

# COMPLETED BELIEF

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

## Completed Belief<sup>1</sup>

We know what he heard. The verse identifies it, up front: "Hashem took Yisrael out of Egypt." Not much room there for any question.

On the other hand, the appropriate response to such news might have been for Yisro to feel great joy upon hearing it. When the Mechilta asks, "What did Yisro hear, that he came?" it is asking an entirely different question: Why did Yisro go well beyond that response, and find it necessary to pick himself up and travel to the wilderness to join the Jewish people?

The Mechilta's answer is that he heard about the splitting of the Sea and about Amalek's attack upon them. Yisro contemplated the effects of the events at the Sea upon all who heard, effects not attributed to the Exodus alone. He considered the fear and trembling that gripped the nations, and was filled with optimism about the future.

Soon after, he heard about the vicious, unprovoked attack by an Amalek that scorned belief, and found this news depressing. If word of the splitting of the Sea left such an ephemeral impression upon those who heard about it, there was no choice but to bolster his own belief by physically joining Klal Yisrael. Nothing else could insure that his belief in the truth would remain intact; clearly, there were no guarantees. There was no choice but to become a Jew himself.

Moshe recaps recent events in his own words to his father-in-law, who sums up his reaction. "Now I know that Hashem is greater than all gods."<sup>2</sup> Rashi, citing the Mechilta, picks up on the inference. "I recognized Him previously, but now, more so." Yisro, the medrash<sup>3</sup> tells us, was no newcomer to belief. Previously a priest in the service of other deities, he began entertaining doubts. He resigned his role, claiming that his advancing years forced him to retire. The ruse did not work. His neighbors determined to shun him and his family. This is why his daughters were treated so shoddily at the well. This *mesiras nefesh* was all part of his "previous" belief. What changed with the "more so" step?

Some people come to believe through their investigation and recognition. This is not the belief that is appropriate to a Jew. A firm conclusion one day can turn into a firm conclusion in an opposing direction the next day. Reasoned, investigated belief is appropriate to the finer people of the nations of the world. It is not the *emunah shelemah*, the completed belief that a Jew declares.

The passage through the split Sea catapulted Klal Yisrael to wonderful clarity of belief. Nonetheless, the first of the Ten *Dibros* thundered a demand to them: Know that I am Hashem your G-d who took you out of Egypt. It is not enough that you have heard and understood. Those reasons are insufficient. You must believe because the Torah says you must believe! Yisro articulated this to Moshe. Previously, I also believed, but that belief was incomplete. It has now matured to the full belief of a Jew, who believes not because of his own internal compass, but because of the mitzvah of *emunah*.

We find a similar distinction in regard to the core belief in the resurrection of the dead. Amongst those who forfeit their share in the world to come, the Mishnah<sup>4</sup> lists one who says that there is no mention of the resurrection in the Torah itself. According to Rashi, this means someone who disputes the midrashic sources of resurrection, even if he believes that the dead will indeed come to life. "Since he uproots the Scriptural basis for resurrection, of what value is his belief? How could he know that it is true; he is therefore a full *kofer*." The explanation is as above: a belief born of rational inquiry simply does not compare to one based on Torah. Rational inquiry is changeable, and can turn into the polar opposite of what one first maintained; we cannot regard this as true *emunah*! The *emunah* of a Jew is an uncomplicated one, predicated on the full confidence in what the Torah says. This kind of *emunah* has staying power.

This distinction underlies the Rambam's description<sup>5</sup> of the pious of the nations of the world. To both earn a place in the world to come and be considered among the pious, a non- Jew must not only accept the Seven Noachide Laws, but believe that their authority derives from a revelation at Sinai - but not because of their rational necessity alone.

We understand somewhat better what motivated Yisro. The lowly servant- woman saw more of a demonstration of Hashem's Divinity at the Sea than the prophet Yechezkel. G-d had made His existence and His nature abundantly clear. Within days, Amalek - waging what we understand to be an assault upon *emunah* itself - threw himself upon them. Yisro understood the precariousness of any belief predicated upon rational "demonstration," how quickly it could be perverted and dissipated. He knew that he needed a different basis for belief - the pure, unmediated belief of the Jew, not conditioned upon any argument or factor. He sought the *emunah* of the Jew through becoming part of the Jewish people.

Purity of belief extends to the arena of mitzvos as well. We need to observe even the logically-compelling mitzvos because the Torah commands them, not because we feel that we understand them. It is often claimed that the Torah bothers to make the rational commandments explicit because of the special circumstances that are not so rationally compelling. In other words, the Torah tells us to avoid murder because of the situations in which even rational and good people might otherwise convince themselves that murder is a virtue and not a vice, as in some mercy killing. The Torah makes the prohibition against theft explicit because of situations in which it is morally

acceptable to people to steal for some noble purpose. While this explanation may be true, we now have another explanation to offer as well. The Torah targets even the murder and theft that all rational and ethical people would avoid. It wishes us to eschew them because the Torah said so. It wishes that we follow its authority, not the dictates of our conscience.

There is another key difference between heeding the call within and heeding the call of the Torah. The honor a non-Jew accords his parent is laudable, because the principle upon which he acts is positive and commendable. He deserves credit for it. The Jew who honors his parents because the Torah demands it achieves something beyond that. The bracha that we make before performing a mitzvah mentions that Hashem sanctifies us with His mitzvos. Beyond any commendable reason for a mitzvah, each one carries with it some special *kedushah* that is connected to it. This is true of all mitzvos, without exception. Each mitzvah has a root in some transcendent element of the Torah. This element is accessed in the performance of the mitzvah, and some of its *kedushah* is made available to us. (The nature of this *kedushah* is far from obvious or predictable. While the "rational" approach to honoring parents sees no distinction between a mother or father, they have separate sources in their Heavenly roots. In the "map" of sefiros (and its basic division between *midos* of *hisphashtus* and *tzimtzum*, of *chesed* and *gevurah*), honoring a father is source on the Right; honoring a mother comes from the Left. Both forms of honor, however, allow us to draw down *kedushah* from its upper source, beyond whatever ethical value we detect in the mitzvah.

The exceptional window into the Divine that opened at the crossing of the Sea was followed by the exceptionally harsh challenge of Amalek. This is to be expected. There will always be parity. Great *emunah* will bring in its wake great rejection. Some will fall prey to it. *Emunah* dependant upon human understanding is fragile and plastic. Only one kind of *emunah* has bedrock strength - that which is predicated upon nothing but the word of the Torah itself.

<sup>1</sup> Based on Nesivos Shalom pgs. 135-137

<sup>2</sup> Shemos 18:11

<sup>3</sup> Shemos Rabbah 1:32

<sup>4</sup> Sanhedrin 90A

<sup>5</sup> Melachim 8:11