

## The Power of Faith in Contemporary Times (RH1 5786)

(Written by Rabbi Michael Schwab)

If you can sit quietly after difficult news...

If in financial downturns you remain *perfectly* calm...

If you can see your neighbors travel to fantastic places without a *twinge* of jealousy...

If you can happily eat *whatever* is put on your plate...

If you can fall asleep after a day of running around without a drink or a pill...

If you can *always* find contentment just where you are...

...you are probably **a dog**.

We laugh, but we also know there's truth in that humor. I imagine we *all want* to live with calm, gratitude, and perspective. We all *want* to be able to be resilient and vice-free—but it's hard. We are human. We wrestle with anxiety, with cultivating compassion, with grudges, and with the uncertainty that abounds in each of our lives.

And while we cannot simply eliminate these struggles and “be a dog”, the choices we make and the gifts we already hold within us can *certainly* help. And this is where I think, faith, *Jewish* faith—real, lived, practiced faith, can play a vital role that few consider. For faith is an approach to life that is *expansive* and provides meaning. Faith signifies an understanding that we were created with purpose and that there is a connection between us and *all* living creatures. Faith, embodied in our amazing Jewish tradition, *inspires* an animated spirituality. Faith *reveals* layers of meaning beneath the surface of our daily life. Faith *creates* vehicles to give expression to our entire range of emotions at critical times in our lives. **Faith** can

be an incredibly powerful force in *anyone's* life, even those of us who never thought of ourselves as believers.

In American Jewish communities, especially in much of the *non*-Orthodox Jewish world, we talk far too *little* about faith. Instead, we emphasize, quite rightly, that Judaism is not *simply* about belief. Rather, we celebrate the real power of Jewish community, of our culture, our history, our people and of our comprehensive ethical and legal systems. And all of that is *spot on*.

But here's what is *also* true: more and more Jews—especially *outside* the Orthodox world—are stepping *away* from Jewish institutions *not* because they reject Judaism but because they are seeking something they don't think they can find here: that expansive sense of spirituality, religious connection, or faith.

As examples, Mark Charendoff, editor of *Sapir Magazine* looks to the explosion of Jewish spiritual music and prayer experiences. Song Leader Boot Camp, for example, is a program that attracts hundreds of Jews of all ages to an *in person* conference each year. My own daughter, Miri, went to the most recent one as part of a nice Beth El delegation led by Hazzan Sandler. Through the vehicle of prayer, song and spirituality the participants connect deeply with **each other**. And through *that* connection with each other, *supported* by the special spiritual environment created, they draw closer: to Judaism, its values, its teachings and to a cultivation of a relationship with Gd. Charendoff notes that (quote) “the **human connection** is tied tightly to a *faith* experience. This *is* Jewish identity performed in a *faithful key*.” (end quote) In other words, relationships, which are essential to *each and every one of us*, which help us cope with life in so many critical ways, are **deepened** and **strengthened** by *faith* encounters. He writes (quote), “Ever since God implored us to ‘hear’—*Shema Yisrael*—at Sinai, *we* have been developing

ever-evolving ways for Him to hear *us*.” That, at its heart, is faith. Our desire to reach beyond ourselves to Gd, to one another and to the Jewish people across space and time. Faith then is not a solitary system of belief. As demonstrated by us today, faith is a *team* sport whose goal is the creation of powerful connections with Gd and with the wonderful people in our lives.

When I was a senior in college, I lived with nine other guys in a big, old, creaky house in New Brunswick, NJ. Some were Jewish, some were not. Some religious, some not at all. We were very close and we talked about *everything* together—God, religion, relationships, our upbringing and . . . football.

Personally, I grew up in a deeply engaged, religiously observant household. *Tefillah* or prayer, Jewish ritual, Torah learning, Shabbat meals, holiday celebrations—these were the rhythms of my life. Sure, I had my questions and doubts, but back then I also had a kind of protective bubble around me. I didn’t face direct challenges to my beliefs or my way of life very often.

However, that year, in *that* living room, with my college buddies, there were *no* boundaries. And my friends, who knew well that I was both observant and religious, challenged me quite directly. They asked: “How can you believe in God? Gd is a fiction”. OR, “What’s the point of those laws and rituals that you spend so much time observing?” “Isn’t religion just a crutch for people who can’t face reality?”

And I’ll be honest: some of the arguments that accompanied these questions were compelling. Wasn’t it plausible that science *could* explain everything? *Could* religion just be outdated, perpetuated by inertia and a desire for more certainty? Could having faith be a sign of weakness or perhaps a complete waste of time?

But even then my intuition and my lived experience as a Jew told me something else. So when I answered them I didn't quote philosophers, I found myself sharing stories. Stories from real life experiences in my childhood around the Shabbat dinner table, where I experienced sanctity, love, togetherness and acceptance. Stories about my moment on the *bimah* when I became Bar Mitzvah, standing in front of the community teaching, leading and forming a sense of the blessing and responsibility of living in a world gifted to us by Gd. Stories about visiting children with disabilities each week at my *Jewish* summer camp teaching me that holiness also meant compassion for others. Stories about my encounter with the vastness of the Grand Canyon, the hum of meaning in its rock walls and rushing river and how it made me feel connected to that which was beyond me and inspired me to recite a blessing I was taught as a child for when you encounter natural beauty. Stories about my experience participating with hundreds of teens on Shabbat, singing joyfully on a Friday night in Israel, moving me to tears. And stories about the indescribable love of my parent's embrace, which surely transcended anything as reductive as pure physiology. I recalled to them insights into life I had come to during Torah study and how my interaction with others while we wrestled with the texts, lent me wisdom while bonding me to my study partners. In those moments I knew that faith did not make me weaker. Quite the opposite. Faith made me stronger, helping me to see that life has meaning beyond what can *easily* be measured. My sense of the spiritual helped me understand that looking at the world with an open heart and an expansive attitude towards meaning can be *more* sustaining and powerful than trying to *reduce* the meaning in the world to only what can be experienced through one set of disciplines or what can be cleverly argued during a cerebral discussion.

As Albert Einstein said: “Science can only ascertain what *is*, but not what *should* be... The fanatical atheists... cannot hear the *music* of the spheres.” The “music of the spheres” is the awareness of the beauty, moral order, and mystery that lives beyond the reach of our instruments. As with the love between people, the majesty of nature, the miracle of life cycle events and the wisdom of insight, Gd, faith, and spirituality *expand* our ability to see the true richness of meaning in the world. Faith gives us language to describe some of the most **important** aspects of life, and Judaism gives us a **framework** for capturing their holiness and sharing that meaning with others.

There is a famous story told about the Kotzker Rebbe. A student once came to him and asked, “*Rebbe, where is God?*” The Rebbe answered, “*God is everywhere — but God **dwells** where we let Him in.*” That answer is so simple, and yet so profound. It is our choice whether to think expansively and recognize that which is beyond us, **or** to keep our hearts closed. We can fill our lives with our own responsibilities, worries, distractions, achievements, and struggles. We can crowd our hearts so there is no *room* left for God. But faith is about invitation. When we open even a little space in our hearts — through an act of kindness, a moment of prayer, a pause to notice the beauty of the world, a realization of gratitude — that is when we let God in. And once God enters, everything begins to shine with holiness.

What is more, I also came to realize something Rabbi David Wolpe has often said (quote): The *Book of Psalms* says: *Amar naval b’libo, ein Elohim*—“The fool says in his heart, there is no God.” Not “in his head”, the rabbis note—in his **heart**. Belief and disbelief are not just intellectual positions—they are indeed *matters of the heart*. You can be intellectually critical of Gd, like you can be of anything - finding faults and problems. And conversely, you can list every philosophical

*proof* of Gd —*ontological, teleological, cosmological*—and no one suddenly says, “Now I get it. I believe!” But take someone into nature. Let them witness the birth of their child with an eye toward the spiritual. Let them experience a moving prayer service, a gorgeous song, an insightful learning session or an act of pure kindness—and faith *can* emerge. Faith is found less through intellectual debate than through relationships, emotions and moments of transcendence that can be grounded in a lived religious framework.

By the way, it works the other way, too. People often *lose* faith not because they’ve *learned* something new, but because tragedy has changed their *relationship* with God. Wolpe writes: “Did anyone not *know*, before they got cancer, that people get cancer? Or before their loved one died, that people die? [Of course they knew, intellectually. But] Our deepest connection to this world is *not* reason but **relation**.” Faith is actually a relationship, not a belief. And like any relationship, it can be wounded. But it can also be rebuilt. And like any *good* relationship, it can bring us joy, comfort, love and meaning even, and often especially, in the face of struggle, anxiety and uncertainty.

Think about *this* story:

A colleague shared with me that he visited a congregant in hospice. The man was only in his early 60s, but the cancer had spread rapidly. The man was weak, but he asked the rabbi to help put on his *tallit* one last time. His hands trembled as he wrapped the fringes around him.

He said: “Rabbi, I don’t know what comes next. But every morning of my life I’ve said *Modeh Ani*—thank you God, for returning my soul. Tomorrow, I *plan* to say it again. As if I believe tomorrow will come, even if it doesn’t. That’s *my* faith: to keep saying thank you, even now.” His family later shared that those were his last

words, “*Modeh Ani*. Thank you”. That is the power of faith. *Not* magical certainty. Not cerebral reasoning. But the **courage** to live—and even to die—with gratitude, trust, connection and love. For this man faith (*Emunah*) was not about *erasing* fear; but preventing fear from having the last word.

For many, it might be that faith is an alienating word - a word that doesn’t sound authentically Jewish. In Hebrew, the word for faith is *emunah*, its root is linked to the meaning of a combination of belief, loyalty and connection. It is the source of the word “Amen”. But here’s the remarkable thing, in our most ancient sources *emunah* was rarely treated like a fixed, static noun. In fact, it comes from the same root as *oman*, which is an artist or a craftsman, someone who actively *constructs*. And it is also the root for the verb that describes “adopting” or “mentoring”, like when this word was used in the Purim story to tell us that Mordechai “raised” his niece Esther.

Faith, in Judaism, therefore, is not simply having a set of dogmas and checking a box that says, “Yes, I believe.” Faith is something you *craft*. It’s something you *do*. It’s a relationship you *adopt*, nurture and develop. *Emunah* is a practice—an undertaking that connects us to Gd and to each other. And if we develop it *robustly*, it can be a major force in helping us with the very essence of the work of these holidays: assisting us to *improve* ourselves and achieve our goals of being more compassionate, resilient, reliable, grateful, calm and helpful people who can create strong bonds with others and have a better appreciation of the world around them (and that’s even better than being a dog).

So what does faith mean for us, here, in 2025? We live in a time of tangible instability. There is political division here in the United States that has ruptured relationships between neighbors, friends and even family. People are worried one

way or the other about the future of our society. And, of course, most personally for us, there is the horrific explosion of antisemitism in our country and around the world. Israel faces a multi-front war and we confront daily the heavy burden of knowing that there are still Israeli hostages in captivity. Not to mention the divide in *Israeli* society and the ethical issues Israel faces in dealing with the civilian population in Gaza. It is a lot for *anyone* to carry! And in the face of such a storm it is tempting to withdraw. To stop hoping. To respond with anger and frustration. To lash out at others in blame and resentment. Yet, for the most part, none of these reactions can help alleviate the problems.

But *emunah*—faith in action—is a real *antidote* to such despair. It gives us *another* way, allowing us to keep praying the well-known words of the *Machzor*: “*Hashiveinu Hashem eilecha v’nashuvah—chadesh yameinu k’kedem*”. “Return us to You, God, and we *will* return. Renew our days, as of old.” Think of our Torah readings and our prayers throughout these Days of Awe, we are inspired by *numerous* examples of resilience and faith. Think of Hagar in the wilderness, cast out with her son. In her darkest moment, she lifted her eyes and saw a well. That is *emunah*: not the absence of suffering, but the courage to lift our eyes, to *search* for salvation, and to walk forward.

Or think of the Holocaust survivor who once said: “They took my family, my childhood, my past. I decided I would *not* let them take my **future**. I *believed* life could still be good—and I *lived* as if it were true. And it became true.” And that too is *emunah*.

Faith is *not* a luxury for the naive. It is a discipline for the strong. It is the courage to act when we cannot see the whole path. It is the inspiration to *search* for



meaning and solace even during tough times. It is the motivation and ability to bring light to the darkness, *m'aafela l'orah*.

Here at Beth El, our mission is to bring this active, living faith, this *Eemunah*, into the modern world of our everyday. To keep Shabbat in a culture that glorifies busyness. To teach meaningful timeless Torah in a world of distraction, frivolous scrolling, and endless updates. To show up for Israel and the Jewish people even when it's so hard. To cultivate compassion for fellow human beings with whom we do not have a personal relationship, in a culture that focuses on “me and mine”. To pray and sing together to provide uplift to our hearts and souls. *This is Jewish faith, this is spirituality and religiosity.* And we do this not alone, but together.

So perhaps this year, you can take the next step in cultivating your lived Jewish faith, ***your emunah***. Perhaps reciting the Shemah before bed and reciting the *Modeh Ani* in the morning, framing your day spiritually with blessing and gratitude. Perhaps you will come on a Shabbat morning more often than you do now. Joining the “team” in practicing faith through singing, reciting personal prayers from the heart, celebrating happy occasions with each other, learning together and making connections with other members of the community. Or perhaps you will commit to more *action*. As Rabbi Tarfon taught: *Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor, v'lo ata ben chorin l'hibatel mimena*—“It is not your duty to *finish* the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.” Join your fellow community members in volunteering and performing acts of loving kindness engaging in faith in action.

Friends, faith is not about having all the answers. It is about having the courage to live the questions—together. It is about cultivating *emunah* not as an *abstract* concept, but as a *daily* practice. I can't promise that with faith you will *always* be

able to sit quietly in the face of difficult news, remain calm as disaster strikes, or that you will always be happy with whatever life dishes out. And I certainly can't transform you into a dog, even if that is what you want. What I *can* pledge is that the type of faith that Judaism describes can enrich your lives immeasurably with gratitude, resilience, perspective, wisdom, connection and love. And that such an approach to Judaism is readily available right *here* to each and every one of you. May it be a beautiful year of *emunah* and good fortune for us all and let us say, Amen.

*Shanah Tovah u'Metukah.*