



SEARCHING FOR FAITH

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My brother and I have been having this recurring argument, for the last five years or so. And he always wins.

And the basic question always being debated is, “Are we doomed?” And my brother inevitably takes up the position that we are, in fact, doomed. And I always argue back, feel compelled to argue, “Nah, we’ll be fine. Things will get better.”

He will point to the disastrous political leadership in this country, and the way that extreme wealth controls the political system anyway, so even good leadership can barely function. He points to how our social discourse and media mechanisms have come undone - blaring into our eyes and ears all the time, but allowing for no real communication across cultural divides, making those divides worse. He points to the rise of fascism and ethnonationalism around the world - including many of the places we care about the most - and the way it leads to this senseless, brutal violence that crushes the vulnerable everywhere in a way that just forces us to question our humanity.

“It’s true,” I say, “But don’t you believe in human progress? It sometimes takes centuries, we learn our lessons slowly, sure, but we do get better, we figure out how to live better.” That’s my recurring position. “There *is* a lot of violence in the world today,” I’ll admit, “but it’s actually statistically a much safer world than it once was.”

You know, I trot out some weak little argument for how things will get better, how societies evolve over time. Look how much progress, undeniable scientific and social progress has occurred over just the last 50 years, not to mention the last 500. Give us another 500, and we’ll fix everything!

And then my brother brings down the hammer. “500 years?” He says. “ 500 years?! We don’t *have* 500 years - and that is the real reason why we are totally and completely doomed. The environment! We’re ruining the earth - we have ruined it! It’s basically irreversible damage unless we completely reverse course, right now, which we will never, ever do. So we are doomed. It sucks.”

Well that’s kinda true... I say. It does suck. And my brother wins the argument again.

So what am I doing here? Why do I keep coming back when I know how this goes? And why does it matter to me so much? What am I trying to do, convince my brother of the coming redemption of humanity, like some holy roller, some hyper-optimist - exactly what you'd expect the annoying rabbi-in-the-family would do?

No. No, I think you know, I'm not trying to convince my brother. I'm trying to convince myself.

Because the truth is, I also feel a tremendous amount of anxiety about all those things. What the hell is going on in our world? Why do the worst people seem to be in charge? Why do I stare at my phone all day long when it brings me no joy? Why are people so cruel to one another? Are we going to be okay, this whole human thing, are we gonna be okay? I'm anxious, and I'm afraid, a lot of the time.

And you know, I don't want to live like this. I don't want to live in fear.

And it occurs to me that what I want, I think, what I'm looking for, is faith.

And it occurs to me, somewhere here midway through life's journey, that I really don't have any. Here I am, this religious guy, devoted my life to it, and I feel like I don't have any faith. I'm not talking about God. I believe in God. But what I want is to believe that everything's going to be okay. That we're going to be okay.

And so, I think I need faith. I think a lot of us are looking for faith this year, maybe lost a little faith over the last year, the last few years, or maybe never had any to begin with.

But what is faith, exactly? It feels very easy to use in a sentence - to have faith - and it seems to be pointing toward some orientation towards the world, some feeling that I want to experience. It's like I know I want it - but what is it? And so I've been thinking a lot, as I prepare for the new year, what does Jewish tradition have to say about faith, where could we go looking for answers?

Well, we are in luck, folks, because today, the second day of Rosh Hashanah, is the day we read the hallmark story of Jewish Faith: The Binding of Isaac. God asks of Abraham the unthinkable - sacrifice your son, your only son, whom you love - and Abraham... just does it. Doesn't question. Doesn't hesitate. He just did what God said, because he had such incredible faith. This is the way the story has been remembered and celebrated - as a testament to faith. Kierkegaard called Abraham the *Knight of Faith* precisely because Abraham was willing to do the unthinkable, to take the leap into the unknown, to do whatever God asked, without questioning, and to believe it would be okay, because Abraham had faith in God.

Except that it never says that in the story. That Abraham had faith. The word - *Emunah*, in Hebrew - is never mentioned. And that's kind of strange, because in the story, Abraham is stopped from killing his son by this Angel of God, and then the angel explicitly praises Abraham for what he was willing to do, basically announcing to us exactly what was so great about it. But

the angel doesn't say, "Wow, Abraham, you have such incredible faith." What the angel says is, *עתה ידעתי כי ירא אלהים אתה* "Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your only son from Me."

Fear God. Not believe in, not trust - but fear. I went over it and over it, and I'm here to tell you, the Binding of Isaac is not a story of faith. It's a story of fear. That's not to dismiss it; fear has an important place in Jewish theology. But that's not what I'm in search of today. Today I'm searching for faith.

But now here's the astonishing thing. If we go searching for faith in the Torah, looking for that word, *אמונה* - where is it, and where is it first used? - it turns out that the Knight of Faith, the first person the Torah actually describes having faith in God...is Abraham.

But it's a different story. It's not the Binding of Isaac, here in Chapter 22. The story of Abraham's faith, the story that sets the paradigm for faith in our tradition, is a quieter moment back in Chapter 15:

Abraham is in his late seventies, he's been on this mission now for a little while, and it's been a rocky road: his wife was kidnapped, his family split apart, he fought a war... and, says the Torah, *אחר הדברים האלה*, after all these difficult things, God appears to Avram in a vision, and says, "Do not fear Avram, *אל תירא אברם*, I am your shield, and your reward will be very great."

And what does Abraham say? Does he say, "Oh I know, You're great, God! I trust you! I have faith!"

No. Abraham speaks up and says, "My Lord God, *מה תתן לי*, What can you give me? *ואנכי הולך ערירי*, Because I'm going to die childless!" This isn't working. You told me my descendants would become this great nation, but I don't have any descendants, and my wife and I are past the age where we will ever be able to have children. So it's not working, it was never going to work, you lied to me, and now I'm... doomed. And what have *you* got to say for yourself?

This, so far, is not a moment of faith, is it? Precisely the opposite. It's a moment of doubt. Of anxiety. So what does God have to say?

Well, it's not so much what God says next, but what God does: *ויוצא אותו החוצה* - And God took Abraham outside, and God said, *הבט נא השמימה*, look up, please, look up at the heavens.

And Abraham looked up, and saw a sky full of stars. And God says, "Now count the stars, if you can count them." And of course Abraham can't. And then God says, *כה יהיה זעריך* "that's what your offspring will be like."

And then, then comes the line we've been looking for:

והאמין בה.

And Abraham had faith in God.

Here it is. Here is the moment that defines Abraham's faith, the first great moment of faith in our tradition, and it comes not as a unflinching response to God's command, not as bold declaration of belief in the One True God, but as the description of the feeling that came over him when he looked up at the nighttime sky.

And I think I know that feeling. I think many of us have looked up at the stars - maybe we had to get out of LA to do it, to look up at a really black sky, like a curtain punctured with all these glimmering lights - and suddenly felt struck by something beyond beauty, overwhelmed by the vastness of it all. Too many to count, God was right, there are too many to count. And it all seems so perfect, in the quiet of the night, all this glory just laid out in front of us, as if it were there on display just for us to view. Maybe if we're really lucky we catch a shooting star, and then it's just too much, too wonderful. And for a moment, we feel like all is well, all is exactly as it should be.

And that is how Abraham felt that night - יוהאמין בה - he had faith in God - and then the next phrase - ויחשבה לו צדקה - which is notoriously difficult to translate, but here I would render, "and it seemed right to him." והאמין בהו יחשבה לו צדקה Abraham had faith, and all seemed right in the world.

These are the moments of faith, and if we're lucky, we've had some of them along the way. Maybe you, too, were stargazing, or maybe you were gazing out at the ocean, or maybe you were walking through these majestic forests we have, or hearing that perfect song, or seeing that painting that captured something, or looking into the eyes of someone you love, and you were suddenly overcome, your chest became full and your eyes welled up with tears, but good tears, because you were filled the joy of feeling the universe to be a fundamentally good and beautiful place, and you a part of it all.

These are fundamental human experiences. They are also the kinds of experiences that religion emerges from. Vincent Van Gogh once wrote to his brother, Theo, "When I have a terrible need of - shall I say the word - religion, then I go out and paint the stars." The stars, again. Van Gogh knew something about painting stars, didn't he? I've seen his famous painting of the Starry Night, and it really is remarkable, and it makes me think that he saw the same kind of sky that Abraham saw that night, and that the religious feeling it gave him was the one Abraham had that night. And the name for that feeling is 'faith.' And our whole religion, in a sense, is founded on that magnificent moment of faith that Abraham had looking up at the heavens.

And then... Abraham looked back down again. His eyes came back down to earth, rested on the plain of a lonely desert in a war-torn world. He looked again at his old, gnarled hands, and he remembered who he was, what his mission was, and how impossible it was. And the echo of God's promise was still in his ears, כה יהיה זערך "So shall your offspring be!... For I am God who brought you out of Ur Kasdim to give you this land to inherit it!" And do you know what Abraham's next words were, after his great moment of faith?

My Lord God, במה אדע כי אירשנה - But how will I *know* that I will inherit it?

How will I know? I still don't get it. It still looks impossible to me. I'm still afraid.

He was still afraid! Abraham had just had the most transcendent experience of faith in his life, and maybe, the Torah wants to suggest, the most transcendent moment of faith that any human being had ever had. And then the moment passed, he was back on earth, and he was back in doubt.

None of the questions had been resolved. The world still looked the same, and his life was just as hard, and his future just as uncertain. And he was afraid. And frustrated, and anxious. Just like me. Just like a lot of us.

I wonder what God was thinking in that moment. "That didn't work. I showed him the pinnacle of my creation, and I, God, *told* him everything was going to be okay. And I saw the wonder come over him, and I saw that he had faith in Me. And then, just as soon as faith came, it was gone.

And this is the guy! This is the one I chose to build a nation around, to introduce Me to the world, to help me build a more just society. If this guy can't maintain faith for more than a minute, what hope does the rest of the world have?"

I wonder if God began to despair of these human beings. I wonder if God lost a bit of faith, too, in that moment.

And then, God tries something different. God asks Abraham to gather things together to prepare a little ceremony, with fire and offerings. The sun sets, and with the fire still burning between them, God introduces a concept that Abraham has not heard before.

ביום ההוא כרת ה' את אברם ברית.

On that day, God forged a Covenant with Avram.

A Covenant. A Brit. That's going to be a big word for our people. The Covenant. We will enter into a covenant with God on Mount Sinai. Every one of our children will be born into the covenant, and every one who chooses to join our people will enter into the Covenant, בריתו של אברהם אבינו, The Covenant of Our Father Abraham."

So what is a covenant? Well, simply put, it's a promise. Or more like, an exchange of promises. An agreement between two parties, who are committing to trust each other, and to each do something for the other.

And what are the terms of this covenant? Well, they will be made up of this entire Torah, eventually, with all of its 613 laws. Our entire religion, all of our rituals and obligations, our festivals and ceremonies, all the laws which structure our society, will all become part of the

covenant we inherit. What we're doing here today. The holiday, the shofar, the *teshuvah* itself - it's all part of the covenant.

But in these earliest formulations, the covenant God articulates is more basic: התהלך לפני והיה תמים - walk before Me with a pure heart; לעשות צדקה ומשפט, do righteousness and justice; the circumcision, the *bris* itself, is a sign of the covenant.

And on the other end of the covenant, what is God promising to do? On God's end, it's always the same. It's a reassurance over the very thing Abraham is so worried about. You will become a father, you will be the father of a multitude of nations - אב המון גוים - and your descendants will inherit this covenant from you, and they will survive all their trials, and they will make it into the land I have promised you. All will be well, in the end.

So there it is. The introduction to the covenant. It began here.

But why here? Why now?

Abraham receives the covenant in this moment because this was the moment after he had found faith in God, he felt it completely, it was in him, and all of his doubts and anxieties were gone. But faith itself is not enough. Because faith is fleeting. It's hard to maintain. In those rare moments when we find it, everything is clear, and we want to hold on to it forever, to live in a state of constant faith. But who among us can? Not me. Not even Abraham.

The Maharal of Prague, one of the greatest philosophers in Jewish history, writes an essay on Faith in his *Netivot Olam*. And you want to know what the first thing he says about faith? He says faith is hard. Faith is rare. And faith is so easy to lose. And how do we know that, he says? Because Abraham, who was ראש האמונים, the first of the faithful, lost his faith when he asked "How will I know?" And Moses, he says, the greatest of all the prophets, who spoke to God face to face, Moses lost his faith when he struck the rock. And so, it seems, everyone loses their faith. Faith is hard to hold onto.

And that is why we have a covenant. The covenant is there as a container, to hold those moments of faith, to remind us that we've had them, to remind us of that starry night, and to give us some way to live out our faith, to commit to it, even after the moment has passed.

We do need those moments of faith. We have to seek them, cherish them, cultivate them.

But when we lose our faith, when we fall, sometimes so quickly, back into doubt - and if we are anything like our ancestors, we surely will - then we have the covenant. We have this container, this reminder, this promise that we have inherited. Because once upon a time, Our Father Abraham had a moment when he saw into the heart of the universe, and for an instant he knew that all would turn out well, and that we would be okay. And God asked Abraham, even as the moment was passing, to make a pledge to live as if that were true, and to do our part to make sure it would be.

So we try to keep our commitments, to walk through the world with pure hearts, to do righteousness and justice, to follow this Torah, as best as we can, and to pass it on to those who come after us.

And we try to trust that God will keep God's promises to us. To care for us, to save us from destruction, and to deliver us, at the end of our perilous journey through history, safely home.

And how do we know that we will make it, that humanity will one day be redeemed? במה אדע
We don't know. These are things we cannot know for sure. I will very probably keep fighting with my brother about it, and very probably keep losing.

But perhaps my best argument, the best reason to trust in the world, to trust that the promise has been kept, is simply that we've made it this far. How will I know, Abraham asked, that my children will inherit me? He had no reason to believe they would, these children who didn't even exist.

And yet, here we are. Our Father Abraham, here we are. We are your descendants, and we're here, still keeping this covenant we inherited from you. It's been a long, hard road, and it has seemed impossible, again and again, that we would make it. But here we are, Abraham's children, spread out across the world, like stars in the nighttime sky.

May we continue to shine on, bringing some light into the darkness, for yet another year. Shana Tova.