

EMUNAH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

On the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. (Vayikra 12:3)

BRIS MILAH IS at the center of Judaism. It is representative of everything a Jew stands for, male or female. It was the threshold that Avraham had to cross to go from being only "Avram," the "father of Aram^ת, to "Avraham," the "father of all mankind." Even Hitler, ysv"z, when he summed up why he was obsessed with killing the Jews, Bris Milah was one reason. The other was the morality they brought to the world.

Yet, when Chavakuk summed up all 613 mitzvos, he did so with the following verse:

"A righteous person lives by his emunah—his faith" (Chavakuk 2:4). (Makkos 24a)

Chavakuk said that all of the mitzvos could be reduced to this single concept. This does not mean that one can fulfill all of his obligations by simply having faith in God. It means that all of the mitzvos are meant to facilitate such a level of faith in God.

How do the mitzvos do this? The following explains:

This is what they meant by, "Is God among us or not?" (Shemos 17:7). (Drushei Olam HaTohu, Chelek 2, Drush 5, Anaf 4, Siman 3)

Just before Amalek attacked the Jewish people at the end of Parashas Beshallach, the Jewish people asked this question. They had run out of water and did not know where to find more. This caused them to question Moshe Rabbeinu about God's Presence among them.

The Zohar explains what really happened:

When they went into the desert to see, The Holy One, Blessed is He, took the Light of Glory from there. They went to look at it but could not find it . . . Rebi Shimon said, "While they were still walking in the desert (immediately after they came to the desert) another domain was revealed to them, that of the rest of the nations. That is, he who has control over the desert (the Sitra Achra) met up with them (to mislead and draw them away through his trickery). The Jewish people saw that it was not the Light of Glory of their King, as it says, 'They came to Marah and they could not drink the water because it was bitter' (Shemos 15:23)." (Zohar, Beshallach 60a)

Thus, the Leshem elaborates, even though the Clouds of Glory surrounded them the Jewish people could already begin to feel the treachery of the Sitra Achra. The desert is a place of death, a spiritual

void. They weren't sure at that moment if the requisite miracle to spiritually survive it would be forthcoming, and they worried about their future journey.

Moshe Rabbeinu knew quite well that this [experience] was [just] to test them. Therefore, he led them into the desert, into the place of the Sitra Achra . . . in order to battle against [the Sitra Achra's] trickery to break his power and strength. (Drushei Olam HaTohu, Chelek 2, Drush 5, Anaf 4, Siman 3)

In life, we confront situations that shake us up spiritually. We have moments of test in which we know the right thing to do, but feel pulled in the opposite direction. Some people overcome temptation and do the right thing, though it hurts. Other people simply capitulate and wait for later to feel guilty. Some "compromise," rationalizing their sin, sometimes even turning it into a "mitzvah."

The first thing a person has to know that, if they feel tested spiritually, it is not to be defeated by the yetzer hara, but to overcome it. The Sitra Achra is strong and can feel unbeatable. He is crafty and resourceful when it comes to opening a door to sin. Nevertheless, with God's help it can be overcome, and success means acquiring another level of personal greatness.

Had the Jewish people constantly strengthened themselves so that their lives and hearts were given over to God, He would have promised them that the revelation of [His great light] would not leave them even while in the desert. They would not have had to look at the Sitra Achra and his schemes at all, because all of it was just a test. (Drushei Olam HaTohu, Chelek 2, Drush 5, Anaf 4, Siman 3)

This is what the rabbis mean when they say, "According to the effort is the reward" (Pirkei Avos 5:26). The effort to which they refer is that which we make to pass a spiritual test.

This is specifically the kind of action from below that would have drawn down upon them the Great Light . . . continuously. Moshe Rabbeinu knew that at that time it was dependent upon their strengthening themselves in trust in God, and for this the verse faults them: "Because you did not believe in God and did not trust in His salvation" (Tehillim 78:22). It adds: "Nevertheless, they sinned further and had no faith in His wonders" (Tehillim 78:32). (Drushei Olam HaTohu, Chelek 2, Drush 5, Anaf 4, Siman 3)

In other words, what is it that we must specifically do to rectify Creation? What power do we have with which to interact with history and bring about desired results? What is it that we stop doing that causes just the opposite to happen, eventually resulting in dark periods of history?

Emunah.

One could think that God gave the Jewish people 613 mitzvos to enforce obedience, to make us into good little soldiers. That can be the result, but it is not the goal. The goal is emunah, faith in God, and though this sounds like the most obvious thing in the world, it is not at all.

What is emunah? What does it mean to have faith in God, and why is it so important that everything comes down to it?

The answer has to do with the purpose of Creation. God made this world for a reason, and it only continues to exist to fulfill that purpose. The moment it becomes unlikely that the purpose of Creation can be fulfilled, as in Noach's time, God will take drastic measures to get mankind back on track.

This is what Chavakuk was saying. By reducing the 613 Mitzvos to one concept he was teaching that the world was made for emunah. Faith in God is not just something to have in times of distress. It is a trait that you have to have at all times, during happy times as well as during distressing times.

It is obvious what it means to have emunah during difficult times. It means not losing your spiritual cool when life works against you. It means not feeling that God has abandoned you during times that it feels He has abandoned you. It means being able to say that "all God does He does for the good" (Brochos 61b), and mean it, even though "bad" is happening.

What about during good times, when it feels as if God is with you? Who needs emunah when they are successful, just as long as they attribute their success to God?

In truth, that IS emunah. Emunah has two facets. One part we know well because it is harder to miss. When bad things happen to good people, "we" know "we" didn't do them. They came from beyond us, from other people or circumstances that God engineered. We believe that, which is why we complain to Him about our difficult circumstances.

When it comes to our successes, it is more difficult. Not only is it easy to take credit that we do not deserve, but it is also easier to overlook details of our success for which we should be thankful. Sometimes people do not realize what God has done for them until later, and sometimes not at all.

This brings us to Bris Milah. Though a sign of many things, Bris Milah specifically states that everything we create is as a messenger of God. It's God saying, "If you're going to blame Me for what goes wrong, then you have to also 'blame' me for what goes right as well."

Ultimately, this is the highest level of emunah one can achieve, whether he is accomplishing spiritually or materially. As God told Moshe Rabbeinu when he assembled the Mishkan, "You just busy your hands with its assembly while I take care of getting it done." Emunah means knowing that this is the way it works in every aspect of life, accepting the reality, and living up to it.