

Rainbows and M & M's – Parashat Noah

For many years the rock band, Van Halen, had a reputation for being a fierce bunch of prima donnas! You see, when the group would negotiate contracts with various concert venues they would bury in their rider a strange provision which called for a large bowl of m & m candies to be brought to them backstage with all of the brown m & m's removed. The presence of even a single brown chocolate, rumor had it, was cause for Van Halen to cancel an appearance immediately, costing the purveyor loads of money and giving rise to the band's reputation for being bigheaded and unreasonable. All this fuss over one little piece of candy!

As it later came to light, there was a method behind the band's seeming madness, a reason why they absolutely insisted upon a no brown m & m policy and cancelled shows to prove it. For as lead singer David Lee Roth explained in his autobiography, Van Halen was one of the first bands to amp up the performance level of their concerts – arriving with truck-loads of complicated, and potentially dangerous, equipment that had to be set up just so. In the group's extensive rider there were reams upon reams of instructions that needed to be followed precisely or else performers could be badly hurt, and it was difficult to determine how carefully venues were taking these directions. Enter the m & m's – a quick and easy way of weeding out those vendors who were paying close attention to detail and those who had gotten lax or lazy. Places that were careful about the m & m's could be trusted to be careful about more important aspects of the contract as well. The presence of brown candy, on the contrary, pointed to a lack of professionalism and precision.

I first read this story about Van Halen in Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner's bestselling book, Think Like a Freak, and I found myself thinking about it again this week as I reflected upon our Torah portion of the morning, *Parashat Noah*. Most of us know the story well: how seeing the terrible corruption and ill behavior that had overtaken over the world, God became disgusted with humanity and decided to start over, sending an enormous flood to destroy the earth. Only Noah and his family found sufficient favor in the Divine eye to merit being saved and were thus instructed to build an ark containing animals of every kind in order to eventually re-populate civilization. "Make yourself an ark of gopher wood," commanded God. "Make it an ark with compartments, and cover it inside and out with pitch. This is how you shall make it: the length of the ark shall be 300 cubits, its width 50 cubits, and its height 30 cubits. Make an opening for daylight in the ark and terminate it within a cubit of the top. Put the entrance to the ark in its side; make it with bottom, second, and third decks" (Genesis 5:15-16).

Hearing these Divine instructions, one can't help but wonder why the specific materials and dimensions of the ark – its length, width, and height; the placement of its entrance, deck, and window; the natural resources from which it was to be made – were so important to God. One might have imagined that with all that Noah was contending – the end of life as he knew it, the impending death of almost everyone he had ever known, the enormous weight of responsibility with which he had been tasked – God would simply have asked that he build an ark – safe and secure and structurally sound – rather than micro-managing the project down to its very last detail. To be sure, God was likely concerned that the ark be large enough to contain all the various animals that it would need to hold. And perhaps God thought to be doing Noah a favor by giving clear and precise instructions so that Noah had fewer calculations and decisions to make on his own. Maybe God knew something we don't about ark building –perhaps there was Divine wisdom behind these particular materials and dimensions. Still, the level of

detail ordered here by God seems surprising, especially given the particular circumstances of this moment in history.

And it is not only here, in the story of Noah, that our tradition delves into such minute detail about seemingly less important elements! Later in the Book of Exodus, the construction of the *mishkan* (the portable Tabernacle used by the Israelites during their period of desert wandering) is described in a similarly precise manner with the smallest and most particular aspects of size, color, shape, and design meticulously spelled out. When the sacrificial system is developed in the Book of Leviticus, the instructions given to the priests about what animals may be offered and how they should be prepared is again recounted with extraordinary specificity. As we think about almost any Jewish practice – be it building a sukkah or lighting a Chanukkah menorah or reciting the blessings of the *Amidah* – there are rules upon rules that determine exactly how these rituals should be carried out and what renders them unacceptable. Following God’s commandments in a general sense seems seldom to be enough. Rather, we are expected to carry out these Divine laws in a most particular and exacting way.

So why *does* God care so much that Noah’s ark be 300 by 50 by 30 cubits, that the Tabernacle’s altar be made of acacia wood overlaid with pure gold and containing two rings underneath its molding, that the blood from the ram of a particular offering be put on Aaron’s right ear, the thumb of his right hand, and the big toe of his right foot? Why does God care that a sukkah be no larger than 20 cubits but no smaller than 10 hand-breaths or that we put on our right shoe on before our left when we get dressed in the morning or that we consume at least an olive’s volume worth of matzah on the first night of Passover? We may not be living in the same conditions of enormous stress and destruction as our forbear Noah, but still the questions remain. Shouldn’t it be enough to live a good and Jewish life even

if we don't quite get all the details right? Shouldn't God have bigger things to worry about than the smallest elements of human behavior and practice?

To be sure, we can sometimes lose the forest for the trees and I believe that embodying the spirit of Jewish law – the larger values and principles to which Judaism aspires – can be important and meaningful, even when we can't get the exact letter of the law just right all the time. But I also think that there is a lesson in the precision of the Divine command to Noah. Faced with the corruption of humanity, God desperately searched for a man not only to build an ark but rather to build a community, a society, a world reborn. God needed to know that this was a man of goodness and of faith, someone who would take the needs of the other seriously, who would be responsible and careful, who could both innovate his own vision and execute the ideas of others. *“Ish tzadik tamim haya b'dorotav* – Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his age” the Torah writes of our protagonist, and the seemingly extraneous word “in his age” leads the Biblical commentators to wonder famously if Noah's righteousness was only relative to the other bad people who surrounded him or if he was truly a good and just soul. God, too, wants to make sure that the man whom God has chosen has the moral character and mettle to create a new and better human race.

Enter the construction of the ark – God's own small version of Van Halen's brown m & m's, a litmus test by which to determine whether this potential savior of mankind is worthy of the task with which he has been charged. “Does he have faith enough in Me to follow a set of arbitrary size requirements?” you can almost hear God muse. “Is he careful enough to follow instructions, humble enough to enact a vision not his own, patient enough to measure just so? Will he care about things that are important to

others, even if they don't quite make sense to him? Will he take his work seriously and follow through on projects undertaken even when the task at hand is hard and thankless?"

On a practical level, details in and of themselves may not always be so critical, but as a barometer of character and concern these small elements often speak volumes. Whether we care enough to respect the seemingly unimportant demands that are important to another says a great deal – whether it is a commentary on our ability to follow through on commitments (a la Van Halen) or a desire to be in relationship with One that we might not always understand (as with Noah). Perhaps Jewish tradition is filled with details and instructions for precisely this reason, because making the effort to carry out ritual practices just so serves as the anti-brown m & m: it proves that we care enough about our faith and our God to be as diligent and precise as we possibly can. It allows us to show – as did Noah – that we are worthy of being entrusted with this great legacy we call Judaism.

And so humanity begins, or really begins anew, Noah's obedience and faith rewarded not only through the very fact of his survival but also through God's promise that the Divine will never destroy the world again. Noah has demonstrated that 'though humans be capable of great evil they be capable of great goodness too; the bow that God places in the clouds serves as a reminder of the covenant made between the Divine and humankind.

Perhaps the next time we see such a rainbow – or come across a brown m & m – we will be reminded, too, that relationships often reside within the details. It is a lesson we have learned well, from a man named Noah and a bunch of rock stars who really weren't so much divas after all. Shabbat Shalom!