

CHILDREN OF BELIEVERS

R. Avi Strausberg

I CONFESS I AM not much of a believer. If God had told me to jump into the Reed Sea, I would have asked, “Can You part it for me first?” If God asked me to march out of Egypt to some strange and far-off land, I would’ve said, “But at least this land, I know.” I am a person that likes clarity and answers. You want me to go on a journey? Show me the roadmap. You want me to enter a land full of giants? Tell me the step-by-step plan. I am not a leap-of-faith kind of person.

Moshe, for all of his great leadership, also seems to be full of doubts when God approaches him by the Burning Bush and charges him with leading the Israelites out of Egypt. He asks question after question, wanting to know, “Who am I to do this?” “Whom should I say sent me?” and perhaps most importantly, his greatest fear, “What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me?”¹ Moshe, with all of his doubts, believes the Israelites will be like him, similarly lacking faith, unwilling to follow a strange man and his strange god out into the wilderness.

In *Shemot Rabbah*, God responds to Moshe’s doubts with anger. Moshe may think that the Israelites won’t trust in God but God knows His children better.

שמות רבה ג:יב

"וַיַּעַן מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר וְהֵן לֹא יֵאֱמִינוּ לִי" (שמות ד:א),
אוֹתָהּ שָׁעָה דִּבֶּר מֹשֶׁה שְׁלֹא כַהֲנָן, הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ
הוּא אָמַר לוֹ: "וְשָׁמְעוּ לְקוֹלִי" (ג:יח), וְהוּא אָמַר:
"וְהֵן לֹא יֵאֱמִינוּ לִי" (ד:א). מִיָּד הִשְׁבִּיבוּ הַקָּדוֹשׁ
בְּרוּךְ הוּא בְּשִׁטָּתוֹ, נָתַן לוֹ אוֹתוֹת לְפִי דְבָרָיו.
רָאָה מֶה כְּתִיב אַחֲרָיו: "וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלָיו מִזֶּה בִּידֶךָ
וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה" (ד:ב), כְּלוּמַר מִזֶּה שֶׁבִּידֶךָ אֶתָּה
צָרִיךְ לְלָקוֹת, שְׂאֵתָה מוֹצִיא שֵׁם רַע עַל בְּנֵי, הֵם
מֵאֱמִינִים בְּנֵי מֵאֱמִינִים, מֵאֱמִינִים, שְׁנֵאֲמַר: "וַיֹּאמֶן
הָעָם" (ד:לא). בְּנֵי מֵאֱמִינִים, שְׁנֵאֲמַר: "וַיִּהְיֶה אֱמִן
בָּה" (בראשית טו:ו).

Shemot Rabbah 3:12

"But Moshe spoke up and said, 'What if they do not believe me?'" (Exodus 4:1). At that moment, Moshe spoke inappropriately. The Holy One said to him: "They will listen to you," (3:18), and Moshe said: "They won't believe me" (4:1). The Holy One immediately answered in God's way, God gave him signs corresponding to his words. See what is written afterward: "God said to him: What is that in your hand? And he said: A rod" (4:2). Meaning from that which is in your hand you need to be struck, because you are speaking ill of My children. They are believers and children of believers. They are believers, as it is said, "The people believed" (4:31). They are the children of believers, as it is said, "And he [Avraham] trusted in God" (Genesis 15:6).

According to the *midrash*, God chose to deploy Moshe’s rod as a miraculous sign, not only because it was conveniently in his hand and would make for a nice snake, but because Moshe deserved to be hit by that very same rod for speaking poorly of the Israelites. God defends the Israelites and says, “My children are believers and children of believers.” Using verses as prooftexts, God attests to the faith of the Israelites and claims that not only does this present generation, living enslaved among the Egyptians, believe in God, their ancestors were believers as well. If anyone is lacking faith in this scenario, it is not the Israelites, but Moshe himself.

I wonder: would God defend me today in the same way that He defended the Israelites? What if the Israelites really did possess a unique faith in God despite the newness of God in their lives and the path of uncertainty

¹ Exodus 3:11, 3:13, 4:1.

that lay ahead of them? What if, instead of possessing the confidence that God claims the Israelites had, I am more like Moshe, full of doubts and questions? Would God say about me that I too am a believer, a child of believers?

R. Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, the Eish Kodesh, wrote during a time when, for many, belief in God was difficult, if not impossible. Teaching Torah from the Warsaw Ghetto, R. Shapira saw that people who had once lived observant, religious lives were losing faith in a God Who could allow the atrocities of the Holocaust to happen. People for whom belief was once a surety no longer had the capacity to believe.

R. Shapira writes that our *midrash* from Shemot Rabbah teaches that “the faith of Jews is an inherited faith, passed down from their ancestors, because they are all the children of believers.” Our faith is not ours alone, nor is it dependent only upon us; rather, our faith is passed down to us from ancestors.

ר' קלונימוס קלמן שפירא, אש קודש,
פרשת החדש, תש"ב

וכנראה ב' בחינות באמונה ישנן באיש. כשהוא
בהתחזקות ומכל שכן גם בשמחה אז גם
מרגיש את האמונה בודאות משא"כ כשהוא
בעצבות ומכל שכן כשחס וחלילה כולו נשבר
יש שאינו מרגישה... אבל גם אז אין לומר
וח"ו אינו מאמין, מאמין הוא גם אז רק שאינו
מרגישה.

**R. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira,
Eish Kodesh, Parashat ha-Hodesh,
March 14, 1942**

*It seems that there are two types of faith
in a person. When he is feeling strong, and
especially when he is joyful, then he also
feels faith with a sense of certainty. But
if she is depressed, and especially if she is
utterly broken, God forbid, it is possible for
her not to feel faith.... Even then, though, it
could not be said, God forbid, that he does
not believe. She is a believer even then! She
just doesn't feel it.*

R. Shapira teaches that there are two kinds of faith. There is the faith we feel in times of joy; this faith comes easier to us. Without obstacles distancing us from God, we experience this faith with certainty. And then, he acknowledges, there are times when a person is so broken they don't experience faith at

all. This person might even testify about themselves: “I’m not a believer.” God forbid, R. Shapira says, that a person should say this. He assures us that even when we are broken, even when we don't believe, we are still believers. Why? Because our faith does not depend only on us. Even if we are not believers, we are children of believers.

In Shemot Rabbah, God defends the Israelites to Moshe and attests that the Israelites are not only believers themselves but they are children of believers. R. Shapira seems to go even further, assuring us that even in moments in which we don't see ourselves as believers, somewhere deep inside we really are still believers. It's a spiritual reality inherited from our ancestors—because we are children of believers.

I experience this teaching as a comfort. First, R. Shapira acknowledges that we may not always have access to the certainty of belief that God claims of the Israelites in Egypt. There may be moments in our lives in which we feel unsure, we are lost without anchor, left with questions and doubt. But even in these moments, he teaches, we can trust that we are never entirely unanchored. The faith that we inherit from ancestors serves to tether us to God, even when our own ability to believe is in question.

I wish for us all this *Pesah* the certainty of the Israelites who were willing to take a leap of faith and follow a strange man and an unfamiliar god out of Egypt, without a map, without a plan. But should we not have their kind of faith, I want to offer us the gift of R. Shapira's Torah: a chain of belief that goes beyond ourselves, connecting us back to our ancestors, and bringing us closer to God. ♦