



Torah Thoughts from the YIGC Community

V'Emunascha BaLaylos

Channa Ireland

It was March 9, Taanis Esther, as I was packing up the workday at the nursing home to head home for Purim, that I heard the fateful news that Covid had come to Ohio. Immediately, a sense of panic gripped me, one that wouldn't leave me for months to come.

You might think, and you would be right, that this scenario that Hashem laid out would be the perfect occasion for bootcamp-level training in *emunah*. Nursing home. Worldwide pandemic. High fatality rate for seniors in congregate living. A multitude of regulations changing fast enough to give you whiplash. Staff panicking and running for the hills. Residents panicking. Family members panicking. Everybody panicking!

Luckily, I had already been working on *emunah* through a daily WhatsApp group when this crisis struck. I had all the tools locked and loaded to get through this. However... it didn't work. I did the daily learning, said the mantras over and over, yet I still couldn't sleep at night. I could barely eat. I couldn't get myself to a place of calm, of accepting fully that everything is in my Loving Father's hands and trusting He wouldn't give me a challenge I couldn't handle. Isn't that what *emunah* is all about?

Then I heard the following concept from Rebbitzin Faigy Blum. Why do we start our morning with *Modeh Ani*, "I give thanks"? Why do we say these words as soon as we open our eyes? Rebbe Nachman of Breslov says there are three states of awareness of Hashem. The first is revelation, where we experience the world in a way that leaves little doubt as to Hashem's hand in it. An example of this would

be experiencing a child's birth or surviving a car wreck. The second state is *hester panim*, hiddenness. That's our everyday life, where we know that Hashem is guiding us but it's easy to forget it under the blanket of mundanity and routine. The third level is *hester she'b'hester*, "hiddenness within hiddenness," where Hashem is completely hidden from us. The example given of this level is sleeping, where we don't even know that Hashem exists. From this third level of awareness springs the highest level of *emunah*: we are completely cut off from any awareness of Hashem's presence, but despite that, we still express our faith in Him. That is why the moment we open our eyes, before we're even fully awake, we say the words of *Modeh Ani*.

This concept gave me great comfort. There's no failing in *emunah*. There's no requirement to be calm and filled with peaceful acceptance of crazy circumstances beyond your control. You can be sleepless and anxiety-ridden and in a state of total *hester she'b'hester*. In fact, that is the optimal time for *emunah*. As we say in *Kabbalas Shabbos* every week (from Tehilim 92:3): "*L'hagid baboker chasdechah*" – when it's day, when things are bright and clear, that is the time be grateful for Hashem's kindness; but "*v'emunascha balaylos*" – *emunah* is meant for the night.

Kislev is the darkest month of the year, and this year it comes after many months of metaphorical darkness. May we each kindle our *emunah* as we face our own personal challenges and may our *emunah* provide a light unto others.

Instructions for Building a Stairway to Heaven

Yosef Rudolph

The famous dream that Yaakov has on his way to Charan contains powerful imagery. The physical and spiritual realms are connected by a structure that is rooted upon the earth ("מוצב ארצה – set on the ground") yet whose top reaches the heavens ("וראשו מגיע השמימה") (Bereishis 28:12). Interestingly, this is not the only structure that is

described in this fashion; in fact, it is not even the only one in Sefer Bereishis! The other example of this language comes from the description of Migdal Bavel (the Tower of Babel). There, we are told that the people planned: "Come, let us build ourselves a city and tower, and its head in the heavens (וראשו בשמים)" (ibid. 11:4). We might ask if there

is anything the Torah wants to teach us with this parallel language. At first glance, the two items and their stories seem rather unrelated. Yet there is one aspect of the stories that hammers home the parallel, and that is the ending: both vignettes end in a *pasuk* explaining the names of the places in which they occurred. In and of itself, this is not unique, as there are many episodes in Tanach, particularly in Bereishis, that explain place names. However, examining the meanings of the names reveals the connection between the two stories.

Yaakov's campsite is named Beit-El, the House of God. The reasoning is clear: "אין זה כי אם בית אלקים וזה שער השמים," "this is none other than the House of God and the Gateway to Heaven" (ibid. 28:17). The place name in the Tower of Babel story seems at first to be very different: the name Bavel means confusion (ibid. 11:9). We could take a moment to wonder if the Babylonians themselves truly named their city Confusion, or Mix-Up. This seems uncharacteristically self-effacing of the people who spawned a Nimrod and a Nevuchadnetzar. (Just imagine American pioneers naming a new Wild West town Confusion, Colorado, or *chalutzim* naming a new settlement Bilbul. Of course, today there would be a Bilbul and then a Ramat Bilbul and then a Ramat Bilbul Bet and Gimmel...) Perhaps they did name it, but with a different meaning; Bavel might mean something different in the language of the Babylonians. Many of the languages of the Ancient Near East were related, so let's examine this hypothesis in the context of Aramaic, a language we know that was spoken in that area. The word "Bavel" could be read as "Bav-El." El, of course, refers to God (even the Babylonians had a God named El, so the meaning is similar whether they meant *Elokei Yisrael* or not), and the word "bav" means "gate." We see this in the names of the

tractates Bava Kama, Bava Metzia, and Bava Basra - the first, middle and last "gates" to the sequence of books about financial interactions. In this analysis, the Babylonians chose to call their capital Gateway to God! Now this name remarkably echoes Yaakov's comment, creating a similarity that was not present at first glance.

Through the parallel that we now see between these two stories, the Torah is showing how we can access the Gateway to Heaven. How can we claim to approach God? According to the Babylonians, it is through the human strength exhibited in building a massive tower. It is through the *avoda zara* of Nimrod (who, according to some midrashic traditions, was responsible for the tower). It is through the desire to meet God as an equal and bring a sword against Him, or at least to hold up the sky against His natural phenomena (goals that midrashim have attributed to the builders). In response to this perspective, the Torah tells us that they were confused and mixed up. This is not the way to find God! They (the Babylonians) were fooling themselves. We need to learn a different way, and that way is shown to us by Yaakov. We are to follow the dweller in tents, not the hunter or warrior. We learn from the man who, according to midrashic tradition, had spent 14 years studying Torah before this night. We model ourselves on Yaakov, who is aware of the prophetic nature of his dreams and immediately has the humility to acknowledge his ignorance in sleeping in a holy place. We are to see that Yaakov's first act in the morning is to consecrate the location. His descendants accepted this consecration and built the Beis HaMikdash on that very spot – a place to be a center for spirituality and a source for holiness to emanate from. In other words, we are to find the Gateway to Heaven by making a House for God on earth.

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