

Personal Perspectives on Emunah

By: MORDECHAI WILLIG*

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

R. Willig: That is a very simple question for me. My parents. My father's faith was unshakable, and I saw it with my own eyes. My father went through many challenges in life. After he passed away, we found his diaries.

I saw his appointment calendar from 1955 in August, when my sister Chavi got sick. She just passed away Pesach 2023. She was famous, had written a book, *A Life Not with Standing*. She had contracted polio at age 3, and was hanging between life and death, while I was 8 years old. In that series of pages from that period in his diaries, you see what *emunah* really is.

But I knew it before. I knew it in his lifetime, just that this was a *rayah berurab bikhtav*. He had total *emunah* in Hashem. His daughter was literally hovering. She could hardly breathe. Every time he left the hospital he would say *L-Dovid*; it was Hodesh Elul. And would sing the *nigunim* of *emunah*.

She pulled through. She had a difficult life, but she got married and had children, which no one thought would happen. She also had a tremendous *emunah*. In my *Haggadah*, which came out Pesach 2024 in memory of my sister, I quoted her. Someone asked her: Did you ever think about why it was your lot to be paralyzed for most of your life? She answered that she had been very musically talented, and that maybe Hashem had thought that if she would not have had a disability, her *Yiddishkeit* would suffer.

No question about it. The core of my *emunah* comes from home. It is not an intellectual *emunah*, not at all. It is not from delving into Rambam, Crescas, and Albo and then Yehudah ha-Levi. These are all great people. I am not minimizing them. My *emunah*, however, came from home.

Question: This source you just described, is it essentially the same now, the root of your *emunah*, as it was when you were younger, when you decided to go into the rabbinate?

* 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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R. Willig: Absolutely the same. I am not a philosopher. Of course, I have read important works. I gave a *haskamah* to Rabbi Netanel Wiederblank's *Illuminating Jewish Thought*¹ and read every page. I appreciate these things, and speak to my *talmidim* about them. However, if you want to know where my rock-solid *emunah* comes from, it comes from my father.

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

R. Willig: I am more into the self-evident/obvious than some of the philosophers who say, well, if it is *emunah* then by definition, you cannot figure it out; if you can figure it out, it is not *emunah*. I am not in that category.

The famous point about if someone overturned an inkwell would they get a book? That is how the world came about! As Avraham Avinu said, *me ba'al ha-birah*?²

Now, would we figure it out without Avraham Avinu? I am not a philosopher. Ramban famously writes in *Parashat Va'Eitbannan*³ that our fathers would not give false testimony to their children: the whole source of our *emunah* is only one thing: *Ma'amad Har Sinai*—which, of course, is only valid if you assume the veracity of what you are getting from your ancestors. Yehudah ha-Levi elaborates that while other religions may fabricate little stories about episodes involving small numbers of people, ours is about three million people, all saying the same thing—impossible to fabricate.

We needed *Ma'amad Har Sinai*. Now, absent *Ma'amad Har Sinai*, and Avraham Avinu who preceded it, I do not know if the average person would be able to figure it out on his own; that is a hypothetical, difficult to answer.

This goes back to my first point. I cited my father, but where did he get it from? From my grandfather. You would see my grandmother move her eyes; she would talk straight to *Hakadosh Barukh Hu*. I still see her now, *bentching* like that. I saw my mother when she lit candles. She covered her eyes and cried. I always say that when women light Shabbat candles, they have a direct line to Hashem. This is the *emunah* that we have from

¹ Rabbi Netanel Wiederblank, *Illuminating Jewish Thought* (Maggid, multivolume set from 2020).

² Cf. *Beresheet Rabbah* 39:1.

³ *Devarim* 4:9.

our fathers and mothers, and it is all from the unbroken chain from *Ma'amad Har Sinai*.

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

R. Willig: No, for the reason I said. If I was a philosopher, by definition, I have doubts. For those who have doubts I have no *taineib* against them; I am not taking a stand on that. For me, however, it is hypothetical because I am not coming at it from a philosophical angle, as I described above.

Question: If you take two *frum* Jews, and they are both *shomrei mitzvot* and in practice are similar, but one has full *emunah* and for whatever reason one does not, is the person who has *emunah* more righteous?

R. Willig: If the second one is agnostic and has doubts, then Rabbi Norman Lamm would say he is a *ma'amin mamash*. That is what he writes in his book *Faith and Doubt*.⁴ However, even Rabbi Lamm would agree that the first one is on a higher level. No question about that.

Question: In your opinion, is belief itself a moral issue? That is, is someone who tries but does not believe being, in any sense, bad?

R. Willig: Reb Elchanan Wasserman famously says that a person should be a *ma'amin* just by definition, just from looking at the world. Therefore, if he is not a *ma'amin*, it is because of his *yetzer ha-ra* [and his desires to take part in prohibited activity, such as promiscuity; it skews his judgment]. Rabbi Wiederblank notes that both R. Aharon Lichtenstein and R. Yehuda Amital questioned this Reb Elchanan, as there are plenty of ethical and fine people who have problems believing. Yet R. Wiederblank quotes religious philosopher [Dr. Alvin Plantinga] who quotes famous philosopher and atheist [Thomas Nagel] that the reason he does not believe is that he simply does not *want* there to be any such entity as God, because of the intolerable invasion of privacy—knowing “my every thought long before I thought it”—that it would entail. Essentially, this is simply a modern-day instantiation of Reb Elchanan’s idea: one’s self-centered biases and desires interfere with one’s objectivity.⁵

Therefore, disbelief, on a certain level, is *per se* arguably not moral, if that description is correct. I am inclined to the view that it might be right.

⁴ Norman Lamm, *Faith and Doubt: Studies in Traditional Jewish Thought* (Ktav, 2007).

⁵ Wiederblank, 699–700.

I am not sure: we have Reb Elchanan and Thomas Nagel against R. Aharon Lichtenstein and R. Amital; I do not know how to weigh that. R. Aharon was my *rebbe*, and while people know he was a *gaon*, he was also a *tzaddik yesod olam*. I lean towards Reb Elchanan on this.

Question: Why has God chosen not to be obvious in this world (assuming He has)? The common, “kneejerk” answer, that it would impede free will, seems to be belied, among other things, by much of *Tanakh*, especially *het ha-egel*, where there appears to have been plenty of free will even where God was obvious.

R. Willig: I would not give an answer to why Hashem does something. That would be hubris.

Question: But what speaks to you, if anything, as intuitive in this regard?

R. Willig: This goes back to Rambam, who discusses, in the context of the sin of Adam ha-Rishon, that whereas now things are grey—the *eitẓ bada’at tov va-ra* means good and bad mixed in together—rather than black and white. *Het ha-egel* was so horrific, it was similar to Adam’s sin. It could be that in the old days, things were more black and white. It could be that Hashem, as *Rambhal* says, wanted there to be *behirah hofshit*, because that is necessary to provide reward; the more free will we have, the more reward we get. If God wants to give us more good, more reward, there needs to be less obvious *hashgahah*, more choice.

Yes, in *Tanakh* we see people choosing *sheker* over *emet*—because they had a *yetzer ha-ra* for *avodah zarah*. The Gemara in *Sanhedrin* states, we do not understand the great attraction for it.⁶ Nonetheless, it was so strong, insuperable, that Hashem had to have it eliminated.

At the end of the day, we do not know.

Hazon Ish famously writes in the beginning of *Yoreh De’ah*, that the law that *moridin ve-lo ma’alin* [essentially putting heretics to death] applied when there was *hashgahah pratit*, and the person turns his back on it. However, today we do not have *hashgahah pratit*.

The obvious question asked on this *Hazon Ish* is what about the *Shulhan Arukh*? *Yoreh De’ah* 158 *paskens* that *moridin ve-lo ma’alin*—even though there were already no open miracles in the days of the *Shulhan Arukh*. Thus, apparently *Shulhan Arukh* implicitly rejects this *Hazon Ish*. This is a bombshell *kashe*.

⁶ 64a.

However, his nephew, R. Nissim Karelitz, gives a very interesting answer in his *Hut Shani (Hilkhos Shabbat)*. What his uncle meant was as follows: In the time of *Shulhan Arukh*, to be a Jew, to be known as a Jew, generally one had to be *frum*, *shomer mitzvot*. Therefore, someone turning his back is doing so on Hashem and *klal Yisrael*. Today, however, when so many Jews identify as Jews yet are not *frum*, someone who is not *frum* thinks he too is a good Jew.

Question: Does *emunah* require more than pure rationality?

R. Willig: The Rav would very often describe the value of the experiential. The intellectual he got from his father, the experiential from his mother, etc.

So, it is certainly valuable. Can you live without it? The Rav said no, and I am a *talmid* of the Rav. ❧