

Subtleties of Emunah¹

Rabbi Mordechai Fachler z'l

The seventh day of Pesach is the anniversary of the crossing of the Red Sea, as hinted at in the third expression of redemption – וגאלתי אתכם, which corresponds to the third cup.² It was on this occasion that the Torah attests for the first time that the Children of Israel believed in G-d: ”וַיֵּאֱמִינוּ בַּיהוָה וּבְמֹשֶׁה עַבְדּוֹ” - and the [People] believed in the Lord and in Moses, His servant.”³

While it is gratifying to discover that the Israelites finally believed in G-d after all these miracles, some disturbing things happened immediately before and after the crossing of the Red Sea. When witnessing the Egyptian armies advance upon them, some of these former slaves thought it appropriate to complain to Moses:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה הַמַּבְלִי אֵין קְבָרִים בְּמִצְרַיִם לְמֹתוֹת בְּמִדְבָּר מַה זֹאת עָשִׂיתָ לָנוּ לְהוֹצִיאֵנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם:

They said to Moses, is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us to die in the desert? What is this that you have done to us to take us out of Egypt?⁴

Similarly, after experiencing the awesome miracles of the Splitting of the Red Sea, and after arriving in Marah where the waters were admittedly bitter, it did not take the Israelites too long to complain again about their situation: ”וַיִּלְנוּ הָעָם עַל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר מַה נִּשְׁתֶּה” - The people complained against Moses, saying, ‘What shall we drink?’⁵

A Distinguishing between true faith and false piety

What is it about *Emunah* – faith or belief in G-d that makes it seem so fleeting? Even nowadays, people approach me and explain to me that they have “lost their faith.” What is the possible reason for this?

My Mashgiach Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe in his book *Pathways*⁶ explains the problem. בטחון and אמונה are all too often shallow, driven primarily by fear and instinct. This kind of belief or faith is too often clothed in a false form of religiosity, what he deridingly refers to as *frumkeit* which is devoid of a deep sense of appreciation and love of Hashem:

On the narrow path to Truth in serving G-d, there is a major impediment which is called *frumkeit* (religiosity) – a term which has no clear and exact translation. *Frumkeit* is the natural urge and instinct to become attached to the Creator. This instinct is also found amongst animals. David said, “The lion cubs roar for their prey and ask G-d for their food”.⁷ “He gives to the beast his food and to the young ravens who call to Him”.⁸ There is no necessity why these verses should be understood as metaphors. Indeed, animals have an instinctive feeling that there is someone who is concerned that they

¹ Originally published in FACHLER, M. & FACHLER, D. 2016. *Redemption and revelation: essays on Pesach and Shavuot*. Modi'in, Israel: Renana Publishers; republished here with slight revisions by kind permission of “Redemption and Revelation ‘s” editor, David Fachler, who is also the author’s son.

² Exodus Rabba 6:4; Or HaChaim, Exodus 6:6

³ Exodus 14:31

⁴ Ibid. 14:11

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ WOLBE, S. 1983. *Pathways: a brief introduction to the world of Torah*. Jerusalem: Jamie Lehmann Torah Ethics Center.

⁷ Psalms 104:21

⁸ Ibid. 247:9

have food, and this is the same instinct that works in man – but obviously at a higher level. This natural *frumkeit* helps us in serving G-d. Without this natural assistance, serving G-d would be much more difficult.

However, this *frumkeit*, as in all instinctive urges that occur in man, is inherently egoistic and self-centered. Therefore, *frumkeit* pushes man to do only that which is good for himself. Activities between people, and actions which are done without ulterior motives, are not derived from *frumkeit*. One who bases his service of G-d entirely on *frumkeit* remains self-centered. Even if a person places many pious restrictions on himself – he will never become a kind person, and he will never reach the level of being purely motivated. This is why it is necessary that we base our service of G-d on commonsense (*da'as*) (see *Sotah* 22b, where it lists 7 types of activities which it labels as foolish piety. Each one of them is a manifestation of *frumkeit* without commonsense).⁹ Commonsense has to direct our service of G-d. From the moment we desert commonsense and act only according to *frumkeit*, our Divine service becomes corrupted. This is true even for a person on the level of a Torah scholar.¹⁰

B Instinctual Faith

What Rav Wolbe is trying to convey is that faith is something so ingrained in our being, that it is often instinctual. Rav Wolbe thinks that this in and of itself can be a good thing. It certainly makes service of and belief in G-d something more natural. However, it is insufficient in truly serving G-d. If it is reduced to an instinct, then it becomes self-serving. If that is so, when faith is no longer needed or does not really help me, I will abandon it.

Perhaps the Israelites who had just come out of bondage and who were told what they can and cannot think, did not yet possess commonsense. Like every being, their instincts were intact. When these instincts told them that in order to survive they had better believe in G-d, they went ahead and did so. However, the moment they thought that faith would not come to their aid, they decided to abandon it.

C Nurturing and strengthening our instinctual faith

Those who complain to me that they have lost their faith are really telling me that they never fully acquired it in the first place. It was an instinctual faith. It was not a deeply held faith which comes after great contemplation. Life is a complicated journey, and we need to apply ourselves to it in a serious manner.

Our task therefore as we journey from Pesach to Shavuot is not merely to create faith. Most of us possess it instinctually. Rather, we need to *nurture* our faith. We need to look around us and see G-d in Nature. We need to be appreciative of the wonders around us, and attribute them all to a kind and compassionate G-d. Once we do this, our faith will be that much stronger, and G-d is sure to respond to this authenticity.

⁹ [Ed: here the Hebrew word “da’as” is translated as “commonsense”, an alternate translation is “intellect”. The term is more nuanced than a single word translation is able to capture as “da’as” also has the sense of an intimate, ingrained knowing.]

¹⁰ [Ed: The origin of this translation is unclear and can be found in a few places online, available: <http://daattorah.blogspot.com/2010/05/frumkeit-self-centered-religious.html>; See the original Hebrew essay in Alei Shur Vol2 p152, available: <http://aishdas.org/as/frumkeit.pdf>]