

Faith

EMUNAH

The righteous live by faith.

Ani ma'amin be'emunah sh'lemah—I believe with complete faith.

~Rambam (Maimonides), Thirteen Articles of Faith

IN OUR YOUTH, questions come to us about space, time, and life that confound the human mind. No one has to introduce these questions to us. They arise unbidden when we are quiet under the night sky or catch a glimpse of the structure and texture of a hand, or meet our first painful, unaccountable loss, or lie alone in bed shielded from the storm, and wonder.

Somehow, most of us reach an accommodation with the profound mystery of life that allows us to get on with living human lives. Some of us turn away from the large questions, which doesn't dispose of them but just tucks them into the back of life's closet. Others receive and accept answers that are really nothing but platitudes and hollow certainties about faith. A few reach their own understanding of the larger issues of life that seem satisfactory. However we may happen to first work out our relationship to the vast mysteries, there is a tendency to carry those answers into our mature years, where they fit no better than the clothes, toys, and books we left behind in childhood.

That may be one reason why so many people find the soul-trait of faith to be a challenge. There are other reasons as well. We are a generation still reeling from the horrors and excesses of the twentieth century that call into question not only the nature of this God of ours, but God's existence itself. Compelling evidence can be mustered to challenge any basis of faith, so much so that faith itself can seem to be not just the super-rational inner state that by definition it is, but fully irrational, an act that defies the empirical facts.

Yet people intent on answering the inner call to make the most of their lives unavoidably have faith on their spiritual curriculum. Even the most firmly atheistic person feels a deep and intense longing for an intimate connection to powers greater than himself or herself. To say "I don't believe in God" doesn't put an end to that yearning, though it may call into question what the person means by "God."

Faith is a challenge even to people who do feel some degree of resonance with the wellsprings of divinity, because too often that inner sensibility is corrupted by stories that have been internalized in the name of faith—because if faith means admiring a big white man with a long white beard enthroned in the sky, then this sort of faith is foolish or, in the view of Rav Kook, who was the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel, heretical. He explains, taking as an example of faith the conviction that the Torah is of divine origin: "A person may believe that the Torah is from heaven, but his understanding of heaven may be so skewed that it allows for not a shred of true faith."

Even people who do have a well-established inner sense of God need to be challenged in their faith, because a fully resolved faith is a dead faith, since the facts of life challenge faith at every turn. Our understanding, like all our inner qualities, is meant to grow.

Faith is essential to the Torah-observant Jew, as the Rambam emphasizes by making faith the very first positive commandment.

At this point, you might be asking me to define what I mean by faith, to help pin down the subject under discussion. I hesitate to offer a definition, and ask you to bear with me while I make the case that faith is not something to be understood intellectually but rather to be appreciated from experience.

Tradition does provide some guidance through models for faith that are accurate to our own lives and with which we can identify. After the people of Israel had witnessed the ten plagues, for example, having seen God's power over nature, and having even experienced God's very presence (in the form of the *Shechinah*), and as they stood on the dry ground between the two walls of water of the Red Sea that had been split for them, the Talmud tells us that the people worried whether God would destroy their Egyptian pursuers or whether they would be overtaken and killed. They said: "Just as we ascend on one side of the sea, so too, are the Egyptians ascending on the other side." As an aftereffect of the years they spent in oppression and bondage in Egypt, the people had little faith. It took seeing the Egyptians splayed out dead on the seashore for faith to become deeply implanted in their hearts, as it says in the "Song at the Sea," which has been incorporated into the liturgy: "On that day God saved Israel from the hand of Egypt, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore . . . and they had faith in Adonai and in Moses, God's servant." That faith was strengthened by the revelation experienced at Mount Sinai. And then it crashed into the Golden Calf.

Here we have faith, in its strength and its fragility.

Faith must be a central concern of anyone who seeks the goals toward which Mussar directs. The target for a life well lived is summed up in the word wholeness (*sh'lemut*), about which Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe says: "We seek only our wholeness." Then he guides, "The foundation of wholeness is faith." Without faith, wholeness will elude us.

Faith and Belief

One problem I see is that issues of faith are often misleadingly presented in terms of belief. The question that is presented as the heart of the matter then comes out as: do you or don't you believe in God? The problem here is the unexpressed assumption that God is some sort of entity that you might or might not think of as having an actual historical reality, like a Martian or the Yeti or, maybe more accurately, like arguments that take place over whether a certain species of animal is extinct or not.

The faith we need is not a simple matter of belief. Belief can be disproved by new facts. If I believed that the world was flat, pictures from space would rightly shake my belief. If I believed that maggots sprouted spontaneously in mud, a microscope would make me see differently. The Rambam conceives of faith not being about "belief" but about knowledge and understanding, and this seems right to me. Rabbi Perr once said to me, "Everybody has faith, but only some people know it."

In a similar vein, the Lubavitcher Rebbe wrote a letter to a skeptical student who claimed atheism:

I do not accept your assertion that you do not believe. For if you truly had no concept of a Supernal Being Who created the world with purpose, then what is all this outrage of yours against the injustice of life? The substance of the universe is not moral, and neither are the plants and animals. Why should it surprise you that whoever is bigger and more powerful swallows his fellow alive?

It is only due to an inner conviction in our hearts, shared by every human being, that there is a Judge, that there is right and there is wrong. And so, when we see wrong, we demand an explanation: Why is this not the way it is supposed to be?

That itself is belief in God.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe finds a basis for faith in the conviction that there is right and there is wrong.

I've brought up these sources to underline that, to my way of thinking, the primary question is not whether or not you believe in God, but rather a more empirical issue of where to look to find God. If you know where to look for God, then you have the potential to perceive a reality, and that is a far better foundation for faith than either blind belief or adherence to received opinions. The question of where to look for God is also primary because it helps us understand what it is that we are talking about when we speak of "God."

Where to Look for God

Let's dispose of the most obvious misconception first. God is indeed hidden, but that should not suggest that if you happen to pick the right bed to look under (even if that bed were as big as the sky), you would catch a glimpse of some sort of Big Boss who manipulates the levers of universal power. That's not the right place to look, because what we are looking for is not like a creature in space and time.

Thinking of God in creaturely terms gives rise to the classic question: if God is omnipotent, can God make an object so big that God cannot lift it? This question itself makes no sense because the God we are looking for need not be bound by the terms of that sort of question. It implies thinking about the universe from a creaturely perspective, which is a limitation that we have no right to apply to God. As seems self-evident, if we acknowledge that there are limits to what the human mind can perceive and think, then why would we assume that all dimensions of reality need to be confined within those limits?

There have been many Jewish sages who have tried to use logic to prove this or that about God, including Rabbi Bachya ibn Pakuda, who devotes the first gate of *The Duties of the Heart* to "proving" logically the existence of one God. I find the chapter to be agonizing reading, and when I told Rabbi Perr that I was organizing a group to study this text but was worried that we would flounder right in this first section, he told me that whenever he leads a study of that book, he skips this section. As Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian teaches, the problem is that it just doesn't work to approach God through rational

thought: “All philosophical speculations and explanations, even if true, can in no fashion bring human beings to cling to the living God.”

The Torah expresses this point by saying that God’s “thoughts” are not like human thoughts.

Despite recognizing the limitations of human thinking, we are still able to find a logic to how God is placed in the world.

For example, if you imagine for a moment that you were given the assignment to design a universe in which there were to be creatures who had the potential to reach some sort of personal wholeness, how would you proceed? Wouldn’t you want to create a world in which there were real pitfalls and detours so that the climb would be real and the consequences real as well? And wouldn’t you want to make your role as “creator” neither fully revealed nor fully hidden? If you were fully revealed, that would put an end to the sense of independence of the creatures, who would then find it incontestable that they are created and would then give up on living and making effort. On the other hand, to be totally untraceable denies the creatures an all-important clue as to the nature of the universe in which they are living. The most useful and effective place to reveal your presence in creation would be only in glimpses, intuitions, and flashes.

And so it is.

To build a foundation of faith, then, we need to pay attention to the sorts of glimpses, intuitions, and flashes that are the only way in which we can hope to experience something of the presence of God. This is a point the Torah makes so beautifully when it describes Moses’s request to see God, which is met only by a glimpse from behind. There is no reason to think that any of us ought to be able to see more, and every reason why we ought to be able to perceive so much less, than did a prophet of the stature of Moses.

Rav Kook cautions us to remember that these flashes—glimpses from behind, so to speak—are all we get to see, and that the trouble with faith starts to arise when we impose images and language onto these perceptions:

One must always cleanse one’s thoughts about God to make sure they are free of the dross of deceptive fantasies, of groundless fear, of evil inclinations, of wants and deficiencies. . . . All the divine names, whether in Hebrew or in any other language, give us only a tiny and dull spark of the hidden light to which the soul aspires when it utters the word “God.” Every definition of God brings about heresy, every definition is spiritual idolatry; even attributing to Him intellect and will, even the term divine, the term God, suffers from the limitations of definition. Except for the keen awareness that all these are but sparkling flashes of what cannot be defined—these, too, would engender heresy.

We are meant to pay attention to those sparkling flashes. They are how we experience the presence of God.

Transcendence versus Immanence

There are two different ways in which God is present in this world, often usefully summarized as the *transcendent* versus the *immanent*.

The transcendent aspect of God is represented by the notion of concealed light. This God is ineffable, inexpressible, and so thoroughly different in scope and concept from anything in creation that we can't fathom anything of the reality of this supreme reality. This is God without end, limitless in scope and limitless in purpose, whom the Jewish mystics call the Ayn Sof, literally "without end."

The immanent aspect of God refers to the ways God is present in the world. The transcendent God does not bless, but the immanent God does.

Having laid down these two traditional distinctions that concern God, we can approach them in the two ways in which we are enabled to know faith, which are by way of the intellect and through experience. In both cases, we can't hope to find certainty and proof, but only pointers for what you yourself have to look for and investigate, since the world is created in such a way as to offer only hints and no certainties of faith. These parameters give rise to four permutations, each of which offers a doorway to God and so is a pillar of faith:

- *Knowing the transcendent* is the least attainable of these permutations because, by definition, the transcendent aspect of God is remote and inaccessible from within human capabilities.
- *Experiencing the transcendent* is not easy, either, though we are more likely to have insight into the ineffability of God through nonintellectual perception than through the mind.
- *Knowing the immanent* is already true for all of us, though only some people associate their experience of the manifest world with God.
- *Experiencing the immanent* happens all the time.

The difference between knowing and experiencing is crucial, because knowing alone has little bearing on faith. This point is made clearly by Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian, who says that God is saying to us:

For I have given you also great understanding and a powerful intellect in addition to your nature so that you are able to mate your intellectual knowledge with your emotive feeling and unite them in order to fulfill "And you shall know this day and lay it to heart that Adonai is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other" (Deut. 4:39).

Then elsewhere he elaborates on this same verse:

The verse says, "Know this day, and lay it to your heart, that Adonai is God in heaven above and upon the earth beneath; there is none else" (Deut. 4:39). At first sight, if one has attained conviction in his mind and brain—having perfect faith and true intellectual understanding—that Adonai is God, what more is required? Yet the verse contradicts this and says that is not so; if you lay your knowledge to your heart, all will be well, but if not, you hold a fragile piece of china in your hand. For unless the heart feels that Adonai is God, etc., one's knowledge will not avail him or her at all to withstand their impulse—however deep such knowledge might be. I once heard Rabbi Itzele Blazer say: "Just as there is certainly a vast distance between one who does not know that God is

Adonai and one who does know, so is there a very much greater distance between knowing without feeling that knowledge in one's heart and knowing and feeling it there.

We stand before a doorway behind which we will not find belief, definition, idea, logical proof, or concept, but directly perceived experience.

Faith and Experience

Our teachers tell us that experience is the gateway to faith and this is guidance to any of us who seeks to plant the first seeds of faith or to nurture and foster its early sprouts. Rabbi Yosef Yozel Hurwitz, the Alter of Novarodok, is clear on this point:

But if he knows all this only with his mind and not with his senses, he will find that his mental effort yields only a mental [i.e., abstract] result, not a sensory [i.e., actual] one. . . . At the moment of trial he is like a blind man who never saw the light, because then the cloud covers the sun and he can see nothing. All his exalted knowledge exists either before the fact or after the fact, but when the [trying] situation is at hand, the distraction of the trial makes him like a different man.

This is like the story of the actor who has only one line to deliver in the play. After the cannon goes off, he is to say, "Hark! The report of a distant cannon." He studies the script and memorizes his lines and is all ready. At his cue, he goes onstage and suddenly he hears a loud "Boom!" and he says, "What the heck was that!" All his preparation had been only intellectual.

The intellect is limited, its habit is skepticism, and so the foundation of faith must be rooted elsewhere.

Rabbis Ibn Pakuda, Lopian, and Hurwitz, among many others, have all been eloquent in telling us that the way to approach knowledge of God and hence to cultivate faith is to open our eyes to the experience of our senses. The world is the tableau of the divine, and in looking at it and experiencing its marvelous artifacts and ways, we can perceive the physical reality and the divinity that lies within it.

This is both the starting point and the key. It is the starting point because it is the most accessible domain for our investigation. And it is the key because the God we can know is hidden, and not only that—God has hidden that God is hidden. We can find our way to faith only by registering and trusting the glimpses, intuitions, and flashes that still come unbidden when we are quiet under the night sky, or catch a glimpse of the structure and texture of a hand, or meet a painful, unaccountable loss, or lie alone in bed shielded from the storm, and wonder.

To Grow in Faith

How can you grow in faith, or into faith?

The doorway to faith is not opened by rational thought. Only through elevated inner experience can one come to faith or strengthen the faith one has. Through

reflection and learning, you may be convinced that there must be more to life than is apparent, but it is only through lived experience that this notion becomes implanted as faith.

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter taught in many places that emotional experience is more potent and convincing than intellectual knowledge—an idea that later generations of Mussar teachers adopted and expanded upon. Rabbi Zvi Miller writes: “In its natural state, the heart—which is the emotional core—is sealed, i.e., the knowledge attained by the mind does not penetrate the heart’s barrier. [But] once the heart is awakened and electrified—it bolsters, stabilizes, and anchors the intellectual concepts.

The Mussar teachers stress one sort of emotional experience in particular as effective in underpinning faith, and that is awe. We’ll consider this quality more in the next chapter, because “awe” is one of the translations of the Hebrew word *yirah* that is our focus there. But of concern to us here is the way in which awe fosters faith more than any idea or concept could possibly do.

The expansive, impressive experience of awe is part of everyday life, though often only at its highest moments. The drama of the natural world brings it on when our breath is taken away by an encounter with a magnificent landscape, a strange and marvelous creature, or the order and intelligence of the natural world. Just to see a blue whale or a mother bear and her cubs or the flapping, honking precision drill of geese migrating is to know awe. Or human creations can bring on awe. Stand by the Western Wall (the Kotel) in Jerusalem, or in a great building, or in a cave inhabited by people for millennia, and then the calluses of the heart peel away to reveal a vibrant, sensitive core.

Awe is there to be had in any moment. When you walk outside, stop to look at a garden, watch or even hear children playing, observe an act of kindness, or feel an intimacy, then you can know with a certainty that bears no critique that there is more to this universe than the discriminative human mind can fathom. We all have those moments, often in nature, often in encounter with another soul, when we are visited by a sense of depths and levels of reality that we do not ordinarily perceive. To open ourselves to those moments without reservation—gently encouraging ego consciousness to step aside—makes it possible to gain more of the gift these moments hold for us. They will come more often as well.

The story is told about the great Chassidic Rebbe Zusya that whenever he would hear the Torah reading in synagogue begin with the words, “And God spoke to Moses, saying . . .,” as it frequently does, he would pass out cold. The thought that God spoke to Moses directly, face-to-face, was too awesome a notion for his mental circuits to handle, and he would just drop like a stone.

We are all familiar with the sorts of dramatic incidents that sweep us into a state of awe. In fact, the experiences of awe that come over us in nature, or in love, or upon hearing a profound idea are just the freebies that God provides as a sample of the wares of awe, like home-delivered advertising for God’s existence. These moments of encounter bring us to the sublime dimension of lived reality without any effort on our part whatsoever. We just walk around the corner, run smack into the vista, and are struck dumb by awe as if shot in the heart with a flaming arrow. But these sorts of grand encounters are certainly not the only way to know awe. When you choose to see the glory that lies within even the obvious and mundane, then that fly on the window, or

simple cloud in the sky, or hand in your hand is as much an invitation to awe as the Grand Canyon or the pyramids.

What I am saying is that the choice is yours. Awe is right there at every moment, separated from ordinary consciousness by no more than a diaphanous curtain that can be pulled aside by an experience, or equally by an instance of will. Of course, I don't want to make it sound like entering awe is just as easy as flipping channels on your television remote control. There are obstacles and hindrances that keep us from even being aware that we can draw away the veil, and even more obstacles and hindrances that keep us from acting on this choice. These are the conditions that keep faith at a distance.

As each of us pursues our own spiritual curriculum, we are "graced" with our own personalized set of hindrances. These are the challenges that face us and that, when we overcome them, are rungs on the ladder of our ascent. As much as each of us has our own unique set of inner challenges, there do tend to be some that are generally problematic to most of us. They are like the spiritual illnesses of the age. Among the spiritual disabilities that plague so many people today, one of the most common is busyness. Overcommitment of our time leaves little space for the simple experience of being, and awe (and, as we have learned, its child, faith) is much harder to find when we are moving at a speed of seventy miles an hour and our mind is taken up with all the items on the long and ever-replenished list that we can't possibly complete, today or ever.

I speak from my own experience. So much in my life is good, and I am deeply grateful for that, but there is just so much of it. There are so many needs, desires, ambitions, and commitments that I sometimes feel that a decade is really just a year. Every life has its challenges, and in mine, because I am free and not persecuted, because I am healthy and not sick, because I am alert and not disabled, because I love what I do and am not oppressed by it, my challenge is that my days are filled and overfilled. When I slip into that way of living, and overcommitment is my reality day in and day out, how can I ever find my way to the awe that precedes faith, that is the precondition and the gateway to faith? Awe can come only when there is space in which to welcome it. The moment needs to be made spacious, time a fertile ground and not an enemy.

That's why I treasure Shabbat. Shabbat is the corrective for me. It isn't just a day in the week on which I simply rest and recharge in order to reenter the fray, it's the reminder of what I so easily forget the other six days, and which I hope to remember so that some echo and trace of the spaciousness of the seventh can filter into the six as well. In my life, I am in danger of getting lost, deflected, and confused in the complex web of demands, responsibilities, and desires I carry with me. Shabbat is when and how I check the map. You would be right to see the honoring of Shabbat as an act of faith, since the source of its observance is God. "God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it because Adonai abstained from all the work that God created to make," and "It will be a sign between me and the people of Israel forever, for in six days God made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day God abstained from work and rested."

To me, though, Shabbat observance is more the opposite, actually a pathway to faith. Although doing can arise out of faith, faith can also arise as a result of the doing. If

I waited until God was more of a presence in my life to be convinced to observe the Sabbath, I would likely not get there. Because I observe Shabbat, my faith grows.

Although I am focusing here only on the spiritual hindrance that is busyness and its antidote, which is Shabbat, you need to ask yourself what it is that stands in the way of your opening to faith, and what you can do about it. There are many sorts of actions that can be undertaken as a result of faith, and that in the doing can also become a source of faith. This is true of the classic acts of loving-kindness, like giving charity, visiting the sick, clothing the naked, and burying the dead. The same is true of prayer. It is logical to think that living a life by the commandments would demand that faith be in place first; my experience is that living by the commandments fosters and nurtures faith as well.

In the end, what is important about faith is that you seek. The psalm says, “When You said, ‘Seek My face,’ my heart said to You, ‘I will seek Your face, HaShem.’” And the Torah reassures: “From there you will seek the Adonai your God, and you will find God,” though there are conditions: “If you seek God with all your heart and with all your soul.”

Rabbi Nacum Zev Broide, who was the son of Rabbi Simcha Zissel, the Alter of Kelm, asked before his death that he be eulogized by only one person, and that the eulogy consist of only one tribute—that “he had the desire to advance toward faith.” We learn from this to emphasize the search for faith over the fruits of that search, yearning over finding.

The body needs air. What is the air of the soul? Faith.

—Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian, Lev Eliyahu

Extra Thoughts

~Sheila Weinberg

Judy Chicago has written a wonderful poem/prayer that captures the profound hope that I identify with the divine. Images of creation and liberation fuse in a promise of oneness and peace.

And then all that has divided us will merge

And then compassion will be wedded to power...

...And then all will care for the sick and the weak and the old

And then all will nourish the young

And then all will cherish life's creatures

And then all will live in harmony with each other and the Earth

And then everywhere will be called Eden once again.

As I look back upon my life from the momentary calm of the rock's shelter, what do I see? I see signs of a presence, footprints in the sand, glimpses of a back, a face, a hand, a moment of risking liberation, a moment of embracing creation. There were times in my life when I was ready to say yes or no in a strong enough voice to make a new boundary. This is how I understand the God of liberation. There were other moments when the truth of my own belonging burst through into the light of awareness. This is how I understand the God of creation. These accumulated moments pass through times of change, fear, loss, uncertainty, and pain. They teach me that I am worthy and responsible. My actions matter. I am part of something greater than myself. I am not alone and am not lost.

~Nancy Flam

As we go about our complex lives, it is hard to find an entry point for general spiritual exploration. But at a time of illness, pain, or loss, our yearning for God's presence is often more acute than usual. Indeed, in the midst of tragedy many of us Jews find ourselves suddenly needing to explore or re-explore our Judaism. When great adversity rips us open and lays us bare, as life's trappings fall away and we set about the task of reconstructing our lives, we search our religious tradition for insight, comfort, guidance, and perspective. My work over the past five years with Jews who are ill has taught me how illness often serves as a springboard for profound spiritual exploration.