Faith and Doubt

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Faith is above all a state of mind not a state of the world. Either we have faith within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul, an orientation of the heart, an orientation of the spirit; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons.
—Victor Frankl

Faith is something we get, as it were, from "elsewhere." It is what gives us the strength to live and to try new things.
—Walt Whitman

Both Frankl and Whitman acknowledge that faith is a gift given from above, beyond our will and ego control. We use our reason to get closer to this dimension (with our *ruah* and *nefesh*) but ultimately the *neshama* (beyond reason) is bestowed upon us as a gift and gives birth to Faith. We yield to Hashem, and only then this Higher Faith is bestowed upon us, say the Hasidim. But what about Doubt?

The Hebrew word for doubt is *safek*, which in numerological terms is 240. The word *Amalek*, the arch-enemy of the Jewish people also has a numerological equivalent of 240. Hence, the idea emanates from that numerical relationship that the energy of Amalek is what bestows doubt on the Jewish psyche. Amalek represents the actualization of radical evil in the world, and when it triumphs faith is damaged. We believe that divine providence is prevalent at all times; if there is not protection for the Jewish people against Amalek it introduces doubt into the Jewish psyche. Yes, we have the doctrine that God proclaims a *hester panim*, an absence of intervention due to the sins of the people, and it is God's plan to allow human beings to utilize free will, choosing the good over evil. Nevertheless, the impact of the radical power of Amalek, and the victory of this destructive energy presents a challenge to our inherent faith.

We read a similar theme in Exodus 17:8–16, where Moses, Joshua, and the Israelites are locked in a battle against Amalek. Perhaps we can view this also as a battle of Faith vs. Doubt. When Moses' hands are uplifted to heaven as a sign of faith, the Israelites triumph, but when Moses is weary and his hands need support, the forces of doubt prevail. But God states that the fight against Amalek will continue in every generation. Our Sages suggest that this fight will continue till the ultimate triumph over evil in the Messianic era (*Nidah* 61b).

The battle of good (Faith) vs. evil (Doubt) is manifest in the story of Purim. Haman is identified with Amalek in his attempt to destroy the Jewish people and their faith. The triumph over Haman (Amalek) makes the holiday of Purim the one mitzvah that will be observed during the Messianic era when doubt will be abrogated and evil defeated; where the unification, the Oneness of God's Presence will be apparent to all. Rabbi Aharon Feldman, in the name of the Maharal, explained that Purim was a time when there was an eclipse of God. We do not find God's name in Megilat Esther. The people were making the Oneness of God (*ehaD*) into a diminution of God's Oneness (*aheR*). They made the *dalet* into a *reish*. In the Torah we find two places where the *dalet* and the *reish* are enlarged. In the verse *Shema Yisrael …Hashem Ehad*. (Devarim 6:4), the *dalet* is enlarged; and in the verse *Ki lo tishtahaveh l' el aher* (Exodus 34:14), the *reish* is enlarged. The Sages explain that we should not make the One into the Many. (Hence, the enlargement of the letters). The holiday of Purim takes place in the month of Adar which contains the letters *dalet* and *reish* as well. When the Jews worshipped the Golden Calf, Moses was told (Ex. 32:7), "Go down (*Lekh REID-R-D*), for your people that you brought out from Egypt have become corrupt." They have made the *DALET* into a *REISH* hinted to by the word "*reid*," *reish*, *dalet*. They have made the one into the many. Purim is an attempt to unify the psyche, to remove doubt, which is what will occur during the Messianic era; thus the holiday of Purim is the appropriate mitzvah to celebrate during the time when the Oneness of God is manifest and revealed to all. In the pre-Messianic world, doubt is part of our psyche, and it presents an opportunity to strengthen faith because doubt is created to be defeated in its encounter with faith. We are commanded to fight against Amalek in every generation and our final victory will give birth to the truth of God's Oneness in the Messianic era.

The Ramhal states that doubt and evil were part of the divine plan to ultimately create a Messianic world.[1] Indeed, our Sages posit that if we did not have doubt, we might be blasé about our spiritual tasks, as Rashi and the Sfat Emet point out at the end of Bereishith. The Midrash states at the end of *Vayehi* that when Jacob gives blessings to his sons on his death bed, he wants to reveal to them the time of the coming of the Messiah to support their faith. However, Jacob is prevented from doing so, because this knowledge would have attenuated the children's drive to seek meaning. It was necessary to have some doubt along the journey toward wholeness. Indeed, this dynamic is preferable to a life of absolute faith, which might lead to lethargy and mediocrity. The doubt would force them to conjure up greater faith in order to overcome their doubt thereby leading to greater virtuous deeds in their lifetime.

Paul Tillich, in his book *Dynamics of Faith*, makes an interesting point about how doubt affirms faith. He suggests that a strong faith in the Highest Power is so beyond human capacity and comprehension, that it inevitably brings along with it the concomitant doubt. Thus, doubt proves that you are actually contemplating the correct "highest of the High" reality. If we say we have no doubt about our concept

of God, it probably suggests that we are not contemplating the *Ein Sof* who is beyond our comprehension. As Tillich says, “Doubt is not a permanent experience within the act of faith. But it is always present as an element in the structure of faith. There is no faith without an intrinsic ‘in spite of’ and the courageous affirmation of oneself in the state of ultimate concern.”[2] Furthermore, the ability to acknowledge our doubt leads to a clearing out of resistance and an opening to an existential faith which tolerates some doubt.

It is told that they once asked Ghandi, Do you have faith that God is love? He replied, “I am not sure if God is love; God is so beyond my definition of Him. But I do know that ‘to love’ is God.” Faith becomes manifest in the loving deeds of human beings. The same idea is expressed in the Talmud (*Yoma* 86a) on the verse, “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart.” The Talmud explains: God shall become loved through your deeds. Carrying on your business honestly, speaking respectfully and gently with others will lead others to say “how beautiful are his deeds and how uplifting.”

For me personally, I have a great connection to the God of the Cosmos who has created this magnificent world and the infinite complexity of the human being. But when at times the world does not fit my ego scheme, I allow a depression to enter my psyche that then gets projected outward to doubt and lack of connection with (my) the Higher Power. So faith is not only contingent upon how I see the outer world, it is also affected by my inner mood and emotional wellbeing. I become revivified either through action, through giving, through experiencing nature, through studying Torah and through prayer and meditation. In prayer when I say “give me strength,” or “Thy will be done,” then I allow my *neshama* to shine again. My mind may be necessary as a beginning in my quest, but it is not sufficient. I must make a space open for God’s energy to enter. It is within the heart where faith is found; the mind is too influenced by chatter and thoughts that may lead us away from our centeredness on Hashem. Thus we say *Shema Yisrael*, “Listen O Israel, quiet down your mind, be still and listen to the sounds of the Infinite.” The eyes and the mind are distracting and lead us astray.

As we live our daily lives, we are constantly encountering change within and without. We have different energies that filter through us, and we can be easily affected by all the choices and stimuli that impact us. What promotes a reliable faith is a lifestyle that constantly connects us to our Creator. Attending a daily morning *minyan* imparts within us a connection to Hashem; the group energy that elevates all participants allows for a palpable feeling that Hashem is within this Holy Space. The rhythm, the inspiring words, the sounds of the Hebrew words and letters conjure up a memory, an association of connection to Hashem. We leave our mindful chatter and distraction as we get caught up in this rhythm. Some sit and learn Torah before davening, and some remain after to learn before going off to work. *Tzedaka* (charity) is donated during the service as well, which touches on our inner capacity to be giving. And yes, there are also moments of surprising synchronization, when things occur beyond probability and we intuit that they are more than just coincidences. Jung calls these synchronistic hints of God’s Presence.[3] We are then awakened to a whisper of God, or a “rumor of angels,” a spark from the infinite, and we are awakened to faith once more.

And yet, there are periods of darkness and distance from Hashem when we return to a state of ego consciousness, when our human needs for connection, recognition, comparisons to others, awareness of our imperfections begin to seep into our psyches. This promotes, jealousies, anger, and impatience, etc. We then become isolated from our *neshama* and from others.
There are also times when we encounter challenges in our tradition that create some doubt, such as the second paragraph in the Shema that does not seem to be akin to our experience.
But our rabbinic tradition continues to make Torah sacred through interpretation, and continues to develop relevant responses to modernity based on earlier precedents and sanctioned methodologies. This allows us to reclaim our faith, and our doubt is assuaged as we encounter the brilliant commentary

and insights of our Sages. As Rabbi Emanuel Rackman points out, our Torah is the most definitive record of God's encounter with humanity.[4] Our tradition is a cumulative process. It uses stories to teach, not to present historical facts, and continues to reveal new meanings and relevant responses to our current times. Tradition may be defined as the sum total of past events and thinking, that is also continually adapting and developing while maintaining the accepted norms from our past history. Moreover, in addition, we experience the wonders of God in our everyday lives.

Though there have been many classic writings asserting why we should have belief in God. But each of them has been logically undermined.[5] The Rambam and others also write brilliantly about why we should have faith in our specific Jewish Tradition and its profound wisdom. Judah Halevy gives a very persuasive argument for the veracity of our tradition through the historical witnessing of our whole people at Sinai, and the Prophets who witnessed God directly. After all, he claims, would the most honest and evolved of people (our Prophets) lie? If so whom can we trust?[6]

But it is the constant mitzvoth that return us to our brothers and sisters and to Hashem. The whispers of Hashem also enter us when we encounter the beauty of nature, the flowers, the ocean, the mountains, the animals, the smiles, the synchronistic events that occur beyond probability and remind us that there is more to this world than our senses. Although our senses and instincts also can be an entry point to something greater than our small I.

Another important factor that promotes faith is connection to community. Rather than living an isolated existence, we grow by connecting to others who manifest the divine image in their actions and temperament, the shining humility of true spiritual leaders, and the lifestyle of mitzvoth. The word mitzvah itself means to join—to join the soul within to the soul without through the deed done with *kavana* (focused consciousness).

In Bemidbar (21:8), in the story of the Copper Serpent, we find a clue as to how to reconnect to our *neshama*. We are told that after the Israelites traveled around the land of Edom in the wilderness, they complained about a lack of food and water. Hashem released snakes to bite the complaining people; the people are contrite and ask Moses to pray to Hashem for an antidote. Moses prays and Hashem tells him to raise a copper serpent on a pole and have the people who have been bitten stare at the serpent and they will live. They had to face what bit them and trace it back to the origin, to what was causing their suffering. That which bites you can heal you, if you engage with it. The suggestion in the story is that we must face that which is biting us. Trace it to its root, in order to understand its origins and how it has affected our behavior. Of course, living a lifestyle of mitzvoth also helps us return to a connected state. Through the deed, through the ritual itself, our energies are elevated to a higher level of Soul. A traditional community helps this process as well.

But many of us live in assimilated communities, or in lonely spaces, and we also observe a world where evil prevails. Doubt and distancing from Hashem slowly creeps in. The antidote is reconnection. R. Nahman of Bratzlav suggests an exercise to return to faith when we reach a place of doubt and alienation. We must get to know our darkness, without remaining in a state of guilt and shame. Despair and self-flagellation are counterproductive. Rav Nahman comments on the verse *v'ahavata l'reakha kamokha* (Vayikra 19:17–18) by suggesting that the word *re'ah* (neighbor) has the root letters *reish* and *ayin*, which means evil (*rah*). Thus we must learn to love the darkness (evil) within, get to know it, and befriend it rather than repress or deny it out of shame; for if we do not identify our dark places we project that evil energy on to others. This, indeed, is the root of all discord in the world, alienation within and seeing others as darkened, rather than identifying these very qualities within ourselves.

When the Israelites stood at Sinai, there was such a close connection to others (*vayihan sham Yisrael*—a singular unity of love) at the foot of the mountain that they reached a level of soul consciousness (of love) so that God became manifest to them. Their faith at that moment was so strong (Exodus

19:2), and thus they were worthy of receiving the Torah.

But now that we live distant from Sinai, we have to recreate that faith through mitzvoth, community, a trip to nature, a warm Shabbat, and a commitment to do good deeds where we experience the beauty of others through the deed. Their appreciation touches us, and we gain more by giving than taking.

In Psalm 133:1, we read: “Behold how good and how pleasant is the dwelling of brothers, moreover, in unity.” *Hinei mah tov u’mah naim shevet ahim GAM yachad*. A Hasidic commentary expounds on the extra word *gam*: this connotes that when we dwell together in unity, the Divine Presence dwells with us. It is the act of love between human beings that makes God manifest in the world and creates a renewed faith.

Another path to create faith is to encounter the awesome beauty and grandeur of nature. So much of our Holy Scripture contains the description of nature and the awesome beauty contained within, whether in the Psalms, the Song of Songs, Job. Paying attention to the magnificent beauty of God’s creation touches our soul and elevates our faith. Job was overwhelmed with great faith, awe and humility as God exposed him to the waterfalls, the glistening sky, the roaring lions, the flying ravens, the goats, the gazelle, the birth of babies, the wild oxen, the wild donkeys, the pastures, the greeneries, the wings of the ostriches, the stork with its feathers, the strong horses, the butterflies, the insects, the fish, the hawk, the eagle, the behemoth, the leviathan. We, too, are transformed and elevated by simply walking along ocean sands, watching the seagulls fly, and the dogs jumping into the waves.

The Hazon Ish defines faith as the perception that nothing is random: “Every occurrence under the sun is by Hashem’s proclamation, whether good or the opposite.”[7] Nothing is random, nor will anything ever be, whether a perfectly clear day, or the most seemingly chaotic political acts, what time the rooster crows, or the occurrence of one scorching summer after another, or the crystalline structure of a gem that has never seen the light, or the position of the electron. Even electrons, supposedly the paragons of unpredictability, are tame and obsequious little creatures that rush around at the speed of light, going precisely where they are supposed to go.
Any event, no matter how small it is, is intimately and sensibly tied to all others. All rivers run full to the sea; those who are apart are brought together; the perfectly blue days that have begun and ended in golden dimness continue. The ocean, the mountains, the butterfly, the roses, the eyes of animals, and humans are always there and open us to the Holy One.

And yet, there are times when there seems to be a randomness in the universe; the student chooses when to rise, the snowflake falls as it will, earthquakes occur, hurricanes ravish our cities. How can this be? But if nothing is random, and everything is predetermined, how can there be free will? Thus within the order, there is also some disorder, so that we can be free to choose order, strengthen our faith, and know that the doubt that also arises at these times is a necessary concomitant in the pre Messianic world to strengthen our faith. When we reach the end of the days, the unity that we are currently missing will be manifest and the Great Faith will be the reality for all. Our task is to build toward that future by uplifting the world with our commitment to faith, to our connection to spirit, to love our fellow human beings and all who inhabit our planet and acknowledge doubt along the journey as a necessary companion.

Notes

[1] Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzatto, *The Way of God*, (New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1981) pp. 36–43.

[2] Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1987) pp. 16–22.
[3] Eugene Pascal, *Jung to Live By*, (New York: Warner Books, 1992) pp. 200–205.
[4] Rabbi Emanuel Rackman, (New York: *Commentary Magazine* Symposium, 1966).
[5] Louis Jacobs, *Principles of the Jewish Faith*, (New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1988) pp. 33–70.
[6] Eliezer Berkovitz, *God, Man and History*, (New York: Jonathan David Publishers) pp. 18–30.
[7] Rabbi Shimon Finkelman, *The Chazon Ish*, (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1989) p. 150.