

Noach haTzaddik doesn't believe?

In all of Tanach, there is only one human being who is explicitly identified as a tzaddik – Noach.¹ Our parshah begins by saying he was תמים, flawless. And Hashem saw fit to save him and his family alone, from the entire world. All of which makes the following midrash hard to understand.

Early in our parshah, we read, “והמבול היה מים על הארץ” And the Flood was water upon the land. And Noach, his sons, his wife and the wives of his sons with him, entered the boat מפני מי המבול, because of the floodwaters.² In a midrash,³ Rabbi Yochanan calls our attention to the cause-and-effect, the water's arrival leading to Noach's entry into the boat, and he comments, “Noach was מקטני אמונה, lacking in faith. Had the water not reached his ankles, he wouldn't have entered the boat.”

Noach doesn't believe in himself

This midrash is bizarre. Of course Noach believes in Hashem! He built the boat! He is called a tzaddik,⁴ and flawless! Hashem chose to save him!

- So some explain that Noach believed in Hashem, he just thought Hashem was bluffing.⁵
- Others suggest that Noach believed in Hashem, he just thought the people would repent.⁶

But Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev said something that is mind-blowing to me: Yes, Noach believed in Hashem. But this midrash is saying that Noach didn't believe in himself. לא היה לו אמונה בעצמו, he didn't believe in himself. The one whom the Torah calls Tzaddik. The one whom the Torah calls “flawless”. The one Hashem elected to save, while destroying everything else – he thought he was unworthy. That's why he was unsure about entering the boat.

Reb Levi Yitzchak applied this idea to explain why we don't see Noach daven to save the rest of humanity, as Avraham davened for Sdom. He said Noach thought, “If Hashem is saving me, surely Hashem is also saving many others. And if Hashem isn't saving them, then who am I to appeal to? I have no power to influence what Hashem does.” And so he didn't try.

Others who didn't believe in themselves

Noach is in good company, in his lack of confidence regarding his relationship with Hashem; in separate stories, we find the same lack of self-confidence regarding their standing with Hashem in others, including Avraham,⁷ the shofeit Gidon,⁸ and King Chizkiyahu.⁹ What is this about? Why have some of our greatest leaders lacked confidence in themselves?

Because the Satan worked on them.

The job of the Satan

Like many Jewish children growing up in North America in the late 1980's, my only real exposure to Satan was via Dana Carvey's *Church Lady* on Saturday Night Live. To me, Satan was a Christian concept, a red-skinned fellow with horns, a goatee, a tail, hooves, pitchfork. You might read about his adventures in Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

But Judaism does describe a Satan. A gemara¹⁰ even states, “הוא שטן הוא יצר הרע הוא מלאך המות” – “Satan is the Yetzer HaRa, and both of them are the Malach haMavet/Angel of Death.”

- But I know what the Malach haMavet does – it kills a person's body, removing the soul.

¹ In Shemuel I 24:17 Shaul says of Dovid מנני אתה ממני צדיק אתה ממני, but this is not a title granted by a navi, and it is really adjective rather than noun. Amos 2:6 describes an anonymous tzaddik being sold for silver, which we take to mean Yosef.

² Bereishit 7:7-8

³ Bereishit Rabbah 32:6, and cited in Rashi to Bereishit 7:7

⁴ Granted that Tanchuma Noach 4 defines Noach and Yosef as tzaddikim because they nourish others, not because of their connection with Hashem.

⁵ Yefeh Toar to Bereishit Rabbah, and see Emet l'Yaakov

⁶ Kli Yakar to Bereishit 6:17

⁷ See Ibn Ezra to Bereishit 15:7 on במה אדע כי אירשנה

⁸ See Rav Saadia Gaon Ha'Emunot v'haDeiot 7 המוצא השני on Gidon's requests for miracles

⁹ See Ralbag Melachim II 20:8 on Chizkiyahu's request for a sign that he would be healed

¹⁰ Bava Batra 16a

- And I know what the Yetzer HaRa does – it kills a person’s actions, by tempting us to sin.
- But what is Satan? What does Satan do?

Look at the three stories in Tanach involving a personified Satan:

One story involves Dovid haMelech.¹¹ After putting down a rebellion, Dovid haMelech initiated a military census and a mandatory draft. A gemara¹² is aghast; doesn’t Dovid haMelech know that we are not allowed to count individuals?¹³ But as Divrei haYamim¹⁴ records, ויעמוד שטן על ישראל ויסת את דוד למנות את ישראל. Satan arose and persuaded Dovid to count Israel. Satan told Dovid haMelech, “You have no allies anymore. They deserted you to follow a rebel, and they will desert you again.” And so Dovid created a military census and a draft.

The second story involves Iyov. The celestial malachim are gathered before Hashem, when Satan crashes the party¹⁵ and declares with a wide smile, “Business is good! I can go wherever I want, and I am welcomed with open arms.¹⁶” Hashem defends humanity, identifying a single champion, Iyov, who is pure in his relationship with Hashem. To which Satan responds, “There are no pure human beings; Iyov is as venal and selfish as the rest of them.”

The third story involves Yehoshua, the Kohen Gadol at the beginning of the second Beit haMikdash. The navi Zecharyah envisions this high priest standing before Hashem, wearing stained clothing, and Satan stands on Yehoshua’s right, לשטנו, to block him. As Rashi and Malbim explain, Satan is there to allege that Yehoshua is unworthy of leading the Jews who have returned to Israel.

Three stories of Satan, with a common thread:

- Dovid! You are not a legitimate king.
- Iyov! You are not a legitimate tzaddik.
- Yehoshua! You are not a legitimate kohen gadol.

The word “Satan” means obstruction, and the creature lives up to the name. The Malach haMavet kills the body. The Yetzer HaRa kills the deeds. But Satan is the most sinister of all – by convincing us of our own worthlessness, Satan kills the soul. He robs us of faith in ourselves, he robs us of our sense that we are valuable.

Hashem formed this entity¹⁷ whose ongoing role is to challenge us by telling us what we can’t do, to stand beside us and charge, “Is that the best you can do? You should just give up.”¹⁸

Our tefillos matter!

This Satan is what all of us face, and it’s what Noach faced; a fear that he was small, that Hashem wouldn’t listen to his tefillah, According to Reb Levi Yitzchak, that’s why he didn’t daven.

I bring it up this morning because I sometimes have the same fear, and maybe others do as well.

During the communal Mi sheBeirachs, I sometimes pause before asking Hashem to help בעבור שאנחנו מתפללים, before asking Hashem to help because of our davening. Sometimes I actually insert that I will give tzedakah, bli neder. One reason for my switch is a technical one, from Rav Soloveitchik.¹⁹ But the other reason is because tzedakah really does feel more substantive than davening, doesn’t it? In davening, I tell Hashem what I want; who am I? But with Tzedakah, I actually change the world. I feel like I’ve done something, and now Hashem will listen.

¹¹ Shemuel II 24 and Divrei haYamim I 21:1; I am taking Malbim’s read. Somewhat differently, Abarbanel to Shemuel II 24’s suggestions include the idea that Dovid feared his army was too small

¹² Berachot 62b

¹³ Indeed, Shaul specifically avoided the census by using בזק and טלאים to count troops in Shemuel I

¹⁴ Divrei haYamim I 21:1

¹⁵ Moreh Nevuchim 3:22

¹⁶ Daat Mikra Iyov pg. 11

¹⁷ Abarbanel to Shemuel II 24 re Dovid suggests that it is really Hashem talking, but the attack is identified as השטנה - obstruction

¹⁸ Ditto Satan attempting to dissuade Avraham from the Akeidah, and shaking the confidence of Sarah as well as the Jews waiting for Moshe to return from Har Sinai. Even Bilam’s encounter with a malach which is לשטן לו is consistent, although that malach was on our side.

¹⁹ See Nefesh haRav pg 143, the issue of המעיין בתפלתו. That actually is relevant here, but it would turn this from a derashah into a shiur.

But we can't think that way. A gemara warns that anyone who can daven for others, and doesn't do so, is a חוטא (sinner)!²⁰ And Hashem has told us that we do have the standing to intervene. As Hashem says in Tehillim, "הרחב פיך ואמלאהו", Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it." We can work miracles, we can speak miracles.

So when we hear that someone is ill, we should ask for their name for our tefillah, with confidence. And when we feel that we are lacking something ourselves, we should reach out to Hashem with confidence. And when אהינו כל בית ישראל, our family in Israel are suffering, we should open our Tehillim and our hearts with confidence.

Rav Schachter's Tefillah

It was 2001, and Rav Herschel Schachter was in Israel with his son, Yummy, with whom I verified this story. On the night before they were leaving, they forgot a suitcase in a taxi. A later passenger recognized Rav Schachter's name on the tag, and told the driver that Rav Schachter is "the Baba Sali of American Ashkenazim." The driver contacted an American oleh he knew, who happened to be in the same Miluim unit as a relative of Rav Schachter, and so the bag came back. But the bag is not the important part of the story.

When the driver brought the bag, he wanted a moment with Rav Schachter, this Baba Sali of the American Ashkenazim. The driver grabbed his hands and started crying; he said, "Rabbi, my wife and I have been married for 14 years and we have no children. Please give us a berachah for a child." Rav Schachter holds the driver's hands, cries with him, and says to him, "You are going to be blessed with a child within the next year."

The driver leaves, and Yummy demands of his father: "How could you say that to him? You have no idea! They've been married for 14 years!" To which his father replies, "Yummy, we're going to daven for him."

About a year later, it's Simchas Torah. During the dancing, Yummy sees a young man trying to approach his father. Yummy asks what he wants. The young man says he had just been in Israel, and on a cab ride the driver had heard him speaking English. The driver asked if he knew Rav Schachter, and when he said Yes, the driver asked him to pass along a message: He and his wife just had a baby boy.

Yummy asks his father, "Did you daven for him?" And his father replied, "Every day. Three times a day."

No, we can't count on miracles. Tefillos are not always answered positively, and people experiencing difficulty having children for years will not necessarily find any comfort in this story. But I bring it because of the confidence Rav Schachter displayed when he spoke with the driver.

Satan does not win in Tanach – in each of the three cases I mentioned, he lost!

- Dovid went on to dedicate the site of the Beit HaMikdash.
- Iyov was identified by Hashem as the victor over Satan.
- And Hashem ordered the malachim to give Yehoshua Kohen Gadol pure, clean clothing, befitting his righteousness.

Satan cannot win with us, either. We will not fall into Noach's trap of being קטני אמנה, we know our stature with Hashem. We know our duty to daven. Let's rise together, and say Tehillim and the Mi sheBeirach for our chyalim. Together, we will halt a Mabul.

²⁰ Berachot 12b, based on Shemuel I 12:23