

FAITH IS the defeat of PROBABILITY BY THE POWER OF POSSIBILITY (YK 5782)

I've been wondering about faith for most of my life. What is it? What does it mean? Who can have it? How can one get it? Why do people find it and then lose it? And perhaps most important what is the relationship between faith and belief? "Belief in", God for example?

I've approached those questions looking through an academic or intellectual lens- I looked closely at biblical figures who are among the-characters of whom it is said they had indestructible faith (in God); primarily Job and Daniel. The theme of the book of Job is the eternal problem of unmerited suffering. The central character, **Job**, attempts to understand the sufferings that engulf him. "There was a man in the land of Uz named Job. That man was blameless and upright; He feared God and shunned evil." (1:1) Satan wanted to challenge Job's faithfulness to God. God allowed Satan to take all of Job's property and to fill Job's body with disease. He suffered personal loss and unimaginable heartache, losing his health, his wife and all his children. His world was destroyed. Even then, Job never abdicated his faith in God. The book has a happy ending. God appears, praises Job for his loyalty and for praying on behalf of his friends. God rebukes the friends for the shallowness of their devotion to Job. "And the Lord gave Job twice what he had before." (42:10).

Daniel is arguably one of the most resilient men in the Bible. He was taken from his land of Israel, as a young adult, forced to serve in Babylon; a country hostile to the Israelites. He witnessed the destruction of the first Temple by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. But he never lost his faith and trust in God. Although he never returned to the land of Israel, he lived when the 2nd Temple was built. Daniel's message is, just as the God of Israel saved him from his enemies, so God would save all Israel from their oppression by mortal kings. With unbroken faith he continued to be obedient to his God and his calling. Job's and Daniel's faith enabled them to watch while their worlds and personal lives were devastated. And yet they remained faithful, never gave up on their steadfast love for and trust in the goodness of God. How could that be?

Unalterable, one might say, blind faith in God, worked for many in Torah. Their resilience and ability to "carry on" were demonstrated in the context of *classic biblical faith*.

Their lives reflected belief systems that revolved solely around God. I began to understand that the concept of faith exists in different ways, at different times in history, in different liturgies and religions. That classic biblical or medieval concept of religious faith doesn't work for me or I imagine, for most modern Jews.

In mid-July, I had a surgical procedure to repair my atrophied vocal folds. The protocol required that I remain speechless, literally, for 36 hours after the surgery. When Rick and I were in the house together it was frustrating. I did a lot of writing. He regularly found his glasses and did a lot of reading. When I was alone in the house the story was entirely different. I felt liberated. No possibility of answering the phone. A big incentive not to read texts or emails because responding was much too tedious without the ability to dictate. By a doctor's direction, separating myself from the daily life in which many of us exist, unleashed a way of thinking, feeling, observing, a kind of liberation, I'd never known before. In the words of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks: "It was then that I realized ...faith is not a complex set of theological propositions. It is both simpler and more profound than that. *It is a sustained discipline of meditation on the miracle of being...*Not how we are, but *that* we are, is cause for finding happiness in unexpected places [and] for wonder".¹ Faith is a feeling which can become integral to who we are. It has nothing to do with reason or belief. It is a matter of the soul and not of the head. And if/when we find it, even for a split second, it is worth trying to nurture and cultivate. Faith is the defeat of *probability*, by the power of *possibility*. **[REPEAT]** It can fill us with calm. Maybe you already have faith and can confirm what I'm just learning.

The biblical word for faith is אֱמוּנָה. It shares the same root as the word AMEN which means 'truly'. The word *emunah* entered Europe through Christianity and Hellenism. Pronounced the same way, its appearance continued from Torah to the New Testament. Modern western civilizations have had difficulty understanding the word *Emunah*, perhaps because the idea is not understood with the human mind. It is felt in our guts and that feeling nourishes our hearts and souls. Because of its derivation, faith was assumed to be a form of

¹ Jonathan Sacks, *Celebrating Life, finding happiness in unexpected places*, p. 9

knowledge, a matter of the intellect; a belief. That is not at all what *emunah* means in Biblical or Torah Hebrew. **Let me explain.**

Faith/ *Emunah* will be unique to and “owned by” each one who possesses it. Yet, it’s one of those things that when you share it, you end up having more. AMEN is said by individuals and often in unison in a communal setting. But it can never attain the individual, personal nature and the certainty of אמונה. Faith endures in our souls. It becomes a part of who we are. Being brave, for example, does not make a person unafraid. Bravery means being afraid and doing it anyway. Faith is like that. It engenders hope and a powerful experience of confidence, despite not understanding it intellectually, and despite living in such an uncertain world. Faith is what enables me to say honestly, “I don’t understand what it means to believe in God, but I can tell you for sure, that I have experienced God.” Faith is the defeat of *probability*, by the power of *possibility*; the hope, the determination, the working together, to be more in control of the outcome. Faith and hope go together, empowering us in every aspect of life. With Covid dominating our lives, it feels like we are living in an echo chamber; not enough joy and too much isolation and confusion, sometimes not even being sure what day it is. We thought we were moving toward the probability of better times, of coming to a better place. Now we have only holes in the bubble and everyone’s own *misehegas* is on steroids. We are sorely missing the social and emotional nourishment that time together with friends and family used to provide. But faith in our ability to connect lovingly with others, faith in our shared humanity, can help us navigate all parts of our lives.

The 2020/2021 Olympics recently completed in Tokyo, have been called **The kindness Olympics**. In many ways watching the competitions, renewed my faith in humankind. Despite the delay of a year and so many other hardships. the athletes powered through. There was an extraordinary, unexpected and much needed show of humility, gratitude, physical, emotional and mental courage. There were seemingly infinite opportunities taken to show the very best of human nature and innate kindness. It was an extraordinary display of power and grace combined with faith and hope. We watched gestures of lifting each other up physically when one fell. There was a sharing not just of medals but of powerful, compassionate and gracious feelings. They had commitment years of hard work, combined with hope and faith,

each day of their young lives. On the one hand their goal was to win. Though they would not articulate it this way, their desire was to defeat probability, and with the addition of hope and faith, to embrace possibility. They all succeeded; each one individually and all of them together- regardless of having won a medal or not.

Rabbi Arthur Green, the founder of the Rabbinical School at Hebrew College once told me: Write about what is bothering you. Write what you would want to hear. In the beginning of my writing I often do not know what I would want to hear. When I think of what *you* might like to hear, what you might wonder about or be troubled by; it is always then that what I want to share begins to come together. As I was assembling the writings I've done for this high holiday season, I realized there is an underlying theme which unites them. The thread was inadvertent. It developed on its own. Or did it?

Usually, we focus at this time of year on the missteps we've taken during the year and the hurt we've caused each other and we ask forgiveness. My hope during these high holy days has been to help us see more of the goodness and beauty in life with which we have been blessed; to let go of speaking from a place of always being right; to empower ourselves with hope and a kind of faith we could understand and embrace. Asking forgiveness is a central and important theme during these days of awe and I do not want us to overlook it. **But today, and at the end of the year 5781, I invite you to focus not on the work of asking forgiveness but on the equally challenging work of *granting* forgiveness.** Offering forgiveness can be an empowering and an unburdening act. It is a unique and uplifting gift we can give each other. What if we collectively turn to each other, virtually or otherwise, or envision each other's faces in our hearts and our minds and especially if we look in the mirror and with kavannah, with deep intention, speak the words "I forgive you"? Perhaps then the forgiveness will gather, filling the air and the water, each of our hearts and all of the natural world, pooling around us and gushing forth. And we will smile and chuckle with relief.

May this new year bring us an awareness of the beauty in the world.

May we share expressions of gratitude that will uplift us.

May we move away from a place where we insist “we are right” in order to grow in relationship with people we’ve not *really* known before.

May we accept as our responsibility and privilege, shape an image of God, as we need God to be.

Bless us with the ability to embrace the power of possibility, to create lives together filled with the Torah of hope, of gratitude and of love.

I close with the words of a prayer sent to me by my teacher, Rabbi Ebn Leader:

May the gates of mercy open before you.

May you find the strength to walk through them, and let your heart expand as you do so.

May you have the courage to be present for others even as you are in that place, so that they may be taken along with you.

May the gates of tears open before you.

May you follow their flow to a place of love.

May this year be sweet and easier for all of us.

May we be the change we long for.

MUSAF - Pls rise as you are able, as we begin Musaf with Hatzi Kaddish p. 518

cont w/ SILENT AMIDAH pp. 520-526. Engl. pp. 371-383; reflections pp.527 to 531.