

Personal Perspectives on Emunah

By: BENJAMIN YUDIN*

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

R. Yudin: I cannot answer that with a one-word or one-line answer. I can only tell you that I truly believe in the product I have been privileged to preach about for 50 years. If I did not believe it, I would not be able to “sell it” to my flock. If you are asking for the source of my faith, however, I would have to say it is clearly a personal accumulation. Meaning that we are all influenced by, first of all, our parents. That is the reality. It was in my “mother’s milk,” if you will.

I was privileged to be born into a family that was *shomer Shabbat*, and faith was in the environment. My father could not afford Camp Munk. So just when I was at the age that you would start sending a young boy to overnight camp, we lived in Crown Heights, and Chabad was starting Gan Yisrael, which was more affordable, so my parents sent me there. While I am not a Chabad chasid, I certainly was influenced in a positive way. During my high school years, I spent most every night learning in Chabad in Crown Heights “770” and most of the time avoiding *hasidut* (to which I was not particularly attracted). I *davened Ma’ariv* every night with the Rebbe’s *minyán*. There was something about pure unadulterated *ahavat Yisrael*, which is what they stand for, that certainly rubbed off on me.

And I happened to love Torah.

I see the *yad Hashem* in my own personal life, in the road that brought me to where I ended up.

I went to YU, and I had to take a science course for non-science majors. It was a biology lab, with a relatively young instructor, and he would schmooze with us a little bit. I remember he said to us, “I believe in God through biology.” For example, he said, take birth. The size of a healthy baby’s head is approximately the size of a softball. The birth canal cannot allow a softball to pass through it. Yet as a result of contractions,

* 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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there is enough expansion to enable the healthy baby to do so. Who tells Mommy to go into contractions? “How does it happen?” asked my instructor, and he answered, “There has to be a God.”

That was a very pleasant infusion of faith that I got without being in a classroom with a *rebbe*. It was from a non-Jewish young science instructor who shared that information with us.

In Friday night’s *Kiddush*, we say both “*zeker le-ma’aseh bereshit*” and “*zeker le-yitzi’at Mitzrayim*.” Which one is it? Ramban¹ explains that the Jewish people at Sinai could obviously not remember *ma’aseh bereshit*. How then were they supposed to know that God created the world? The answer is that they did witness *yetzi’at Mitzrayim*. They witnessed God performing all the overt and spectacular miracles during the Exodus (even on a personal level for each Jew. For example, an Egyptian and a Jew could be standing right next to each other, yet the plague of darkness only affected the former and not the latter.) We can then extrapolate that He also created the world and each of us as well.

Rav Yaakov Emden writes, in his introduction to his *siddur*, that the greatest miracle, even greater than *yetzi’at Mitzrayim*, is the survival of the Jewish people throughout the ages and all the persecutions in every generation, which we continue to witness in our times.

Question: Is the source of your faith today essentially the same as the original source when you decided to go into the rabbinate, or has it evolved and changed over time?

R. Yudin: When I was a young *rav*, a relatively young man in my community, in his late twenties, passed away. I did not know Rabbi Berel Wein, but somehow I got the idea to call him for guidance. I will never forget what he said. He quoted the *Hafetz Hayyim* regarding the bitter waters in *Parashat Be-Shallah*, saying, in Yiddish, that while “you can say it is bitter, you cannot say that it is bad.” In other words, we believe that while you and I do not understand why the 29-year-old young man had to die, and it is okay for us to say and feel that it is a bitter pill, we cannot say that it is bad. We just do not understand it. As I grew more experienced as a *rav*, and would go from funeral to wedding often on the same day, it is this thought that I focused on.

What I am saying is that this helped my faith mature over time. As a *rav*, I was exposed to great and bitter moments in life. I was forced to grapple with them, and to think about this *Hafetz Hayyim*. It strengthened my faith.

¹ *Devarim* 5:15.

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

R. Yudin: I believe Hazon Ish in the beginning of his *Emunah U-Bitahon*, points out that we expect of a thirteen-year-old to keep all the *mitzvot*, which includes saying the *Shema*, a declaration of faith. It is something that even someone at that age can intuit. Similarly, by just observing the world, its beauty, and science (*à la* Rambam), one can only conclude that only Hashem could create this. I can say that I regret not having gone to medical school—even though I would not want to practice medicine for even one day—because the more I learn about medicine and the intricacies of the human body, the more I see *Elokus*.

To be honest, not everything can be explained by the Big Bang theory. Someone who claims to be an atheist is influenced by the fact that it is easier to not have to be bound by halakhah—to have to wake up early every morning to go to shul.

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

R. Yudin: The answer is no.

I will ask you, why do we need *hukim*? I believe the answer is straightforward. If you could understand all of Torah, then you are in a sense just worshipping yourself. What you understand you follow. What you do not understand perhaps you do not follow. Without the *hukim*, we would not have Torah today. There is something larger than life about *emunah*.

Question: Do you consider there to be greater reward for someone who believes and is righteous than for someone who does not believe but is righteous?

R. Yudin: Rambam in *Hilkhot Melakhim* says regarding the seven Noachide laws, for a Gentile to attain the status of *hasidei umot ha'olam* it is not enough that he observes the laws because they make sense. He has to do them because they were commanded by God.

Perhaps regarding *mitzvot bein adam le-haveiro* there is room to say that a Jew who does them even without those intentions is rewarded. One can look for example at the *mitzvah* of *shikhebah*, where, by definition, the farmer is doing it unintentionally. More generally, let us say, for example, someone not religious does the *hesed* of helping to shovel at a burial; it

seems difficult to say that what he is doing is less, simply because he is not religious. It is very hard to say that the secular Jew in the Holocaust that shared his bread with his bunkmate but did not believe in God, that his lack of *emunah* will detract from his incredible *hesed*.

Perhaps we can distinguish between *bein adam le-haveiro* and *bein adam la-Makom*. For the former, as I just said, it would seem that the reward should be similar; for the latter, I do not know.

Question: To what extent do you believe that *emunah* is a moral issue (putting aside the formal *machloket* Rambam/Ramban about whether it is a mitzvah)? Is someone who tries but does not believe being, in some sense, bad?

R. Yudin: I think there are probably many different levels of not believing. There are atheists of convenience. There are those who were turned off by their fourth grade *rebbe*. Some who married the wrong woman/man. There are so many different possibilities.

At some point in our lives, we each feel our conscience arousing us, a call to *teshuvah*. In the end, part of the accounting upstairs is God saying, I gave you a conscience. It is God's way of talking to each person individually. It might border on immorality if I am not moral with myself, if I avoid His stirring the pot in a certain direction and I willfully turn my back because I just do not want to "go there."

In other words, we have an innate conscience and that conscience is not only about things like stealing but also about the awareness of the existence of God and all the *ikkarim*. Ignoring, disregarding, rejecting our conscience therefore, has an element of immorality.

Question: Why has God chosen not to be obvious (assuming He has)? The common response is that we would not have free will if He were obvious, yet we see throughout 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?

R. Yudin: Why did Elisha have to perform "mouth to mouth" on the child, after first *davening* to God to save him? Why did Noach need a large *teivah* to fit in all the animals (which according to Ramban was anyway not big enough and needed a miracle to fit everything in)? Why not just perform the same miracle with a rowboat? Why does the Torah describe

the strong wind all night that generated *Kriyat Yam Suf*, rather than just have God splitting the sea by a pure miracle?

God always tries to minimize His miracles because otherwise there would be no free will. Do you “believe” that you are breathing now, or that you are sitting in a chair now? No. You know it. “Belief,” by definition, is something that no matter how much someone tries to prove it, they cannot know it irrefutably.

When the Jewish people were asked at Har Sinai whether they want to accept the Torah, the Gemara² states, “*kafa aleihem har ke-gigit*,” that God held the mountain [Har Sinai] over them like a tub. *Mesbekeh Hakebmah* explains that this was not literally a threat to drop the mountain on them and kill them if they do not accept the Torah. Rather, the Gemara is telling us that accepting the Torah at Har Sinai was not fully an act of free will, because they were so convinced that it was God, it was as if He had made such a threat. Hence, the Gemara tells us it was not until Purim that the Jewish people voluntarily accepted the Torah—because the miracle of Purim was a *neis nistar*, a hidden miracle. Following Purim the Jews were able to accept the Torah of their own free will.

The Midrash says,³ when Moshe asked Yitro for Zipporah as his wife, Yitro answered, “Only if you commit that your first son will worship idolatry”⁴ and Moshe agreed, and swore, as it is written, “*Va-yo’el Moshe*.” Rav Shimon Schwab explains that what we have here is a disagreement *le-shem Shamayim*, on the best way to educate a child. Moshe received the *masorah*, experienced the Burning Bush, and had direct revelations from God. Yitro, who came to accept God by trial and error (worshipping all sorts of gods), argued that his belief in God is stronger precisely because his life lessons taught him that there is nothing else out there. Yitro wanted his grandson to have the same trial-and-error experience.⁵ We believe Yitro may have been right. You have to find God yourself. We are not advocating delaying the process, but it does not happen automatically. Each person has to work to find God on his own. Therefore, God chooses not to be obvious.

² *Shabbat* 88a.

³ מכילתא יתרו פרשה א: בשעה שאמר משה ליתרו תן לי צפורה בתך לאשה, אמר לו יתרו קבל עליך דבר זה שאומר לך ואני נותנה לך לאשה. אמר לו מהו? אמר לו בן שיהיה לך תחילה יהיה לעבודה זרה, מכאן ואילך לשם שמים. וקבל עליו. אמר לו השבע לי, וישבע לו. שנאמר (שמות ב' כ"א) ויאל משה לשבת את האיש ויתן את צפורה בתו למשה...

⁴ The phrase “בן שיהיה לך תחילה יהיה לעבודה זרה”, can be interpreted two ways, depending where you place the comma: “בן שיהיה לך תחילה, יהיה לעבודה זרה”, “the son you have first should be designated to idolatry,” or “בן שיהיה לך, תחילה יהיה לעבודה זרה”, “the son you have, should first be designated to idolatry.”

⁵ Rav Shimon Schwab, *Ma’ayan Beit Ha-Sho’eivah*, *Shemot* 18:4.

Regarding your point that the very group that experienced direct Revelation at Sinai were still able to sin with the Golden Calf, the Gemara in *Avodah Zarah* (4b) seems to say that this was indeed an exceptional event. God allowed them to experience some uncertainty, to teach future generations about the power of *teshuvah*. In other words, it was a unique exception, and not something from which we can extrapolate.

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

R. Yudin: I am going to take away the word “require” and answer whether *emunah* brings more than pure rationality, and the answer is yes. I believe that with *emunah* comes *hashgahah pratit*, and that is a privilege for each individual in their own life. You see it every day.

Imagine running a food catering business for ... eight billion people! God could have nourished us in black and white (the requisite amount of carbs, of protein, etc.). Yet, instead, look at even a basic salad: the carrots are this color, the peppers another; a simple thing like a salad should be a reminder of the gratitude we should feel to God, that there is a God in this world. *Emunah* pushes its way into anything and everything.

As whether rationality is enough: you need to open the door, and He comes in. Where is God? Wherever you let Him in. By His coming in, He will show you *hashgahah pratit*, you realize that this has surpassed the realm of rationality. There is something supernatural that each individual experiences.

Shabbat is not just another night like Tuesday night and Wednesday night. Is it something rational or tangible? No, but there is something about the experience of Shabbat that is more than just the 39 *melakhot* and X number of positive *mitzvot*. It is on more than just the rational plane. It is a different “Thank you, Hashem” on Friday night than it is on Thursday night. I believe that at that point, we have crossed over from what you would call the realm of rationality to what I called the supernatural, a taste of the supernatural.

In other words, my reference to *hashgahah pratit* is not just in the sense of, on a rational level, what are the odds? It is also an experiential matter.

