

"THE MEANING OF FAITH"
fifth in a series on Jewish Meanings

A-55

"Faith" as a subject for a sermon by a Rabbi seems so appropriate and so to-be-expected, that it is almost an invitation to the congregation to doze off into a gentle Sabbath nap. And yet it is a topic which is rarely discussed from a Traditional Jewish pulpit. It is rarely mentioned because it is taken for granted that those who do come to synagogue already have faith. It is an assumption which is, I believe, mostly correct. But the fact remains that Faith is a very hazy concept, and that its causes and effects are not always understood. I believe this sufficient reason, therefore, to invite you with me in an exploration of the Jewish Meaning of Faith.

The first thing to be said about Faith is that it makes life liveable. Without Faith in G-d, life is neither intelligible nor worth enduring. Even the world's greatest skeptics maintain that you have got to believe in something. Bertrand Russell, that famous philosopher and brilliant mathematician whom we might well dub the high-priest of all atheists, writes, "To live a human life, man must have grounding in something, in some sense outside of human life.... in some end which is impersonal and above mankind, such as G-d or Truth or Beauty." Life without Faith is a dull, mechanical, meaningless routine. With it, life begins to take on meaning.

Our Rabbis seem to make this point in their comments on this week's Bible portion. The children of Israel began their long trek out of Egypt and Pharo's legions began to give chase. They arrived at the banks of the Red Sea which G-d, in a miraculous act of deliverance, split in two allowing the Jews to walk across its dry banks. When they finished crossing the Red Sea, the sea rushed back, drowning the Egyptians, who were pursuing them through the divided waters, and the Jews realized that they had been helped on the first leg of their journey to freedom. At that moment, the Bible relates, VAYIRU HA'AM ES HA'SHEM VA'YAAMINU BA'SHEM UVE'MOSHE AVDO, "they feared the Lord and they believed in the Lord and in His servant Moses". After this profession of Faith in G-d, AZ YASHIR MOSHE UV'NEI YISROEL, Moses and the children of Israel began to sing their famous SHIRAH, their famous song of freedom and liberty and gratitude and redemption. Our Rabbis saw some connection between the Faith in G-d and the singing of the Song.

LO ZACHU YISROEL LOMAR SHIRAH AL ~~XX~~ HA'YAM ELA BI'ZCHUS EMUNAH, Israel was given the privilege of SHIRAH, of Song, only because ^{of} EMUNAH, their faith and belief in G-d. Faith, our Rabbis want to say, is that which makes of life a song, that which gives it cheer and happiness and delight and hope. SHIRAH can come about only as a result of EMUNAH. With Faith, life is a song; without it - a dirge. With it, life is a smile; without it - a tear. With Faith there is enough laughter in Life to buoy a man up so that he can ride the waves of adversity; without that faith, he must inevitably sink, pulled down by the dead-weight of drudgery. Without Faith, life is dull and boring and desperate and hopeless; with it, you have cheer and hope and firmness and equanimity. Certainly, EMUNAH leads to SHIRAH.

But it would be a sad mistake if we were to think that this is the only or major reason for Faith. We would not be true to the JEWISH meaning of Faith if we said, as so many do, that "Peace of Mind" is the purpose of all religion. And this leads us to our second point which is this: while it is true that Faith leads to Song, that religion gives a man security and peace of mind and peace of soul, yet the real and compelling reason for belief in G-d is Truth. The reason that I believe that G-d watches over every living being is not because if I believe it then life is easier to live, but because I think that such is really the case. Religion should not be accepted because it gives a man a sense of security, anesthetizes his complexes and bolsters his alter-ego; rather should it be accepted because of a firm belief that its teachings are true and its principles are correct.

As a matter of fact, there are two different Hebrew words which represent these ideas. The word EMUNAH signifies the type of faith which is rooted in conviction and aims at Truth. The word BITACHON, on the other hand, represents the type of faith which results from a desire for security. We might better call it "trust". And the two should not be confused. Emunah means religious faith, believing for its own sake, not for any selfish desire to pacify my own mind. BITACHON is the psychological desire for protection and safety. EMUNAH, according to the famous Hebrew grammarian of the 12th century, Radak, is related to the Hebrew word EMESS, which means "Truth", while BITACHON is derived from the word BETACH, which means secure, firm, fast, safe.

Our contemporary world has unfortunately discarded EMUNAH and substituted, in its stead, BITACHON. Modern man has stopped believing in G-d because he has been attracted by

the shiny new theories of natural science, which he never really understood, because he has become over-proud in considering his accomplishments - machines, skyscrapers, bombs, and has imagined that life can be lived without faith, without EMUNAH. But two world wars, a severe depression and the icy grip of a cold war have succeeded in showing man that he is unsafe, insecure and possibly marked for extinction. And so, after trying out all kinds of belief, man returns to religion. But not to the religion he once knew, not to the genuine belief which sought truth and revered a living G-d. Rather, his religion is one of BITACHON. He goes all out for best-sellers like "Peace of Mind", which offer him a watered-down religion as a quick cure for all his complexes, conflicts and neuroses, a religion which does justice to the Marxist claim that "religion is the opiate of the masses".

It is that attitude which we must avoid in our Jewish understanding of Faith. For while religion does offer security, that is not its primary goal. We believe not because it is good for us, but because it is right for us. The famed Hassidic Rebbe, Reb Moshe Leib Sossower, in one of his piquant remarks, pointed to this sad confusion of EMUNAH and BITACHON when he observed that, "How easy is it for a poor man to depend upon G-d - what else has he to depend upon? And how hard for a rich man to believe in G-d - all his possessions cry out to him : believe in us." If Religion is to become only a matter of security and peace of mind, then religion is only for the poor, the insecure and the weak-minded. ~~Now~~ Our understanding of Faith and Religion, however, is such that it is for all men, for the wealthy and the happy and the well-adjusted as well as for all others.

The Sages of the Talmud no doubt had this in mind when they ruled that as part of the EMESS VEYATZIV prayer, in which we reaffirm our faith in G-d, we also recite a verse making mention of the KRIAS YOM SUF, the dividing of the Red Sea, because, they explain, SHE'KI VAN SHE'KARA LAHEM ES HA'YAM HE'EMINU BO, because G-d split the sea for the Israelites, did they believe in Him. The important point in this is the order in which things occurred. Here was a people which had just left the slave labor camps of a strange country where they had been imprisoned for over 400 years. They were weak, tired and spiritless. Behind them were amassed legions of crack troops, brave riders and experienced soldiers, cruel slave-traders who were planning an enjoyable massacre of every last Jew. And there in front of them was the Sea, the forbidding sea which almost certainly sealed their doom. The morale of the people must have been as low as possible. They must have been desperate. ~~Khakh~~

What an occasion for missionaries to gain converts to Faith! What an opportune moment to sell Religion with its promise of security. And yet there is no mention of Faith, no hint, no matter how vague, at a sudden recrudescence of religious feeling. But after the crossing of the Sea, after the miraculous escape and victory, when safety has been assured, when things seemed just rosy, when the hordes of Pharo were drowned and a Promised Land beckoned on ahead, when the need for security and peace of mind was just nill, at a time when an American Jew would cast off his Tallis and Teffilin and rush to the nearest exclusive golf-club, just then VA&'YAAMINU YISROEL BA'SHEM, just then did the Israelites reaffirm their Faith in G-d. For a truth had been demonstrated to them - that G-d is all powerful, the Creator of all men and the Lord of History. Their Faith was not blind, it was ~~not a result of fear, but the result of searching for truth. It was an intelligent, and~~ enlightened. It was ^{not} the mendicant faith, a faith of men and not beggars. "The only faith", writes a biographer of Abraham Lincoln, "that wears well, and holds its color in all weathers, is that which is woven in conviction and set with the sharp mordant of experience".

The third and last point that must be made is similar to what we have been stressing in most of the other "Meaning" talks. And that is, that we must apply the Jewish test of what it accomplishes. The test of Faith is the behavior that it produces. As long as a man's faith exists in vacuum it is meaningless; as long as it is not translated into concrete action, it is as valid as the theory of green cheese on the other side of the moon. Judaism, unlike certain other religions, does not preach the doctrine that "believe and you will be saved". Faith cannot produce redemption; good behavior and good works can. ~~A man will be saved". Faith cannot produce redemption; good behavior and good works can.~~ A man can shout from the ~~2~~ roof-tops that honest is the best policy, but until he practices honesty in his own business relationships until it hurts, all his talk is meaningless. Only this week, at a meeting of the Rabbinic Alumni of Yeshiva University, Dr. Belkin, President of Yeshiva, quoted from an unpublished lecture of that great Christian scholar of Judaica, Harvard's George Foote Moore, that "The only difference between philosophy and religion is that religion does something about it". And rightly so! For religion and faith to be meaningful and significant in life, it has got to do something about it".

There is a beautiful Midrash in which this point is dramatically underlined. When Israel first left the land of Egypt, and just before they arrived at the Red Sea, Moses, as the leader of this inspired but frightened group of Hebrew slaves, found himself in difficult ^{*}mutiny. Moses began to pray, and G-d answered: MAH TITZAK ELAI, K "why do you pray to Me?" Our Rabbis elaborate upon that response of G-d, and they say that G-d replied: HA'YAM SO'ER, VE'HA' SONEI RODEF, VE'ATAH OMED UMARBEH BE'TFILLAH LEFANAI? The seas are storming, Moses, a world is in turmoil, a nation is on the banks of a sea which threatens to engulf it, and a cruel and bitter enemy is pursuing you; at a time of this sort how can you pray? No, says G-d, when a world is unsettled, when waves of hate and enmity and sadism flood entire continents, when storm-clouds gather ominously on the horizons, when the smell of war and the stench of genocide again are felt, when the enemy of all decency and the self-confessed assassin of the Divine in man is in the ascendancy, when three million of your people again face extinction, when persecution and discrimination and bigotry rule the minds of men, then, least of all, is the time for profession of Faith; that is not the time to piously point to your good heart, it is not the time for silly sentimentalism, not the time for talking in abstract generalities about Religion and Democracy and Freedom and Love and Mother and Home. No, when YAM WO'ER and SONEI RODEF then MAH TITZAK ELAI, then why shout, why pray, why talk of faith? And Moses answers G-d, in all simplicity, MAH LI LA'ASSOSS? What then, O G-d, should I do? And G-d answers, as the Bible records the answer in today's portion, VE'ATA HAREM ES MATCHA ~~UNETEI~~ ^{AL HA'YAM.} ES YADCHA ~~HAREM ES MATCHA~~, lift up that rod, bravely stand on your own ~~two~~ two feet and face the SONEI, the enemy, strike where it hurts; and NETEI ES YADCHA AL HA'YAM, stretch forth your hand on the sea, if the seas of hate and cynicism are flooding your world, then go ahead, stretch out your hand and save all who can be saved; if there is but one man who needs your help, then your task is not to talk of faith, but to lend a helping hand. Now is the time to arise, lead your people to a Promised Land, teach them to fear G-d and respect their fellow humans. Forget the preaching, get down to the practice. Forget sentiments, show results. Don't dare talk of how religious you really are until you live a religious life. For only then does Faith become meaningful, only then does Faith lead to Song, EMUNAH to SHIRAH. In times when the seas storm and the enemy pursues, then forget

You, Moses, have a greater mission. There certainly is something you can do. HAREM ES MATCHA

* straits. There were problems of food & supplies & morale & a threatened

the ANI MA'MIN, and proceed to the HINNI MUCHAN UMEZUMAN LE'KAYEIM.

In summary, then, we have made three points. First, that Faith leads to a happier kind of life. Second, that this is only an effect, not the reason for Faith; the reason is that we are really convinced of the Truths in which we believe. And finally that Faith must be more than a theory, it must be observed in practical life.

In the words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, which he wrote the night before he died, "The only limits to our realization of tomorrow will be our doubts of today. Let us move forward with a strong and active faith".