

Do you believe in God? Do you have faith in God? Generally, we begin answering this question by stating our opinion with conviction. Yes! With all my heart or No! Heavens, no! It is as though I had asked you, do you believe in the tooth fairy or in unicorns? What if we left the words God, tooth fairy and unicorns out of it just for a moment and asked about the two other key words in this question-- Belief and Faith, -they are also critical concepts to think about.... what do they mean? What does it mean to believe or have faith in something or anything?

Webster's definitions of Belief:

: something that is accepted, considered to be true, or held as an opinion : something believed

And Webster's definition of Faith:

: belief and trust in and loyalty to God

: firm belief in something for which there is no proof****

Belief, then, is an un-provable fact. That is confusing, isn't it? Why would one believe anything to be true if it is unverifiable? Or does faith have anything to do with scientifically verifiable facts at all?

About 15 years ago, I heard the world-renowned motivational speaker and life coach, Tony Robbins say: Belief is not a thing at all --it is, rather, a

feeling. A feeling? What kind of feeling is a belief? According to Robbins, it is a feeling of absolute certainty. I had always assumed that “belief” and “faith” were convictions of certainty about matters that can only be described as “uncertain,” but Robbins was not speaking about intellectual conviction, but of the power and legitimacy of belief, of having faith in a “feeling.” How might faith feel? Calm, confident and certain - perhaps this certainty that Robbins speaks about could be what we call - trust. In Hebrew, trust is אמון and faith is אמונה. Trust, after all, is usually based on what we sometimes call a ‘gut feeling’ or *kishke gefil*. If faith and belief are feelings, then the essence of living a life of faith means living your life in a feeling of certainty, despite the “facts” of what is actually happening around you!

We read about Abraham on both days of Rosh Hashanah. Why Abraham? What do we learn from Abraham about faith and trust? How do these stories affect us on the days of the year in which we ask the ultimate question: What is the meaning of my life?

At a ripe old age, Abram receives a message from God, telling him that he will yet produce an heir, and that the child will inherit not only Abram’s property, but also his father’s covenant with God. Surely God’s promise would strain the credulity of even the most devoted follower. Sarah has been barren throughout her life. Now she is old, her body no longer surges with the monthly cycle of women—childbearing isn’t even a possibility. And she herself testifies that her husband is far too old to father children. Yet,

despite biological reality, God tells Abram that he will have a child, and that his descendants will outnumber the stars in the sky!

In response to God's astounding promise, the Torah states simply that "because he put his trust in the Lord, he reckoned it to his credit." [like and act of *tzedaka* or *hesed*]

וְהָאֱמֵן בַּיהוָה וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ לוֹ צְדָקָה [חסד]: Bereishit 15:6

The 11th-century French commentator Rashi explains how Abraham expressed his faith, 'והאמין בה' AND HE BELIEVED IN THE LORD (trusted God) — He did not ask Him for a *sign* proving that he would have a son; but in respect to the promise that he would possess the land he did ask for a sign, inquiring of God, במה אדע "By what sign shall I know [that I shall possess it?]" (Genesis 15:8). One way to read the verse, as Rashi did, is to recognize Abraham's willingness to trust God, despite the reality of the apparent impossibility [of having a child at an old age]. So, Abraham's trust in God is a **feeling of absolute certainty**, of trust and faith that he will have a son with Sarah despite the facts. He has faith in the ultimate meaning of life that God has in store for him, despite the challenges or tests he faces in life, like the promise of an heir through Sarah [there were 10 in all]. He found or created meaning in the challenges that faced him.

You see, the feeling of certainty in faith, in trust, has far more to do with the reality of our internal world than the external one. For example, if a couple today would have the same "problem" of infertility as Abraham and Sarah did, they would likely turn to medical technology to "solve the problem" by

means of IVF and many other medical treatments. Yet, we might also ask a legitimate question, to what degree does *faith* play a role in the natural ability to have children from a psychological perspective? Does a feeling of hopelessness or a belief in our inability to have a child or anything else affect the outcome? To what degree do any of our beliefs, our inner emotions play in the manifestation of the external outcomes in our lives? That isn't to say that people shouldn't utilize modern technology to bear children, but I myself have seen several miracle stories that point to the power of an extraordinary psychology and faith leading to the unexpected birth of children. Abraham and, I would argue, Sarah had an extraordinary psychology and absolute faith that however much they suffered in their infertility or otherwise, God would not forsake them.

In today's portion, we read about Sarah's miraculous birth of Isaac, when Abraham was 100 years old and she was also over 90! In Genesis chapter 21 we read: Summarise:

וַיְהִי כִּי־שָׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת־שָׂרָה כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבְּרָה׃

The LORD took note of Sarah as He had promised, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken.

וַתְּהַר וַתֵּלֶד שָׂרָה לְאַבְרָהָם בֶּן לְזִקְנָיו לְמוֹעֵד אֲשֶׁר־דִּבְּרָ אֱלֹהִים׃

Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken.

וַיִּקְרָא אַבְרָהָם אֶת־שְׁם־בְּנוֹ הַנּוֹלָד־לּוֹ אֶשְׁרֵי־יְלֵדָהּ לּוֹ שָׂרָה יִצְחָק:

Abraham gave his newborn son, whom Sarah had borne him, the name of Isaac.

They had their first child when they were 90 and 100 years old. What did they call this son? Yitzchak--from לצחוק to laugh! Why do you think they were laughing?

The Torah explains:

וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרָה צָחֵק עָשָׂה לִי אֱלֹהִים כָּל־הַשְּׂמֵעַ יִצְחָק־לִי:

Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me." She laughed at the absurdity of experiencing what she believed could never be! The birth of a child to a 90 year old woman and a 100 year old man! It would seem absurd to anyone...unless one has the belief and faith that anything is possible...

Is there a lesson about a life of faith that Avraham Avinu and Sarah Imenu can teach us? Is it possible that it is not the external circumstances that but our internal reality, what we believe and feel that affect our lives, our destiny. But what creates those feelings? What we think things mean to us, that is what we **believe** things mean - dictates how we feel and what is the quality of our life. This belief or faith may or may not change the objective outcome of a difficult situation, but it definitely changes how we respond to it. Our internal world, our emotional world of feeling is where we

actually live, it is driven not by external realities, but by what we believe, by what we are absolutely certain about. For example if you believe with absolute certainty that you are cursed, you will feel and actualize being cursed or being a curse - but if you are absolutely certain that you are blessed, you will actualize being a blessing to yourself and to others.

I have always seen spirituality and our inner life (that is-our feelings) as being overlapping, rather than separate realms. That means that what I am feeling inside is inextricably connected to the **“situation of my spirit”** - WHAT did the rabbi say? In Hebrew, when we talk about our mood or how we are feeling מצב הרוח we speak in terms of the situation, condition or STATE of our spirit. What is the state of your spirit today? How do you feel? It is a spiritual question! Contrite? Apathetic? Distracted? Fearful, angry, frustrated, impatient, anxious,.... Filled with love, gratitude, joy, hope? What is your level of faith in the face of your “problems”? Look, we all have problems and here is the good news and the bad news--they never go away! So it is our choice -do we see our life as filled with problems or offering us a another challenge?

So if how we feel is a reflection of what we think things mean than how do find, how do work to feel positive emotions on a regular basis? Whenever we are feeling a painful feeling, ask yourself, what would I have to believe to feel this way? Maybe I believe, “Nothing ever works out for Me”? Really! Does nothing ever work out for you? (hmmm) When we realize what beliefs we repeat to ourselves over and over, we begin to realize we may be sending ourselves untrue messages, creating unhelpful beliefs and then

getting really certain that they are true! One belief that many of us (that we feel certain about) have is that once we solve all our problems then we will be able to feel happy. So we spend tons of time focusing on our problems. But you see, problems never go away, we solve some and get others. Once we realize that problems are here to stay, we can stop focusing and obsessing over them! There is no connection between our happiness and our problems! If we wait for all of our problems to go away to feel certain, joyful, loving...we will wait forever! Problems are here to stay, so focus on gratitude, hope, love and the joy now and feel good right now!

Understood in this way, belief or faith are feelings of absolute certainty about something: which may neither be true nor false in the objective sense, but absolutely real in terms of the individual's emotional or spiritual state (that is our own subjective reality). Hopefully we are all in touch with the world around us, what we call the external world, but isn't the quality of our life really about what is going on inside, in our internal world?

So, big question, can one have faith and find meaning no matter what life throws at us?

Victor Emil Frankl (1905-1997), a renowned Austrian psychologist and Holocaust survivor thought so. The psychological approach he developed is known as logotherapy; it states that an individual's primary motivation is the search for meaning in life.... and that the primary purpose of psychotherapy should be to help the individual find that meaning. In 1942 Frankl and his family were sent to the [Theresienstadt concentration camp](#),

where his father perished. In 1944 the surviving Frankls were taken to [Auschwitz](#), where his mother and wife were both murdered. As Frankl observed the brutality and degradation around him, he theorized that those inmates who had some meaning in their lives were more likely to survive; He said and I quote:

- **“We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms -- to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.” [choose what it means to you]**
- — Viktor E. Frankl *Man’s Search for Meaning*

There is an Italian movie that you may have seen that illustrates this point beautifully. It is called *Life is Beautiful*. In short, the plot centers around a Jewish-Italian waiter, Guido Orefice (played by Roberto Benigni who is as full of joy in real life as in the movie), who meets Dora (Nicoletta Braschi), a pretty schoolteacher, and wins her over with his charm and humor. Eventually they marry and have a son, Giosue (Giorgio Cantarini). Their happiness is abruptly halted, however, when Guido and Giosue are separated from Dora and taken to a concentration camp. Determined to shelter his son from the horrors of his surroundings, Guido convinces Giosue that their time in the camp is merely a game and that he must endure all kinds of “challenges” in order to earn more points.

The father creates meaning, joy, love and playfulness within the context of a concentration camp-he makes a game out of it and creates “a beautiful life” for his son under the worst possible circumstances.... Proving ultimately that love, family and imagination conquer all.

On Rosh Hashanah, we must come to the understanding that it is not merely more life that we are after in the new year, but a life that is beautiful. How can we be more joyful, more loving and have more faith? We all want to live in a beautiful state, and that means to experience pleasant emotions on a regular basis.

If we live our lives in the primary emotions or feelings that we experience, shouldn't we spend some time trying to cultivate the ones that we want? At least decide and set our intention to cultivate the emotional life we crave?

What does any of this have to do with belief and faith? As has been stated, we live in our emotions and, therefore, what should we FEEL ABSOLUTELY CERTAIN ABOUT on these Days of Awe? That, God, the source of all life, loves and forgives us on these days, that the Kadosh Baruch Hu's greatest desire is that we actualize ourselves and our purpose in this world. That we have more love to give, more to create, more purpose and mission to accomplish.

So, to recap-What is faith and belief?

According to Tony Robbins: a feeling, a feeling of absolute certainty

According to Abraham? Trust

According to Victor Frankl:...“Faith is trust in ultimate meaning.”

We are all mefarshim of our lives, that is, we are the interpreters of the external realities of our lives. We do not have absolute control over what happens, but we do have absolute control of what it means to us. What we decide things mean determines how we feel. If we see God's image in every face, we will feel love and connection; if we believe that problems are here to stay, and that is ok, I will shift my focus to gratitude, love and joy right now as I look around at my family, my lover, my children, my grandchildren--I can be the richest person in the world.

Ask yourself, what is going on in my inner world. What do I believe with absolute certainty? What are the primary emotions that I live in every day? Are they frustration, anger, fear or are they joy, love, gratitude, belief and faith? Take the time to find out. Write them down hour by hour. Find out where you are living and more importantly, decide where you will live in the coming year. Every one of us can take massive action and change our lives -When? When is NOW a good time? That is the real power of these days of awe, you can make massive changes in your life, your inner life, right now.