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### The Source of Faith is Faith Alone

We used to tell visitors that the only kosher restaurant in Princeton was our kitchen. As such, we developed a tradition of hosting the graduating seniors and their parents for a BBQ dinner the evening prior to graduation. The kosher dining hall was already closed at that time of year; the students and their parents needed someplace to eat dinner. These dinners became a very special time in our lives each spring. It was a chance for us to say goodbye to cherished students and to thank parents for lending us their children for four years.

There were two groups of families who stood out. One group was parents who never anticipated that they would be eating a kosher dinner at the home of the rabbinic couple on the eve of their children's Princeton graduation. They did not raise their children with Kashrut, perhaps they did not raise their children as Jews at all, and here they were eating a kosher BBQ dinner because of the religious and social choices their children had made at college. And there were also families who came to dinner whose children we did not recognize; they were not involved in campus Jewish life and we never had a chance to meet them, but their parents needed a kosher meal and so they came to our home.

I think of those two groups of families frequently because our community is fixated on questions of religious commitments and how to transmit them. And we are fixated on questions of religious faith and how it is cultivated, preserved, or lost. I recently read a book written by Rabbi Chaim Jachter, called "Reason to Believe: Rational Explanations of Orthodox Jewish Faith" which gave me further opportunity to reflect on these questions. The book was shared with me so I could write a review. Instead of writing the review (for now), I've written this *drasha*, but I hope to write a review soon...

In the book's introduction, Rabbi Jachter shares a passage from one of the posthumously published books by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik that presents a powerful and compelling metaphor for the recognition of God (Abraham's Journey 29-31). A lost object can be claimed by its rightful owner through one of two methods. If the owner can identify *simanim*, distinguishing features of the lost object, she can combine enough of those *simanim*, to infer that the object is the one that she has lost. Alternatively, an owner may be able to recognize the object holistically through "*teviat ayin*" a general recognition of the form and shape of the object. *Teviat ayin* is a superior form of recognition because it is an instantaneous, spontaneous, and certain identification of an object all at once. Rabbi Soloveitchik suggested that these two approaches to identification of lost objects can be used to describe religious faith as well.

*Simanim* are akin to the arguments and proofs that suggest God's existence or God's role in history. *Teviat Ayin* is akin to an encounter with God that creates recognition instantly, prior to and really independent of, any specific argument, proof, or issue.

This distinction was the basis for a powerful essay written by my teacher Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein z'l called "The Source of Faith is Faith Itself." Rav Lichtenstein, in this short essay originally published in 1992, describes the impact of his parents and of his teachers on his religious life, but concludes that is direct encounters with God, the moments of his life in which God was apparent, meant more to his faith than any specific arguments or educational messages he received. *Teviat Ayin*, recognizing something all at once for what it is, provides stronger grounds for correct identification than using *simanim* to make an identification.

*Parashat Lekh Lekha* begins in media res, Avraham and Sarah are called to leave their homeland and journey to Eretz Yisrael for a new and special destiny. We know nothing about what makes them special. We know nothing about why God has chosen them for this special blessing. We know nothing about why Avraham and Sarah deserved this special relationship with God.

The Midrash fills in this gap in the Torah's narrative and presents Avraham as being the first of human to discover one God who cannot be represented by any statue or image. Curiously, the Midrash shares two opinions for when and how Avraham discovered God. According to one opinion, Avraham was three years old when he discovered that only one God exists. According to a second opinion Avraham was forty years old when he discovered God. Rambam, Maimonides, reconciles the two opinions and says that Avraham began to think about God at age three, and reached his definitive understand about God's existence at age forty.

The debate about Avraham's faith and its origins can be mapped onto the distinction between two sources of religious faith. If Avraham discovered God as a three year old, it was not as a philosopher but rather it was, instead, the faith that comes from basic awareness - *teviat ayin*. If Avraham discovered God as a forty year old adult, especially if that discovery came at the culmination of a process of investigation and thought that lasted for thirty seven years, then his faith was one built on a foundation of arguments and proofs, *simanim*.

Our end-of-year BBQ meals were proof, if any proof was necessary, that college is a time of great religious flux. Students living away from home for the first time have a chance to examine and evaluate the lifestyles and beliefs with which they had been raised by their parents and communities. As people of every imaginable religious and philosophical outlook come together to live and study and argue together, students have a chance to try-on new ways of worship and new perspectives on life. It is to be expected that college would be a time of religious exploration alongside the intellectual exploration that occurs at any great university. What I had not expected was the disconnect between the intense arguments and debates about elements of religious faith on the one hand, and any actual changes in religious practice.

Our students were deeply interested in all of the questions and answers that thinking people ask about God and the Torah. How was the Torah written? Does archeology discredit or reinforce the Biblical narrative? Can Judaism become consistent with Feminism while preserving its continuity with the past? And so many students shift their relationship to Torah and mitzvot dramatically while they are in college. But I can't recall a single student who changed his or her relationship to Torah and mitzvot because of a question or an answer to a question.

One helpful description of the nature of contemporary religious faith was provided by the recently deceased philosopher of religion Peter Berger. Berger argued that religious commitments are built on the ability to live within a "sacred canopy" that provides meaning and orientation to our lives. Communities enable their membership to live under a sacred canopy by constructing what he calls a "plausibility structure" in which religious commitments can still make sense and be reinforced by something outside ourselves.

For example, as modern people, we are all aware that our Jewish way of life and faith commitments are not the only choices that are available to us. We are surrounded by people who spend Saturday mornings having a second cup of coffee and reading the newspaper in bed at the time that we all walked to shul for *tefilot*. On our way to shul this very morning, we passed hundreds or thousands of our neighbors who are are spending this very hour catching up on work at the office, or seeing the latest movie, or raking leaves in the yard. We maintain our commitment to Judaism, or to Shabbat in particular, for example, because all of the elements of Jewish observance and faith fit together to create a "sacred canopy" that gives our lives order and meaning and beauty. Shul, and the relationships we cultivate here, provide a "plausibility structure" in which we see that the commitments that guide our life, are shared by others.

It is extremely uncommon for someone to abandon a faith commitment because of a question he cannot answer or an argument that she cannot countenance. But it is so common for faith to be undermined by an unfriendly or unwelcoming visit to a shul, or by a religious leader whose serious ethical lapses are exposed. From one perspective acceptance of a religious worldview shouldn't depend on whether people are nice in shul! Either the Torah is true or it is not true! But, Berger's paradigm helps us understand this common phenomenon. Faith is maintained by the communities and relationships that sustain a plausibility structure. When those relationships are strained or those communities shut us out, or we can no longer find religious leadership that is ethically compelling to us, faith itself can be lost or undermined.

I don't know how Avraham discovered God or how old he was at the time. But I know that Avraham and Sarah spread their faith to their children and inspired their neighbors to recognize God, not through arguments and proofs, but by living a life of ethical excellence and kindness to others. If we wish to spread Judaism today to our children, or to strengthen the commitment to Judaism within ourselves, we would be well advised to follow the model of Avraham and Sarah and open our homes to guests, concern ourselves with the welfare of our neighbors, and convey our deepest ethical commitments to our children as if our lives and our legacies depended upon it.