

Personal Perspectives on Emunah

By: **HERSHEL SCHACHTER***

Question: What would you describe as the source of your *emunah*?

R. Schachter: I knew my four grandparents. In fact, I was partially brought up by my mother's parents because when we lived in Pennsylvania, the day school only went to fifth grade. Therefore, for sixth grade, my parents sent me to New York and I went to Salanter, which was an elementary school. I also knew my father's parents. We visited them every so often. They knew their parents and their parents knew theirs. They all told us that they have a historical tradition of *Eser Makkot* and *Kriyat Yam Suf* and *Ma'amad Har Sinai*, which was witnessed by several million people. There were 600,000 men between the ages of 20 and 60, and probably approximately the same number of women. Then there were people over 60 years old and younger than 20. There was also the *erev rav*. Putting everything together, there were a few million people, and they all said the same thing—that all these things occurred. We have a historical tradition that all of the *ikkarei emunah* were demonstrated during the *Eser Makkot*. The *Humash* records what the grandparents said.

וּלְמַעַן תִּסְפֹּר בְּאָזְנִי בְּנֵה וְכֵן בְּנֵה אֶת אֲשֶׁר הִתְעַלְלָתִי בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֵת אֱהֲתִי אֲשֶׁר
שָׁמַתִּי בָּם וַיִּדְעֵתֶם כִּי אֲנִי ה' (שמות י:ב).

לְמַעַן רַבּוֹת מוֹפְתֵי בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם (שמות יא:ט).

The purpose of the miracles that occurred in the *Eser Makkot* was to demonstrate all 13 Principles of Faith. I thus have a historical tradition that these things are true. That is our source. Just as we have a historical tradition that George Washington at one time was president of the United States, and if someone denies it, we will consider him crazy, so, too, many people witnessed the *Eser Makkot*, so we know it is true. How could a religion whose miracles were witnessed by millions of people be false?

* David H. Schwartz conducted this series of interviews on *emunah*. See his "Introduction to: Personal Perspectives on *Emunah*" in this volume of *Hakirah*.

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A group of his disciples supposedly witnessed Yoshka's story that he came back to life. They did not have millions of people witnessing it. They do not even claim that.

Our religion has a historical tradition that all our miracles—*Eser Makkot*, *Kriyat Yam Suf*, *Ma'amad Har Sinai*—occurred and all the *ikkarei emunah* were demonstrated to be correct.

On Pesah night, when we recite *sippur yetziat Mitzrayim*, we are supposed to tell it in such a way as to bring out all the *ikkarei emunah*—not just to recite the *Eser Makkot*.

Rambam lists 13 *Ikkarei Emunah*, but there are more than 13. We are not sure exactly why Rambam picked these 13. We believe in free will; that is an *ikkar emunah*, but Rambam does not mention that among the 13. There is also the power of prayer. The Rav said that prayer is included in the *ikkar* of prophecy. There are philosophers who think that philosophically and logically it is impossible to have any communication between man and God. God is infinite and man is finite. However, we can have communication. We *daven* to God, and God gives prophecy. Hence, prayer is included in the *ikkar* of *nevu'ah*. There can be communication in both directions. God communicates with man, that is *nevu'ah*; and man communicates with God, that is prayer.

Why is there no prophecy today? The Gemara¹ says that—based on verses in *Shir ha-Shirim*—after the seventy years of exile, the overwhelming majority of Jews did not want to go back to Eretz Yisrael. They were accustomed to *galut*. They enjoyed it and wanted to stay there. God, therefore, said in advance, if the majority of the Jews will not want to go back after *galut Bavel*, He will punish them and not send any more prophets.

We believe, however, that there was prophecy in the past, and in the future, there will once again be prophecy. In principle, there can be prophecy. Just like nowadays there is prayer all the time, so, too, there can be another kind of communication—God communicating with man by sending messages of prophecy.

Question: Is this source of your *emunah* essentially the same as the original source when you decided to go into the rabbinate or has it changed over time?

R. Schachter: I am a simple person. I had an easy life. I never had any terrible problems. Children like to imitate their parents. My father was always learning so I too would learn. My father was always in the rabbinate. He was a rabbi in the shul. The practice—60–70 years ago—was that

¹ Yoma 9b.

whoever put out a *sefer* would send a copy to all the *rabbanim* in America, and ask for funding. Our shul therefore had a lot of *sefarim*. I remember, between *aliyot*, when they were making *mi she-beirakhs*, I would look into different *sefarim*—even before my bar mitzvah.

Some people went through different *tekufot* in their life in *emunah*. I had a very easy life.

Question: In your opinion and experience, is *emunah* intellectually obvious/self-evident (once one thinks about it and investigates), far from obvious, or somewhere in between?

R. Schachter: We have historical traditions for all the *ikkarei emunah*. *Emunah* is thus an easy thing. There is, however, a major *kasha*, which all prophets and philosophers have asked: How can it be that there is *tzaddik ve-ra lo* and *rasha ve-tov lo*, that the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper? This is particularly difficult for the Jewish people, who have always believed in just one God who has the ability to control everything without any offsetting forces. It would seem problematic that He apparently allows this to happen, whether through poverty, war, genocide, sickness, etc.

We believe, however, that after all of history will have unfolded, at the end of days—and the Gemara states this—that instead of having one blessing for the good and another for bad, we will say only *ha-tov ve-ha-metiv*, the blessing for good.² Presently, we live a relatively short lifespan and do not see the big picture. As a result, from our narrow perspective, *tzaddik ve-ra lo* and *rasha ve-tov lo* appear problematic. If, however, we could look at everything from the beginning to the end, we would understand it is all good. The Rav pointed out the verse, “And God saw all that He had made, and found it *tov me’od*, very good.”³ When you look at everything from the beginning to the end, when you have the correct perspective you realize everything is for the good.

Many people after the Second World War gave up their *emunah*. Yet for others, their *emunah* was strengthened. I was once invited by Rabbi Fabian Schoenfeld to speak at his shul in Queens for *Yom Ha-Shoah*. I was not sure what to say. I said, we are all bothered by how God could have allowed the Nazis to kill so many *tzaddikim*. Rashi in the story of *Het Ha-Egel* writes that the punishment for the *Het Ha-Egel* will be meted out little by little over the generations.⁴ God will punish the Jewish people over many years. It does not necessarily mean that when we experience a punishment it is for what that generation had done. Perhaps they were holy

² *Pesachim* 50a.

³ *Beresheet* 1:31.

⁴ *Shemot* 32:34.

tzaddikim, but it is a punishment for the *Het Ha-Egel* from that earlier generation.

There was one fellow in that shul. He and his wife were both survivors of concentration camps, and they never had any children, likely because of something the Nazis had done to her. They adopted a daughter, had aggravation from her, and then she got divorced. It was very difficult for them. He used to come to my weekly *shiur* in Queens, and he loved me very much. He came over to me after that speech, and he had tears in his eyes. He said, “Rabbi Schachter, you have no right to say that. Even if we had all worshiped the *egel*, we did not deserve what they did to us!” He is probably right. What I said may not have been wise.

At the end of the day, *tzaddik ve-ra lo* remains a very difficult *kasha*. One with which everyone struggles. The *pasuk* says “*ve-ra’ita et aḥorai, u-fanai lo yei-ra’u*.”⁵ Some⁶ interpret it allegorically to mean that after all of history will have unfolded, we will be able to look back and realize in retrospect that everything was for the good. We do not see all of history, but only a small span of some hundred years.

I lived, in the United States, in possibly the best time in history. Today with the current war, there is a lot of anti-Semitism. I, however, was born in 1941, in the middle of the war, but I did not experience it, and I never experienced anti-Semitism. During the rest of Jewish history, however, the Jews continuously suffered from pogroms and the like. I was therefore never personally shaken up by *tzaddik ve-ra lo* and *rasha ve-tov lo*.

Question: So, given this, where do you stand on the question: Is *emunah* intellectually obvious/self-evident?

R. Schachter: *Emunah* is obvious. We witnessed the *Eser Makkot* and we witnessed *gilui Shekhinah*. So, we know it is all true, but people have a desire to do otherwise, and some people are so obsessed with the *kasha* of *tzaddik ve-ra lo* and *rasha ve-tov lo*. Indeed, life might be easier if you do not believe in God, but what is the value in such a life?

I think after World War II, there was a group of French existentialists who came to the realization that life is not worth living, it is a waste—so they committed suicide.

We do not think we have a *negi’ah*, a bias, that life should be meaningful. Rather, we have a historical tradition, ratified by our ancestors, generation after generation, that what is passed down to us is true.

⁵ Ibid., 33:23.

⁶ See the Introduction to R. Aharon Soloveichik, *Od Yisrael Yosef Beni Hai*, based upon *Yalkut Shimoni* 966:2.

Question: Do you ever have doubts about the veracity of our faith principles?

R. Schachter: I was never shaken up by anything. Maybe because I never witnessed [anything so horrible].

Question: If you have two people, who are both knowledgeable about Torah, and one of them believes, and the other has lost his faith, or does not believe—but they both do their best to be fully ethical, is there greater reward for a person who believes than for the person who does not, even if the latter honestly does not believe?

R. Schachter: Yes. We assume that if a person is honest he would believe. It is not a question of belief; it is a historical fact, just as George Washington was president.

Behag did not count *Anokhi*, the first commandment, belief in God, as one of the 613 *mitzvot*.

Rambam says that is ridiculous. The Gemara overtly states that it is one of the 613.⁷ While Ramban holds like Rambam, he comes to defend *Behag*. He says it does not make sense that there should be a *mitzvah* to believe in God. If you do not believe that there is anybody there, that there is no Commander, you cannot have any commandments. *Anokhi* is a preamble; it is a prerequisite.

So, what is the counterargument? Reb Elchonon Wasserman explains. There is a lot of information that I store but I never recall it. My social security number, phone numbers, etc. That is, there are some things that you keep stored in the back of your memory and some things in the forefront of your memory. So, the *mitzvah* of *Anokhi* is not described as a mitzvah to believe, it is described by Rambam in *Mishneh Torah* as a *mitzvah* “*lay-da*,” to know. What does that mean? The *Ba'al ha-Tanya* writes on the first page. As we see in the *pasuk*, “*Ve-ha-Adam yada et Havah ishto*.” The verb “*lay-da*” in Biblical Hebrew sometimes connotes *hithabrut*, [being] closely connected. The *mitzvah* to know God is that it should not be just some information stored in the back of your memory but rather it should always be in the forefront of your mind. You should always be visualizing “*shiviti Hashem le-negdi tamid*,” that God is always there.

A story is told that there was a period of time when the Ba'al Shem Tov was starting his movement, and the Noda Bi-Yehudah, a cousin of his by marriage, called him into his office and said, “To be a leader of a movement in Judaism, you have to be learned.” He asked the Ba'al Shem

⁷ *Makkot* 24a.

Tov a couple of questions but he did not want to answer. He asked, what is the *halakhab* if you forget *Ya'aleh ve-Yavo* in *Shemoneh Esrei* on Rosh Hodesh at night? The Ba'al Shem Tov, not wanting to answer, hiding the fact that he was, in fact, learned, said, "Rebbe, it would not make a difference for your followers and it would not make a difference for my followers. My followers have such *kavanah* when they *daven* that they would not forget *Ya'aleh ve-Yavo* on Rosh Hodesh. Your followers, however, will forget the first time and if you tell them to *daven* again, they will forget the second time as well." (Now, the *hasidische* version of this story adds that that morning, which was Rosh Hodesh, Noda Bi-Yehudah forgot *Ya'aleh ve-Yavo*, prayed a second time, and again forgot to say it.)

Noda Bi-Yehudah then asked the Ba'al Shem Tov, "They say you know how to read people's minds, so tell me, what am I thinking about now?" The Ba'al Shem Tov answered, "You are thinking about God." Noda Bi-Yehudah said he was wrong. So the Ba'al Shem Tov responded, "Well, you are supposed to always be thinking of God; *shiviti Hashem le-negdi tamid*."

Thus, *shiviti Hashem le-negdi tamid* is precisely the *mitzvah* to have *emunah*. True, you cannot command a person to have *emunah*, like Ramban argued. But the fact is that there is a God (just like the fact that George Washington was president), and the *mitzvah* is the *bitbabrut*, for it to always be in the forefront of one's mind, to visualize that God is right here in front of oneself always, and to act accordingly.

Question: Putting aside the formal *mahloket* of Rambam and Ramban, is belief a moral issue? If someone tries to believe but just does not believe, are they in some sense, bad? If they do not succeed in believing, even though they try, does that make them bad?

R. Schachter: Yes, we assume they are being bad. To think that one's grandparents and great-grandparents, and so many generations of the Jewish people, are all stupid! That they made up a *bubba maisch*! Millions of people witnessed all ten plagues and they experienced *gilui ha-Shekhinah*, which demonstrated that all the *ikkarei emunah* are true.

That is why there is a *mitzvah* of *sippur yetziat Mitzrayim* every day in brief, and on Pesah at length, and the *mitzvah* of *zekhirat ma'amad Har Sinai*—because all of the *ikkarei emunah* were demonstrated on those occasions.

Our ancestors were intelligent people and they knew how to distinguish between something that is a *bubba maisch* and something that is real. They told us this is real and we are even prepared to give up our lives for these beliefs.

I would therefore assume that if a person does not believe, it is because he does not want to believe. It does not seem to bother them to accept that George Washington was the president of the United States. But accepting our religious beliefs means you have to keep *Shabbat* and *kashrut* and *tabarat ba-mishpachah*. That is why they have a big desire not to believe.

Or perhaps if a person suffered a lot, if he is a *tzaddik ve-ra lo*, then perhaps he finds it hard to believe; the *kasha* is overwhelming. But our ancestors told us they were bothered by that *kasha* and God assured us that in the future He will answer the question. He will explain the answer to us.

Question: What about the person who experienced *tzaddik ve-ra lo*, and because of that does not believe. Further, assume the person also claims that they are trying to have *emunah*, but they are not successful. Do we believe that such a person is being bad?

R. Schachter: Maybe not. He suffered so much. People do crazy things when they suffer from depression. Consider prisoners of war who were tortured continuously. How much pressure can a person absorb before they crack? Maybe those people who suffered so much were indeed fine people, but they cracked.

Question: What about people who did not directly experience *tzaddik ve-ra lo*? What if they have empathy for others who experienced it and thus do not believe?

R. Schachter: Yes, perhaps sometimes them as well. Sometimes they are bad, for the reasons we discussed previously, but others maybe not.

Question: Many people do not experience Hashem as obvious. To the extent that Hashem has at least to some degree hidden Himself, why does He do so? The common response is that we could not have free will if Hashem were obvious. Yet we see throughout the Torah and *Tanakh*—most prominently in the story of the Golden Calf—that Hashem being obvious and having revealed Himself was apparently not any obstacle to the exercise of free will. So back to the question: How should we think about why Hashem makes Himself, to some degree, hidden? Would

it not be better and easier for everybody, for keeping Torah and *mitzvos*, if Hashem did not hide Himself, but made it obvious that He exists?

R. Schachter: The Torah says “*ve-halakhta bi-drakhav*,”⁸ you should imitate the ways of God. Why should we? He is God and we are humans. Why imitate Him? Is He about to retire that we will need to take over for Him? The answer seems to be, to preserve the image of God in which we were created. As the *pasuk* says, “*Kedoshim tiheyu, ki kadosh Ani*.”⁹ You should act with holiness because I am holy, and I created you in My Image. For you to preserve your *tzelem Elokim*, says God, *kedoshim tiheyu*. So, similarly, you shall go in the ways of God, “*ve-halakhta bi-drakhav*,” to preserve your *tzelem Elokim*.

It is quoted from the Vilna Gaon in *Aderet Eliyahu* on the next *pasuk* in the Torah [after “*ve-halakhta bi-drakhav*”], “*ve-ra’u kol amei ha’aretz ki shem Hashem nikra alekha*”: they will realize that they too have *tzelem Elokim*, then “*ve-yar’u mimekha*,” they will learn from you how they can also lead their lives with *yir’at Shamayim*. The Vilna Gaon believes that this is *psbuto shel mikra*. Since we generally assume (with the exception of the *Kuzari*) that non-Jews also have *tzelem Elokim*, we should serve as a light unto the nations, so that they too should realize that they can lead their lives like we do: with work ethics, honesty, and integrity.

One of the aspects of *ve-halakhta bi-drakhav* is to act *bi-tzin’ah*. God is a *Kel mistater*, He hides. We too should lead our lives *bi-tzin’ah*, with modesty. “*Hatzne’a lekhet im Elokecha*,” walk modestly with your God.¹⁰ The Midrash¹¹ says that the reason the first *lulav* did not endure, while the second ones did, is because the first were given with great fanfare, whereas the second ones were given *bi-tzin’ah*. *Tzini’ut* is not just about clothing but about living our life privately. The Rav once said that Americans cannot really understand this; there is so much focus today on publicity and fame.

God is a *Kel mistater*, and He does such a good job at this that so many people do not even believe He exists. He hides so well. This, however, is how He functions, and He wants human beings, who have *tzelem Elokim*, to function *be-tzin’ah* as well.

So, yes, one reason God hides is to preserve free will, but that is not the whole story. It is also because of this idea of *tzini’ut*.

⁸ *Devarim* 28:9.

⁹ *Va-Yikra* 19:2.

¹⁰ *Micah* 6:8.

¹¹ *Tanpuma, Ki Tisa* 31:2.

Question: Even with the benefit of instilling the ideal of *tzni'ut*, does it not seem that the benefit to humanity of God being obvious, and of not needing to struggle with issues of *emunah*, would be greater than what we would lose by missing out on this demonstration of *tzni'ut*?

R. Schachter: I do not know. Not necessarily. They say that when the Beit Ha-Levi was a young child, they asked him: What is more important, *middot tovo*t or *hashkafot*? He answered: God said, “Let us make man,”¹² in the plural. Even though it can be misunderstood to mean that there were multiple gods, it also teaches that one should consult with other people who may even be less intelligent than them. We thus see that God chose to teach us *middot tovo*t even at the risk or expense of someone thinking heresy. Apparently, teaching *middot tovo*t is more important than *hashkafot*.

Regarding the question about the Golden Calf and other instances of *avodah zarah* in *Tanakh* even where God was obvious, for that we have the famous Gemara¹³ that the rabbis successfully prayed to have the *yetzer ha-ra* for *avodah zarah* eliminated, as its power was beyond what we can imagine.

In fact, it appears that once the rabbis succeeded in eliminating the *yetzer ha-ra* of *avodah zarah*, there needed to be a new *yetzer ha-ra* to replace it. Otherwise, there would be no challenge in living. God then replaced it with the *yetzer ha-ra* for *apikorsut*.

The Gemara also says¹⁴ that so long as the *yetzer ha-ra* for *avodah zarah* was around, God created the Torah as its antidote. The implication is that so long as the *yetzer ha-ra* was *avodah zarah*, the antidote or medicine for it was *Torah she-bi-khtav*, the Written Law. Whereas the main development of the Oral Law was during the Second Temple period, when the *yetzer ha-ra* for *avodah zarah* was replaced with the *yetzer ha-ra* for heresy. *Seder Olam*¹⁵ says that from the time of Haggai, Zekharyah, and Malakhi—the beginning of the Second Temple period—prophecy ended, and from then and until now is the era where our focus must be “*divrei hakhamim*,” *Torah she-b'al peh*. That should be the main focus of Torah study.

Putting all of the above together gives the impression that during the era of *avodah zarah*, *Torah she-bi-khtav* was the antidote. However, once that *yetzer ha-ra* was successfully eliminated and replaced with the *yetzer hara* for *apikorsut*, then the Torah that is now the antidote is *Torah she-b'al peh*.

¹² Bereshit 1:26.

¹³ Sanhedrin 64a.

¹⁴ Kiddushin 30b.

¹⁵ Seder Olam Zuta.

Hence, in our generation, our emphasis should be on learning *Torah she-b'al peh*, not *Torah she-bikhtav*.

Question: In your experience, does *emunah* require more than pure rationality? Is rationality enough?

R. Schachter: Yes. Just as rationality is enough for the fact that George Washington was the president of the United States. It is basic history. Similarly, our people know this (the *ikkarei emunah*) from our historical tradition.

To strengthen oneself, it is certainly better if you have more than just historical tradition. The experiential aspect (as discussed above), of *ley-da*, of *bitlabrut*, makes one's *emunah* even stronger. But even without the historical tradition, rationality alone is sufficient. ❧