

2005 – Rosh Hashanah Morning

An old joke tells of a man who is walking by a cliff face. He slips and falls down the cliff, grabbing desperately for something to hold on to. Luckily he manages to catch himself on a hanging branch. Looking down at the long fall below him, he turns his eyes toward the heavens and says, “G-d, I never really believed in you, but if there’s anybody up there, please help me!” A still small voice comes down from heaven and says, “Do not worry my child. Have faith in me. All you need to do is let go, and I will save you from the fall.” The man looks down again at the jagged rocks below him and up to heaven and says, “Is there anybody else up there?”

Faith can be difficult, all the more so because, as with so many things in religious life today, we can’t agree on what we actually mean by it, and when we can, we don’t always like it. The problem is perhaps most clearly seen in the continuing debate over the story of the binding of Isaac that we read today. Traditionally the story is understood as showcasing Abraham’s faith. We know from the text that G-d never intended Abraham to go through with the sacrifice, but Abraham showed his faith and faithfulness by following G-d’s command to sacrifice his son Isaac without question or compunction. Indeed, according to one midrash, Abraham carried out this command with eagerness and rejoicing in performing the will of the creator! The moral, according to the traditional interpretation, is that Abraham passed G-d’s test of faith by being willing and able to carry out G-d’s command, even when it seemed grotesque and wrong to do so. In submitting to G-d’s will in this way, Abraham showed that the epitome of faith is the willingness to obey the will of G-d no matter what.

This ideal of faith is one that is deeply troubling for us today. Professor Zvi Adar asks the following questions: “Is there not something primitive and dark in a faith through which an old man is ready to slaughter his son in obedience to a meaningless command? And if G-d did not seek a human sacrifice, is it moral behavior on His part to make tests that are immoral in their very essence? And what is the value of faith if, because of it, a man is prepared and even driven to carry out the most immoral, the most inhuman, the most primitive and shocking act?”

In our age of religious extremism, in which so-called religious leaders call for the death of innocents because they are convinced G-d told them so, and in which young men and women blow themselves up, along with countless others, all because they are convinced that they are carrying out G-d’s will, a definition of faith that requires blind obedience to theological ideals is frankly disturbing. This vision of faith is one that has haunted us in every age and caused suffering to countless numbers of people. It is this kind of faith that, quite frankly, gives faith a bad name and is the basis of the sentiment that religion has caused more deaths in the history of the world than anything else. The belief that we know for certain what G-d wants and that nothing else matters, whether that is the life of others, the health of the planet, or the life of one’s own son, is one of the most dangerous beliefs held by people today or in any age. Indeed the Rabbis of Talmud knew it and also felt uncomfortable with the idea, leading them to suggest that the real act of faith was not Abraham’s, but Isaac’s. Isaac, they argue, was a willing participant in his own sacrifice.

Thus the merit of faith was Isaac's in being willing to sacrifice his own life for the sanctification of G-d's name. While we might not feel much more comfortable with this interpretation today, it reflects that the rabbis were much happier with the idea that Isaac had the faith to give up his own life, rather than praising Abraham's willingness to murder his son.

Thankfully, however, this is not the only understanding of faith we can draw from the story of the binding of Isaac. Other commentators are puzzled by the dialogue in the story between Abraham and his servants. As they approach the mountain on which Abraham has been commanded to sacrifice Isaac, he tells his servants to stay there while he and Isaac go up to worship and says to them, "Then WE will return to you." How, the rabbis ask, could he say this, believing that only one of them would return? Surely Abraham would not have stooped to lying to placate his son and his servants. Thus, the rabbis conclude, he was not lying. The faith that Abraham showed in this story was not in his willingness to sacrifice his son, but in his conviction that G-d would not make him do it, in keeping with G-d's previous promise to Abraham. Faith, according to this interpretation, is the certainty that there is a divine plan, conceived and conducted by a good and just G-d. On the basis of such faith, Abraham could say with certainty, "We will return," despite the fact that he had been commanded by G-d to sacrifice Isaac. This model of faith does not require blind obedience to an immoral command. Rather, it reflects a certainty about the justness and compassion of G-d that allows us to accept that whatever happens to us is for the best.

This attitude is epitomized by the Talmudic stories of Rabbi Akiva. According to rabbinic tradition, Rabbi Akiva was accustomed to saying, "Everything the Eternal does is for the good." Once Rabbi Akiva was traveling, and when night came, he tried to find lodging in a nearby village, only to be turned away. Although Rabbi Akiva was forced to spend the night in the field, he did not lament his fate. Instead, his reaction was, "Everything the Eternal does is for the best." That night a regiment of soldiers came and took the entire town captive, while Rabbi Akiva, who was sleeping in the field, went unnoticed and thus was spared. When Rabbi Akiva realized what happened, he said, "Didn't I tell you that everything that the Eternal does is for the best?"

This form of faith is certainly powerful and comforting. To believe with certainty that whatever happens, it is for the good, that G-d has a plan and that your part in that plan is to your benefit, is a belief that lends comfort and strength to many. In my experience as a hospital chaplain, I encountered many people whose spirits were raised by the certainty that what was happening to them was part of the divine plan of a compassionate G-d. They were thus able to face their illness with a positive and upbeat attitude. That certainty in G-d's benevolence, the unshakeable belief that all the Eternal does is for the good, including their current illness or injury, helped these patients keep their spirits up and recover. Did they recover because G-d was looking out for them? Would they have recovered anyway? Did their strong faith that G-d would bring them through then truly become a self-fulfilling prophecy? I cannot say for certain. But I can say that the belief that all would be well helped these patients and gave them strength, comfort, and a sense of calm in a stressful, difficult, and often painful situation.

But while the power of such faith is undeniable, it is not without its problems. For one thing, in the story of Rabbi Akiva, the rabbi states that all that the Eternal does is for the good after seeing the regiment take the town captive. Well, that's nice for him, but what about the poor town? Things did not turn out for the good from their point of view.

Moreover, most of us, particularly in this modern age, have difficulty looking at the world around us with all its many problems and still feeling with absolute certainty that all we see and experience is truly for the good. The Chaffetz Chayim, a 19th century rabbinic scholar, once famously stated that, "...in the final analysis, for the believer there are no questions and for the nonbeliever there are no answers." While this is certainly a poignant statement of faith, it fails to allow for the questioning believer, a staple, indeed arguably the basis, of Jewish tradition. As Jessica Gribetz notes in her book Wise Words, the statement does not allow for the questions a believer must necessarily pose. "Even a believer," she asserts, "must question the brutal murder of six million innocent people, as well as the senseless tragedies that occur daily in our society." To live entirely without doubt is to blind oneself to reality. But where does this leave faith? If faith requires certainty, if faith requires that we neither doubt nor question, can any of us truly claim to have faith? Indeed, can any of our illustrious ancestors, who based an entire religion on questioning and arguing, be said to have had faith? The answer is that faith is more than simple certainty. In Judaism, certainly in Judaism today, faith is not an unquestioning obedience or a blind certainty that life is good and fair despite all rational evidence to the contrary. Faith in Judaism, from the rabbis through the rationalist philosophy of Maimonides in medieval Spain to the present day, does not require that we ignore the evidence of our senses and of rational thought in favor of irrational beliefs. It does not require Kierkegaard's famous leap of faith based on no more than the strength of our belief. It does not demand that we close our minds to questions or reject out of hand the doubts that inspire those questions. Indeed, even in the Jewish mystical text the Zohar we read that "There can be no faith without truth." What, then, is truth for the modern Jew? Faith, according to Rabbi Leo Baeck, is "the capacity of the soul to perceive the abiding ... in the transitory, the invisible in the visible." Similarly, Abraham Joshua Heschel states that "Faith is an act of man who, transcending himself, responds to Him that transcends the world." Faith, then, is not a certainty but a yearning – a yearning for connection with something greater than ourselves, to transcend the material and reach the spiritual dimension of life as taught in our tradition.

But even more than yearning, faith is the ultimate expression of hope. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of Britain and the Commonwealth, states in his book From Optimism to Hope, that "to be human is to live with uncertainty and yet still have the courage and the wisdom to decide." In this context, Faith plays a vital part. "Faith," he says, "is not certainty. It is the courage to live and even celebrate in the very heart of uncertainty, knowing that G-d is with us, giving us the strength to meet any challenge that the future may bring." Faith is not the antidote to doubt, but to despair. With faith we answer the questions that bother us, not with certainty that life is just and good, but with hope that we can make it so. Faith gives us meaning amidst the chaos and comfort in our time of need. And it is through faith – through our yearning for the transcendent

and our hope for a better future – that we touch the divine, the sacred, and the joyous in our lives.

Rosh Hashanah is a time of hope. Today we celebrate the birthday of creation and begin a process of spiritual rebirth as we enter the days of awe and repentance. As did our ancestors Abraham and Isaac before us, we face an uncertain future, unsure of what will challenge us over the next hill, the next mountain. But I would like to think that, like them, we do not face that steep climb into despair, resigned to a terrible fate, nor with blind certainty. Rather, we face that mountain, over which lies the New Year 5766, with hope renewed, ready to face the new day, resolved to draw upon our faith in G-d and Jewish tradition to create a world filled with peace, joy, and wisdom in the year to come.