

A Jewish View of Faith

Have you ever taken a leap of faith?

Let me tell you about my biggest leap of faith. It happened in August of 1989. That's when I had just finished up my first five-day conference as a Wexner Graduate Fellow. I had spent the week learning about leadership and the challenges of Jewish communal life with 24 other rabbinical students, Jewish educators, and students of Jewish communal service from across the denominations. But as I left that conference, I was really only thinking about one of my fellow fellows—a Reconstructionist rabbinical student named Deborah. We had spent a whole lot of time together when the sessions were over—and we were about to be spending the next many months in different cities—Deborah in Philadelphia at RRC and me in New York at JTS.

From the conference I was heading off to spend the last few days of summer with my family in southwestern Maine. I got off the road and found a strip mall where I went into a store and bought a pen, some envelopes, some scotch tape and a notebook. I wrote a love letter, taped a piece of clover to the bottom of the letter, found the nearest post office, and dropped the letter in the mail. Six weeks later, Deborah and I were engaged; eight months after that, we were married on her family's farm in Bennington, Vermont. This upcoming June it will be 30 years since our wedding day.

I had never even met Deborah's parents before I proposed—although I had sent a letter to them asking for their blessing! Now I will admit, that if one of our kids were to do this with someone that they had fallen in love with on roughly the same timetable, as a parent, I would probably be terrified. But looking back on my life, I know that putting that love letter into that mailbox—and six weeks later proposing—were tremendous leaps of faith—and certainly the best decisions I have ever made.

And my guess is that if you are like me, and if you think back to the most consequential decisions that you have ever made in your lives, I suspect that you, too, will have taken some

leaps of faith—deep dives into the unknown where whatever lay ahead was completely uncertain.

On this Yom Kippur day, I want to speak to you about faith—and about what it might mean to live with more faith. Because the Jewish vision of faith springs from the frequent times in our lives when we will be asked to act irreversibly upon only *partial evidence*; to make a binding commitment under the haze of doubt, something each of us does every single day. Faith is something that we enact as individuals, and faith is something that we enact collectively. And yet, many of us struggle to embrace faith because we are not comfortable with the concept and because we are not even sure that our tradition values faith all that much.

This morning, I am going to make the case for why faith should be an essential cornerstone of our lives and why faith is central to the Jewish experience. But let me acknowledge the doubts. One reason we Jews tend to avoid using the language of faith is that we associate faith as being anti-intellectual. Those who eschew religious traditions of any stripe dismiss faith as the “purposeful suspension of critical thinking.” And yet, we sit here together in a sanctuary filled with critical thinkers; ours is a religious tradition that demands that we engage with our sacred texts by asking questions and arriving at answers through logic and reason. As Jews, we can never suspend our willingness to think critically. Therefore, faith cannot be that which suspends critical thought.

A second reason we Jews are hesitant to speak about our faith is that we associate people who profess faith as having absolute certainty. My colleague, Rabbi Eddie Feinstein, likes to tell the story of the time he asked a Christian colleague how he responds to challenging dilemmas. “I ask God”, responded the Priest. “What does that mean?” asked Rabbi Feinstein. The priest continued, “I clear my mind of everything else and I wait for God to speak to me... What do you do?” asked the Priest; to which Rabbi Feinstein replied, “I ask my wife.”

In the Jewish tradition, faith does not require us to shut out the world around us. Rather, it assumes interaction and negotiation with those we hold dearest. It requires understanding that paradox is not the basis for which faith is discarded, but often the essence of where it is found.

A third reason that we struggle to embrace faith is because of the pain and the suffering that we have experienced—both as individuals and that we Jews have experienced collectively. Faith may seem like a luxury when you are presented with the diagnosis of a loved one for whom modern medicine has no cure. And faith can seem expendable when we look back upon the long expanse of Jewish history and remember the many times that we were tortured or murdered simply because we were Jews. But the experience of God’s absence and the ability to live out one’s faith are not mutually exclusive.

Let me give you a recent example. Some of you may have read in the New York Times about a man named Chaskel Tydor who survived Auschwitz—although his wife and many of his family members were murdered. As a long-time prisoner, Tydor was entrusted with the role of being a work dispatcher at one of the more than 40 Auschwitz subcamps. One fall morning, ten religious Jews came for their work assignment. Knowing that it was the first day of Rosh Hashanah and that these men would want to pray, Tydor contrived to send his fellow prisoners on a distant detail where they might safely, and privately, pray. He did not know that they carried something with them. But when they returned, one of the prisoners confided in him that a shofar had been produced and blown.

In January 1945, the Germans hurriedly began dynamiting Auschwitz and emptying the camp as the Russian armies approached. Mr. Tydor, and some 60,000 other survivors, were herded on a 30-mile march to another subcamp. But the night before they left, one of the ten men from the work detail came up to Tydor—and pressed into his hands an object wrapped in a rag—the shofar. The man told him: “I’m going to die on this march. If you live, take this shofar. Tell them we blew the shofar at Auschwitz.”

After his liberation a few months later, Tydor sailed to Palestine. He arrived in time for the High Holidays. In a small synagogue in Haifa in 1946, Tydor sounded that same shofar and continued to sound it every year on Rosh Hashanah until his death in 1993....Today, and for the next several months, that shofar will be on display at the Museum of Jewish Heritage near Battery Park in Manhattan.

The miracle of the faith that shofar represents is a miracle of faith I pray that none of us should ever be called upon to enact. And yet I want to argue that faith is not a luxury for our time. At this fraught and challenging moment in history when we face so many challenges, and when the path forward seems so uncertain, we need to learn how to embrace the concept of faith. Because faith is what we will draw upon to move forward when our natural instincts may be to cower in fear and to give in to despair. Faith is believing in what we can't see; believing against all odds, sometimes, against all evidence. Our people have believed, trusted and wrestled with God, even when God seemed absent; have believed in love and fundamental goodness, even when we experienced evil; have affirmed the notion of peoplehood and nationhood even when for 2,000 years we lived in Exile; have believed in the possibility of Redemption, even when the world was so far from being redeemed. Faith, belief, trust: in Hebrew, *Emunah*—from the same root as the word Amen—as if we are saying—I will say Amen to the circumstances that lie in front of me—even when I don't understand them; even when the path forward is shrouded in uncertainty.

On this Yom Kippur day, let us talk about what we Jews mean when we use the language of faith—when we say that *Emunah*—is really ours—and let us understand how faith translates itself in to **belief**—which is the cornerstone for how we **enact faith** in our lives.

The 19th century Jewish philosopher Martin Buber notes that when the ancient Hebrew expresses belief, the Torah uses the language of **believing in** something rather than **believing that** something is true—in Hebrew—*Ma'amin beh*, not *Ma'amin sheh*. What's the difference? When I say “I believe that,” I am asserting that I judge a proposition to be true. For instance, I **believe that** climate change is real. On the basis of the preponderance of scientific data, I believe that the planet is warming, and that serious weather threats are more common than at any time in recent history. On the other hand, to say that I **believe in** something is to affirm that I have an investment in a **process** that allows me to affirm life. For example, I **believe in** these Days of Awe as an effective means of self-assessment; and I believe in the possibility that human beings can do *teshuvah*—that each of us is capable—with great effort—of making fundamental change. **Belief that** implies certainty over a fact. **Belief in** implies engagement in a relationship. We can engage in a proposition while still maintaining our intellectual integrity. A

Jewish view of faith does not require us to suspend our critical faculties. But a Jewish vision of faith **does** require that we invest in a process of affirming life—even when the going gets tough. And if we are looking to understand the origins of what it means to live with faith from a Jewish perspective, we can go back to the story of the first Jews—to the story of Abraham and Sarah—the first believers in the unseen hand of God in human history.

In fact, we began this New Year on Rosh Hashanah reading the story of Abraham and Sarah—the models of what a Jewish vision of faith looks like—who are called by God to leave their birthplace and to journey across the world to a place they have never seen. Abraham and Sarah hear a call. They can't point to Who or What is calling them into this journey. And yet, they come to **believe** that God calls them into action so that the world may be forever changed by the knowledge that it is One God who is the source of all.

If this were a Hollywood film, Abraham and Sarah would embark on this journey, have some cuts and scrapes along the way, and arrive triumphantly into the land that God has promised. But of course, that would look nothing like life as we know it. Once Abraham and Sarah arrive in Canaan, they find the land to be barren and they are forced to move again, this time to Egypt. They finally arrive back in Canaan, where Sarah struggles with infertility, jeopardizing the very promise that Abraham was given to be the father to a nation. Enduring marital strife and a lack of direction, Abraham and Sarah forge on together. Eventually, in her old age, Sarah is given the gift of a child.

The life of Abraham and Sarah underscores the notion that faith is neither perfect nor certain. Judaism's first family do not have it made as soon as they reach the Land of Canaan. God's call is not a lottery ticket. There is trial and tribulation at each and every step along the way. Therefore, the real mark of faith is not that Abraham is willing to sacrifice his child. It is that he and Sarah have come all of this way and have had a child at all. That they have struggled and scrapped and somehow stayed together and finally in the end have had the child that they were originally promised, in the land of their destiny. Though their faith was tested, they managed to hold on to their **belief** in the meaning of their journeys.

That is what real faith looks like. Faith is the belief that gives us the strength to forge ahead as we continue to cross a series of forks in the road, and as we navigate the detours along the way. In this way, we all lead Abrahamic lives, negotiating our way between success and failure, hand in hand as we walk together through lives of uncertainty.

You may have heard the story of Franz Rosenzweig, one of the greatest Jewish thinkers of the 20th Century, who came perilously close to leaving his Jewish faith and converting to Christianity. He had grown up in a nominally Jewish home but, but like so many of the intellectual Jewish families of early twentieth century Germany, there was very little that was Jewish about it. Going to university in Berlin, the young Rosenzweig met religious Christians who seemed to be at great peace with themselves. And so, Rosenzweig resolved to become a Christian. He decided that he would go to services at a Berlin synagogue one last time on Kol Nidrei night to say goodbye to his Jewish past.

But when Rosenzweig came out three hours later, he was a changed man. He found something in Judaism that he had never known was there. For the first time in his life, Rosenzweig saw a community of Jews who *cared* about their religious tradition—and who greeted him warmly and invited him to share it with them. In that synagogue, the young man encountered Jews with a sense of spiritual engagement which he had sensed and envied when he saw it among the devoted Christian students he knew. On that Yom Kippur night in Berlin, Rosenzweig encountered a community that believed in a Covenant that made claims on their lives—and which provided them with orienting principles about how to live in the world with decency and with humanity and with reverence for life.

Rosenzweig's experience in that Berlin synagogue teaches us something very important: Judaism is not primarily an **idea**; it is primarily a religious **community**. It is not one person at a time contemplating God; it is people interacting with each other in God's service, treating each other humanely, sharing and striving for something transcendent together, and supporting each other in faith. Judaism is not the sum total of Jewish belief. *Judaism is the Jewish people living in relationship with God and living Jewish belief.* What ultimately "converted" Rosenzweig back to Judaism (if I can use that term) was the impact of the Jewish community. Faith may

happen in *moments* for us as individuals; but faith can only be *sustained* within the context of community.

The truth that we are connected to something larger is, I would argue, what draws us to this synagogue on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. Because to those who will open themselves up to it, Yom Kippur can be a truly life-transforming experience. It tells us that God, who created the universe in love and forgiveness, reaches out to us in love and forgiveness, asking us to love and forgive others. God never asked us **not** to make mistakes. All God asks is that we acknowledge our mistakes, learn from them, grow through them, and make amends where we can. In the language of Jewish life, God believes that we are capable of doing *teshuvah* because God believes in us.

The God who created us in God's own image gave us freedom. We are not tainted by original sin, destined to fail, caught in the grip of an evil only divine grace can defeat. To the contrary we have within us the power to choose life. Together we have the power to change the world.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has summed up this truth with the following words: "The majesty and mystery of the Jewish people is that though at best we Jews were a small people in a small land, no match for the splendor of the empires that periodically persecuted us, we Jews did not give way to self-loathing or despair. Beneath the awe and solemnity of Yom Kippur one fact shines radiantly throughout: that God loves us more than we love ourselves. God believes in us more than we believe in ourselves. God never gives up on us, however many times we slip and fall. The story of Judaism from beginning to end is the tale of a love of God for a people who rarely fully reciprocated that love, yet never altogether failed to be moved by it. In this way, as much as Yom Kippur expresses our belief in God, it is equally the expression of God's belief in us."

And so, on this Yom Kippur morning, each of us is challenged to answer the call: How will we enact our faith this year? What will we believe in and commit to? What endeavors, relationships and processes deserve a greater focus of our energies? How are we supporting those around us as they strive to endure their own moments of uncertainty? And lastly, how

will we help Beth Sholom Congregation to be a community that supports one another in living out our deepest beliefs collectively? These are the essential questions of faith—because they are the basis by which we manifest our most cherished values. In the end, faith needs to be practiced in order to endure. It takes hard work. We don't close our eyes and hope for the best. Rather, we open our eyes, our hands and our hearts, to bring the yearnings of our deepest beliefs to fruition. As we enter into this New Year of 5780, may each of us gain the strength and courage to demonstrate true faith in ourselves and in those who surround us—just as God continues to have faith in us. *Kein yi'he ratzon—Shana Tova Tikateivu*—May we each merit a New Year of blessing and the ability to live out our deepest beliefs.