

# TATTOOED WITH FAITH

*by Rabbi Naftali Reich*

In this week's Torah Portion, the Torah outlines in detail how Moshe Rabbeinu prepared the people for their entry into the Promised Land. He first wrote and expounded the Torah in seventy languages. He then commanded the nation that immediately upon their crossing of the Jordan River and entry into the land of Israel, they were to assemble respectively on the two mountains of Grezim and Aival that faced one another. Moshe goes on to outline a dramatic ceremony that would take place at that august assembly. The people were to split in two groups; six tribes on each mountain, while the Levites were to stand in the valley in between. The Levites were to proclaim a selection of the Torah's laws, after each commandment declaring, "Blessed is the one who keeps this Law and cursed is the one who doesn't."

After each declaration, the people were to respond in a thunderous "Amen," enunciating their uncompromising faith that upholding the Torah's mitzvos generates blessing and abandoning the mitzvos brings curse. Furthermore, the Torah informs us that before the Jordan River crossing, Moshe translated the Torah into seventy languages, demonstrating that the Torah's Laws transcend geographic boundaries and culture. Wherever the wandering Jew will find himself, his commitment to Torah and his performance of the Divine mitzvos will be absolutely binding.

The question is obvious: would it not have been more appropriate for the Jewish people to make their declaration of faith immediately following the Sinai revelation? Wouldn't that occasion have been most suitable for Moshe to impress upon them the universality and timelessness of the Torah's mandates?

The Sfas Emes explains that during the 40-year sojourn in the wilderness, the nation lived on a miraculous plane of existence that has no parallel in the history of mankind. The Heavenly food they ingested was entirely absorbed in their bodies-leaving no waste material. They were accompanied by a Heavenly cloud by day and a pillar of fire at night. Their clothing and shoes grew with them. They witnessed daily miracles and traveled according to instructions from the Divine Word. Surrounded by constant evidence of Divine Providence, they inhabited a spiritual incubator in which G-d's existence was clear and undisputable.

The purpose of this 40-year odyssey was to condition the nation for the true goal of their existence: entering into the Promised Land and taking part in the world of agriculture and commerce, while trusting that His Divine Grace would bring the rain and yield a bountiful harvest. Once established in the land, they were required to leave their homes each festival to travel to Jerusalem, all the while

trusting in Hashem that their undefended borders and national vulnerability would not be exploited by the neighboring countries.

It was therefore only once they had taken up residence in the Promised Land that the true meaning of their existence was to be realized. Thus it was only at that point that they needed to impress upon their hearts the declaration of pure faith on the mountains of Grizim and Aival. Only now was it critical that they absorb the message that the Torah can never, under any circumstances, be watered down or altered in any manner.

The theme of recognizing Hashem's guiding Hand in all circumstances is underscored in the laws governing the recitation of the Shema, our national declaration of faith, and the prayers surrounding this recitation.

Our sages tell us the Shema is to be recited both in the morning and evening. After the morning's recitation, we continue with "Emes V'Yatziv, it is true and correct." At night we recite "Emes V'Emunoh, it is true and we have faith." During daytime, we witness the Creator's presence everywhere in creation. The magnificent foliage, blossoming trees, and the plethora of animal life all testify to the Al-mighty. At night, however, this clarity of vision is absent and His presence is concealed. It is at night when the darker forces of nature emerge and prowl under the protection of darkness.

Our lives, too, fluctuate between moments of light and clarity and moments of darkness. However, our faith does not depend on the concrete, minute-to-minute manifestation of His presence. Even when He is concealed, even in times of darkness when we don't experience the same keen awareness of His providence, we declare our faith in His oneness with the same fervency. This loyalty and tenacity to the principles of Jewish belief have kept our faith alive throughout the centuries.

The Satmar Rav zt"l left his many students who resided in the newly founded State of Israel to relocate in New York. His Chassidim were distraught and beseeched him to stay. "Rebbe," they said, "who will bless us? To whom can we go for strength and courage in times of challenge?" He pointed to a Holocaust survivor who was putting away his Tefillin after the morning prayers. "Look over there," said the Rebbe, pointing to the tattoo on the man's arm. "Someone who bears a tattoo from the Holocaust and despite what he endured, is still a loyal Jew who keeps Torah and mitzvos - that is a person to whom you can approach for a blessing."

This well-known story is somewhat difficult to understand. As heroic as it is to maintain one's beliefs under hellish circumstances, is it enough to qualify the person to accept a kvittel and to beseech for Divine intervention? Can this elevate a person to the status of a Rebbe, who, according to Chasidic tradition, is graced with a special "direct line" to Hashem?

The answer is yes, indeed. When a Jew has his faith tested in the crucible of suffering, and despite the utter concealment of G-d's presence, the sufferer clings tenaciously to the Jewish faith, that is a

crowning spiritual achievement that cannot be surpassed. This individual's faith is so deeply embedded, he was able to overcome the need most of us have for a direct manifestation of Hashem's presence to fortify our faith.

A faith that endures even without such reinforcement attests to the sublime level a Jew can reach. May we merit to nurture our faith to the degree where it can weather all challenges and remain strong even in the face of life's greatest challenges.

Wishing you a wonderful Shabbos,

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