

Rosh Hashanah – Day 2
The Faith of Avraham
Rabbi David Wolkenfeld

For more on the history of the term “*emunah*,” see this important article by Rav Yo’el bin Nun [here](#).

The hero of Rosh Hashanah is Avraham. Yesterday we read the story of the long-awaited birth of his son Yitzhak, as well as how, at God’s command, Avraham was prepared to lose his beloved son Yishmael – who was saved at the last minute in a miraculous fashion. Today we read how, again, at God’s command, Avraham was prepared to lose his beloved son Yitzhak, who was also saved in a miraculous fashion at the last minute.

My favorite story about Avraham however is from the Midrash Rabbah and answers a question that isn’t answered anywhere in the Torah itself. How did Avraham discover God? What was the origin of his faith?

(Gen. 12:1) . . . Rabbi Isaac said: [God’s call to Avraham] may be compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a *birah doleket*. – a palace with lights burning.

Is it possible that this palace lacks a caretaker?’ he wondered. The owner of the palace looked out and said, ‘I am the owner of the palace.’ Similarly, because our ancestor Avraham said, ‘Is it possible that the world lacks a caretaker?’ the Holy Blessed One looked out and said to him, ‘I am the Sovereign of the Universe.’

Avraham saw a world with beauty, with coherence, with order, and with stability. “How can there be a palace,” Avraham asked, “with candles lit, with lights burning, without an owner, a caretaker, who is responsible for maintaining that order?” Avraham’s discovery of God, his *emunah* came from a recognition that reliability and dependability, and order cannot emerge from chaos without God’s creation and direction.

But maybe “*birah doleket*” means - not a palace with lights burning, but a palace engulfed in flames. Avraham saw a world on fire. He saw a world with violence, hatred, pain and suffering destroying the beauty of the palace. “Who is the owner of this palace?” Avraham cried. “Someone built this palace and is responsible to protect and maintain it! Where is that person? Who will put out the flames?” And in response to those questions, God called from the window – “I am the Sovereign of the Universe.”

And what did the Sovereign of the Universe tell Avraham – “Lekh Lekha.” It’s your task Avraham, and the task of your children after you, to put out the fire. Avraham traveled to a land he did not know – not as an immigrant looking to fit in – but as a revolutionary seeking to transform human life.

“*Ki Yidativ LeMa’an Asher Yitzaveh Et Banav v’Et Beito Acharav veShamru Derekh Hashem La’asot Tzedekah u-Mishpat*”

“For I know,” God says in Genesis, that Avraham will “command his children and his household after him to keep the way of God, to act with righteousness and justice.”

Avraham is central to Rosh Hashanah because he is the archetype of *emunah* but his *emunah*, as we have seen, can be understood in two different ways.

Avraham’s *emunah* was built on his recognition that the Universe is predictable and it has order and structure because of God. In turn, our response as faithful human beings must be to relate to God, and to one another, with dependability, reliability, and trust.

Alternatively, Avraham’s *emunah* was built on his recognition that the order and beauty of the Universe is fragile and needs our protection. We must become agents of justice and ethical behavior to salvage the

beautiful palace of God from the destructive flames of hatred and violence.

These two interpretations of the midrash, and these two interpretations of Avraham's faith do not contradict each other. Both interpretations are encompassed by the meaning of the word "*emunah*" in the Hebrew Bible and both are crucial. Rav Yoel Bin Nun has written extensively on this.

The first meaning of "*emunah*" in Tanakh is a synonym for ethical integrity. Tomorrow we will read, in *Parashat Ha'azinu* – from the end of *Sefer Devarim* "*El Emunah v'Ayn Avel; Tzadik veYasbar Hu.*" God's *emunah* is contrasted to "*avel*" – moral corruption, and is made parallel to God being *tzadik* and *yasbar* – just and ethically upright. These characteristics were at the core of Avraham's religious worldview.

The second meaning of the word "*emunah*" in Tanakh is trustworthy, reliable, steadfast, and Avraham explicitly exemplified this form of *emunah*. In Genesis 15 we are told "*Ve'He'emin Bashem, VaYechashev Lo Tzedaka*" – Avraham trusted God's promise, and in turn, God viewed that trust as a form of righteousness. Later in the Book of Nehemiah we find God's relationship with Avraham characterized as "*U-Matzgata et Levavo Ne'eman Lefanecha*" – You found his heart faithful to you. Here too, *emunah* means "faith" in the sense of being faithful, reliable, and trusting.

It is only in the medieval period, with the writings of Rav Sa'adia Gaon and Rambam - Maimonides, that Judaism developed a system of dogma and doctrine, and that is when "*emunah*" came to be understood as an affirmative belief in specific doctrines about God and the Torah. The move to develop a Jewish creed of faith is connected to Maimonides' attempt to synthesize Judaism with Aristotelian physics and metaphysics. For Rambam, metaphysical truths about God can be proven and are knowable in the same way that the laws of physics can be proven and known. *Emunah*, for Rambam, believing the correct things, is therefore part and parcel of having a refined intellect, which in Rambam's view, is the only path to *Olam haBab* – an eternal soul.

Rambam's philosophical accomplishments endure as one of the greatest legacies of Jewish literature. I also have great personal admiration for the way that Rambam put cognition and ideas at the heart of Jewish religious life. In addition, Rambam was essentially correct in his distillation of the essential beliefs that lie at the foundation of Jewish life.

But, the grand synthesis of faith and philosophy that Rambam constructed has not survived intact.

For Jews, Christians and Muslims of the medieval world, Religion, science, and philosophy all reinforced each other in a coherent vision of the world. But, piece-by-piece, that medieval paradigm crumbled as new ways of thinking began to spread. During the Enlightenment, philosophy, religion, and science all went their separate ways and religious knowledge and religious faith became a sphere where nothing could be known with scientific certainty. Descartes developed philosophy independent of religion. Galileo developed science independent of philosophy, and finally, Kant charted the limits of what could be known by "pure reason" removing metaphysics from the realm of what can be known with certainty.

Jewish thinkers too recognized that the medieval world, where science, philosophy, and religion were all part of one coherent system had broken down. As early as the 17th century, some of the greatest halakhic minds of all time, wrote masterpieces of Torah scholarship focusing on *safek* – doubt and uncertainty – as the orienting point of halakhic thought. [c.f. *Shev Sh'matata* by Rav Aryeh Leib Heller, Kuntres HaSefeikot by the Shakh.]

In the 20th century, Rabbi Avraham Karelitz – known as the "Hazon Ish," the founding father of Haredi, Ultra-Orthodox Jewry in Israel, Rabbi Avraham Kook, the founding father of Religious Zionism, and Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the central figure in American Modern Orthodoxy, all articulated understandings of *emunah* that embraced a post-Medieval experience.

According to the Hazon Ish, there are no longer any heretics. Since God's presence in the world is no longer manifest and easily apparent, or provable, there is no longer an obligation to hate heretics and confront them in the ways that Medieval Judaism demanded. In our fallen world, where Divine reward and punishment are slow to make themselves felt, our response to heresy must be connecting to those who do not believe as we do with "chains of love."

Rabbi Avraham Kook came to the same conclusion, but arrived there from the opposite perspective. Because humanity, in his view, was moving towards greater and greater perfection, there was no longer any true evil in the world. Medieval Heretics, according to Rav Kook, knew the truth about God, but opposed those truths out of evil. In the modern period, there is no true evil or heresy because everyone desires to do good and that quest, in and of itself, is a manifestation of something Divine.

Writing autobiographically, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik in his masterpiece "The Lonely Man of Faith" described living a life of faith as living a life filled with doubt and crisis. But that crisis of faith, for Rav Soloveitchik, had absolutely nothing to do with dogma or doctrine, but was rather existential crisis rooted in the experience of living in covenant with God.

All three of these thinkers are showing us that we have an opportunity, in the aftermath of Modernity, to return to a Biblical understanding of *emunah*, which is the *emunah* that first captivated and inspired Avraham. If we don't follow their lead, we risk turning *emunah*, religious faith, into another subject that needlessly divides Jew from Jew. Indeed, we see too often how *emunah* is just another piece of rhetoric that we use to accuse each other of having insufficient *emunah*, or to accuse each other of deviation from Orthodox dogma, or to accuse each other of fanaticism and religious fundamentalism.

Avraham is the hero of Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah is the time to make a shift and rededicate ourselves to Avraham's form of *emunah*.

Emunah means ethical excellence. Our communities must become famous as places where ethical excellence, the absence of corruption, and compassion are fostered. The Talmud teaches that the first question we are asked after our lives on Earth have ended is, "*Nassata veNattata beEmunah?*" Have you conducted your affairs with *emunah* – meaning with integrity? Jewish communities need to be places where we learn how to do that with greater refinement and concern for details. This is the meaning of Isaiah's vision of *Mashiach*, the Messiah, being wrapped in *emunah* and *tzedek* – redemption follows ethical integrity.

Emunah also means trust, commitment, reliability, and these too need to be hallmarks of Jewish religious life. Are we the same people, with the demonstrable commitment to the same values each day of the year, or is the person we appear to be when we come to shul on Rosh Hashanah a totally different person from whom we are when we walk out of the door? Do our brothers and sisters in Israel know that we have their backs – that their fear is our fear, that their hopes for peace are our hopes too? Or, do we forget about Israel when it drops to the inside pages of the newspaper?

Do our friends and neighbors know that they can trust us to be there for them and with them to celebrate happy news, and for support in hard times? Is our connection to *mitzvot* characterized by reliability and dependability or do we engage with *mitzvot* as if they were a hobby like collecting stamps rather than a unique opportunity for a connection to the Infinite?

Avraham's relationship with God was characterized by *emunah* – there was trust, reliability, and consistency. And there was a cultivation of ethical excellence and a passion for justice. Today is an opportunity to dedicate ourselves to that same value of *emunah*: to be faithful in that way to ourselves, to the members of our family, to our community, and ultimately to God.

Shanah Tovah.