

I'd like to begin my remarks today by sharing two short stories. See if you can identify the common denominator between them.

British actor Anthony Hopkins (who shot to fame as Hannibal Lecter) was delighted to hear that he had landed a leading role in a film based on the book *The Girl From Petrovka* by George Feifer. A few days after signing the contract, Hopkins traveled to London to buy a copy of the book. He tried several bookshops, but there wasn't one to be found.

Waiting at Leicester Square underground for his train home, he noticed a book apparently discarded on a bench. Incredibly, it was *The Girl From Petrovka*. This was merely the beginning of an extraordinary chain of events.

Two years later in the middle of filming in Vienna, Hopkins was visited by George Feifer, the author. Feifer mentioned that he did not have a copy of his own book. He had lent the last one containing his own annotations to a friend who had lost it somewhere in London. Stunned, Hopkins handed Feifer the book he had found. "Is this the one?" he asked, "With the notes scribbled in the margins?"

Amazingly, it was the same book. Some people seem to have all the luck. But is all luck good?

True baseball fans know the name Richie Ashburn. Ashburn, the great Philadelphia Phillies outfielder, was a Hall-of-Fame player and popular broadcaster.

But if you ask old-timers what Richie is remembered for, they'll probably talk about his bad luck playing for the awful Phillies and Cubs of 40s, 50s and the Mets in 1962 when they lost 120 games. What they will also recall was Richie's ability to keep fouling balls off until he found a pitch to his liking. Fouling off 10 in a row was not an uncommon feat for Richie. Foul balls were good for Richie Ashburn, bad for pitchers and very good for fans -- unless that fan's name was Alice Roth.

On August 17, 1957 Ashburn and the Phils were hosting the New York Giants and Richie hit a foul ball into the stands which unfortunately struck the face of Alice Roth. Mrs. Roth, accompanied to the game by her two young grandsons, was the wife of Philadelphia Bulletin sports editor Earl Roth. The foul ball broke Mrs. Roth's nose and there was blood everywhere. Play on the field stopped as even the players watched the commotion in the stands as medical personnel rushed to her aid.

Talk about bad luck! Dazed and shocked, Mrs. Roth was put on a stretcher as play resumed and Richie took his place in the batter's box. On the very first pitch to Ashburn he again fouled it off into the stands hitting Alice Roth on her knee as she was carried off on the stretcher!

There was a humorous postscript to the story: The Phillies treated the family royally after the event. Mrs. Roth's grandsons were invited into the clubhouse and given free tickets and an autographed baseball. After that, the kids visited their grandmother in the hospital, and one asked, "Grandma, do you think you could go to an Eagles game and get hit in the face with a football?"

People talk about and believe in luck, both of the good and bad variety. But as Jews we don't believe in luck. The words 'luck, chance and coincidence' aren't even in our vocabularies. We believe that Hashem is running the show and that everything happens for a reason. Does that mean that we believe in faith?

There's a wonderful story about a fruit seller in lower East side in New York who complained to a friend that he wasn't doing very much business. The friend said, "Well, look, you know, you're living in a very Jewish area. Do something to bring in the Jewish customers. Put up a sign on your shop that reads 'Fresh fruit from Israel' " - which he did and he got a lot of customers. After a week he decided to go one better, putting up a sign that read 'Fresh fruit from Jerusalem'. Even more people came in. The next week he decided to go one better still and he put up a sign, 'Fresh fruit from the Western Wall'. After a week his friend came in and said, "How did it work?"

He said, "Terrible! They all came in, kissed the fruit and left."

On a certain level I respect that kind of faith -- the Kotel-kissing kind of faith where people *just believe*. However, if you ask what the basis of their faith is, they can't begin to explain it. They'll say, "I just believe. I just have faith."

While there *is* something to be said for that type of faith, I believe that primarily Judaism wants us to have a form of faith that allows us to speak from and to our intelligence. G-d wants us to have a faith that appeals to our reason, logic and experience. In Hebrew, there's a special word for that type of faith. That word is: *Emunah*

Pesach is known as the "Rosh Hashanah of Emunah" - the New Year for Emunah. What does *emunah* mean? Not faith, but trust. Our rabbis say that it was on account of *emunah*, our trust in Hashem, that we were redeemed from Egypt, and it will be on account of *emunah* that we will be redeemed in the times of *mashiach* (messiah).

Therefore, since *emunah* is the essence of the Yom Tov of Pesach, I'd like to spend this final day of Yom Tov discussing ideas to enhance our understanding of this important topic.

Let's begin by looking at the word *emunah* itself.

-- *Em-unah*, has at its root the word *em*. *Em*, which means 'a solid foundation', is found in many Hebrew words you know. *Em* is a root of *imma*, mother -- the foundation of life, family, and the greatness of the Jewish people.

-- *Em* is a root of *em-et*, a cluster term signifying 'truth,' 'conviction,' 'decency,' and 'nobility.'

-- *Em* is a root of *am-en*, which is an untranslatable answer, a 'certainly!' said in response to a blessing; the sacred response of people to the gifts of life, abundance of nature, and blessings bestowed by Hashem.

Let's explore more deeply the connection between *emunah* and *emet*.

Both begin with the letter "*aleph*" which is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. "*Mem*", the middle letter of the alphabet, comes next in both words. But "*emet*" ends with the final letter of the alphabet ("*taf*") because when we have truth -- we know the beginning, middle, and end.

Emunah, on the other hand, in its root form "*amen*", ends with another middle letter, "*nun*" (in the 26 character Hebrew alphabet there are two of them). That's because when it comes to *emunah* we get most of the story but not all of it.

Emunah gives us a foundation to believe. There's substance. There's evidence. But the last step -- to arrive at *emet* -- we have to choose to take.

Why is *emunah* important?

It's a fact that the African impala can jump over 10 feet and in a single jump cover a distance of over 30 feet. How is it possible that these great leapers can be kept in a zoo with only a 3-foot tall wall surrounding them? Here's the explanation: The impala won't jump if it's not able to see the spot where its feet will land. . Because it can't see it won't jump, even though it could. Therefore, the impala remains behind the fence.

In life, we're often like that impala, standing behind the fence of doubt, plagued with uncertainty, worry and *tzuris*. Should I jump? I'm worried. What's going to be? How am I going to get through this? If you have *emunah* you almost have *emet*. You can act. You can get on with your life! You don't have to jump in 'faith'. You have good reason to believe you'll land on solid ground.

Where do we need *emunah*? It's a mitzvah for a Jew to have *emunah* in 3 areas.

- 1) *Emunah* in Hashem as Creator of the world, in which righteous non-Jews of the world also believe.
- 2) *Emunah* in Hashem's Divine Providence (*Hashgacha Pratis*). This means that Hashem takes the time and "effort" to involve Himself in the details of our lives here on earth. It means that we understand that there's no such thing as luck, accidents, or coincidence.
- 3) *Emunah* that we, the Jewish people, have been chosen for a unique and Divine role and mission.

As we reflect on the holiday, all three aspects of *emunah* are part of the Pesach experience.

- 1) All the miracles (*nissim*) we experienced in Egypt point to Hashem as the Creator of the world.
- 2) The Ten Plagues (*Makos*) show there is Divine Providence (*Hashgacha Pratis*).
- 3) The Exodus (*Yetzias Mitzrayim*) itself and the subsequent revelation of the Torah to the Jewish people indicate our unique role and mission.

We've described what *emunah* is and how it can be accessed from Pesach. What is the overarching, all-embracing function of *emunah*?

The story is told about the time Albert Einstein was traveling from Princeton on a train, and when the conductor came down the aisle to punch the passengers' tickets Einstein couldn't find his. He looked in his vest pocket, he looked in his pants pocket, he looked in his briefcase, but there was no ticket. The conductor was gracious; "Not to worry, Dr. Einstein, I know who you are, we all know who you are, and I'm sure you bought a ticket."

As the conductor moved down the aisle, he looked back and noticed Einstein on his hands and knees searching under the seat for his ticket. The conductor returned to Einstein; "Dr. Einstein, Dr. Einstein, don't worry. I know who you are. You don't need a ticket, I'm sure you bought one."

Einstein arose and said "Young man, I too know who I am; what I don't know is where I am going."

Where are we going? Where do we want to go? Wherever we want to go in life -- *emunah* will help us get there.

Over Pesach we use this special Yom Tov to increase our *emunah* in all three areas. We must also remember that the Talmud tells us that it was in the merit of our righteous women that the Jewish people were redeemed. What did they do? They demonstrated remarkable *emunah* in the face of great oppression and danger and continued having children.

And speaking of children: If we're REALLY looking to set the bar high, we can look for inspiration to the *emunah* that our children have -- as this final story indicates.

This past Wednesday was supposed to be Corey Woolf's first baseball practice. (Corey, son of Rich and Mindy, is six years-old). Rich told me that Corey had literally been talking about this for weeks. He was SO excited that since Sunday he was confirming multiple times a day when practice would be held. But as you know, the weather hadn't been very good this past week. And on Wednesday, the weather was supposed to be horrible.

In checking the weather, St. Louis was supposed to get hit with strong storms late Wednesday afternoon through the evening. It was raining heavily earlier in the day. The weather report had a storm hitting Olivette at 4:45 P.M. Coach Woolf was convinced that rain would hit by then and he'd have to cancel practice by 5 P.M. Rich sent an e-mail to the parents telling them to stay tuned, but that due to the weather practice would likely be canceled.

Meanwhile, Rich (working downtown) spoke with Corey, who Mindy said was checking the weather every 5 minutes. Corey hadn't given up! At 4:30 P.M. he was still wearing his uniform, cleats and glove. However, things didn't look good. The radar now showed Olivette getting hit with heavy rain at 5 P.M.

Suddenly, something amazing happened. Right at five the sky in Olivette began to clear and the sun came out. The radar now said the storm was moving south and would miss Olivette. It would be clear until 7:30 P.M. when another storm was going to hit the area. That meant -- practice was on!

Coach Woolf sent the e-mail and the team had their practice.

What happened? Mindy said that Corey said a prayer to Hashem. When Rich asked Corey what he said, he responded: "Hashem, don't let it rain so I can have my practice."

Strong, resolute *emunah* can bring about wondrous changes. If not a change in a stormy sky, then a change in ourselves.

Have you ever noticed how at times things don't go seem to go according to plan? *Emunah* -- trust and conviction in Hashem -- is the grease that allows the wheels of life to turn smoothly. By seeking awareness of G-d, being sensitive to the Divine providence that surrounds us, and understanding what it means to be part of the Jewish people, the quality of our lives is guaranteed to change. Such commitment and sensitivity will allow us to become a *ba'al emunah* -- a person of great trust and conviction in Hashem, understanding internally that His watchful loving Hands are upon us.