

Are we M'Katney Emunah? A Siyum on Masechet Sotah

Shabbat Bamidbar – Maimonides Kehillah – May 20, 2023

There is a popular niggun associated with a Shabbat Zemer with a segment that goes “bim-bam, bim-bim-bim-bam...” What is the significance of the words Bim Bam? I had the zechut of hearing the answer to this question from Rav Binyamin Tabori, zt”l of Alon Shvut who taught for many years at Yeshivat Har Etzion. He smiled at me and sitting across the table from me, said: “Jesse, Bnay Yisrael are people of Emunah – people of faith. Do you know what Bim-Bam stands for? Bnay Yisrael Maaminim Bnay MaaMinim. The Jewish people are believers, the descendants of believers. No matter what, he stressed, we have faith in Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

With this comment in mind, I wonder about the statement in the penultimate Mishna of Masechet Sotah that teaches:

מִשְׁחָרַב בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ — בְּטֵל הַשְּׁמִיר וְנוֹפֶת צוֹפִים, וּפְסָקוֹ אֲנָשֵׁי אֲמִנָה מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל, שְׁנֵאָמַר: “הוֹשִׁיעָה ה' כִּי גָמַר חֶסֶד וְגו'.”

From the time of the destruction of the Second Temple, the Shamir worm now longer exhibited its miraculous stone cutting ability, the sweetness of the honeycombs in Eretz Yisrael was eradicated, and people of Emunah/Faith were no longer present within the Jewish people. The prooftext from Tehillim 12 reads: Help us HaShem, for the Chassid/the pious one is finished...

The Gemara, in discussing the phrase about “Anshey Amana” states that, according to R. Yitzchak, these individuals were those that earlier had Emunah in HaShem. He brings a Beraita in the name of R. Eliezer HaGadol: Anyone who has a loaf of bread in his basket and comments “what will I eat tomorrow?” is considered a MeKatney Amanah (a person of little faith).

Who else does our tradition teach us might have been a MeKatney Emunah? The Zohar Chadash on Sidrat Noach observes that Noach, the Ish Tzaddik, was an example of a Mekatney Emunah. Why? For he didn't believe that the Mabul would really come and, as a result, he did not enter the Teyva until the water forced him to as the Pasuk states:

וַיָּבֹא נֹחַ מִפְּנֵי מֵי הַמַּבּוּל –

And Noach came (to the ark) because of the flood waters.

One more example. The Gemara in Berakhot, Daf 24 states:

הַמְשַׁמֵּעַ קוֹלוֹ בְּתַפְלֵתוֹ הָרִי זֶה מִקְטְנֵי אֲמִנָה

A person who raises their voice during the Amidah, to an extent louder than what he or she can hear only themselves, is considered a Mekatney Amana. Why? Chazal explain that this kind of person is unsure that HaShem will hear them if they recite the words silently. This kind of person lacks the faith in HaShem's ability to see into their heart and understand what the pray-er is saying.

Finally, our Gemara in Sotah on the final Daf recounts a long series of sad events that occurred to the Jewish people around the times of the Churban. Three times, the Gemara tells us about disruptions that will occur in the fabric of the Jewish nation and three times, what does the Gemara suggest we do:

על מי לנו להשען על אבינו שבשמים

Who are we to rely upon? On our parent in Heaven, on HaShem. What does this mean about our faith? If we continue to rely, even in the worst of circumstances, on the support of HaShem, then we are MaAminim-faithful.

One year ago, on the 3rd Shabbat of May, Brenda experienced the full-force of an aggressive infection that was nearly fatal. To what do Brenda and I owe our gratitude? Well, to a great medical team at the Brigham but above that, Al Avinu SheBashamayim.

What about all of us, living in the 21st century, surrounded by family and friends, living reasonably safe and secure lives, and with near-limitless possibilities before us? Yes, we are 2,000 years removed from the Churban Bais HaMiqdash but we continue to sing – Yibaneh HaMiqdash. And yes, we are 80 years from the Shoah, a Churban in its own right. But we continue to sing – Eliyahu Hanavi – and we look forward to the coming of brighter days. Further, we celebrate the 75th anniversary of our homeland, of Eretz Yisrael, and we have a unified Yerushalayim under our sovereignty. In fact, our National Anthem is entitled HaTiqvah – Hope!

I propose that all of us, rather than being MeKatney Amana because of the Churban, are MaaMinim Bney MaaMinim. We are, in our generation, another link in the unbroken chain of the Masora that stretches back to Kabalat HaTorah at Har Sinai.

It is probably true that the Rabbis at the time of the Churban were worried about the future of the Jewish people and it is true that there were Jews who, facing the terrifying tragedy of the Churban and the more recent Shoah of truly cataclysmic proportions, no longer believed that HaShem was close by and watching out for us.

But as time stretched out from Churban to Galut, the resilience, inventiveness, creativity, and energy of Am Yisrael became ever stronger. We are the beneficiaries of many generations of Jews who laid the groundwork for us. We are truly Bney Yisrael MaaMinim Bney Maaminim.

Our Masechta concludes on such a powerful note:

The final line of the Mishna states:

משמת רבי בטל[ה] עננה ויראת חטא

When Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi passed away, an exemplar of humility and fear of sin was now gone. This is as if to say that with Rebbi's passing, there was no longer anyone who demonstrated deep humility and serious fear of sin. He was a role model and was now gone. One might have thought but what about his disciples – didn't they learn from Rebbi's life and personality?

So concludes the Gemara:

אמר ליה רב נחמן לתנא: לא תיתני יראת חטא, דאיכא אנא.

Said Rav Nachman to the Tanna who was reviewing our Mishna when he heard this statement about Rabi. He proposes: "Don't teach this Mishna as if to say that Yirat Chait stopped! Why? For there is (at least) one person who lives a life informed by Yirat Chait, fear of sin, and that is me.

Rav Nachman is teaching all of us that there is still hope, there is still potential, there is still Emunah. What is Emunah if not a deep understanding of the relationship between our behavior and our relationship with HaShem? If there is a Rav Nachman who is still a Yeray Shamayim and a Rav Yosef who is still a role model for how to express humility in all parts of our lives, then there exists the potential for all of us to follow in the footsteps of those before us and to be the proper role models that our children and grandchildren will emulate thus bringing greater joy to HaShem and all those around us.

On Yom Yerushalayim, we recited in Hallel –

יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּטַח בַּהֲשֵׁם עֲזָרָם וּמִגִּגַּם הוּא: -

O Israel, have faith in HaShem, He is their help and their shield

And the niggun continues:

אנחנו מאמינים בני מאמינים ואין לנו על מי להשען אלא על אבינו שבשמים

Hadran