

## Parshas Beshalach

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*"And Israel saw the great hand that Hashem did to Egypt, and the nation feared Hashem and they had faith (emunah) in Hashem and in Moshe His servant." (Shemos 14:31)*

Imagine the sight of a nation of millions surrounded on all sides by existential dangers and locked in by the sea. A stunning miracle occurs and the sea splits into twelve dry walkable trails, and the nation's enemies are vanquished before their very eyes. We cannot fathom what a transformational life-altering experience it would be. This verse tells of an unsurprising achievement of emunah in the Almighty and in Moshe that the nation underwent after witnessing the miracles at Yam Suf.

Implied by this verse is that prior to this experience they did not have emunah in the Almighty and in Moshe. However, as far back as Parshas Shemos (4:30-31) when Aaron conveyed the words of the Almighty via Moses to the people, the verse states that the people had emunah. If they already believed prior to the Ten Plagues what more was achieved at Yam Suf? Moreover, in the lead-up to the revelation at Sinai the Almighty informs Moshe (19:9) that the transcendental experience the Jews are about to undergo will engender emunah in Moshe forever. If the people already had emunah in Moshe several weeks earlier, what else was accomplished at Sinai?

After investigation it appears that emunah is not a cut and dried concept the way we perhaps imagine. Take Noah, for example. He spent 120 years of his life building the Ark in anticipation of the pending Flood based upon what the Almighty told him. Clearly, Noah is the paragon of resolute, unflinching and unwavering emunah in God. Yet Chazal (see Rashi Genesis 7:7) describe him as a "man of limited emunah who sometimes believed and sometimes did not believe that the Flood would come, and only entered the Ark after the waters compelled him to." It seems outrageous

to suggest that someone who dedicates a lifetime working on a project solely due to his belief in God is nevertheless a man of limited emunah.

Evidently, emunah is not as simple as we would have imagined. Our society tends to regard the concept of faith as a yes or no question. You either are a believer or a non-believer. It is a box that you check, not unlike selecting your race on a voter registration form. To get a sense of what emunah actually is, let's examine an interesting statement from the Talmud (Sotah 49): "Ever since the destruction of the Temple, men of emunah ceased. Rabbi Yitzchak said: 'this refers to people who believe in the Holy One blessed is He, as Rabbi Eliezer said: whoever has bread in his basket and says what will I eat tomorrow is a man of limited emunah.'" This Talmudic teaching defines emunah for us. If a person has food for dinner, but has no money, has maxed out his credit card, and has no way of feeding his children breakfast in the morning, and is concerned by that - that person does not have emunah! Emunah is when someone realistically believes that the Almighty is their billionaire dad; the child of a billionaire is truly secure that breakfast tomorrow will be served, tonight's empty cupboards notwithstanding.

Emunah is when the existence of the Creator is upgraded from a theoretical idea to a reality. Jewish sources delineate the many different levels of emunah that are achievable. A high level of emunah is when the knowledge of the existence of God supersedes the reality of the physical and material existence and becomes a person's governing reality. The existence of a benevolent and limitless Power who loves us as a parent is more real than the fear that an empty pantry may strike in the hearts of man. That person surely wouldn't worry about who will provide tomorrow's food! The Talmud informs us that after the Temple was destroyed this level of emunah was no longer achievable.

Noah, however, was capable of this high level of emunah. Our Sages note that Noah

entered the Ark when he was compelled to by the waters of the flood, and not when the Almighty explicitly instructed him prior. If Noah's emunah was on this level, then there would have been a greater imperative to enter the Ark when the Almighty told him regardless of the weather forecast. For Noah, the weather forecast had greater influence on his actions than the Almighty's word and thus was a man of limited faith.

Clearly, there are multiple bands on the spectrum of emunah. We are incapable of the variety of emunah wherein our spiritual reality dwarfs our physical reality, and certainly the higher levels of emunah that engender prophecy, etc. Perhaps the highest we can potentially achieve is the last instruction of Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai to his students (Brachos 28a): "May your fear of Heaven always be like your fear of man." Perhaps we can achieve parity between our physical and spiritual realities.

The Torah enlightens us by letting us follow the trail of the Jewish nation's ascent up the ladder of emunah. Obviously, the people had a degree of emunah already in Parshas Shemos. At the splitting of the sea the reality of God and His absolute dominion over all became even more tangible to them and consequently their emunah was upgraded commensurately. Before Mount Sinai the Almighty told Moshe that their emunah will be deepened even further due to the experience that they will partake in.

The human malady is that we tend to pursue physical and material goals determinedly and to settle for spiritual mediocrity - a symptom of a distorted worldview where the physical reigns supreme and the spiritual is merely a box we check. Let us take inspiration from our antecedents and not let our emunah stagnate; rather let us relentlessly pursue spiritual greatness with the same gusto and passion we employ in our material and physical pursuits.

Good Shabbos!