

Selling the Mission: Why Noach would have made a poor salesman **Rabbi Maury Grebenau**

I have a riddle for you: What do a secular Israeli leaving the army to backpack around India and a frum businessman going to a small town in America have in common in their travel plans? Answer: they both look for the Chabad house near where they are going.

Chabad has an incredible presence in the world and for the most part this has been the work of the last Rebbe. This was a bit of a revelation to me which became much clearer as I read a few of the recently published biographies of the Rebbe. The idea of shluchim out on the street trying to convince less-than-religious Jews to don Tefillin is so synonymous with Chabad, I had a hard time imagining that Chabad ever didn't look like it does today. But the reality is indeed that the Rebbe outlined a new mission for Chabad in terms of outreach to all Jews. I recently learned that one of the main muses for this undertaking is Avraham Avinu and his work in kiruv. The idea that one's lifework could be to inspire Jews to perform mitzvot and be more connected to their Judaism comes in large part from the example of Avraham.

Indeed Avraham was incredibly successful; he single-handedly reintroduced monotheism to the world. Noach also seems to have been a lone figure in a world which had turned away from Hashem and yet he does not seem to have had an impact beyond his immediate family. What did Avraham do to be so successful?

Author and commentator, Simon Sinek has one of the most widely viewed TED talks on how leaders inspire¹. He introduces the idea of the Golden circle and suggests that inspiration comes when we sell something from the mission, the 'why' of the company or organization. He suggests that leaders who try to sell the 'what' or the problem which is being solved do not go far. He gives the example of Apple which sells being innovative and pushing the envelope and are very successful at selling their product. He contrasts this with Tivo which essentially sells the 'what' of being able to record live TV without any real mission driving them.

As I thought about the difference between Avraham and Noach it seemed that this idea might well explain the difference. In the Midrashim when we are told about Noach's pitch to people as he is building the ark he is selling the 'what.' Hashem is going to destroy the world so if you know what is good for you you'll initiate a lifestyle change². He focuses on the what and it is not very inspiring.

Avraham on the other hand is depicted as realizing there is a Master of the universe and we are obligated to serve Him³. His message would seem to be that there is a Creator who cares about our lives and there is a purpose in all that we do. It is the 'why' that Avraham presents when he asks people to follow him and the inspiration is there.

¹ http://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action

² See Rashi Bereishis 6:14, T.B. Sanhedrin 108b

³ See Bereishis Rabbah 39:1

A few summers ago one of my children was in camp Gan Izzy (a Chabad run camp) which has a staff of teenage Chabad girls as counselors. One of the fast days over the summer there was camp and my wife said that she feels so bad that they have to work while they are fasting. I told her that for these girls they are bringing the joy of Judaism to young Jewish children, as far as they are concerned what better activity would there be on a fast day. This was clear to me every day when I would see them interacting with the children. They deeply believe in the ‘why’ and like Avraham, this is what they are selling and I believe it is part of the reason why they are so successful.

This week was the global Shabbat project which was an attempt for Jews around the entire world to keep one Shabbat together. The Shabbat project as well is a way to focus on the ‘why’. We don’t hand the 3rd volume of Mishna Brurah⁴ to people when introducing them to Shabbat, we tell them about the day set aside to explore and deepen our relationship with G-d and invite them to join us.

Rav Yeshaya Horowitz, the Shlah haKadosh, asks an interesting question about the flood. He points out that fire is usually the medium of destruction and water is a medium of growth. Why is it that the medium of water is used here for destructive purposes? He explains that we know the two major sins of the generation of the flood were theft and immorality and that there is a commonality between them. We are placed in this world in order to be creative; to work hard in order to impact the world positively. Both of these sins seek to undermine this creative force. Stealing is trying to get something without expending effort and being creative. Immorality as well uses the force which is meant to create life in a subversive way. Since this generation did not use their creative force properly, the creative medium of water was used to destroy them in violation of its usual purpose.

This could have been Noach’s pitch to the generation of the flood. When he was stopped while he was building the ark, he could have turned to his neighbors and said, “We believe in a vibrant life of creativity and effecting the world in a positive way. Don’t let stealing and self-gratification be your end-goal and join me in making the world a better place.” Wow, that might have won him a few more followers.

Sometimes the pitch we need to give is not to our neighbors; we need to give ourselves this pep talk. We lose sight of the forest for the trees. We should not forget that the ‘what’s are integral to our commitment to Judaism and Hashem but we also must remind ourselves that at the core we believe deeply in a ‘why’ which drives us.

⁴ Which deals with the intricacies of the laws of Shabbat