

TRUSTING GRACE

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

"And Noach found Chain in the eyes of G-d."

Central to the concept of Chain (grace) is trust. Noach was saved on the merits of Chain because G-d trusted him to be the new progenitor of humanity.

G-d trusted Noach because Noach had lived his life trusting G-d. Noach trusted that G-d desired to have a relationship with Noach as much as he desired to have a relationship with G-d.

Because Noach believed that G-d desired a relationship with humanity, Noach understood that Teshuva had to be an active component of the relationship. Trusting that G-d desired the relationship and was willing to accept Teshuva, Noach knew that regardless of his mistakes along the way he did not have to despair. He knew that if he wanted to correct the wrong and apologize for his inconsistencies, G-d would willingly and lovingly accept his repentance.

Recognizing and embracing the dynamic of Teshuva made Noach the perfect father and teacher of the new post-diluvium world. Rabbi Sugarman Shlit'a (Rabbi Emeritus of Shaarey Zedek) told me that the Talmudic assertion Noach was "among those who did not trust G-d," meant that Noach did not trust that in the end G-d would really destroy the world. Noach trusted that in the end G-d would find the necessary merit to give humanity one last chance. (The Talmud's assertion is founded on the Medresh that Noach waited till the last moment to enter the Tayvah, rather than entering as soon as G-d told him to do so. (Rashi 6:7)

This is similar to the story of Yirmiyahu at the time of the destruction of the 1st Bais Hamikdash. Although Yirmiyahu (Jeremiah) had spent 40 years forewarning the Jewish people of the impending destruction and exile, at the very end, as Yirmiyahu saw smoke rising from the burning Bais Hamikdash his first thought was that the Jews had done Teshuva and they were once again offering sacrifices to G-d! Like Noach, Yirmiyahu trusted that Teshuva would win the day and that destruction would be averted! This was the level of Chain that defined Noach and correctly identified him as deserving of salvation.

Without trust in G-d's willingness to forgive we would despair and turn against G-d. Think about it. Did it ever happen that you asked for forgiveness and were rebuffed in the process? How long did it take for the rejection to turn into anger against the person you asked forgiveness from? So too with G-d. If we ask for forgiveness and think that G-d is not accepting of our Teshuva, why continue to try? More so, our egos quickly reassert themselves and the regret and shame turn into righteous

indignation. The story of Acher (Elisha ben Avuyah) perfectly reflects this negative dynamic. Acher was considered among the leading Tanaaim (authors of the Mishnah) of his generation. (For purposes of reference and perspective, he was on par with Rabbi Akiva.) Unfortunately, Acher became a heretic; however, he continued to study and teach Torah.

His most famous student was Rabbi Meir. The Talmud records that one Shabbos R' Meir was studying Torah from Acher. Acher was riding a horse while R' Meir walked behind him. At some point Acher informed R' Meir he had been keeping count of the hoof beats and that R' Meir would have to stop walking. They had reached the Techum Shabbos ? the distance allowed for someone to walk outside a city's limits!

R' Meir said to his teacher, "If so Rebbi, do Teshuva! Do Teshuva!" Acher responded, "I cannot. I heard a voice from heaven proclaim, "Return my children, return, except for Acher!" (The Talmud argues whether or not Acher ever did repent. R' Meir was of the opinion that he had.)

If a person does not trust that G-d desires our Teshuva, the relationship is doomed. However, a relationship founded on Chain establishes Teshuva and trust as an essential component and allows for the relationship to adjust with personal growth and responsibility. The pre-diluvium world did not trust G-d. Rather than accept the limitations He had imposed on nature and society, they attempted to alter both the social and natural order of things. Thievery, rebellion, rape, murder, and adultery soon followed on the heels of idol worship. Nevertheless, Noach continued to believe in the basic goodness of humanity's potential to repent and G-d's willingness to forgive. He was right, but there is an exception to every rule.

There comes a time when evil is so entrenched in the being of society that no good remains. So it was with the generation of the Mabul, the generation of the Tower of Babel, and the five city-states of Sodom and Gomorrah. (In the present, the same is true with the likes of Saddam Hussein, Bin Laden, and Arafat. May it be G-d's will that our President have the strength and courage to stay the course of his convictions.)

Chazal tell us that Avraham set the standard for the true Eved G-d. As a servant of G-d, Avraham did not question G-d. Avraham trusted G-d without reservation. The ten-tests, each one more challenging than the previous, pushed the limits of Avraham's unyielding and unquestioning trust in G-d.

From the all-consuming flames of the furnace to the steadiness of his hand at the sacrifice of Yitzchak, Avraham neither questioned nor faltered. His level of trust continued to grow until it transcended the obvious and the rational and raised Avraham to become the Chosen. Yet, he still argued for the lives of Sodom and Gomorrah; yet, he challenged G-d to clarify His justice.

The challenge was not in opposition of G-d; rather, it was to understand Him. Therefore, G-d explained that Sodom and Gomorrah had fallen beyond the reach of Teshuva. They had become an evil that needed to be destroyed. Avraham trustingly accepted G-d's decree.

Avraham also trusted Sarah just as Sarah trusted him. "I have had a vision. We are moving to Canaan." "We must leave Canaan and go Mitzrayim, "Tell them that you are my sister?" Sarah trusted and Sarah listened.

"Marry Hagar my maid servant." "Send away Hagar and her son Yishmael. He is a bad influence on Yitzchak." Avraham listened.

A relationship founded on trust is a relationship that manifests Chain. It is a relationship that can weather any storm and survive any challenge. It is a relationship that sees the entire picture, not just the immediate difficulty. It is a relationship that allows for mistakes and forgiveness. It is a relationship where there is no such thing as not having a second chance. The ten-generational legacy of Noach to Avraham was the power of Chain. To trust, to forgive, and when necessary, destroy evil; however, mostly it was a legacy of trusting G-d and believing in His goodness, regardless of the questions.

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The author is the Rabbi of Shaarey Zedek Congregation, Valley Village, CA, and Assistant Principal of YULA.