

# I Have Never Seen the King – On Simple Faith

*Rosh Hashanah Day I 5779 (2018)*

R. Yonatan Cohen, Congregation Beth Israel

My maternal grandfather, Nono Meir, was a travelling salesman in Egypt. Throughout the year, he would travel from town to town by train, selling merchandise and soliciting offers for commercial goods. Once he stayed in a hotel overnight, where he encountered a rabbi who was travelling as well. After a brief conversation, the two realized that they were both set to depart in the morning from the same train station to the same next destination. The two decided that they would meet in the morning to pray together and then afterwards they would walk together to catch the train at the station.

Soon after the two met up in the morning, my Nono quickly realized the grave error he had made. The rabbi prayed slowly, very slowly. Nono, who held rabbis in very high esteem, did not know what to do. He anxiously watched the hands of his watch move ever closer to the train's hour of departure and yet he could not bring himself to disturb the praying rabbi nor could he leave without him.

When the rabbi finally concluded his prayers, my grandfather quietly explained that they must rush, as the hour was late. "We are on God's time," said the rabbi as he meticulously wrapped his teffilin back into their boxes. My grandfather, a man of great restraint, likely smiled faintly.

Upon arriving at the station, the two men learned that the train had already left and that they would need to await the next train which was scheduled to arrive in the late afternoon. Frustrated and defeated, my grandfather could not find comfort or solace in his travelling companion, for surely the rabbi would say..."We are on God's time."

Only moments later, the announcer at the train station declared that in fact no trains would depart that afternoon at all. My Nono was about to lose his mind...perhaps also his job. And then the announcement went on: The train that departed that very morning, the same train Nono and the rabbi were supposed to be on, somehow came off the rails and tragically there were many casualties.

The rabbi didn't need to say anything, but Nono as a young man, perhaps for the first time in his life, felt that we are truly "on God's time."

My Nono shared this story with me about a month before I became Bar Mitzvah. As he went over the morning prayers with me, gently, and at times humorously, instructing me about which sections were essential and which sections could be left out, he also recounted this story. It was his way of saying, when praying, slow down, this is where God wants you to be, after all, you're on God's time.

Prior to getting married, as a young travelling salesman, my grandfather lived with his mother. Orphaned from his father at a very young age, Nono Meir was fiercely devoted to his mother. One morning, as he was headed out to work, his mother requested that he help her with a few quick chores. Anxious about arriving late to work, and yet, ever the obedient son, Nono could

not refuse his mother. As one chore led to another and one task added to another, Nono came to realize that he would be an hour late to work, and yet he could not bring himself to disrespect his mother's wishes.

After an hour that seemed like an eternity, Nono finally found himself on a bus to work. Seated next to him was a nun. As the ride went on, the nun turned to him and asked him whether he knew where she could purchase a typewriter. Sure enough, he knew. God had led this nun specifically to him because the very company he was working for at the time also carried typewriters. Nono's sense of shame of arriving late to work that morning, quickly turned into pride, as he walked into his office with this lovely nun. Later that morning, Nono's pride turned into great joy. After showcasing several typewriters to the nun, she placed an order for 15 typewriters, an amount which was unheard of in those days. It turns out, this nun was buying typewriters for a network of schools throughout Egypt under the auspices of her church. In those days, Nono worked for a commission and this very sale allowed him and his mom to pull themselves out of poverty and to set them up for a better future.

For Nono, the appearance of the nun on the bus that morning was nothing short of a sign from God. Nono honored his mom and in turn God lifted him to a state of greater honor and dignity. Always respect your parents, was the lesson Nono learned that day.

This way of looking at the world was not unique to Nono. He seemed to have learned it from his mom.

For many years, Nono's mother struggled with infertility. In fact, his parents' desire to conceive a child was so strong, indeed, so desperate, that tension and strife filled their home until at some point they decided to separate from each other, something that was somewhat uncommon in Egypt in those days. And yet thankfully love drew them back to each other, aided by a sense of faith that God would bless them with a child.

At some point, my Nono's mother received advice to go spend a night praying in the synagogue of Rabbi Meir Baal Hanes, meaning, R. Meir, the miracle worker. In my family, there are many stories about things that occurred after one relative or another spent the night praying at that synagogue. In Nono's mother's case, she spent the night praying for a child. Months later, after years of great sorrow and sadness, she finally conceived. When Nono was born, she named him Meir, acknowledging the miracle that transpired in the synagogue of Rabbi Meir, the miracle worker.

Nono was blessed with *Emunah Peshuta* – a simple faith. Oftentimes, I find myself longing for the simplicity of that faith. Certainly, in the sort of world we live in now, both in terms of current events and contemporary modern and postmodern thinking, I often wonder whether it is still possible for us to cultivate this sort of simple faith.

To be sure, my grandfather's faith wasn't passive or naïve. It wasn't a faith that necessarily left everything in the hands of God or ascribed everything to Godly design thoughtlessly. It turns out that knowing when to be simple, or maintain simple faith, takes a bit of wisdom.

After Nono made Aliyah to Israel in the mid-fifties, he became a travelling salesman for an Israeli company. There, once again, he drove from town to town selling merchandise and soliciting offers for commercial goods. As a young child my mother once joined him at work and the day's adventure left a permanent mark on her soul.

In the early afternoon, Nono stopped by an ice cream truck. He bought my mom a popsicle and then was charged by the seller for several other popsicles which Nono did not collect. A few moments later, a large group of children who had just emerged from school, stopped by the truck to purchase ice cream and popsicles, paying for the goods joyfully. As the commotion quieted down, the owner emerged from the truck and gave out popsicles to a few of the kids who had not purchased any.

"It was for them that I paid," Nono whispered to my mother.

He didn't need to say much more. As an orphan, Nono knew what it was like to be a poor boy and what it must have felt like not to have what others so easily possessed.

That same day, in the late afternoon, they stopped at a falafel shop where Nono bought the two of them falafel for lunch but this time he paid for a week's worth of falafel. As they left the store, an old decrepit man walked in. Noticing Nono, his face suddenly lit up and he embraced Nono warmly.

In the car, Nono offered a stunning explanation to my mom:

"Every day, when we say the grace after the meal, we conclude the prayers with the following words:

*Na'ar hayity gam zakanti ve'lo rayity Tzadik neezav ve'zaru mevakesh lachem –*

*I was once young, and now I've aged, but throughout my life, I have never seen a righteous person who was abandoned, nor whose offspring cry for bread.*

We say these words every day. They are part of our sacred tradition and they must be true. Since they are true, then there cannot be a righteous person who is abandoned nor children who cry for bread (or popsicles and ice cream)."

That was Nono's explanation.

If faith in God means that no child or righteous person would ever be abandoned, then it is up to us to ensure that this faith becomes true in our lives. In this way, among others, Nono demonstrated an active form of faith.

Even more so, it was the faith of an activist.

For Nono, when faith clashed with reality, reality needed to be reshaped by faith, and not the other way around. Too often, we surrender faith to reality. Too often, we forget the important and critical role faith has in transforming reality.

Indeed, his faith was a bit more complex than the simple way it seemed to be.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, the great Hassidic master, offers a stunning story that delves into the complex nature of simple faith called "The Wise Man and the Simpleton."

In the story both a wise man and a simpleton are presented with a letter that was sent directly from the King, asking each of them to appear before him.

Startled by the message, the simpleton, who seems to be incapable of logical reflection or rational thought, immediately heads to the palace with great alacrity. Upon arriving at the palace and meeting the king, the simpleton receives his due reward, eventually becoming a cherished and trusted advisor to the king.

The wise man however offers a different response which I will now share directly from the tale: “[The ‘wise’ man said to the messenger who had brought his letter:] ‘Wait here tonight and let us discuss this matter’. . . The wise man, with his philosophic mind, set to thinking about it and said: ‘Why should the king be sending for an unimportant fellow like me? Who am I that the king, out of all his vast kingdom, should send for me? Compared to the king I am a nobody; how can it possibly make sense that the king should send someone after a person as small as I am? If I were to say that it is because of my wisdom – certainly the king has his own sages, and he himself is also a very wise man. So what is this matter of the king’s sending for me?’ He became very much confounded by it until finally he said: ‘It is now very clear in my mind that there is no king in the world at all. The world is full of fools who think there is a king. How is it possible that they should all have subjected themselves to one man, thinking that he is the king, when in reality there is no king at all?’

The messenger answered him: ‘But I brought you a message from the king!’ The wise man asked: ‘Did you receive that message from the king’s own hand?’ The messenger was obliged to admit that he had not, but rather that someone else had given him the message in the king’s name. The wise man continued: ‘See how right I am – there is no king at all!’ He said to the messenger: ‘You have lived all your life in the capital. Tell me, have you ever seen the king?’ The messenger replied that he had not. (This is indeed the case. Not everyone merits to see the king, who reveals himself only on very rare occasions.) And the wise man responded: ‘Now see how perfectly clearly my position has been proven: there is no king at all, for even you have not seen him’ . . . so the two of them decided that the king did not exist. .. They went into the market and there they came upon a soldier. ‘Whom do you serve?’ they asked him. ‘The king,’ he replied. ‘Have you ever seen this king?’ ‘No.’ ‘What a fool,’ they thought ...” (Arthur Green, *Tormented Master*, p.291)

In our own lives, Rebbe Nachman’s letter from the king can be a symbol for Torah and Mitzvoth. At times, we lack the *Emunah Peshuta*, the simple faith that summons fools, as it were, to wholeheartedly commit to the Torah’s commands. Sadly, like the wise man, at times, we fall into the trap of overthinking God’s existence or the Torah’s origin, and when the king summons us, and mitzvot call upon us to act, we simply fail to appear.

Rebbe Nachman’s letter might also symbolize our attitude towards finding meaning in our lives. We’ve all had moments in which our life seemed to have lacked direction or a sense of purpose. At those tough moments, oftentimes, like the wise man in the story, we resolve the tension by simply giving up on the possibility that a greater meaning might eventually present itself to us. We view as foolish those who choose, at times forcefully, to tease out God’s presence, even at the risk of discovering that there is none.

Rav Shagar zt"l, the great postmodern Israeli Orthodox theologian offers a challenging reflection on this very issue. In an article titled, "On Faith," Rav Shagar argues as follows: "Faith is the suspension of the principle of reality. Therefore one cannot prove it or discount it either; it is always possible to interpret what occurs according to faith. Does that mean that faith is then empty of meaning? According to my opinion, not at all – faith allows the believer an approach to reality that is not chained by reality.

According to Jack Lakan: "The letter will always arrive to its proper destination." What is the meaning of this sort of firm faith? The correct explanation is that the letter will always arrive to its proper destination not because the destination is predetermined, as it is suggested by the traditional theology of divine providence, but rather because wherever it arrives, that is the letter's proper destination. ...It is the encounter with the letter's arrival that fills it with its meaning. Meaning does not exit independently outside the letter's destination; rather it is the place of the letter's arrival that lends the letter its interpretation, and that then is the letter's meaning."

Ever since my parents left Israel, now a little less than thirty years ago, I often time stumble on the question of what my life would have been like had my family stayed in Israel, my birth place. It is a question that tears at my heart every few years and at times presents me with very difficult practical, religious, and existential questions. Had my family not left Israel during my early childhood, I probably would have been a very different person today and my life would have looked quite differently.

I once shared these feelings with my father and he said something simple and profound all at once:

"What do you mean? We had to move from Israel to Montreal so you could meet Frayda and so that your children would be born."

He said those words and my heart opened.

The letter arrived to its proper destination. The letter will always arrive to its proper destination. "It is the encounter with the letter's arrival that fills it with its meaning. Meaning does not exit independently outside the letter's destination; rather it is the place of the letter's arrival that lends the letter its interpretation, and that then is the letter's meaning."

It is Rosh Hashanah and the letter has been sent and the king summons us.

The letter contains God's directive for our life and if we dare read it, interpret it, and live by it, with simple faith, then we may merit to lead lives imbued with a sense of ultimate meaning.

This Rosh Hashanah, let us all garner enough courage to overcome what we think we know and let us also cultivate, through conscious choice, a simple faith that is not simply simple.

But friends don't listen to me...I'm just a fool...I serve the King...and I have never seen the King.