi's idiom quite literally: נֹחַ מְאֵמִין וְאֵינוֹ מְאֵמִין, "Noah believed and he did not believe." The Rabbis, according to this

interpretation, fault Noah for two things: for believing in himself, and for not believing in himself!

Let me explain. All of us, by virtue of our mortality and finitude, must rely upon each other. Especially in more advanced civilizations, we are not fully independent and autonomous. We all know that we need God, and God knows that we need each other. It is impossible to survive without interdependence. And yet, we so often fail to seek help on time and frequently wait until it is too late, until the flood waters reach not only our ankles, but our very noses! Why?

There are two reason, each the opposite of the other. One of them is: too much self-confidence, an excess of security, egoism, arrogance. A man is a מאמין (believer) in his own powers and image, and he is afraid that asking for help will put him in a position of dependency, inferiority, and subservience.

The second reason is: an utter lack of faith in oneself. A man is an אינו מאמין (non-believer), who lacks a sense of security, who experiences lowliness and diffidence and unworthiness and sinks in despair.

Remarkably, both of these can and usually are present at once. It is the phenomenon of ambivalence, where two opposite tendencies conspire to paralyze us unnecessarily.

After 120 years of building the ark, Noah still had to be driven into the ark by the waters reaching his ankles, because of both reasons: he was a maamin who thought to himself, "I have been spared so long, I will be spared longer. If I really am such a righteous man, such a צדיק תמים, then nothing will happen to me now." Noah was also an אינו מאמין, he lacked faith in himself. He probably thought to himself, "I am doomed with the rest of the world. There is nothing in me that makes me worthy of being saved, whereas the rest of the world drowns. I am helpless and hopeless."

When one is so beset by these extremes of overconfidence and under-confidence, of both an excess and a want of faith in himself, it is a sign of serious spiritual defect. It shows that he is מחוסר אמונה, that he lacks faith -- in the Almighty.

* * * * *

I mention this not only as a way of explaining a text, but more important, as a way of bringing to your attention a disturbing problem, namely, that many people come for help when it is too late, or come not at all, because they are either too sensitive

to their own egos or too considerate of those whom they consult; because they have too much confidence, they think they can handle every problem by themselves, and too little confidence that anyone in the world can help them.

I speak to you from a background of counselling experience. I am constantly worried by people who hesitate too long before calling out for help. Parents who have problem with children sometimes wait until the problem is unmanageable. Religious problems are sometimes allowed to fester beyond the possibility of successful solution. Domestic tensions should lead a couple to ask for help before an eruption is irrevocable. Yet too often, people believe that to ask for help is a blow at the ego, a sign of weakness -- or, the opposite, that they are so far gone that no one can help.

The same holds true for medical assistance. This week, by startling coincidence, the wife of the Vice President-designate was operated on for the same disease as was the wife of the President. All this helped in calling attention to the importance of seeking medical help -- on time! It is amazing how many people defer examinations because of these two opposite reasons: because of maamin, the feeling that "it can't happen to me," and eino maamin, the feeling that "it is too late, I am afraid to find out because if I have got it I am finished" -- both dangerous, both false, both to be shunned in every way.

But even more than these, there is something else that comes up most frequently in my experience. In mentioning it to you, I should like to make it clear that I do not refer to anyone individually -- but I refer to every one individually. I refer to situations where there are emotional or family problems, and where psychological or psychiatric help is clearly indicated.

Now, I do not believe that every psychologist is a modern version of a witch-doctor who can, by certain incantations and the payment of appropriate fees, cure everything and anything. I am not sufficiently affluent to indulge in such fantasies. I do not think that psychological help is the right of the poor and the duty of the rich. But I never fail to be startled by intelligent and sophisticated people who shrink from consulting psychologists, when to do so is the only rational recourse. I am amazed at how often I have to speak to intellectual and sensitive and au-courant people, and explain to them as simple as teaching the A-B-C, that "if you taken a broken knee to the orthopedist, and an injured eye to the ophthalmologist, why not take your bruised emotions to a psychologist?"

The answer is that these people are נאמין ונאמן, they suffer from both extremes. On the one hand, they cannot admit their supposed inferiority by asking someone else to help, and on the other hand, they inwardly feel that their problems are too enormous, that they are beyond salvation. But this is a perfect formula for perishing in the flood of personal anguish.

Of course, as with any other profession, one must seek out a person who is competent. Moreover, in the case of religious Jews, we must also make sure that the therapist in question is, if not personally observant, at least sympathetic; if not sympathetic, at least understanding. At the very least, he should be an ethical professional, who understands and abides by the canons of his own discipline, according to which the therapist must fully respect the values and principles of his patient and not seek to dissuade him from them.

But this having been done, I urge all of you: seek help on time! If you need help -- call!

* * * * *

Recent events of the past week or two impel me to add one more point to what I have been saying. It is something which I mention not because there is anything any of us can do about it, but perhaps I can in some small way help to express the frustration and anger all of us feel.

It is easy enough to get individuals to seek help. That is a comparatively simple thing. The big problem is, not what does one person do when he needs help but does not ask for it, but what of a whole world which desperately needs help but does not realize it?

This past week the United Nations, by an overwhelming vote, invited -- in a precedent-breaking act -- the Palestine Liberation Organization to have the right to appear before it as observers. Arafat or one of his deputies will soon come to New York to address the UN. The world organization is extending its hospitality to the chief international gangster. And by the perverted power of radical rhetoric, this butcher is presented to us as a genuine revolutionary and guerilla!

The ghosts of the slain children of Maalot will testify that such a world is sick, very sick, and desperately needs help!

Sometimes I think back to those naive and romantic days when, in the euphoria of expectations following World War II, we hypnotized ourselves with those progressivistic incantations about the UN being the "family of man," and we spoke about it as the "concert of nations," attributing to it some supernal moral authority. We overlooked the simple and obvious fact that a collection of nations with self-interest, some of it malicious, means that we have more malice than one nation individually, not less!

We used to tell ourselves: if only we had a UN in the days when Hitler came to power we might have escaped the terrible experience of World War II. That was what we thought. But now we know the truth. This week we have begun to realize: if there had been a UN then, they would have overwhelmingly invited Hitler to address them as their honored guest! And who knows but that a vote to condemn the "final solution" would have been defeated by a lopsided majority?

Where shall we find a psychiatrist wise enough to deal with the whole UN, that not only acts in brazen cynicism -- and according to some theories of diplomacy, such amoral conduct may be necessary -- but whose outrageous and shameless acts are greeted with applause and murmurs of consent in the corridors, without contrition or remorse?

Where, oh where, can we find a couch big enough for nine-tenths of mankind?

If I were the analyst or the chaplain of the UN, I would diagnose the illness as a critical case of ambivalence, of maamin and eino maamin!

The UN is maamin, it arrogantly expects to get away with it, it is willing to vent its hostility in a kind of diplomatic gang-mugging, and then honor the bully.

And it is eino maamin. The Western nations and the "developing nations" do not have enough confidence, not enough will, to organize and unite against the common threat. They do not understand that if they do not confront the Arabs now in the case of Israel, they will have to do so later under far worse circumstances.

If I were to make that diagnosis, I would add that both attitudes lead to a מבול, a deluge -- but not a מבול של נפט (flood of oil) but מבול של דם ודמעות (a flood of blood and tears).

So the Noah syndrome is upon us again. From Munich to Maalot and the invitation to PLO, is some 35 years -- what a short memory the intellectual community has! What we are when we do not understand that God will not long let the world get away with it!

For ourselves, in addition to bearing in mind what I said urging each of you to seek help on time, I also would like to add two things we can do, one large and one small. The big thing is to stand by Israel and support it in every way in the days ahead. The small thing is that before that day of infamy comes at the UN, let us assemble, two weeks from this coming Monday, in peace and in dignity, but vigorously, to goad the UN into the awareness of the enormity of its infamy. Of course, no one will listen. But so what? We must do it as an act of conscience to ourselves, and as human beings, to protect and maintain the dignity of mankind despite what has occurred.

We recognize that the extremes of maamin and eino maamin, both of which lead to the flood, stem from the lack of faith in the Almighty. We must therefore respond with more faith -- faith in God, faith in ourselves, faith in our holy Torah -- and also faith that this faith will redeem an unworthy world.

ה' עוז לעמו יתן ה' יברך את עמו בשלום