

# EMUNAH: KEEPING THE FAITH

*by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene*

## *The Mitzvah:*

The first of the Ten Commandments is emunah, the belief and faith in G-d and His Torah, which lies at the very core of Judaism. It is obvious how without a firm conviction of G-d's All-transcendent Reality, a commitment to Torah and mitzvah observance is impossible.

The emergence of the Avos, the patriarchs, begins with Avraham.

Avraham's life was the epitome of emunah, "faith in G-d". He bravely challenged the pagan beliefs of his times and championed belief in the existence of One Supreme G-d. Nimrod had him cast into the fiery furnace for not renouncing his beliefs, only to witness Avraham miraculous escape unscathed. Throughout Avraham's life, he journeyed declaring the name of G-d to all he encountered and attracting thousands of converts.

The Jewish nation, his descendants, is lovingly called mamonim bnei mamonim, "believers the children of believers".

The concept of emunah is the foundation of Jewish life - so much so that the Rambam lists the belief in G-d as the first mitzvah, the springboard to observing all the other commandments. (Other Rabbis disagree asserting that emunah is the precursor to all the precepts but not a mitzvah in itself). In condensing the principles of Torah, the gemara draws it back to one statement "The righteous [man] lives with his faith" (See Makos 24a).

The Rambam famously established the 13 principles of faith upon which Judaism rests. The Sefer Halkkarim (1:4) subdivides faith into 3 main components - belief in the existence of G-d, in His providence for reward and punishment, and the heavenly origins of Torah.

The definition of emunah - related to word ne'eman - is "loyalty", or "faithfulness" to G-d and to the sacred principles of our faith practiced by the Jewish people throughout the ages.

It is not a blind "leap of faith" in something that has no basis, experience or track record. Jewish faithfulness is the affirmation to uphold the beliefs of our ancestors. It is a loyalty to and trust of an established system. Seeing ourselves as part of the greater historic picture - where past, present and future coalesce -we are forever conscious of the Torah legacy that has forever guided the Jewish nation. The quality of emunah is implanted into the Jewish spiritual genetic makeup - an inheritance from Avraham.

Accordingly, a Jew seeks to preserve and perpetuate the rich lineage and heritage from his forbearers in the Torah, which is faithfully transmitted from father to son. He is the next link in the chain uniting generations. This is testimony of how far emunah reflects the Judaic concept of mesorah, tradition. The Oral Law of Torah was, after all, verbally transmitted by mouth down the ages until the redaction of the Mishnah.

What emunah connotes is the basis for the soul's relationship to spirituality.

One who lives with emunah is one who sees his existence firmly rooted in the divine. It is the end all and be all. It is his lifeline. Without his faith, he has no spiritual existence - even for a short period; it is as if his air supply has been cut off.

Starved of a relationship to G-d, the Jew loses meaning to his life. In the innermost recesses of his being, he has a natural pull towards G-d. That is where his neshama, "soul" longs to attach itself.

The faith of the Jew is the universal Jewish response in good times and in bad times. It flows deeply in his veins. It is the proclamation of emunah in the saying of Shema or singing the Ani Maamin, "I Believe" with which the Jewish nation have weathered the storm. That is because the existence and outlook of a Jew is forever focused upon how to serve G-d in my set of circumstances.

This unique perspective permeates every movement and action in the life of a Jew - to the extent that the Psalmist sang "All your commandments are emunah" (Tehillim 119), an expression of our faith that translates in mitzvah observance.

The chosen nation is proud of their title as mamonim bnei mamonim, "believers the children of believers". Their affirmation to preserve and continue the lifestyle and ideals of our ancestors is all about "keeping the faith". The course material is presented by Osher Chaim Levene, author of "Set in Stone: The Meaning of Mitzvah Observance" (Targum/Feldheim), a writer and educator in London.