Faith and Truth

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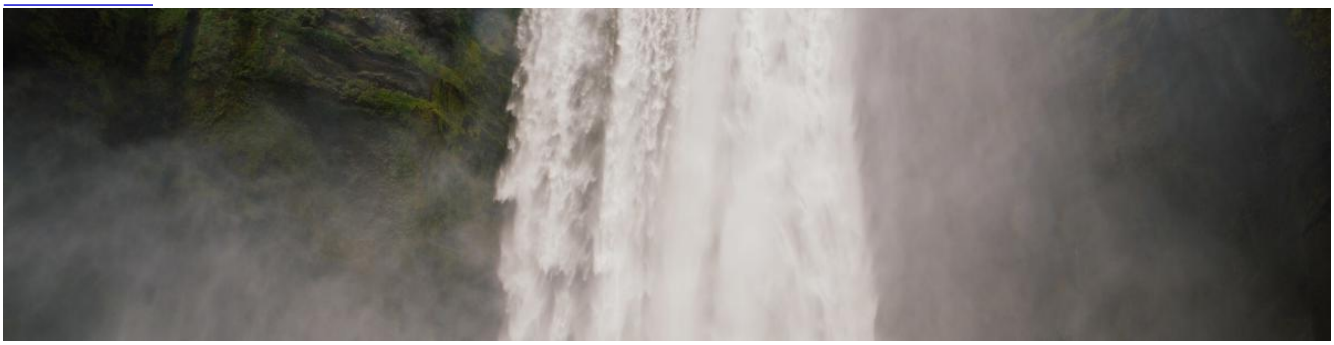

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Much of my life has been a search for meaning and truth. The Great Mystery often hovers over my search as I move from experience to experience, and often I am left with a remnant of faith in my journey toward truth, and this faith sustains me. I often find that it is the journey itself that is most meaningful and that absolute "Truth" may come in hazy, sudden flashes, but is not always sustainable; for the *hester panim* (eclipse of God) in our contemporary situation is a formidable energy that can implant doubt in me.

This is the devastating curse of the energy of Amalek—radical evil—that truly dims the "Throne of the Lord," and attacks our faith. For how can evil flourish in the face of the reality of God; the prevalence of evil hampers our lofty faith. As our mystical sages explain, in *gematria* (numerology) the word Amalek totals 240; the word for doubt (*safek*) also totals 240; thus, Amalek symbolizes the insertion of doubt into our psyches. This is the radical evil that must be fought against with increased faith in every generation so that God's Throne can be manifest in clear Light. It is the movement forward even with this doubt, that I will call faith; "faith rather than truth" is the actual legitimate quest in the thought of some of our most traditional sages.

As a prelude to this path, one might ask: What are some of the prevalent suggestions as to how one finds truth in this world? One way is to move broadly to a recognition of all the myriad energies that flow through us, an integration of

these “opposites,” the conscious and unconscious, the kabbalistic *sephirot* that need to be felt and balanced, the *middot* that we encounter on the path of mussar. This broad perspective keeps us from seeing life through a narrow lens and perceiving things from that narrow space. This way of expanding consciousness and accessing truth is through an inward journey.

Another way is to trust Scripture, and the transmission of ancient knowledge that we believe is divinely revealed through an event, (Sinai). What happens when there is a clash between the outer dictum, and inner experience, (what happens when we encounter biblical criticism)? Whom do we trust then? Can God be experienced from within, or is there a tension of opposites at that point that leads to a deeper perception and integration that we call Truth or getting closer to truth as it is refined as we live through life’s stages?

Some of our Sages suggest that we should accept that this is actually a world of faith and not of Truth, and it is the “striving” for truth that is essential. A part of life will always be mysterious, and our reasoning minds can only reach doubt when encountering so many variables. One constant challenge is how we distinguish objective facts from our constant projections. We bring ourselves to everything we encounter, so we have to rely upon a myriad of sources, such as feeling, intuition, imagination, experience, senses, reason, and revelation.

And, yes, there are those who are blessed with the absolute belief in our sages and transmission. It is certainly easier if we live in a community of faith where we are influenced by this energy. Hence, *na’aseh v’nishma*; our experience influences our perception. But much of our community does not live with this certainty and relies on “faith” rather than Absolute Truth. So let us now explain this specific point of view from the parables and teachings of the Sages.

There is a story told about the Rambam that one day he was visiting a beloved student who was on his deathbed. The Rambam asked that when he reaches the True World to please inquire why bad things happen to good people, why justice is not always achieved in this world. He asked his student to visit him in a dream and reveal to him the answer. The pious student promised to do so. Sure enough, a month after he died he appeared to the Rambam in a dream. The Rambam asked him, “Can you now share with me the answer?” The student replied sadly: “When I was in the upper world, everything was clear to me; truth was crystal clear. But when I crossed over—retuning back to the earthly realm, everything became unclear, questionable, filled with limited perception, so I cannot communicate what I learned up there!”

The Sefat Emet at the end of Bereishith, in Parashat Vayehi, shares a similar idea and gives another reason why this is a world of faith, *Emuna* and not a world of truth, *Emet*. When Jacob intended to give blessings to his sons at the end of his life, he gathered them together to reveal to them details relating to the secret of the End of the Days. Rashi points out that he was prevented to do so by an angel. The Sefat Emet explains that the reason for this is that the next world is the world of *Emet*, but this is a world of *Emuna*. If indeed, the Truth would be revealed in this world there would be no striving for truth, no growth or depth would occur. Absolute clarity and objective truth are withheld so that human beings would strenuously strive for truth, actualize their potential and contribute to the world. It is the journey toward truth in this world that is even more valuable than the actual truth.

The development of faith contains within it some element of doubt, risk taking, and the virtue of courage, but when one lives a life of faith blessings are achieved. Joseph Campbell suggests this idea when he quotes the philosopher who said, “When you are on a journey, and the goal seems further and further away, the journey itself is the goal.”

The Hassidim present a similar idea inherent in the Hebrew letters. The Torah begins with a letter Bet rather than Aleph. This may seem strange, since Aleph is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and Bet is the second letter. The Hassidim point out that Aleph connotes unity and oneness; however, this is a world of duality, opposites constantly emerging. This is actually a blessing. The letter Aleph begins the word *Arur* (a curse), for it leads to a naïve unity, imagining that unity can be achieved without striving. The return to the reality of the Garden of Eden, an imagined place of unity, is actually a desire to be free of stress of the dualities of this world, a desire to sleep, a death wish (Thanatos). The letter Bet (two, duality) is the first letter of the word *Berakha* (a blessing). It is through engaging with duality, striving to move toward greater unity consciously that creates blessing. The shape of the letter Bet also connotes this; it is closed on three sides and open on the fourth side, incomplete. It is up to us in this world of *Emuna* to fill in the fourth side, through our striving, through our mitzvoth. Truth in this world is not achieved easily, nor is it supposed to be; hence it is only the next world that is called *Olam ha-Emet* (the world of Truth).

So how do we come closer to Truth in this world? There are two basic traditional historical approaches. One can be found in the view of the Rambam and the other in the view of Yehuda Halevi. The Rambam’s view is the more rational approach. Because of the beauty and logic of the Torah, one can apprehend the Truth of

God’s creation and Presence through study and action. The comprehension of the absolutely wise directives of the Torah trains us “To do the right and the good in the eyes of the Lord” (Deut. 6), thus leading us to the truth. To observe the glory of creation, its infinite biological and physical beauty and complexity leads us to the awe and Truth of the Creator as well. It is not just a contemplative path that leads us there, but the doing of the commandments (*na’aseh v’nishmah*) that leads to a spiritual path that becomes our truth. When done in fellowship in a community of faith, we also find the support and reaffirmation of this Truth.

Yehuda Halevi approaches our imbibing of truth through historical transmission and witnessing, not just individually but as a whole people. It is because a whole nation witnessed at Mount Sinai the revelation and the transmission of the commandments, and passed it generation after generation. For if the Prophets, the greatest truth tellers were to lie, whom can we trust? And if a whole people witnessed the event of revelation, rather than one person, it attains a reliability that cannot be denied. So it is from the faith of the righteous leaders of all earlier generations, their students and the community of Israel through the generations that we imbibe the truth that we must follow.

In our present day, when Torah study is not always the norm, and when there is not always a connection to a community of believers, the search for truth and meaning is challenging. One is faced with the possibility of many truths rather than one Absolute Truth. Some individuals are able to feel the truth, the still small voice from an inner calling, when one is touched by kindness and intuits that as a spark of God; some from the actions of the righteous, the pious, the courageous in the face of darkness; some from the gentle, resilient response in the face of rational incredulity, where the Mystery of something deeper appears. Some as they walk the inner cities and glance at the hundreds of faces and wonder how incredible that each has a unique story, each is a whole world. How can there not be a Creator, a purpose to this magnificent cosmos! Some obtain moments of a sudden flash of insight, perhaps a dream, perhaps the small still voice in the forest of the redwood trees; perhaps in the restfulness of the Shabbat; some through meditation, or sinking the winning basket in front of a large crowd. It is not only in the supernatural miracles, but in the miracle of the everyday when we are open to the glory of the natural creation that works every day. Perhaps from a kabbalistic perspective we may call it the integration of intuition and wonder (*hokhma*) into the realm of the rational (*binah*), which transforms it into a deeper knowledge (*da’at*), a contact with the Infinite.

The elevated behavior of human beings, especially of the genuinely pious, also point to the spark of Truth that alludes to something beyond our limited perceptions. As an example, Gandhi was asked: “Is God Love?” He responded: “I am not sure if God is Love, this Great Mystery is beyond my comprehension, but I know that to love is Godly.” In other words, even if God seems to be distant, we can feel the spirit and reality of God by the qualities in human beings that we define as God-like.

Other people can feel God by observing God in nature; the magnificent, awesome beauty and grandeur that transcend all our doubts, through beauty, creativity, music, poetry, song. And yet we are faced by moments of doubt; and that doubt is a concomitant of faith because it indicates the beyond rational Mystery of Mysteries. If God were a simple rational entity that we could control, doubt would not be present; but would we really be thinking of the Mystery of Mysteries? The doubt, of course, is also engendered by perceiving the world through our limited ego, and the radical evil that we face (Amalek).

The Hassidim suggest that we can learn from the word truth (*Emet*) itself an important path toward moving toward truth. They explain that the word *Emet* is made of the first letter of the alphabet, the last letter of the alphabet, and the middle letter—a broad perception. The word for falsehood, (*Sheker*) is made up of one letter after the other, a narrow perception. So how do we achieve this broad perspective?

One way is to acknowledge that this is a world of continuing complexity (Bet), or as R. Yisrael Salanter states, “Man is a drop of reason in a sea of irrationality,” and one must accept the change that constantly flows, allow it to be a constant learning experience and not cling to a simple truth that leads to disappointment. Truth is not achieved by repressing something that contradicts our initial perception, it is to be welcomed as an additional element to add to our perception, an attempt at balancing competing truths.

We look at the many dimensions of self, discovering how we are ego driven. Until we gain greater consciousness and clarity of the many dimensions of the self, we only live from a constricted perception. We first have to become aware of how we avoid facing the anxiety of the unknown, and remove the blockage in order to grow toward a broader perception. How we erect defenses to avoid vulnerability, potential pain and anxiety must be faced, and ultimately overcome. We must work to create the ability to accept life as it is, with all its changes rather than follow our proclivity to control everything, which is impossible and thus creates pain, anger and distance from God. The path of “control” is living from the realm

of the ego and not from faith. When we reach the state of depression and guilt that results from living an ego based life, we move even further from God until we open again to the process of *teshuvah* and are gathered back through love, living from the realm of faith and meaning.

The attribute of faith implies our ability to at times rest in anxiety rather than trying to escape our discomfort immediately. The enduring of the pain of uncertainty is challenging but it leads to depth and appreciation. It suggests that this is not a world of absolute *Emet* but a world that contains Mystery as well, and thus necessitates faith. This way of encountering the world moves us from the realm of dogmatic certainty and promotes creativity, depth and sublime learning. As the Kotzker Rebbe taught: “The assertion that one knows the full truth is the demise of religion, the journey toward truth is the flowering of religion.”

Let us conclude by finding within the Torah several indications that the path of faith—of searching for truth in this world rather than owning the absolute truth—is an authentic path to be considered. We find in the Torah a potential example of the necessity to “search” for truth in the story of the eviction from the Garden of Eden. One might interpret that the exile (eviction) of Adam and Eve from the Garden was actually an act providentially built into our universe; that we must go out into the world to discover consciousness and return to the Garden only as developed human beings as opposed to the naïve unity that the Aleph, implies in the origins of the Garden. We must encounter the Bet (opposites in this world), in order to move to the Gimmel (the integration of the opposites), and find wholeness in the Dalet (the attenuation of the ego—Dal=impoverishment—and thus contact with soul). For ultimately, the naïve desire to return to the Garden is an attempt to escape stress, to avoid the discomfort of this world.

This interpretation teaches that we must go out into this world, actualize our God given talents and achieve our destiny through living and giving. The desire to grow (Eros) is the counterforce to our desire to escape stress (Thanatos). It is a very powerful, redemptive trait.

A second example is found in the story of Abraham, when he is visited by three angels after circumcision. Although in great physical pain, his natural inclination to do *hessed* overcame his physical pain. He proceeded to feed the angels finding spiritual meaning in moving onward rather than choosing to rest and de-stress. The story teaches that the primary way to spiritual fulfillment is to keep moving forward on the path, moving with faith, doing the mitzvoth, even while enduring physical pain. With meaning that stems from giving and following a soul journey, we actualize our spirituality and discover the truth of the soul through faith, even

without Absolute Truth.

Moshe Rabeinu, too, is an example of one who achieves faith through the “heroic journey.” He is abandoned as a child but then lives in the palace of the king, the secure place. But something is missing; the material comfort that surrounds him does not satisfy his soul. Life remains a mystery; so he risks leaving his secure place and takes a journey toward the unknown, open to discovery. He has the courage to “turn aside,” and he is blessed to discover the “burning bush” and God’s Presence, and he knows he must share this knowledge with his people and with the world. Faith emanates from his journey, and truth is discovered as a blessing in his search. But then he must return to the reality of people who challenge his faith, through all the changes of life; yet his faith remains strong, and God dwells with him.

In our world, when God does not speak to us as directly as to Moses, Abraham, and the Prophets, we are challenged. The more the darkness of evil reigns the more our faith is impacted (Amalek); the more we as human beings do not act with faith, the more elusive faith becomes. And we turn to other gods—materialism, hedonism, and secular culture—which ultimately fail to give us the awesome, sustaining faith that we yearn for.

So if life is ever changing, and we are always changing, what can we rely upon? Can we accept that the nature of life is change, and discover God within that change?

Maybe we may never find the Truth, but we can, through our actions create faith, a movement toward truth that connects us to something larger. The word *mitzvah* comes from the root *tzavta*, to join; through the deed we join with God. Living in a community of faith helps support and strengthen our soul proclivity.

May each of our unique journeys lead to meaning (faith). And may we discover truth at the end of our lives when we may we look back and see that the journey itself held all the clues to the meaning of our lives. The acceptance of the journey toward truth, leading a life of faith without expecting absolute truth along the journey will lead to Truth itself at the end. The acceptance, the journey itself will become the Truth. We will do and we will understand.