

FAITH OR BEETACHON

Rabbi Yisroel Chait

Faith in God is the mark of the righteous. It characterizes the unique outlook which the man of God has on reality. But what exactly is meant by faith in God is not simple to define. In times of trouble we are told to have faith—'beetachon'. We are expected to understand what is meant by this adjuration, as if it were self-explanatory. But when one takes the trouble of putting it into intelligible terms great difficulties or confusions emerge. Is one to believe with certainty that one's wishes will be fulfilled or that what one fears will not occur? If so we are faced with the question of how we know what God has in store for us. Do we not believe that even the righteous may be punished? Haven't we seen people with even greater faith than us suffer tragedy? Does having faith mean we ought to believe, 'all is for the good'? But then we are not speaking of faith, only acceptance. Acceptance and faith are on two different sides of experience: the latter prior to the experience, and the former after the experience, when all that we feared has already occurred. Some may say we cannot question the injunction to have faith. Such people are admitting that they are devoid of knowledge and understanding. We the followers of Toras Moshe cannot look favorably upon ignorance. We thus remain with an unintelligible injunction which even if adhered to cannot be truly virtuous as virtue and ignorance are mutually exclusive. "The ignorant cannot be righteous."¹ Moreover, since we do not comprehend what is meant by faith we have no way of knowing if we are fulfilling the injunction. We do not know if what we think is faith, is in fact faith and not some erroneous notion.

Let us turn to the Torah as interpreted by our Talmudic scholars to help us in the task of unraveling the idea of faith. In Genesis 40:23 we read, "and the chief butler did not remember Joseph and he forgot him." Rashi comments in the words of our Rabbis "since Joseph placed his faith in him to remember him [Joseph] to Pharaoh he was destined to be incarcerated for two years." Targum Yerushalmi elaborates, "Joseph abandoned the heavenly kindness that accompanied him from the house of his father, and placed his trust in the chief steward, in created flesh, flesh that tastes of death and he didn't remember the passage that states and explains, 'Cursed shall be the man that relies upon flesh and makes flesh his stronghold and blessed shall be the man that places his trust in Hashem the Word of God and the Word of God shall be his stronghold'². On account of this the chief steward did not remember Joseph and he forgot him until his time came to be redeemed."

In the words of our Rabbis, Targum Yerushalmi and Rashi are referring to Joseph's entreaty to the chief butler as mentioned previously (40:14,15) where Joseph states to the chief steward in anticipation of the latter's release, "If you will only remember me when things are good with you and you will show kindness to me and you will make mention of me to Pharaoh and bring me out of this house. For I was stolen away from the land of the Hebrews; and here also have I done nothing that they should put me into the dungeon."

It was apparently considered sinful by the Rabbis that Joseph, after interpreting the dreams of the chief baker and chief steward, should plead with the chief butler to remember him to Pharaoh.

We are stymied by the words of our Rabbis. What did Joseph do wrong? Doesn't the Torah teach us that we should make use of all available means to bring about for himself beneficial results? Is it anathema to ask another human being for help when in need? Didn't Jacob prepare an elaborate present to appease his brother Esau? Didn't Esther use her psychological insight to manipulate the emotions of the king? Did she not even fall at his feet crying and pleading, all of which she was praised for, being considered the savior of Israel? Why then should Joseph have been condemned when he used, it would seem, the most natural method of securing his freedom via the chief butler? Surely political savvy is not reviled by Torah; it is not viewed as a denial of one's faith in God.

The words of the Rabbis have deep meaning and we cannot comprehend them by a superficial glance. Let us look more closely at the account of Joseph. We must ask one question—what did Joseph do wrong in placing his request before the chief butler? More correctly, what should he have done what alternative method should he have used? The answer comes slowly but clearly—he should have done nothing. He erred politically. Joseph had completed the interpretation of the two dreamers who were with him in prison. His interpretations convinced them that he was correct. In a few days reality would corroborate his interpretation with exactitude. The chief butler would walk away dazzled by this amazing man who via interpretation could foresee future events. Joseph would have left an indelible impression upon him, and at the first available opportunity he would tell his master Pharaoh of the unbelievable wonder he had witnessed while incarcerated in order to further ingratiate himself to his master. What prevented him from doing so? Only one thing—Joseph's request. The Rabbis tell us that a scholar is held in the highest esteem in the eyes of an ignoramus until the former tries to benefit from him. It is a matter of human nature that when one sees another person in need and asking for assistance, one's estimation of that other person is seriously compromised, whether rightfully or wrongfully. It is further true that the baring of one's soul and the disclosure of how one was repeatedly wronged to another human being in an attempt to obtain sympathy is a double-edged sword. At first, the listener may be compassionate. In the presence of the pleader his emotions are softened; but when he leaves, his mind ruminates other thoughts of a contrary nature. Is this person truly a victim? Are all those who wronged him blameworthy? Perhaps this person is the cause (albeit unwittingly) of his own downfall. Such thoughts and others like them preoccupy the mind of the former listener. The high esteem that was accorded the pleader is questioned and seriously reduced.

When Joseph bared his soul to the chief butler he destroyed the idealized image the latter had of him. Joseph removed himself from the pedestal he formerly occupied in his mind. The butler instead saw a man in need of his favor, one that was wronged by many individuals. Were those who supposedly betrayed him, his family, and his master's house, totally to blame? Questions arose in the chief butler's mind about Joseph's true worth. His former high estimation was replaced with a low evaluation of Joseph. This is clear from the report the chief butler subsequently gave of Joseph to Pharaoh two years later as stated in

Genesis 41:12: "And there was there with us a young man, 'naar,' a Hebrew servant to the officer of the guard..." The Rabbis point out that the chief butler was belittling Joseph by these introductory remarks. The term naar, meaning youth, carries with it a connotation of foolishness. The word "Hebrew" implies that he is not one of us. The term servant or slave further indicates one of lowly status. Joseph had committed a faux pas, a political indiscretion.

What was the cause of Joseph's blunder? In the theology of Yahadus every error is to be traced to some human imperfection. The Torah, being all embracing, leads one to be wise, to act judiciously. If one does not act so, he is not in harmony with its principles. Where does the imperfection that led Joseph to his blunder? The Rabbis trace it to a lack of faith, beetachon.

In the words of the Targum Yerushalmi Joseph "abandoned the heavenly kindness that kindness which accompanied him from the house of his father." How did he abandon this? The answer is straightforward—he sought human compassion. He was lonely, estranged from every society he knew, even that of the house of his master. In a moment of weakness, he sought the compassion of a human being—the chief butler. Joseph bared his soul to him, looking for the satisfaction and sense of security one receives when eliciting human compassion. He thwarted his own goal because of this momentary need. He unwittingly sabotaged the one element he had in his favor—the chief butler's idealization of him. In the words of the Targum Yerushalmi Joseph abandoned the chisda d'l'ail, the compassion of the above, the true compassion of G-d which had been with him from the day he left his father's house, the compassion which sustained him while he was alone all those years in a strange land. He reached instead for human compassion, basar avid—created flesh that tastes of death. The sense of stability that man projects is illusory. Man is a created being who has a very transitory and fragile existence. Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no salvation; his breath leaves him and he returns to his earth.⁴ He cannot offer the security man seeks when he is in need of compassion. The security man offers is illusory. It is supported by the senses, not by the mind. Man's task is to rise to the world of reality, a world beyond the senses; one, which is known only by the Tzelem Elokim, the divine part of his nature, his mind. On this plane man realizes the only one he may turn to seek compassion is the source of all reality, the only eternal being—G-d. Failure to rise to this level of existence is catastrophic for man. Joseph's momentary lapse from the world of true reality to the world of the senses and the emotions cost him two years of his life. Had he possessed beetachon, true faith, he would not have failed. His success was ironically imminent.

What then is beetachon or true faith? It is not a mental mechanism or device to be used when in need. It is a state of mind; an appreciation of ultimate reality. In this state of mind one is in contact both in mind and emotion with the creator. It is a state in which one senses total security in the knowledge that the Creator knows his plight, that all operates under his providence and jurisdiction. This idea offers man his true sense of well being. It pervades him with an inner calm in the face of the most formidable obstacles. In such a mental framework he is not in search or in need of human compassion.

What gives man this view of reality? His knowledge of G-d, which stems from knowledge of G-d's works, the Torah—his word. As the Targum Yerushalmi translates, Blessed be the man who placed his trust in Hashem, the word of G-d. And the word of G-d shall be his stronghold. All of man's knowledge of G-d is of His word. The word means His Torah, His Law, and His Creation. The term 'word' is always used to describe G-d's creation. "With ten words the world was created".⁵ "Who with His word created the heavens".⁶ This is all based on Genesis I in which the metaphor of speech is used to connote G-d's act of creations. Beetachon is based on an outward direction of one's mental energies. It's an appreciation of the full realm of the external world and its source. This is the exact opposite of primitive man whose energies are directed inward toward the self, who seeks to employ G-d as a means of satisfying his wishes. Primitive man seeks faith in G-d as a component of his overall egocentricity, a tool to secure his own well being. In Yahadus the concept is based on an appreciation of the outer world, the world of G-d's wisdom. Strange as it sounds, the person who has greater beetachon is less involved in the self. He sees himself as an insignificant component of the whole. This does not mean he has no needs but that his needs are different. As a creature of G-d he recognizes how integrally tied he is to his Creator, and his relationship with the Creator is an intimate one, one that is fully satisfying. He is not in need of man for approval or compassion.

The man of faith has G-d at the center of his world. His focus is constantly upon Him. He is in perpetual appreciation of G-d's word, His Torah, His universe, and His wisdom. King David expresses it in Psalm 16:

I have set Hashem before me always; because He is at my right hand I shall not falter. For this reason my heart does rejoice and my soul is elated, my flesh, too, rests in confidence: Because You will not abandon my soul to the grave, You will not allow Your devout one to witness destruction. You will make known to me the path of life, the fullness of joys in Your Presence, the delights that are in Your right hand for eternity (verses 8-11).⁷

His knowledge that the source of all creation knows him intimately, that whatever stems from that source is truly and of necessity the good, is the cause of his total calm and sense of well being in all circumstances. As it is stated in Psalm 23, "Yae though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I fear no evil for thou art with me." There can be for him no greater reassurance than this one idea.

Definitively we might say faith is knowledge of G-d as it concerns one's sense of security. Does having faith change the outcome of an event? Most certainly! But not as an isolated mechanism with some magical content. The outcome is changed indirectly. It is a result of the fact that an individual with such ideas, one who lives on such a plane is constantly under G-d's providence and thus meets with a different fate than the rest of humanity.⁸

End Notes

1 Ethics of the Fathers 2:5

2 Jeremiah 17: 5,7

3 Book of Esther 8:3

4 Psalms 146:3-4.

5 Ethics of the Fathers 5:1.

6 Blessing for the new moon.

7 The Artscroll Tehillim. Trans. by Rabbi Hillel Danzinger. (Brooklyn: 1988, Mesorah Publications, Ltd.) p. 27.

8 Praiseworthy is the man who does not forget You, the human being who takes strength in You, for those who seek You will never stumble nor will those who take refuge in You ever be humiliated.--Scherman, Rabbi Nosson.The Complete ArtScroll Machzor Rosh Hashana. (Brooklyn: 1985, Mesorah Publications, Ltd.) pp.459-461..