

*Rabbi Shlomo Farhi*

Building for a Maybe: Noach, “Failure,” and the Holiness of Just Trying



## 1. Rashi's Question That Hurts

Parashat Noach presents us with a powerful and almost painful question.

Rashi comments that **Hashem has many ways to save**.

Hashem did **not** need Noach to build a *teivah* — an ark — to save him.

Let's think about a few possibilities:

- Hashem could have relocated Noach and his family to **Eretz Yisrael**, or at least **Yerushalayim**, which according to some opinions was not affected by the Flood. Noach could have made *aliyah*, bought a small apartment in the Old City, and when the waters came – they never would have touched him.
- Hashem could have sent them to the **top of the highest mountain**, or tucked them into a **sealed cave** protected miraculously from the waters.
- Or Hashem could have pulled the famous **Yonah trick**:  
swallow them all in a giant fish.  
One enormous Leviathan, family suite, fully inclusive.  
In New York's rental market, people will soon be checking if "one-bedroom inside a whale" is available on Zillow.

Hashem is not limited. Rashi says explicitly:

**"Yesh leMakom harbeh derachim lehatzil" – God has many ways to save.**

So why choose this way? Why this massive construction project, a DIY ark that takes **120 years** to build?

Rashi explains:

Hashem "troubled" Noach with the building of the *teivah* so that the people of the generation would **see him** building,  
ask him what he is doing,  
hear about the coming Flood,  
and **maybe** do *teshuvah*.

One hundred and twenty years of construction, teaching, warning, preaching...  
**for a maybe.**



And here's the part that hurts:

At the end of 120 years, when the rain finally begins,  
Noach walks into the *teivah* with...

**no one** from the outside world.

Not one ba'al teshuvah.

Not one neighbor.

Not even a curious guy who thought, "You know what, I'll hedge my bets."

Noach's kiruv success rate, after 120 years?

**Zero.**

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## 2. Past Performance, Disclaimers, and What Was the Point?

In the financial world, there are mandatory disclaimers:

**"Past performance is not indicative of future results."**

**"This product is not FDIC insured."**

"Side effects may include dizziness, nausea, heart palpitations, and in some cases... death. Please talk to your doctor."

They should add similar disclaimers to every gambling website and sports betting app:

"Side effects may include:

divorce,

bankruptcy,

having to buy off-brand ketchup because you can't afford Heinz."

But let's look at Noach's "track record."

- **Year 1 of the project** – zero people persuaded.
- **Year 2, 3, 4... 50, 70, 100** – still zero.
- **Year 120** – still zero.

Imagine a rabbi opens a shul. For 100 years, no one comes to **any** minyan.

You would say, "Rabbi, maybe this isn't working."



And yet, Hashem Himself assigns Noach this mission.

Hashem knows **exactly** how many people will eventually walk into the *teivah*.

So the question screams:

**Hashem, if You know nobody is going to listen, why put Noach through 120 years of effort?**

Why all this heartache? All this work? All this “failure”?

Rashi’s words are clear:

**“Kedei sheyir’u oto dor hamabul... ulay yashuvu.”**

“So that the generation of the Flood would see him... and maybe they would return.”

The work Hashem gave Noach was **not**:

“Make sure people do teshuvah.”

The work Hashem gave Noach **was**:

“Spend your life creating the **possibility** for them to do teshuvah.

Build the conditions for a **maybe**.”

That’s it.

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### 3. Your Job Is the “Maybe” – Not the Result

This is a foundational lesson for anyone involved in:

- Kiruv
- Teaching
- Parenting
- Inspiring friends
- Influencing a spouse
- Leading a community

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We think success is:

“They changed. They listened. They became religious. They fixed their life.”

But Hashem’s definition of Noach’s mission was:

**“Do the work that might move them. Even if it doesn’t.”**

Your job is not to **guarantee** *teshuvah*.

Your job is to be the person who builds the *teivah*.

- You invite a guest for Shabbat.
- You pay for someone’s kosher birthday dinner.
- You move to a neighborhood with a beautiful mikveh to help your spouse be more comfortable with family purity.

You pour effort, heart, and money into it.

And sometimes...

they still say, “No thanks.”

From our perspective, it feels like failure.

From Hashem’s perspective?

You did exactly what Noach did.

You built the “*ulay yashuvu*” — the **maybe**.

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## 4. “At Least I Tried” – No. At MOST.

People say,

“Well, at least I tried.”

That phrase, says the derasha, is **toxic**.

It sounds like consolation:

“At least I’ll get some reward for the effort.”

But the truth is much deeper:



**The effort itself *is* the mitzvah. Full value.**

Not “at least.”

**At most.**

If Noach had spent 120 years building Bikkur Cholim, or a learning program, or a social services network – and they had been wildly successful – in Hashem’s accounting he would not have been standing in a “better place” than he actually was after 120 years of “failed” outreach.

Because the mission Hashem gave him was to build for a maybe.  
And he did it.

For anyone who ever poured their soul into a child, spouse, student, or friend and saw no change:

**Your mitzvah is complete.**

Not partial, not discounted. Complete.

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## **5. Hidden Success: Maybe Noach Saved His Own Family**

We often say:

“Noach didn’t succeed with anyone except his wife and children.”

But maybe that’s not an *exception*.

Maybe that’s exactly **where** his success was meant to manifest.

After all, to step into the *teivah* required **faith**:

- The world outside still looked “normal” when they entered.
- The rain had just begun.
- There was no tsunami yet, no clear evidence of global catastrophe.

Even then, the Torah implies that Noach had to be **pushed** into the *teivah* by God.

If it was so hard for Noach, imagine how hard it was for his family.

Maybe, without 120 years of hearing their father talk about the Flood, watching him build plank after plank, they wouldn’t have come on board either.

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Sometimes you think:

“I failed with the guest I invited. They didn’t change.”

But your **children** were sitting at that same Shabbat table, watching:

- How passionately you spoke
- How much you cared
- How generous you were

And your “failed” kiruv guest became the greatest chinuch moment of your child’s life.

Noach’s *maybe* work for the world might have been the solid foundation of faith for his own family.

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## 6. Why Didn’t Noach Convince Anyone? The Painful Mirror

So we’ve answered why the project was **worth it** even with no visible results.

But there’s another question:

**Why didn’t Noach succeed?**

Why didn’t even one person repent?

The Torah gives us a hint.

On the day Noach enters the *teivah*, the pasuk tells us that Hashem had to “shut him in.”

Rashi comments:

**“Noach mikitanei emunah haya.”**

Noach was of those with **small faith**.

“Ma’amin ve-eino ma’amin” – he believed *and* didn’t believe.

What does that mean?

How can a man who:

- Speaks directly to G-d

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- Spends 120 years building an ark
- Obeys all the details

be called “small in faith”?

One answer in the commentaries is that:

Noach believed in Hashem

— but he couldn’t quite believe that Hashem would actually carry out such a devastating decree.

He thought Hashem’s mercy might still avert it.

So practically, the message he carried for 120 years was:

“A Flood is coming. I mean... probably. Maybe. I think so. Possibly. But, you know, Hashem is merciful...”

When a person doesn’t fully believe what they’re saying, it leaks out in the tone, in the body language, in the urgency. And people don’t buy it.

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## 7. The Rabbi in Oujda – Crying for the Right Reason

There’s a powerful story about **Rav Refael Baruch Toledano**.

He heard that in the city of **Oujda**, on the Algerian border, many Jewish families were sending their children to non-Jewish schools — the French “Alliance” system — rather than to Jewish schools.

He traveled all the way there to speak to the community.

He poured his heart out in a speech, urging them to give their children a Torah education.

When the meeting ended, not a single family changed their decision.

And the rabbi began to cry.

They asked him:



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“Rabbi, why are you crying?  
The kids were in those schools before you came,  
and they’re in them after you leave.  
Nothing changed.”

You’d think he would say:

“I’m crying for your children. For their Jewish future. For what they’re going to lose.”

But he said something else.

He quoted the Gemara in Berachot:

**“Amar Rav Helbo, amar Rav Huna:  
Kol sheyesh bo yirat Shamayim, divarav nishma’im.”**  
“Anyone who has fear of Heaven — his words are heard.”

And then he said:

“If my words were not heard,  
it must be that I am lacking in yirat Shamayim.”

He cried not for **them**,  
but for **himself**.

He said:

Look at Moshe Rabbeinu — he had a speech impediment, and yet he transmitted the Torah to the entire nation.

Look at the Navi Amos — his name is linked to “**im’um**”, speaking as if the mouth is full, unclear — and yet he was chosen as a prophet.

It’s not charisma, diction, or eloquence that ultimately makes the impact.  
It’s **yirat Shamayim** — the depth of inner conviction, the authenticity of faith.

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## 8. Rav Chaim Kanievsky and the One-Sentence Advice

One of the most sought-after figures for advice in our generation was **Rav Chaim Kanievsky**.

If you ever merited to go to him, you know:  
his answers were often **less than one sentence**.

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No dramatic speech.  
No stories from his childhood.  
No TED Talk.

People flew across the world for:

“Do this.”  
“Don’t worry.”  
“Go ahead.”

Why did people accept those answers so completely?

Because behind those few words was a mountain of **emunah** and **yirat Shamayim**.

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## 9. When Our Words Don’t Land

This leads to a very uncomfortable but crucial question:

When we speak to:

- our children
- our spouse
- our friends
- our community

and they don’t listen —  
should we ever ask:

**“Maybe / don’t believe this deeply enough?”**

We say:

- “I keep Shabbat.”
- “I close my business on Shabbat.”
- “I built the mikveh.”

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- “I pay for the kosher restaurant.”

Noach could say:

“I built the ark. I followed instructions. I invested 120 years.”

But something in his inner conviction, according to Rashi, was incomplete.

“Ma’amin ve-eino ma’amin.”

Before yelling louder at those who don’t listen,  
sometimes we need to deepen our **own** understanding:

- Why do I care about this mitzvah?
- Why is it important to **me** personally?
- Do I believe in it enough to live it with joy and clarity — not just obligation?

A child who hears:

“That’s just what we do. Don’t ask questions,”

hears a parent who may be doing the mitzvah,  
but doesn’t fully own it.

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## 10. Strengthening Ourselves Before We Speak

So maybe, before we deliver a big message, we should:

- Open a sefer
- Speak to a rav
- Learn more about that mitzvah
- Understand its beauty, its depth, its reason

And then come back to our children or spouse and say:

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“This is what I want for our family.  
This is why it matters to me.  
This is what it means.  
This is why I’m willing to sacrifice for it.”

That conviction carries a power that yelling never will.

But even then, if they still don’t listen?

Then we go back to Noach:

**The mitzvah was the maybe.**  
The effort is completeness, not consolation.

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## **11. The Gym, the Spotter, and Where Growth Really Happens**

One last image.

Back when I played football, I used to go to the gym.  
(Yes, it was a while ago. No, we’re not bringing photographic evidence.)

When you want to **grow muscle**, you don’t keep lifting the same easy weight.

You:

- Increase the load
- Do a set of 12
- Then 10
- Then 8
- Each time pushing closer to your limit

On that last set, you’re supposed to lift **just beyond** what you’re sure you can do.

You struggle.

You’re not sure the bar is going up.

So you call over a **spotter**:

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“Can you give me a hand? Just in case?”

That zone — where you’re not certain you can make it —  
is exactly where **progress** lives.

It lives in **Ulai Land**.

In **Maybe Land**.

If you only lift weights you’re sure you can handle, you never grow.

If Noach only spoke to people he was certain would listen,  
he’d have built nothing.

Hashem puts us in situations where we don’t know how it will turn out —  
where the person might say “no,”  
where the child might ignore us,  
where the student might not change.

Because **that’s** where our spiritual muscles grow.

Our job is:

**Not to guarantee success,  
but to live fully in the effort of “maybe.”**

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## Takeaway

- Hashem doesn’t measure us by how many people we changed.
- He measures us by **how deeply we tried,  
how authentically we believed,  
how courageously we built the “maybe.”**

Noach’s 120 years were not a colossal failure.

They were the greatest success in the world of effort, faith, and responsibility.

So:

- Keep inviting.

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- Keep teaching.
- Keep modeling.
- Strengthen your own belief.
- Do everything in your power to create a “maybe.”

And then... let Hashem handle the rest.

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## Shabbat-Table Questions

1. **Where in your life are you avoiding a “maybe” because you’re afraid to fail?**  
How might Noach’s story encourage you to act anyway?
2. **Think of a time you tried hard to influence someone and “failed.”**  
How might Hashem view that situation differently than you do?
3. **When someone doesn’t listen to your spiritual message, how can you balance self-reflection (“Maybe I lack conviction”) with self-compassion (“I still did my best”)?**

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4. **Can you identify a mitzvah or value you do by habit but don't deeply understand?**  
What's one step you can take this week to strengthen your own emunah in it?
  5. **Where have you seen "hidden success" — where the impact of your effort wasn't on the person you aimed at, but on someone watching from the side (a child, a friend, a spouse)?**
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