

## The Postmodern Piety of Rav Shagar (session 2) Faith Without Illusions

### 1. Rav Shagar, Panecha Avakesh, Shemot

The parsha ends in crisis. Moshe calls to God: “O Lord, why did You bring harm upon this people? Why did You send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has dealt worse with this people; and still You have not saved Your people.” (Shemot 5:22-23). Moshe Rabbeinu loses his faith in his mission and develops a deep and shocking doubt. We must again use the power of our imagination: The faithful shepherd, not only has he not helped, rather he has done damage. As a result, Moshe has doubt about his mission and his abilities. It is as if he has come just to make things worse.

These crises occur to every true believer, to every person that aspires to true goals and sees that sometimes reality slaps him in the face, contradicting his faith and goals. This is a sign of true faith. Faith that does not fall is suspect of being false, because it is a faith that does not attempt to grapple with reality. It does not attempt to bring itself to expression in everyday real life. For one whose faith is not real for him, it cannot fall, but one grapples with reality often loses faith in their mission and abilities. This is what happened to Moshe Rabbeinu.

The midrash (Shemot Rabbah 5:22) struggles to understand how Moshe, the master of prophets, asks a question like this, “Why did you make things worse for the people.” On this there is a typical disagreement between R’ Yishmael and R’ Akiva. Rabbi Yishmael says: “still You have not saved Your people”- literally (*vadai*). This is typical of the approach of Rabbi Yishmael, who understands the Torah more literally. According to it, even Moshe Rabbeinu, who was at such a high spiritual level, is able to arrive to doubt such as this. This happens to everyone, to every true believer- one day they will fall into the dust. They will feel that everything they do is worthless and incorrect.

R’ Akiva, as is his wont, does not explain it according to its more literal meaning. Rather he interprets Moshe as saying, “I know that You will eventually redeem them, but what do you care about those stuck underneath building?” Moshe Rabbeinu does not doubt. The remaining Jews will be saved, but what about those that died, the ones underneath the building? This is Moshe’s cry to God and it is a terrible one. R’ Akiva continues and says: “In that moment, the divine attribute of justice requested to strike down Moshe. But because God saw that Moshe said such things on behalf of Israel, the attribute of justice did not strike him. These words are appropriate for the one who said them. R’ Akiva, the great lover of Israel, the one who rebelled, joined the Bar Kochba revolt and also saw its failure, he felt that same cry [as Moshe]. R’ Akiva did not lose his faith in redemption, but those who were underneath the building could not be redeemed.

### 2. Sigmund Freud, The Future of an Illusion, SE vol. 21, 30-31

When I say that these things are all illusions, I must define the meaning of the word. **An illusion is not the same thing as an error; nor is it necessarily an error.** Aristotle's belief that vermin are developed out of dung (a belief to which ignorant people still cling) was an error; so was the belief of a former generation of doctors that *tabes dorsalis* [syphilis] is the result of sexual excess. It would be incorrect to call these errors illusions. On the other hand, it was an illusion of Columbus's that he had discovered a new sea-route to the Indies. **The part played by his wish in this error is very clear... What is characteristic of illusions is that they are derived from human wishes.** In this respect they come near to psychiatric delusions. But they differ from them, too, apart from the more complicated structure of delusions, In the case of delusions, we emphasize as essential their being in contradiction with reality. **Illusions need not necessarily be false-that is to say, unrealizable or in contradiction to reality.** For instance, a middle-class girl may have the illusion that a prince will come and marry her. This is possible; and a few such cases have occurred. That the Messiah will come and found a golden age is much less likely. Whether one classifies this belief as an illusion or as something analogous to a delusion will depend on one's personal attitude. Examples of illusions which have proved true are not easy to find, but the illusion of the alchemists that all metals can be turned into gold

might be one of them. The wish to have a great deal of gold, as much gold as possible, has, it is true, been a good deal damped by our present-day knowledge of the determinants of wealth, but chemistry no longer regards the transmutation of metals into gold as impossible. **Thus we call a belief an illusion when a wish-fulfilment is a prominent factor in its motivation, and in doing so we disregard its relations to reality, just as the illusion itself sets no store by verification.**

### 3. Rav Shagar, Shiurim al Likkutei Moharan

I was once at a symposium about certainty and doubt. One of the speakers mentioned that they had been at a particular form where one of the participants had raised the possibility that there could be a third Churban... Following his words, they threw him out of the forum for his “heresy” of placing doubt on the continued process of redemption through the establishment of the state of Israel. The speaker used this story to praise the certainty of faith and positively viewed the lack of willingness to hear arguments like these as truth faith. I was frightened. I saw this as making an idol of faith, an expression of arrogant faith that cannot accept the other, which is the source of violent that reveals itself in religious discourse. In my opinion negating this opinion derives from patriotism in the negative sense of the word and not from a position of deep faith. Absolute certainty is a point of reference that gives the speaker confidence in the rightness of his path, but faith only occurs at the moment when a person gives up on certainty and becomes open to the possibility that it is not within the bounds of their understanding. In this context, raising doubts is not the opposite of faith, rather it can bring us to real faith. The raising of doubts is not an educational goal, and it is not my intention to say there is a need to nurture skepticism, primarily because there are people who remain in a chronic condition of doubt and are unable to escape from it. But on the other hand, there is a danger in cultivating baseless religious certainty. The trap of being over ideological can lead to behavior like idolatry, which cover up their approach with words of faith.

### 4. Mei Shiloach, Yitro

“I (anokhi) am the Lord your God.” The verse does not state “ani,” for if it stated “ani” that would imply that the Holy One Blessed Be He revealed then the totality of His light to Israel, precluding the possibility of further delving into His words, for everything would already be revealed. The letter “khaf” [of anokhi], however, denotes that the revelation is not complete, but is rather an estimation and comparison to the light which God will reveal in the future.”... The reason that the Commandment of Thou shall not make for yourself a graven image [follows the commandment of anokhi]. . . is because a graven image is cut according to specific dimensions, perfect, lacking nothing. . . this is to teach us that nothing is revealed to man completely

### 5. Rav Shagar, Shiurim al Likkutei Moharan

It is important to remember that an answer like 'maybe' is an actual possibility in existence, which can be as certain as certainty. The existence of a positive option itself changes the feeling of life; For example, It doesn't need to be good for me in the simplistic sense in order to believe; It is enough for me to believe that it can be good, that this is a potential possibility, in order to feel the divine presence. Faith is not necessarily certainty, so it is possible that a faithful answer to the question of whether there is a creator for the world will be: maybe. In this respect, the presence of faith in the world depends on human beings, on their willingness to accept the existence of God in the world despite the uncertainty.

This is a very deep point of faith, which emerges from the following story about Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditsov inviting one of the enlighteners of his time to his home. This visitor is described as a Torah scholar and a knower of books, but an unbeliever, and therefore argues with rabbis and with his questions undermines their proofs and claims against him:

“And when he entered his house, he saw him [Rabbi Levi Yitzchak] walking and sitting in his room with wondrous devotion and great enthusiasm, and his appearance was very awesome, and he spoke to his soul in this language: “Perhaps the matter is as true as it has been said,” and repeated this saying several times. He did not pay attention to the visitor at all, and the visitor was stunned silent and did not know what to think and

terror and fear fell upon him... and finally the holy rabbi approached him and said to him, listen, my son... it is impossible to show heaven and hell “on the table”, and what is the point if I do this, for I myself cannot show you clearly, but please listen, my son, perhaps the truth is as written in the Torah. Remember, my son, the great danger hovering over your head. Maybe the truth is yes, and if so, how will you escape it.”

Indeed, from conversations with *baalei teshuvah*, I came to see that what changed the lives of many of them was not the certainty about religion but the possibility, the 'maybe', which was accepted as a real option that excited them and gave them a sense of liberation and redemption. This feeling itself was for them the proof of the truth which is the root of this 'maybe', of this possibility. From here on, all that remains for them is to complete the process of teshuvah.

Faith is indeed certainty, especially when we are talking about the existence of God, and that is literally true. However, what can lead to belief is actually the doubt, because language makes us give a definition to the phenomenon, and thus instead of touching the phenomenon we are satisfied with defining it externally. Doubt comes to reopen language, to prevent rigidity and allow us to reality anew. If we come and say 'Yes, of course there is a God', then this statement may close the possibility that at some point there will ever be a revelation. Rather, the ability to answer 'maybe' in relation to religious life creates a space that may create the sudden possibility of revelation.