

Kol Nidre 5779/2018

The Wedding Plan: How Strong is our Faith?

Rabbi Irving Elson

George Burns once explained that the secret to a good sermon is to have a really good beginning and a really good ending... and to have these two things as close together as possible.

I'm not sure how well I will fulfill the words of George Burns today, for today we have some pretty important things to think, speak, and pray about. Today, on this holiest night of the year, as young people say, **things get real**. There is no pretending, no faking it, no delaying it. On this most holy of days we focus not on trivial things: there is no talk of Star Wars, or of Batman, no movies... well, maybe one movie - perhaps the most important movie of the year! Shockingly NOT *Solo: A Star Wars Story*, but rather an amazing Israeli movie. But before I tell you about this movie I want to ask all of you one question: **“How deep is your faith?”**

A few years ago the U.S. Navy Submarine Service came out with a new tag line: The Navy's Submarine Service: Where Pride Runs Deep. And the tag line for chaplains serving with submarines? Faith Runs Deep.

How deep is your faith?

Do you have faith and believe that God can split the Red Sea? Do you believe that God can make it rain? Do you have faith that God can save us from a disease or cure an illness?

Rambam, Rabbi Moses Maimonides, wrote a beautiful treatise based on a mishna in Tractate Sanhedrin on the principles of the Jewish faith. There are 13 of them, and each begin with the words *Ani Ma'amin B'Emunah Shelema...* "I believe with perfect faith."

As a matter of fact, did you know that we actually recite them every Shabbat, in the form of a hymn called *Yigdal*?

Rambam wrote, based on the Mishnah, that there are 13 things that every Jew should have: "complete faith, *emunah shelema*."

Think about it... we're all here, we have all spent the last few hours praying. Presumably to God. Well, at least those of us who got here on time have been praying for a few hours, the rest of you, I'll talk to later...

And so, I think it's fair to ask: How deep is your faith?

How much do you really believe?

Do we believe in the coming of the messiah?

Do we believe that God punishes the wicked?

Do we believe that God can make a miracle for you?

The most important movie of the year is an Israeli masterpiece called "The Wedding Plan" by Israeli-American director Rama Burshtein and our heroine is a young woman named Michal.

Michal is a 32-year-old Orthodox Jewish woman in Jerusalem whose fiancé, Gidi, announces that he doesn't love her. Crushed, yet bound and determined to get married anyway, the lonely

Michal decides to keep her planned wedding date (22 days away, on the eighth night of Hanukkah). Hashem, God, will provide the groom, she pronounces with great determination. She pays up with Shimi, the bemused and dashing owner of the banquet hall she's already reserved, sends out invitations, and put her faith in God that a suitable groom will appear in time.

At first, it's a seemingly kooky, far-fetched premise with an initial air of inevitability. But as the film progresses, **predictability fails** and we are confronted to ask: Is Michal's faith enough? For all intents and purposes, Michal is the perfect Jew: she is pious, she is kind-hearted, she meticulously fulfills all the commandments. She is the perfect candidate for this miracle.

I am not going to tell you how the movie ends. But I am going to tell you that what I first thought was a cute mystical fairy tale, has caused me to ask of myself some profound questions... how deep is **my** faith? How much do I really believe that God can (you fill in the blank here) heal me? Make a miracle for me? Make me win the lottery? Am I a "Michal" who trusts that God can and would make miracles for me?

Shouldn't all of us here today, on this Yom Kippur eve, be asking ourselves these questions? We certainly ask God for an awful lot of things as part of the liturgy, but how many of us really believe that God will provide?

My words today are not meant to make you feel bad or even doubt yourselves. All of us, and believe me, perhaps me more than many of you, have a long way to go to reach the spiritual

and faith level of a Michal. But as we begin this season of introspection and repentance, I believe the question is a valid one.

And in actuality, my question is a two part question:

How deep is our faith in God, and perhaps even more importantly, how do we deepen our faith?

I am not going to try to answer the first part for anyone but myself, as I do so often in the quiet recesses of my mind and soul. But I do want to spend a few minutes speaking about the second part:

How do we deepen our faith?

At the very beginning of Pirke Avot, Rabbi Shimon HaTzadik teaches that the entire world endures because of three things: Torah, work, and acts of kindness, *gemilut hasadim*. The Hebrew word for work, *avodah*, is the word used to describe the labor required in the Temple: everything from cutting wood and cleaning out the ashes to the singing of the Levites and the prayers of the priests. Everything was work, *avodah*, and it was all to serve one purpose: to bring Heaven down to earth and human beings closer to God.

After the destruction of the Temple, this word, *avodah*, came to refer to spiritual work including prayer. In English we speak of self-work and inner work. In Hebrew we speak of *tikkun atzmi*, the fixing or improving of oneself. Or as I like to call it “deepening our faith.”

It is no coincidence that we call deepening our faith “work.” Deepening our faith is hard, namely because we don’t have a manual on how to do it. Believe me, I checked!

A few weeks ago I did a Google Search, what else, and I searched: “How do I deepen my faith?” There’s good news and there’s bad news. The good news: 13,400,000 hits or answers on the internet! The bad news: **at least** the first 100 have nothing to do with Jews or Judaism.

So how do we deepen our faith? How do we become the Michal of the movie with an absolute faith?

I’d like to humbly propose an answer, not THE answer, but AN answer: The first step in deepening our faith is realizing that our faith is centered not so much in believing as it is in doing.

Doing leads to believing.

The deepening of our faith, the profundity of our belief, lies in our actions.

It is no mistake that we come together on the High Holy Days and pray, talk, and meditate not about faith, not about believing, not about what we should or should not believe it, but about deeds, and mitzvot, and actions. What we did or did not do last year, what we said or did not say, what we should have done but didn’t. We judge ourselves as individuals and as a community on what we have done, or have not done, this past year.

We are reminded that these days are called Days of Awe, *Yamim Noraim*. They are not called ‘Days of Belief’ or ‘Days of Self-Endorsement.’ They are Days of Awe because of the work they require of us. They are Days of Awe because they force us to evaluate what we have done to better our world during the past year. They are Days of Awe because they are to overwhelm us with a sense of responsibility. Not of belief, but of action.

During these Days of Awe we are forced to confront ourselves during the year that just passed:

-Did we stand by while our neighbor was oppressed?

-Did we stay silent when our voice needed to be heard?

-Did we turn a blind eye to the plight of the poor, the orphan and the widow, the immigrant?

-Did we pass up any opportunities?

-Did we DO enough??

We do, so we can then believe, so we can deepen our faith.

The famous Hasidic master Rabbi Simchah Bunim relates of how, when once in the market, he offered a certain price to a farmer for his vegetables. The farmer replied: “You can do better.” What an amazing lesson from a farmer! From then on, we are told, Rabbi Bunam always told himself: “I can do better.”

We can all do better, couldn’t we? It’s not easy. This is not child’s play; it is, as we say, the big leagues.

Rabbi Bunim would further teach his followers that when you stay at home, everything is comfortable, but when you leave home, things can become discomfoting. He explained that when we stay in our homes, when we remain in our comfort zones surrounded by people who endorse and support what we say and do, all is fine for us. But when we leave this secure zone we become vulnerable because of all the people we are exposed to who have different values, priorities and perspectives. When we see the moral and ethical accomplishments of others, their activism and altruism, their generosity and compassion, their studying and learning, we suddenly see ourselves differently and we are not as content and comfortable with ourselves as before. Not for our beliefs... but for our deeds.

Rabbi Bunam would encourage his followers to always be moving out of their comfort zones thereby making themselves vulnerable. His *hasidim* did not come to services to feel good; they came to work on more doing, and therefore more believing.

At the end of the movie *The Wedding Plan*, Michal's faith is rewarded in a beautiful and surprising way. As for me, I can only hope that my "more doing" in this next year will lead me to the faith portrayed in the movie. A faith that comes from action, a faith that comes from love and respect for all people, and a faith that comes from seeing the face of God through the actions of myself and others.

Why is it so hard for us rabbis to follow George Burns' advice? I do not know. I will keep working on it... maybe. One thing I do know is that I pray that for all of us, this year will be a year of deep, personal, positive, transformative and loving deeds, a year of doing and believing.

Amen