

## Finding Faith

This past July, during a visit with my mother in Maryland, we happened upon the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historical Park, on the Eastern Shore. Established just a few years ago, [the Park](#) has a wonderful visitors' center, with a great exhibit about Tubman's life and the activity of the Underground Railroad in Maryland and Virginia.

Before my visit, I had been down in the D.C. area for a week. I was feeling more depressed than usual about the state of our country and the state of the world. It's hard to escape the bad news emanating from Washington when the Washington Post arrives on your doorstep every day. This was my mind-state as I roamed through the exhibits about Tubman's incredible life.

I thought about what she faced, and how she faced it. Here was an enslaved woman, someone who never learned to read or write, who was sent to heavy labor in the fields when she was 6 years old and who, in her early teens, had a heavy metal weight thrown at her head, cracking her skull and causing symptoms of head injury that lasted throughout her life. The obstacles she faced were simply beyond anything I could ever imagine. And with all that, she determined, at the age of 27, that she was going to free herself from bondage, rather than be sold "down the river" into the horrors of even worse slavery in the Deep South. And so in 1849 she escaped, making her way to Philadelphia and freedom.

That story alone would be inspiring enough. But it was only the beginning. After a year away, missing her family terribly, Tubman went back to Maryland and liberated a few of her relatives. That trip was the first of many. Tubman ultimately freed over 70 people enslaved on the Eastern Shore. She was the only fugitive slave to ever work as an Underground Railroad "abductor," going into slave territory to bring others to freedom. She was never caught, and she never lost a "passenger" on her trips. Tubman lived a long and amazing life, working as a nurse and a spy during the Civil War, agitating for abolition and women's suffrage, and establishing the first old age home for African-Americans in Auburn, NY.

What struck me at the Visitors' Center was not just Tubman's bravery and intelligence and unbelievable determination—although there was abundant testimony to those. What moved me was her faith. Each step of the way in her journey, she communicated with God. In an interview in 1896, she spoke about her decision to work with the Underground Railroad. She said: "The Lord told me to do this; I said, 'Oh Lord, I can't—don't ask me—take somebody else.' But, Tubman said, God spoke directly to her: 'It's you I want, Harriet Tubman.'"<sup>1</sup>

In her journeys in and out of the South, Tubman felt God's presence with her. She had faith not only in the success of her missions, but in the coming of Emancipation. [She told an interviewer in 1859](#), "God's time [Emancipation] is always near. He set the North Star in the heavens; He gave me the strength in my limbs; He meant I should be free."

Tubman's faith felt like a direct challenge to me. Who was I, an economically privileged, highly educated, free white American to feel defeated, to feel despair? If Tubman could remain resolute and steadfast in her faith despite the enormity of what she faced, who was I to feel hopeless about the current state of our world?

And so today I'd like to talk with you about faith. I sometimes joke with my Christian colleagues that including Jews in the generic term "communities of faith" is a bit of a misnomer. Most Jews I know don't really think of themselves as "people of faith." People of struggle, perhaps, people of questioning, people of spiritual practice, even—but "people of faith"?

In today's Torah portion, we read about someone whose situation echoes that of Harriet Tubman. This is Hagar, the Egyptian maidservant to Sarah. We first meet Hagar in chapter 16 of the book of Genesis, when Sarah abuses her and she runs off into the wilderness. There, Hagar is greeted by a *malakh Adonai*, a messenger of God. In this first encounter, she gets a mixed message: she must go back to Sarah, to the oppressive situation, and there she will give birth to a son. Through him, she will become the matriarch of a great nation, with descendants too numerous to count. An audacious promise for a lowly slave.

When we see Hagar again in today's portion, that promise seems long forgotten. Again due to Sarah's jealousy and anger, Hagar is cast out, this time with her son Ishmael. Agonized by the fear that her son is near death, she sets him down, walks away, and weeps aloud. At this moment, she has her second encounter with a divine messenger. The *malakh* gently asks her, "what's going on, Hagar?" and directs her to get up and take her son by the hand. In that moment, she opens her eyes, sees a well of water, and saves her child. She goes on to fulfill the prophecy, finding a wife for Ishmael, and then exiting the Torah for good.

So, what does Hagar's story teach us about faith? Like Tubman, she develops her relationship with God in the context of slavery. The divine message she first receives seems to be a dangerous one: to go back to Sarah her mistress, who has oppressed her, in order to fulfill her destiny.

We don't hear anything about Hagar's relationship with God in the intervening years. All we know is that when she finds herself in the wilderness again, Adonai seems to have abandoned her. She despairs. And yet—she is not passive. When she puts Ishmael under a bush, the text says twice that she sits down *mi-neged*—literally, "in opposition." The text reads: "When the water was gone from the waterskin, she placed the boy under one of the

bushes, and she went and sat herself down *mi-neged*—opposite, at the distance of a bowshot. For she said, “I will not look upon the death of the boy,” and she sat *mi-neged*—opposite—and lifted up her voice, and wept.” (Gen. 21:15-16)

Hagar’s “opposition” to what is happening is captured in her cry, and in that moment, she hears a divine message. Her eyes are opened, and then we get a verse packed with action verbs: *va'tereh* –she saw the well—*va'telekh*—she went—*va'timaleh*—she filled the flask—*va'teshk*—she slaked the boy’s thirst. She saw, she went, she filled, she gave drink. Reassured by the *malakh*, Hagar recovers her ability to shape her own destiny.

From Hagar and Harriet Tubman, I learn that “hearing God’s voice” is about discovering one’s agency in a moment of terror and despair. I learn that faith means being able to perceive the possibility of a reality different than the one staring me in the face. And from Hagar and Harriet Tubman I learn that faith can be defined as love in action.

So why is faith so hard for so many of us? What gets in the way?

I recently read an essay by the writer Barbara Graham, in an anthology on the topic of faith. In it, Graham—a New York Ashkenazi Jew – recounts her lifelong journey to overcome the anxiety and fear that, she writes, “seem hardwired into me.” She goes on:

“I grew up believing that if you worried hard enough, bad things wouldn’t happen to you. This was the legacy passed on to me by my mother, my grandmother, and her mother before her...The idea was that if you paid your dues in terror, along with the ulcers and migraines that went with it, then you and your loved ones would be spared the full catastrophe.” She goes on to say: “Judaism may have been our religion—we may have given lip service to God—but we put our faith in fear.”<sup>2</sup>

This unspoken, even unconscious “faith in fear” manifests in powerful ways in many a Jewish psyche. Cherie Brown of the National Coalition Building Institute [writes about](#) the Jewish need for control as one manifestation of internalized anti-Semitism:

“Jews are sometimes scared and panicked, the result of a long history of betrayal and abandonment. This panic leaves us, in certain circumstances, wanting to take charge of a situation, exerting strong leadership, even interrupting or taking over if it looks as though something could go wrong. I have sometimes called the Jewish need to take charge of situations and the urgent need to “get things right” as being “scared active.”

Whether we call it “faith in fear” or the need to “get things right,” I believe this deep desire to be able to control all things at all times is a major obstacle for many Jews to the experience of faith. What others call faith we might see as naiveté, or dismiss as irrational or simplistic. Better to expect the worse, we think, in our misguided attempts to fend off disaster.

Another serious obstacle is the notion that faith is only tenable as long as I get what I hope and pray for. When we long for a child but can’t conceive; when we watch a loved one suffer; when we lose a job we love or watch a cherished relationship end—how do we have faith then? How do we not feel betrayed by whatever Power in the Universe is supposed to be on our side?

Sharon Salzberg, in her book entitled “Faith,” writes about the Buddhist concept of “fixated hope.” Fixated hope is a hope that is conditional on my getting what I want, and the attendant belief that my happiness is tied to a certain outcome. Salzberg writes:

“Any insistence that people or circumstances meet our exact expectations is not faith, but another effort at control, bound to end in disappointment...When our hope for relief from suffering is based only on getting what we want, in the precise way we want it, we bind hope to fear rather than to faith.”<sup>3</sup>

One last obstacle to faith is what we might call the “God problem.” That is, if I don’t believe in a certain kind of God—a Being that intervenes in human lives, that responds to prayer, that can come in and fix things that go wrong—if I don’t believe in that kind of God—or in any kind of deity—then what exactly am I to have faith in?

The good news is, none of these obstacles are insurmountable. Even more—I believe it is possible to grow faith, to nurture faith, even for those of us not so faithfully inclined.

To develop faith—what in Hebrew is called *emunah*—is to simultaneously relinquish our illusions of control while fostering a connection to something enduring both within and around us. Much of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy is designed to foster exactly this mind-state. The best example is the liturgical poem known as the Unetaneh Tokef, which we chanted earlier this morning.

The poem opens with the image of God as Judge on a throne, affirming the existence of a divine law of right and wrong. There is Godly order in the universe, the poem is saying, grounded in lovingkindness and truth.

But just as soon as this seeming order is established, along come images that function like a Zen master whacking a disciple on the head in order to dispel delusion. God becomes a shepherd, and we are the flock—suggesting that, like a Biblical flock of sheep, we are to be

randomly numbered, every 10<sup>th</sup> one taken for a sacrifice. And then, we get the famous litany—*b'Rosh Hashanah yikateivun u'v'Yom Tzom Kippur yichatemun*: Somewhere, far off, completely beyond our control, it is determined for the coming year: who will suffer, and who will flourish; who will be born, and who will die.

Whack! None of this is in our hands.

And the poem goes on: *Adam yesodo k'afar*—humanity comes from dust, and returns to dust. We are like grass that withers, flowers that fade, a cloud passing by.

Whack! Impermanence is the reality of all created beings. This is the ‘wake up!’ part of the prayer. Wake up to our lack of control; wake up to our mortality; wake up to the temporary nature of all things human.

But—the Unetaneh Tokef doesn't leave us dangling helplessly in the face of randomness and transience. *U'teshuvah, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah ma'avirin et ro'ah ha'gezerah*. We have three paths of refuge, three ways to soften the harsh realities of life. *Teshuvah*—returning to our true path, acting in accordance with our deepest values. Practicing forgiveness of self and other. *Tefillah*—spiritual practice, prayer, those actions that connect us to the Godliness within us and the world around us. And last but not least, *Tzedakah*—acts of generosity and justice; our efforts to be meaningfully engaged in caring for others and the world around us.

And at the very end of the Unetaneh Tokef, we are given one more gift: an affirmation that we don't do any of this on our own. There is something eternal within us and around us. We come back to God, but now there are no more thrones, no more shepherds, no more fear and trembling. In the end, the poet refers only to “Your Name.” This “Name” is Yud-Hay-Vav-Hay--which means Being Itself, the ultimate Reality. Here the poet addresses YHVH directly: “Your name is fitting to you, and You are fitting to your name, and our name is called in Your name.”

This is the faith lesson that Unetaneh Tokef is trying to teach us: to embrace the reality of transience and impermanence, while at the same time feeling deeply the Divine Name that hums within us and around us, that shapes us, that calls to us, that affirms the existence of right and wrong, love and justice, in this Universe.

But how do we get there? Maybe, sometimes, we're lucky, and the “whack” of the High Holydays liturgy wakes us up to this truth. But in my experience, this kind of faith needs to be nurtured and cultivated. Here are a few ingredients I've discerned in my reading and ruminating on faith:

Contrary to what many people might think, faith is not about belief, and it is not about certainty. Quite the opposite. Faith is about the willingness to step into the unknown. As

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Faith is the first step, even when you don’t see the whole staircase.”<sup>4</sup>

I met a woman once whose husband had died a year or so earlier. His death left her bereft; she felt depressed and unable to move on. As she dealt with her grief, she realized she needed to do something radical to re-affirm her faith in living and in herself. She decided to go hang-gliding. I listened in awe as she described stepping up to the edge of a cliff and then—stepping off, into the air, into nothing—her faith in the glider holding her up. That was the first step in her journey back to herself.

Sharon Salzberg teaches that faith is “the willingness to take the next step, to see the unknown as an adventure, to launch a journey... With faith we move into the unknown, openly meeting whatever the next moment brings.”

Faith is also an act of imagination. It is a deep sense that things as they are now are not as they are meant to be, and that we can do something about it. Mordecai Kaplan, writing about the metaphor of God as “king” on Rosh Hashanah, says that bringing about the Kingdom of Heaven “depends on [our] capacity for imagining situations that do not as yet exist.”<sup>5</sup> Our liturgy says that God is the Power that makes Creation new, each and every day. Kaplan interpreted this to mean that the universe is constructed in such a way as to support our efforts towards change and growth. Our task is to be partners in the process of bringing about something new, a world where every human being, every creature, can realize its Godly potential.

In her wonderful book *Emergent Strategy*, the writer and activist adrienne marie brown says, “We are in an imagination battle. Trayvon Martin and Renisha McBride and so many others are dead because, in some white imaginations, they were dangerous...Imagination gives us borders, gives us superiority, gives us race as an indicator of capability...We have to imagine beyond those fears.” She goes on, “At this point, we have all of the information we need to create a change; it isn’t a matter of facts. It’s a matter of longing, having the will to imagine and implement something else.”<sup>6</sup>

To foster faith in what is possible, we need to become aware of what we pay attention to. In her despair and fear, Hagar was unable to see a well of water that was right there in front of her. Once she was reminded of God’s presence and of the promise made to her, the life-giving water was revealed. Kaplan writes, “If we are to hold on to our faith in the possibilities of human life, we must avoid the tendency of keeping our attention fixed on evil in the world, while overlooking the good that coexists with it.”<sup>7</sup> And adrienne marie brown teaches: “I do believe that what we pay attention to grows, so I wanted to stop growing the crises, the critique.”<sup>8</sup>

Neither Kaplan nor brown is saying that we should be ignorant of what is going on in the world around us; we of course need to see clearly the reality in which we live. But it is difficult to foster faith if we are imbibing an endless stream of bad news and commentary on the bad news. I take to heart brown's wise words: "What we pay attention to grows." If we do not want to participate in the growth of ignorance, delusion, and greed, then we need to stop paying so much attention to it. We can take Shabbat as an opportunity to turn off Twitter and Facebook and email for 25 hours. We need to think carefully about how much, and which news, we take in. And we need to consciously spend as much, if not more time paying attention to those things that nurture our sense of humanity, our optimism, our belief in ourselves and in the people around us.

Which leads to the next step in our faith journey: fostering a sense of awe - in Hebrew, *yirah*. The Jewish tradition of Mussar, dedicated to cultivating wholesome character traits, teaches that fostering a sense of *yirah* is an important step in the development of faith. In the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel:

"Awe is more than an emotion; it is a way of understanding. Awe is itself an act of insight into a meaning greater than ourselves...The meaning of awe is to realize that life takes place under wide horizons, horizons that range beyond the span of an individual life or even the life of a nation, a generation, or an era. Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the simple..."<sup>9</sup>

A sense of awe is a matter of perspective, a kind of reframing of our daily experience. In traditional Jewish practice, we say this blessing three times every day: "*Modim anachnu lach...We give thanks to Adonai, the Source of Life...al nisecha sh'b'chol yom imanu...b'chol et, erev vaboker v'tzohoraim*—We acknowledge the miracles that greet us every day, each morning, noon, and night." Miracles! These clearly are not wondrous events outside the laws of nature, but aspects of reality imbedded in our daily lives—the regular miracles of our breath, our capacity to love, the beauty of nature, the reminders of all that is precious in life.

Cultivating a sense of awe does not mean fooling ourselves into thinking things are fine when they are not. adrienne marie brown writes, "It is easy to think everything is a miracle during a moment of external joy...What is harder is to bring my miraculous perspective to grief, to injustice, to delayed travel, to broken technology, to conflict, to changes of plans, to mercury retrograde—things that can be filed under 'bad day' or 'bad life.'" She emphasizes a kind of stance as she moves through life - she says, "I choose what to embody, what to long for, even as the horizon shifts before me. The adaptation is up to me."<sup>10</sup>

A sub-category of *yirah* is the capacity to see the aspect of Godliness within human beings. At a time when everyone is calling our attention to the evil and decadence of those on the “other side,” it is an act of faith to bear witness to the humanity of ourselves and others. There is a powerful Chasidic teaching on a verse from this week’s Torah portion, in the book of Deuteronomy. The people of Israel say, after calamity strikes: “*Is it not because God is not within me that these evils have befallen me?*” (Deut. 31:17) The Hasidic drash is that the Israelites’ mistake was believing that God was not within each of them. This doubt led them into crisis. The challenge is to have faith that the Holy One, the Shechina, some quality of holiness, is within each of us. And with this affirmation comes a kind of protection in the face of calamity, a strength and a refuge.<sup>11</sup>

So, I offer to myself, to all of us, an invitation to actively cultivate faith in the coming months. Here, again, are some ingredients:

A willingness to relinquish our need to always be in control.

Letting go of what we perceive to be the only “right” outcome, and attending instead to this moment, right here.

A willingness to take the next step without knowing what the ultimate result will be.

An ongoing practice of paying attention to that which feeds the best in us, not the worst.

A daily gratitude practice, noticing both the small and large miracles in our lives.

Turning off the news on a regular basis. I recommend listening to music instead.

Imagine the world as it could be. Do this with friends; do it with people you think you disagree with. Be bold, be creative; imagine from a place of love and curiosity.

And, finally, remember that human beings are precious, starting with ourselves. Affirm the godliness, the beauty, of every human being, no matter how obscured by delusion, ignorance, and greed each of us might be. Look for that humanity where you tend to think it doesn’t exist. And be compassionate to yourself first and foremost.

Like Hagar, may we all find the life-giving M’kor Mayyim Hayyim, Fount of Living Waters, to sustain and nourish us in the new year. Like Harriet Tubman, may we each hear the call to do our part in bringing about liberation. And may we remember the blessing said each morning upon awakening: *Modah ani lifanecha*--I am grateful to be awake--which ends

with these words: *rabah emunatechah*--How great is Your faith! Each day we say that, just because we have woken up to one more morning, the Universe has faith in us. May we take that faith to heart, and know that each of us is here for some purpose, and may we act on, and within, that faith.

*Rabbi Toba Spitzer*  
*Rosh Hashanah 5779*

#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Catherine Clinton, *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom* (2004), p. 83

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Graham, "Grace Happens," in *Faith: Essays from believers, agnostics and atheists*, ed. Victoria Zackheim (2015), pp. 84-85.

<sup>3</sup>Sharon Salzberg, *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience* (2002), p. 81.

<sup>4</sup>Quoted in Tim Costello, *Faith: Embracing Life In All Its Uncertainty* (2016), p. 7.

<sup>5</sup>Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (1937), p. 123.

<sup>6</sup>adrienne marie brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (2017), pp. 18-21.

<sup>7</sup>*Meaning of God*, p. 136.

<sup>8</sup>*Emergent Strategy*, p. 47.

<sup>9</sup>From *God In Search of Man*, quoted in Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness: The Path of Mussar* (2007), p. 238.

<sup>10</sup>*Emergent Strategy*, pp. 73-75.

<sup>11</sup>See Sefat Emet, Shabbat Shuvah 5634, third ma'amar.