

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat B'shalach
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Parashat B'shalach – Don't forget your umbrella!

In this week's Parasha of B'shalach we read about the splitting of the Reed Sea¹ and the destruction of the Egyptians. After the miraculous salvation, Moshe led the men and Miriam led the women in singing a song of praise to Hashem.

Bnei Yisrael is praised for having the faith to follow Moshe and Aaron into the wilderness. One of the few positive pesukim in Yirmiyahu states:

Go and call out in the ears of Yerushalayim saying: so said Hashem, I remember to you the loving-kindness of your youth, the love of your nuptials, your following me in the desert, in a land not sown.
(Yirmiyahu 2:2)²

Rashi explains that Hashem has mercy on Bnei Yisrael because He remembers the loving kindness of their youth and the love of the nuptials of their wedding canopy [Har Sinai and the giving of the Torah is often compared to a wedding between Bnei Yisrael and Hashem]. What was this loving kindness of Bnei Yisrael's youth? Bnei Yisrael followed Hashem's messengers, Moshe and Aaron, into the wilderness without provisions and without any knowledge as to how they would survive. They did this based on their belief and trust in Hashem. This was an act of emunah for which we are remembered with fondness. Admittedly, Hashem made it easier for Bnei Yisrael by displaying open miracles during the plagues before the left Mitzrayim. These events would have given their emunah an enormous boost.

Let's now look at the song that Miriam and the women sang after the splitting of the sea.

Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron took a drum in her hand and all the women came out after her with drums and with dances.

There is an obvious question here. Bnei Yisrael left Mitzrayim to enter the Wilderness. They did not even take sufficient provisions for the journey. So where did the drums come from? Why did the women have musical instruments with them? I don't think that they were accustomed to holding musical soirees during their times of slavery in Mitzrayim! Rashi explains³ that the righteous women of that generation were so certain that Hashem would redeem them with great miracles, that they made sure to take musical instruments with them when they left Mitzrayim to use when they would sing Hashem's praises. That is emunah in practice! Following Moshe and Aaron into the wilderness is one level of emunah. But packing musical instruments rather than food, before even witnessing the splitting of the sea, is taking emunah to a whole different level. The Gemara⁴ teaches us that Beni Yisrael were redeemed in the merit of these righteous women who were in that generation.

There is a story told about a town that was suffering a terrible drought. The residents had tried praying, fasting and giving extra tzedakah, but the rains would not come. Eventually they sent a delegation to visit a great tzaddik to ask him for help. He agreed to lead a prayer vigil in the town square to beg Hashem for rain. He guaranteed the people that Hashem would send rain, but only if they truly believed that He would save them. The residents were delighted. The whole town turned up and they all called out to Hashem in prayer... but nothing happened. The residents asked the tzaddik to explain. He said that Hashem didn't send rain because the residents did not

¹ Often incorrectly called the Red Sea.

² This pasuk has a lot of meaning for my family. It is inscribed on the tomb of my grandmother, who after the Holocaust followed my grandfather to the then unsown and undeveloped land of Israel to begin a new life.

³ In his commentary to Shmot 15:20, based on the Mechilta.

⁴ Sotah 11b.

truly believe that He would do so. “But we do believe”, claimed the residents. “If so”, replied the tzaddik, “then why didn’t you bring your umbrellas?”

How do we know if we truly have emunah? Sometimes we can tell by the way we act, as with Miriam and the righteous women, as compared to the residents of the town in our story above. But sometimes the best indicator as to our level of emunah is simply gauged by how we feel inside. When times are tough and we don’t know what the future will hold, how do we feel? Are we anxious? Are we scared? Or do we remain calm and composed? If we can retain tranquillity of the soul during stressful times, it is likely that our emunah in Hashem is strong.

The Gemara⁵ teaches us that Chavakuk came and established the entire Torah upon one mitzva – emunah. As it says, “The righteous person lives through his faith”.⁶ The Rambam⁷ writes that the mitzvah of emunah is the first mitzva in the Ten Commandments. The Ramban argues. He claims that emunah is the foundation of the entire Torah and all of the mitzvot. It underpins every single mitzvah rather than being a mitzva of its own.

Rabbi Ephraim Wachsman shares an amazing idea. In the bracha of Al HaTzaddikim, the 13th bracha of the Amidah, we ask Hashem to “give a good reward to all who sincerely believe in Your name and put our lot with them”. And we finish the bracha: “Blessed are you Hashem Who is a pillar of support and a secure haven for tzaddikim”. Who are these tzaddikim that we are praying for? The answer is in the verse from Chavakuk that we quoted above: “The tzaddik (righteous person) lives through his emunah (faith). This bracha is recited by all of Am Yisrael three times a day, it’s a prayer that those who have faith in Hashem should be rewarded for putting their faith in Hashem. Rabbi Wachsman says that it is worth having emunah in Hashem just so that we can have the benefit of all Jews praying for us three times a day!⁸

There are many paths to achieving emunah, but they all have one thing in common - they require hard work on our part over a long period of time. Emunah does not come easily. Here is one suggested approach – a 5 step program brought in the book “Just One Word: Emunah”:⁹

- Recognise Hashem’s love and kindness and that everything He does is for the best – even if we can’t see it clearly.
- Verbalise our faith in Hashem when we feel that stress and panic may overcome us – saying things out loud can be a very powerful boost to our emunah.
- Accept and make peace with our challenges.
- Ask for anything and everything we desire with total dependence and sincerely believe that Hashem will provide it (that is, remember to bring your umbrella!)
- Pray to Hashem for success in all of your endeavours – because at the end of the day, our success will only come if Hashem grants it to us.

Remember – emunah is a spectrum. We shouldn’t be disheartened if we fall short, we should rather contemplate how we feel and act, compared to how we did so in the past in similar situations.

The more we practice these steps, hopefully the better we will become at mastering this vital skill and mitzva.

Let’s try something this week:

1. Try to be aware of how we feel when times are tough. Are we tranquil and calm? Or the opposite?
2. Try the 5 step plan suggested above, or any other avoda to develop our emunah muscle. Try to do it at least 5 or 6 times a week for at least three weeks.
3. Monitor your inner tranquillity after having practiced your emunah avodah for a substantial period of time.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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⁵ Makkot 24a.

⁶ Chavakuk 2:4. Of course this doesn’t mean that one can abandon all of the other mitzvot and just focus on this one mitzva! Rather, Chavakuk is teaching us a method in which to approach the mitzvot of the Torah.

⁷ Sefer Hamitzvot, section 2.

⁸ See “Just One Word: Emunah” by Esther Stern, Artscroll p53.

⁹ Page 54.