

# LETTING GO WITH BOTH HANDS

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

*So they said to one another, "Let us appoint a head, and let us return to Egypt!" (14:4)*

One bright winter day, Morris, a not-so-observant Jew, was having the time of his life vacationing in the Swiss Alps. At least, that was, until he skied past the "DANGER" sign, and went straight over a cliff. Somehow, as Morris began his plunge to the abyss 3,000 feet below, he managed to reach out and grab hold of an outstretched branch.

Perched perilously above the void, hanging on for his life, Morris began to rethink things. Perhaps, he thought, now would be a good time to strike up a conversation with the Almighty.

"G-d," Morris said, "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I should have gone to shul more. I should have kept Kosher. I shouldn't have gone golfing on Shabbos. I never should have put bubble-gum on my Hebrew School teacher's seat. I know G-d.

"But G-d, I've decided that the time has come to make it all right. From here on in, it's no more Morris - I'm Moshe, and I'm going to do everything I can to be a good Jew. There's just one thing, G-d. I'm kind of in a bit of a mess here. So, G-d, I'll make You a deal; You get me out of this mess, and I'm a changed man! I'll do whatever you say."

To Morris' complete and utter surprise, he heard a voice, seemingly emanating from Above. "Morris," the voice said.

"Yes, G-d?"

"Do you really mean it - you'll do anything I say?"

"Y-yes G-d, I promise, whatever You say - just please get me down from here!"

"Okay, Morris," says the voice, "let go with one of your hands."

Understandably, Morris was somewhat taken aback by this suggestion. After pondering the direness of his predicament, however, he figured he had no other choice. "Okay, G-d, I'm doing it - I'm letting go with one hand."

And so he did. Now Morris hung precariously from the swaying branch, suspended by but one hand, as he watched small pieces of ice break off from the tree and plunge to the ground 3,000 feet below. "G-d," Morris said, his voice quavering, "what now - tell me what to do now."

"Morris," came the voice once again, "now you must let go with your other hand."

Morris looked down. He closed his eyes, and pondered the meaning of life and death. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, Morris turned his gaze upward.

"Is there anybody else up there?"

When the Jewish nation heard the report of the Meraglim/Spies, they were gripped with terror. The spies' descriptions of huge giants and insurmountable fortresses caused the nation to begin, for the first time, to doubt Hashem's promise to take them to the promised Land of Canaan/Israel. Until this point they had, with some noteworthy exceptions, trusted in the word of Hashem as dictated by Moshe his faithful servant. Now, however, they were experiencing regret. The time had come for outright revolution:

*"Would that we had died in the land of Egypt, or would that we had died in the wilderness! Why is Hashem bringing us to this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken captive! Is it not better for us to return to Egypt?!"* (Numbers 14:2-3)

Faced with a formidable test of their faith in G-d's word, they failed. Rather than using this "test" as a vehicle to build upon their faith and conviction, they gave up.

*"So they said to one another, 'Let's appoint a [new] leader, and let's return to Egypt!'"* (ibid. 14:4)

Rashi notes the Torah's unusual syntax: "Nit-na Rosh - " literally, "Let us place a head." He cites two possible interpretations: 1) Let us appoint a new leader ("head" is a metaphor for a leader). [Targum Onkelos] 2) It is an expression of service to foreign gods. [Osiyos de- Rabbi Akiva; Mechilta to Shemos 15:22] I.e., let us make for ourselves a "new beginning," a substitute for the Primal Cause, the Beginning of all existence. [Gur Aryeh]

When the going got tough, the weak-willed nation gave up. "Let's find ourselves a new god," they said, "we don't like the things this One's telling us to do any more."

"Finding a new god" isn't always as blunt nor as obvious as good-old Morris makes it out to be. It is no great feat to "believe" in Hashem when all is well, and the Torah is asking of you things you can manage. The true test of our faith and conviction comes during the "rough times"; when the Torah asks of us things which defy our sense of logic. To pat oneself on the back because he "almost always" acts as a G-d-fearing Jew should - except when it's really hard - misses the whole point. True belief is only necessary precisely at those times when "it doesn't make sense," not when our beliefs happen to match with what feels good.

Sometimes in life, one just has to "let go with both hands," and trustingly place one's faith and life in the firm grip of the Almighty. After all, how long can one last up there with just one hand?

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