



LOUGHTON SHUL
MORE THAN A SHUL

INSPIRE

LECH LECHA 13TH CHESHVAN -31 OCTOBER

WHY BE JEWISH?



As a rabbi I am often asked why it is important to be Jewish. A plethora of answers are offered, but only one is intellectually honest. Some argue that Judaism is a religion of ethics. Others say that it encourages free thinking and open dialogue. Others invoke Judaism's old age and tradition. To my way of thinking, these answers do not suffice.

Judaism is ethical, that is true, but so are many other religions. Judaism does encourage open dialogue, but so do many other academic, social and cultural movements. Judaism is the oldest Western religion, but what of other, more ancient religions? Besides, since when is age a criteria for religion?

Since Judaism is not the only ethical, traditional or philosophical tradition, why should we be Jewish? What does Judaism have that no other religion has?

The only honest answer can be summed up in two words: Mount Sinai. G-d appeared to every single Jew at Sinai and gave us his Torah. This is a religious answer that requires a leap of faith, that is true; but what else did you expect from a religious rabbi?

The moment you say that you are Jewish, you have distinguished yourself from every non-Jew on the planet. By what right do we distinguish ourselves? By what right do we establish a difference between ourselves and others? By virtue of the pact G-d struck with us at Sinai. G-d chose the Jewish people, and with that we stand apart from others.

An Accomplished Man

Abraham was three years old when he discovered his faith in monotheism. He examined every possibility and analyzed every faith system before reaching his conclusion. As a young boy, he was renowned for his sterling character. As an adult, he gained fame for his morality, generosity and hospitality.

He was beloved for his kindness and respected for his conviction. He was a trail blazer in the philosophy of religion; a scholar of original, even revolutionary, thought, who converted thousands to his way of thinking. He was persecuted for his faith and sentenced to death, but miraculously escaped execution.¹

These tales were preserved in the annals of Jewish tradition and documented by the Talmudic sages, but the Torah itself is mute on this era of Abraham's history. Abraham is introduced in the Torah at the age of seventy-five, long after all of the above transpired, when G-d instructed him to leave his birthplace and travel to an undisclosed destination.²

The Father Of Judaism

This is because Abraham is introduced in the Torah as the first Jew. There is scholarship in Judaism, but Judaism is not defined by scholarship. There is conviction in Judaism, but neither is Judaism defined by conviction. The same is true of kindness, morality and even persecution. They all exist in Judaism, but they do not define Judaism.

Abraham was not unique among the people of his day by virtue of his many qualities. He was surely a man of note, but he was not a category unto himself. He was not the father of Judaism. Not until G-d appeared to him and gave him his first commandment.

It was then that Abraham began the journey that culminated four-hundred years later at Sinai. It was then that Judaism was born. The father of Judaism surely required all the qualities listed above for Judaism encompasses all these qualities. Yet these qualities alone do not define Judaism. Judaism is defined by G-d and his choice of the Jewish people. He chose Abraham in Ur Kasdim and his children at Mount Sinai.

This is the essence of Judaism. Without it we have no reason to be Jewish. The noble qualities espoused by Judaism are available, in one form or another, elsewhere. The only element unique to Judaism is its divine mandate. To reject it, is to reject Judaism itself. To embrace it, is to set ourselves apart.

Racism

Many are uncomfortable with the notion of a "chosen people" because it evokes shades of racism or bigotry. Should we set ourselves apart? Isn't this a form of racism or bigotry?

I make choices every day. I decide which coffee shops to enter and which boutiques to patronize. Which books to read and which music to listen to. Each decision entails a form of discrimination. I discriminate between that which suits my tastes and that which does not.

I don't view those I dismiss as inherently deficient. I pass them by only because they have yet to meet my standards and needs. The moment they alter their style to fit my tastes I would select them too. Such decisions are a form of discrimination, not bigotry.

To view one race as inherently better than another, is indeed racism, but Judaism doesn't make that claim. Jews are not better than non-Jews; their religion is. Anyone can join this religion. A non-Jew, who converts to Judaism is every bit as chosen as a Jew from birth.

Unique

Rabbi, you might say, the entire notion of a "Chosen Religion" might be true if G-d did indeed appear at Sinai. But can you prove that he did?

The Sinai episode is an article of faith, yet I suggest that you give honest consideration to the following thought. Billions of people throughout the world heard about Sinai from their parents. These parents heard it from their parents, who in turn heard about it from their own parents. This chain of tradition goes back thousands of years, but it had to originate somewhere.

Is it reasonable to assume that at some point in history a group of scholars persuaded an entire generation to accept a hitherto unheard of tale of fantasy? Is it reasonable to assume that not a single voice of dissent was heard at that time? If there was dissent it would surely have been recorded.

By contrast, is it any less reasonable to assume that the original transmitters of this tradition believed it because they experienced it themselves?



This is an excerpt from Rabbi Shaul Rosenblatt's new book *Why Bad Things DON'T Happen to Good People*. The book provides a forthright response to the age-old question of human suffering in the face of a good and just God.

Rabbi Rosenblatt draws on his experiences during his late wife's illness and subsequent passing, at the age of 30, leaving behind four very young children.

Our Sages tell the story of Rabbi Akiva who was travelling with a donkey, a candle, and a rooster (Talmud, Berachos 60b). He went into a city to find a place to sleep and was turned away. "Everything God does is for the best" he said and went to spend the night in a field outside the city. His lamp blew out in the wind. "Everything God does is for the best," he said once again. His rooster was mauled by a fox. "Everything God does is for the best," he repeated. Then his donkey was eaten by a lion. Once again, Rabbi Akiva repeated the mantra, "Everything God does is for the best."

When he awoke in the morning, he ventured into the city and realized that bandits had attacked it during the night, capturing many people. Had he found a place to stay, he would probably have also been captured. Had the bandits noticed a lamp in a field nearby or heard his donkey or rooster, he might also have been in trouble. Instead, his life was saved by all the "bad" things that happened to him.

Now if God had wanted to save Rabbi Akiva from the bandits, surely He could have let him find a nice room in the city for himself, his lamp, his rooster, and his donkey and let him sleep through the night unmolested. If God is all powerful, then He can do things in a way that is more, rather than less, comfortable. Rabbi Akiva might have been saved, but he still went through pain.

Why could he not have been saved in a painless way?

I think that there was a message here for Rabbi Akiva. Yes, he was a great enough man that he should be saved in a miraculous way. But he did not merit an open miracle of staying in the city and being saved during a rampage. There was something lacking in him that God was trying to point out to him. Yes, it was good – for it is always good. But it was painful also, and in pain there is always a lesson.

No human being, not even a man as great as Rabbi Akiva, is perfect. God is teaching him and guiding him always – as indeed he is doing with all of us. There was a lesson that God wanted Rabbi Akiva to learn and most surely he learnt it from his experience and became an even greater man because of it.

The idea of saying "Everything God does is for the best" is something that our sages suggest we do to help point us in the direction of these lessons. Let me explain a little how that works.

My late wife, Elana, was first diagnosed with cancer in 1998. She was 27. When we first heard the news, I found it very difficult to believe that "everything God does is for the best" could possibly apply in our situation. In fact, Elana was able to say the phrase much sooner than I. The whole experience caused me to examine what our Sages mean by this phrase, and I discovered an insight that has made it possible for me to say it very easily nowadays.

I used to understand the idea as follows. When something bad happens to you, take a moment to remind yourself that God has a plan; that He knows what he's doing and he's not making a mistake. It looks bad, but that's only how it looks on the surface.

You'll look back one day and realize just how good it was.

That's how I used to understand the purpose of saying this phrase – simply to remind us that God is in control at a time that one might panic and forget.

Now I think that the idea is much, much deeper.

We live in a neutral world. Everything has the potential to go one way or the other. A gun can kill, but it can also protect. Medicine can heal, but too much of it or given in the wrong circumstances, can make you sick. Computers can enhance our lives – and they can help us to waste our lives. Nuclear energy can light up cities – and destroy civilizations. Even something like Torah – a book of wisdom for life – the Rabbis tell us can be an elixir of life or an elixir of death. All is neutral depending on how it is used. Things become good or bad depending on human choice – they do not start out that way.

The same is true of events in our lives. Our response is that which defines which way they will go, whether an event is something that will bring more good feeling to our lives or bring us more problems. All events, as such, are completely neutral. You win the lottery. There is a lot of good there. You can support your family. You can enjoy God's beautiful world. You can give money to charity. You can be free to pursue meaning and wisdom. That's all great. But with money comes other things. From now on, how will you know who is sincere in their friendship for you? How will you be able to trust people? You will become much more of a target for robbery. You will be more likely to worry and think about losing your money now that you have it. I remember once talking to a man who lives in a forty-million-pound house on a beautiful road in London. He was telling me about how wonderful his security was – he had dogs and he had cameras throughout his house, as well as all the way up his driveway. (Before the cameras, he was once attacked in his driveway and he and his wife were beaten up before the thieves ran off with his money.) I told him that I have no cameras. I have no dogs. I open my door to strangers without fear. Is the money really worth it? And he wasn't sure.

Money has its blessings but also its curses. It's just that the blessings are more immediately obvious and the curses are a little more subtle. The same is true of 'bad' things. Let's take a person's house burning down. It's easy to see the bad elements of that, but what about the good? Well, there are many possibilities. Maybe it will give him more humility – something worth much more than a mere house. Maybe he will have to spend time with his family in less spacious surroundings and will have the opportunity to get closer to them as a result. Or maybe even just the challenge itself will be something that brings them closer together. Maybe it will put life and possessions into perspective for him. There are many positive elements one could focus on, depending on the circumstances. And the choice is always ours to make.

"Everything God does is for the best" is a reminder, at a time of seeming challenge, that there is good in this also. It's a reminder for a person to choose. The person is being presented with a challenge: this is good, now go and find out why.

At the moment of a new and difficult experience in life, there is a choice to be made – will I look for the good or will I wallow in the frustration and upset? Do I want to find good, or am I satisfied with how it seems on the surface?

Saying "Everything God does is for the best" is simply a form of orienting oneself. Let me be open to the good. And when a person is open to the good, he will always find it.

PARSHA SUMMARY

G-d speaks to Abram, commanding him, "Go from your land, from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you." There, G-d says, he will be made into a great nation. Abram and his wife, Sarai, accompanied by his nephew Lot, journey to the land of Canaan, where Abram builds an altar and continues to spread the message of a one G-d. A famine forces the first Jew to depart for Egypt, where beautiful Sarai is taken to Pharaoh's palace; Abram escapes death because they present themselves as brother and sister. A plague prevents the Egyptian king from touching her, and convinces him to return her to Abram and to compensate the brother-revealed-as-husband with gold, silver and cattle. Back in the land of Canaan, Lot separates from Abram and settles in the evil city of Sodom, where he falls captive when the mighty armies of Chedorlaomer and his three allies conquer the five cities of the Sodom Valley. Abram sets out with a small band to rescue his nephew, defeats the four kings, and is blessed by Malki-Zedek the king of Salem (Jerusalem). G-d seals the Covenant Between the Parts with Abram, in which the exile and persecution of the people of Israel is foretold, and the Holy Land is bequeathed to them as their eternal heritage. Still childless ten years after their arrival in the Land, Sarai tells Abram to marry her maidservant Hagar. Hagar conceives, becomes insolent toward her mistress, and then flees when Sarai treats her harshly; an angel convinces her to return, and tells her that her son will father a populous nation. Ishmael is born in Abram's eighty-sixth year. Thirteen years later, G-d changes Abram's name to Abraham ("father of multitudes"), and Sarai's to Sarah ("princess"), and promises that a son will be born to them; from this child, whom they should call Isaac ("will laugh"), will stem the great nation with which G-d will establish His special bond. Abraham is commanded to circumcise himself and his descendants as a "sign of the covenant between Me and you." Abraham immediately complies, circumcising himself and all the males of his household.

HAFTORAH SUMMARY

This week's Haftorah continues the theme of Hashem's manifest presence within nature and our selection as the Chosen People. The opening verses, taken from the end of Yishaya Chap. 40, directly attribute strength and success to belief in Hashem. "But those who put their hope in Hashem shall renew their vigor...they shall run and not weary..." (40:31) Hashem's eternity in relation to all generations is established, "...I am first, and with the last ones I am He." (41:4) and it therefore makes sense to trust Hashem. This realization mirrors Avraham's quest for understanding. Nature's inherent consistency and order revealed itself to Avraham as absolute proof of a Creator who cares for His creations. "...he says of the cement, "It is good," and he strengthened it with nails that it should not move." (41:7) With the conviction of certainty and truth, Avraham embraces G-d as a true servant. Hashem, in return, bestows upon him the singular accolade as the one "who loved me". In all of the Tanach, only Avraham is referred to in this manner. To love Hashem means to trust Hashem, and Avraham trusted Hashem more completely than anyone else. In merit for his devotion, Hashem promises to protect his children from the onslaught of the other nations. As all things are put into perspective, we realize that our nation's greatness and praise is but a reflection of Hashem's greatness. (41:16)

WISHING ALL THOSE WITH YARTZEIT THIS WEEK CHAIM ARUCHIM

Michaels Marilyn Father Yisrael ben Yisrael 6 Cheshvan
Cohen Lois Father Yissachar ben Zev Ha'Cohen 7 Cheshvan

Wiseman Clive Brother Baruch Yaacov Shlomo ben Yeshaya Meir 8 Cheshvan

Ward Madalyn Mother Faigal Raisal bas Yehuda H'Levi 10 Cheshvan

Tancer Janice Father 11 Cheshvan

Posner Karen Mother Yiska bas Chaim 12 Cheshvan

JEWISH HUMOUR

Up until recently Chaim Yankel had worked at Heshey's Discount Warehouse, but after a falling out with Heshey, Chaim Yankel was out of work.

Fortunately, Herman's Discount Warehouse on the other side of town was hiring and Chaim Yankel got himself a job. Trying to prove his worth Chaim Yankel said, "Mr. Herman, I make the best announcements on the public address system. Your customers will love it, watch this." Chaim Yankel pressed the PA button and said loudly, "Attention Heshey's Discount Warehouse shoppers..." Seeing the look on Herman's face and suddenly realizing his mistake Chaim Yankel added "...you are in the wrong store!"

RIDDLE OF THE WEEK

What flattens all mountains, wipes out all species, destroys every building, and turns everything into pieces?

Answer by Harvey Berg
Charcoal

STORY TIME

When he was a youngster, Rebbe Naftoli Katz, the head of the Rabbinical Court of Posen, was once playing outdoors with his friends. They were throwing rocks, and Naftoli accidentally hit the passenger of a fine carriage that was nearby. Unfortunately, that passenger was none other than the High Prince of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The prince's guards arrested the boy for this act of "rebellion." He was brought to court and found guilty. His sentence: public execution.

Naftoli was to be escorted by a guard to the empire's capital, where his sentence was to be carried out. It was a difficult journey, and the stormy weather they encountered made travelling almost impossible. At one point they stopped at an inn that was owned by a Jew.

While the guard made himself comfortable in a corner by the stove, young Naftoli sat and listened to the innkeeper's sons studying Talmud with their tutor. Naftoli knew this tractate by heart, and when the boys and their tutor were stumped by a question in the tractate, Naftoli supplied them with the answer.

The innkeeper realized that this was a brilliant boy, and when he found out why Naftoli was being kept in custody, he thought of a plan to save the boy's life. The innkeeper offered the guard free food and drinks, thus convincing him to stay at the inn for a few days until the weather cleared up.

After a while the innkeeper approached the guard casually: "What would happen if a prisoner was to die in custody as he was being escorted from one city to another?" he inquired.

Replied the guard, "The escort would simply have to present a document testifying to the prisoner's death, signed by the local authorities."

Using his connections, the innkeeper obtained the required document and handed it to the guard, along with enough money to bribe him. The guard left Naftoli with the innkeeper, who took the boy in and raised him as if he was a member of his own family.

Years passed. Naftoli was of marriageable age, as was the innkeeper's daughter. The innkeeper proposed a match between the two young people and they both agreed. The wedding date was set.

One night, some time later, the innkeeper passed by Naftoli's room and heard him talking. He peeked through the keyhole and saw Naftoli sprawled on the floor, begging and pleading. "What can I do?" Naftoli was saying, "these people saved my life."

The scene repeated itself the next night. The innkeeper could not contain his curiosity, as he knew no one was in Naftoli's room, and he asked Naftoli for an explanation. "My parents keep appearing to me and telling me that your daughter is not my intended mate."

The innkeeper, realizing that a Heavenly hand was guiding the young man, told him to obey his parents' wishes, and that he bore Naftoli no ill will.

Before Naftoli left, he requested that the innkeeper give him a written account of the money paid on his behalf to bribe the guard so many years before.

"I have merited to fulfill the commandment of redeeming a hostage, and seek no reimbursement," exclaimed the righteous innkeeper.

Naftoli insisted and the innkeeper finally gave him a paper stating the sum paid to the guard. Naftoli left and became famous for his exceptional qualities. He married and was appointed the rabbi of the city of Posen.

The innkeeper's daughter married a storekeeper, and settled in a town near Posen. One night, as she was walking home from the store, she was kidnapped by a wealthy landowner and brought back to his estate with obvious intentions. Despite the dangerous situation, the young woman maintained her composure. "I will go along with all your wishes," she told the landowner, "but first you must go to town to purchase some fine liquor for me." The landowner readily agreed.

While he was in town, the clever woman looked for a means of escape from the mansion. The only window she found unbarred was very high up. Realizing the jump was dangerous, she looked for something to cushion her fall. She found the landowner's heavy lambskin overcoat and, wrapping herself in it, offered a prayer and leaped out the window. Miraculously, she was not hurt. She fled home, still wrapped in the coat.

The husband was thankful for his wife's narrow escape. He related the entire incident to the rabbi of Posen.

Rabbi Naftoli told the husband, "Your wife is a righteous woman and her level-headedness is admirable. G-d is truly with her. Open the seam of the landowner's coat, and you will find money that rightfully belongs to you and your wife."

A few days later, the landowner came into the husband's store to make a purchase. He complained about "some Jewish woman" who had not only outwitted him, but had managed to steal his overcoat that had a large sum of money sewn inside it. The husband returned to Rabbi Naftoli and told him what the landowner had said.

"This finally concludes a much longer story," Rabbi Naftoli replied, and proceeded to tell the husband the whole story of his arrest and ransom. "That landowner," he concluded, "was the guard who had escorted me. The amount of money in the coat is the sum that your father-in-law paid for my release. Here, I will show you a bill which confirms the figure exactly."

FOOD 4 THE SOUL

Abraham worshipped idols as did his father, Terach. Abraham was an intelligent man, as was Terach. But Abraham came to recognize the alseness of the idols, while Terach stayed behind. Because Terach never truly believed in the idols and never truly worshipped them. But when Abraham worshipped idols, it was with all his heart, mind and soul, every hour of the day and night. It had to be real. Everything Abraham did had to be real. And therefore, he found truth.