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Paya bas Chayim a”h
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

The “Heart” of *Emunah*

PARSHAS SHELACH 5778

In a landmark dissertation that opens the *sefer Kovetz Ma’amarim*, R’ Elchonon Wasserman expounds on some fundamental aspects of *emunah* (faith).

Believing – with the Heart

He begins with Chazal’s exposition on a *passuk* from the end of this week’s *parshah*, which states: “*V’lo sasuru acharei levavchem* – Do not go astray after your heart” (*Bamidbar 15:39*). The Gemara interprets this as an injunction against harboring heretical beliefs (*Berachos 12b*). At first glance, it seems somewhat perplexing that Chazal would connect this particular *passuk* to the notion of beliefs. After all, *emunah*, it would seem, is a function of the intellect, relating to what one thinks with his mind. Why, then, would the Torah formulate the directive for pure beliefs in this manner, attributing *emunah* to the *heart*?

There is another key aspect regarding the obligation of *emunah* that R’ Elchonon seeks to clarify. We find that the Torah attaches much gravity to the notion of correct beliefs, as borne out by the Mishnah (*Sanhedrin 10:1*):

אלו שאין להם חלק לעולם הבא, האומר אין תחיית המתים מן התורה, ואין תורה מן השמים, ואפיקורוס.

“The following (individuals) do not have a share in the World to Come: One who denies the Torah-source for (the concept of) the Resurrection of the Dead; one who denies that the Torah originates from Heaven; and (other) proponents of heresy.”

We see, then, that one who denies the principles of *emunah* is deemed so distant and such a wanton transgressor that he forfeits his share in the World to Come. As with all Torah obligations, the directive of *emunah* applies to all Jews alike, whether young or old, brilliant or otherwise. As soon as one becomes bar-mitzvah at age thirteen, it is incumbent upon him to profess these beliefs; failure to do so, as we have seen, carries with it the most dire consequences. And yet, R’ Elchonon wonders, we have found throughout history that some of the wisest men in the world were heretics. The Rambam considers Aristotle to have attained a level of wisdom that was essentially one step below prophecy; but even this paradigm of philosophers remained in denial of his Creator. How, then, could a simple and unlearned lad be held to account for something even the greatest genius of all time apparently could not figure out?

One other point R’ Elchonon aims to elucidate is the very idea of a directive of *emunah*. Is it indeed possible to command and “coerce” a person to hold certain beliefs? That is, in order to accede to such a command, one must first believe in the One Who is issuing the command. And so it almost seems that the whole matter is superfluous. If one already believes in the Commander, there is no need to instruct him to believe. And if, for whatever reason, one does not ascribe to this belief – then how can he be obliged to believe? After all, in his mind, he does not think that Anyone is obligating him. Shouldn’t such a person, at the very least, be deemed an inadvertent transgressor and hence exempt in the first place?

Preserving Purity

In elucidating the issue, R' Elchonon lays forth a simple yet penetrating truth. In reality, *emunah*, at its core, is the most simple and straightforward matter that could possibly be. In other words, it is so obvious and clear that one need not be any sort of genius to “figure out” the imperative of Hashem’s existence. One who finds a watch on the ground immediately knows that it was fashioned by a professional. Someone who claims that it just “happened by itself” will be mocked and ridiculed by anyone who hears him. And so it is with every aspect of Creation, each facet of which is filled with infinite wisdom and complexity. Certain insane individuals advance a claim that gas swirled, a bunch of fortuitous explosions came along, a few volcanoes and earthquakes got thrown into the mix, and somehow there was an amoeba, which turned into a frog, which turned into a hedgehog, which turned into a monkey, etc. And to make it all the more palatable, this all happened over “gazillions of years.” As should be obvious, one need not be a top-rate philosopher to recognize the ridiculousness of such assertions. As R' Akiva sums up: “Just as a garment attests to a weaver... and a house to a builder, so does the world attest that it was created by Hashem” (*Midrash Temurah*).

Why is it, then, that there are so many people, including some of the wisest of men, who could not reach this simple conclusion? The answer, explains R' Elchonon, is rooted in the prohibition forbidding a judge to take a bribe: “For bribery blinds the eyes of the wise” (*Devarim 16:19*). Here the Torah reveals a most basic truth about human nature: personal interest has an unavoidable corrupting effect. And so, the prospect of believing in the Creator runs counter to one’s selfish interest; for accepting His existence means acceding to His will and desire. For all intents and purposes, each inhabitant of the world could be seen as a “judge” regarding the matter of the world’s origin. And while it is so painfully obvious that creation came from the Creator, this prospect threatens to upset one’s ability to live his life with wanton abandon. One can’t simply devote himself just to satisfying his every whim if there is an Authority Who governs and places restrictions on his behavior. Thus, a person becomes “bribed” by his innate desires, which corrupt his vision and render him incapable of accepting *emunah*.

What emerges, then, is that *emunah* is in fact a matter of the heart. For as we have seen, the notion of faith in and of itself is patently obvious, so glaring that it can be effortlessly attained by anyone in possession of even the most minimal brain function. Essentially, it is automatic. The only real challenge, however, is that there are factors that may corrupt and distort his vision; and these factors are the desires of his *heart*. At its core, then, the *avodah* (endeavor) of *emunah* entails an act of preservation. That is, one must strive to maintain the purity of his heart and ensure that his desires do not overpower his intellect. Left to its own devices, the mind will certainly gravitate toward the clear truth of *emunah*. A person just has to hold strong and avoid the pitfall of “going astray after your heart.”

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