

THE WILL TO BELIEVE

A High Holiday Sermon, 1984-5745

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I would like to tell you a story about my wife's grandmother.

Sarah Geller's son had died at the age of 53. Sarah herself was over eighty and in failing health. I was with her middle-aged children as they tried to solve the dilemma, "should we tell mother about her son's death?" "It will kill her," someone said. Another child said, "She has a right to know. She is his mother". The children turned to the Rabbi for his advice. The Rabbi said, "This will be a great blow to your mother, but older people are familiar with the reality of death. She may take it better than you think". The children decided to tell their mother. I observed Sarah Geller closely throughout the funeral and afterwards. Sarah knew how to take care of herself. When she left the synagogue where the ceremony was held, she looked up to the heavens, shook her fist at God, and exclaimed, "Don't do it again". Sarah was from the old school. She knew God well enough to do battle with him. She was angry with him and didn't mind telling him so. But such was the faith of Sarah Geller that she knew she had to accept even this greatest of a mother's sorrows. To be sure, Sarah was not giving up on God. It was just a family quarrel. As time went on, Sarah absorbed this sudden shock, this tragic loss of her son. She had faith that somehow this all had meaning. Life to her was still worthwhile. She didn't fall apart. She didn't become morbid or pessimistic. After all, she had other children and lovely grandchildren. Such is the stuff of faith, with a touch of Jewish audacity.

The faith and courage that sustained Sarah Geller in her crisis is not all that apparent among Jews today. Many of our modern Jews are not intimate enough with God to shake a fist at Him. Many of us ignore God altogether. We think, even if we don't put the sentiment into words, God is for old ladies and for uneducated people who don't have at least two college degrees. After all, God himself never even went to college! The debate between those who believe in God and those who don't has been going on ever since Abraham discovered that the sun is not God. God, said Abraham, is the creator of nature but not in nature. How to understand this unseen God is not an easy matter. The pagans who saw Gods in every aspect of nature, in every tree and in every animal, had no trouble believing in the Divine. For the pagans, the gods were everywhere. But those who conceive of a spiritualized God, taking Him out of nature, have given the atheists room for argument. The world is a matter of chance, the unbelievers tell us. You can't see God, because He isn't there.

Facing this debate in the 17th century, the famous scientist and religionist, Pascal, spoke of religious faith as a bet, a wager. "God exists or he doesn't," said Pascal. "If he does exist, we can look for eternal life in the hereafter. If he doesn't, you face the suffering of this world with no hope of transcendent meaning". "It's a matter of heads or tails", said Pascal; "why would you opt for tails?" Pascal went on to say, "If there were only a thousand chances, and only one chance in a thousand for God in this wager, still you ought to stake it all on God, for with God you have the possibility of infinite gain". Since Pascal was a Catholic, he went on to say in effect, "Come then and take the holy water and the masses. As you go through the ceremonies you will forget your doubts..."

One who disagreed with Pascal, was the English atheist, Clifford, who wrote, "Belief is desecrated when given to unproved (and unquestioned) statements for the solace and private pleasure of the believer". "It is always wrong", said Clifford, "to believe anything upon insufficient evidence".

Here we have the two prongs of a classic debate; Pascal says, why not believe? The stakes are high, and what have you got to lose if you make the religious commitment and you turn out to be wrong? Clifford holds that you show a lack of integrity when you believe anything for which you have insufficient evidence. Now I am certainly not a Catholic, as was Pascal, and the doctrines of Judaism are often distant from those of the Catholic Church. Still I would like to suggest that of the two men, Pascal has, in a general way, the better argument. I would like to strip the argument down to its base. The essential is this, one cannot live a meaningful life unless one is willing to take a leap of faith at some point. If we are to follow Clifford's admonition and believe only those things for which we have full evidence, then we will wind up believing very little, and we will miss much of the excitement and fun of life.

The second main point I wish to make is that faith in a possibility should produce action to realize that possibility, and not infrequently the faith and the action lead to the fulfillment of the thing hoped for. In a nutshell, we can say that this attitude, which finds its expression in Judaism in many different ways, can be restated as : "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition". Which is to say, first comes the faith that we can win over our problems in this world, and secondly, we must commit ourselves to that faith and work to see that that which is hoped for comes to pass. Indeed, without the faith in the possibility for change and good, the world would never progress.

Jewish history attests to the practical reality of this kind of faith. It is central to Jewish faith that there is a God who cares about what happens to people, to ordinary people. Moses saw the burning bush in the desert and heard God say, "I hear the cry of my people. I know their pain. Now you must help me liberate them". The radical message of this God is that he cared about slaves. Whoever heard of such a thing? Certainly, this was not a message for the second millenium BCE. In those days the great Gods spoke only to kings, generals and nobles! But somehow Moses acquired the faith that if he could persuade the slaves to revolt, to rise up against their masters, then there was a God who would meet them in the wilderness and lead them to freedom in a promised land.

As you can imagine, it was not easy to convince the slaves, who were bereft of hope, to believe in such a God, yet such is the power on some occasions of men of great faith. They can arouse others to accept their dream; and Moses obviously was such a man. For the first time in human history, a large block of people, the Bible says, "a vast mixed multitude, an erev rav", rose up and said, "We will be free, because there is a God who decrees that we are worthy of more than this". You will recall that the slaves escaped from Pharaoh only to face the later peril of Pharaoh's armies racing to destroy them in the wilderness. Many of the former slaves thought they had been duped. They had flipped the coin and selected "heads", but it was turning up "tails". The Bible tells us that the multitude accused Moses of leading them to their death. "There is no God out here in the wilderness who will save us", the people exclaimed. At this point Moses himself begins to doubt, and he prays to God, saying "Lord, all of this was your idea. These are your people. You told me to lead them out of Egypt. Now it seems we are all to be killed". How many of you remember the unusual answer of this unusual God. God declared to Moses, "Why do you cry unto me? Tell the children of Israel to go forward". To go forward? Into the sea? How could the people be expected to take what seems to be a fatal step. It didn't make sense to challenge the people who were having a crisis of faith with the need to have even greater faith! Yet this was the answer. You must believe in the possibility for the better life enough to take extraordinary risks to achieve it. You know the climax of the story, the Israelites walked into the water. They risked their life to obtain a greater life.

Now there are those who will tell you that the great miracle that happened at the Red Sea was that God split the sea so that the Israelites could walk over on dry land. I rather think that the great miracle was that these former slaves exhibited such

dramatic faith in the possibility that there was a God who would help them in their distress. It is of no real concern of mine whether Cecil B. DeMilles' version of the splitting of the Red Sea is correct or whether the biblical version is literally true when it says the sea was divided into two standing walls. The historic truth is that the Hebrews were slaves in Egypt; they did manage to escape at this moment in history; and they did set up one of the great nations in all human history. The laws which our people established in their new society were laws directly related to their personal experience. Some of the laws are: "A person who returns an escaped slave to his master is guilty of a crime against God". "You shall have one manner of law for the stranger as well as for the native citizen". "If you do not care for the poor, for the widow and the orphan and the stranger, they they will cry out unto me", saith the Lord, "and I will hear, and it will be accounted to you for evil". The soul of the Hebrew nation was the soul of those who had suffered grievously and who from the depths of their experience had a new vision of what the world ought to be like.

Three thousand years later, you and I, descendants of these very slaves, are here to tell the story which grew out of the faith in a possibility. The rational basis of the Hebrew nation and the sophisticated philosophy of Judaism came later. These were built on top of the Exodus experience which could never have been possible without a leap of faith. William James, the great psychologist and philosopher at the turn of the 20th century, has written, "A genuine option cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds. At such times when we do not have enough answers to say this or that is the clear alternative, we must choose a path, and the choosing of a path in these circumstances is a choice of our passions. It is a choice of faith".

The scientist Einstein used to speak of this very thing. There comes a time, said Einstein, when one has to choose which way to go in an experiment. Frequently, that choice is made on the basis of the way we would like the experiment to go and the results we hope to obtain. By making a certain choice, we may well help to achieve a discovery which could never have been made otherwise. Scientists could not possibly proceed without certain preconceptions or hypotheses and without intuitive choices, as Einstein described them. Einstein said, "God does not shoot dice", for he had the faith that there is order and a master mind behind the universe and in it. Other scientists disagree with Einstein. The world, they say, is a chaos of conflicting and ununified forces. But even this view of the disordered world is an hypothesis and an expression of faith, for surely this attitude will influence the results that these latter scientists will obtain. Einstein was moved by his faith in the order of the world to hypothesize that "energy equals mass times the speed of light squared". To this theory we owe the impulse for splitting the atom. The experiments proved the validity of the hypothesis. Without the hypothesis, without the pointing of a way to go, without the faith, we might never have achieved this remarkable evidence of the miracle of the atom, this demonstration of the marvel of the world's order. Einstein's faith that there was a specific relation between matter and energy produced the evidence which in turn supports the faith.

The truth is that everyone operates on the basis of faith, even if that faith is negative. The psychologists give us ample evidence of this in the case of the chronically depressed person who has an extreme inferiority complex. Everything you say to this person in such a state will be interpreted negatively. Say to the woman, "You are one of the most beautiful women I have seen," and she answers, "But Elizabeth Taylor is prettier". Say to the depressed man, "But you are making \$100,000 a year", to which he answers, "I know, but Tom Jones is making \$200,000. I'm a failure". Heads or tails. The person without faith in himself says, "I'm a loser. Nobody loves me". The person with faith in himself says, "Oh tomorrow is another

day. Surely something good will happen tomorrow". The psalmist said it this way, "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy cometh in the morning". The psalmist's faith was that God will help us as we manifest our courage to move from darkness to the light.

The Hasidim of the 19th century taught the greatest sin is not to believe that you are the beloved child of the King. God is the King, the Hasidim taught. He created the world for you as well as for others. He gave you eyes to see and a mind to think and to create. Each of us is different to be sure, but each of us has his unique talent and strength. Respect your own talent, the Hasidim taught, however meager it may seem to you. God loves the street-cleaner as well as the Ph.D.

You can learn three things from a child, said the Rabbi from Kobrinsk. "First," he said, "the child is happy for no special reason. Secondly, he is never idle. And thirdly, he demands what he wants vigorously". "So should it be with us," the Rabbi taught. "If you believe that there is a God, you will be happy, for you as well as others are His beloved child. If you believe in the importance of what you are doing, for the community, for your family, for your friends, for yourself, then you will be enthusiastic in your activity". "And if you think enough of yourself", said the Rabbi, "you will insist that the world provide reasonable answers to your needs, for the world was so created as to provide those answers. The Book of Genesis reads, "And God saw the world which He had created and it was good!" We need to have the faith of a child.

Depression and pessimism are things to which we are all subject in this bewildering world, but we need to climb the rope out of the abyss. We need to make a leap of faith such as that made by the unknown Jew who spent much of World War 11 in a cellar inside Germany and wrote on the wall of that cellar: "I believe in the sun even when I cannot see it shining; I believe in prayer though I do not see my prayers answered; I believe in God when he seems most to be absent". Such faith, even if it does not always produce the most desirable result, is surely in the very least, a way to survival. The State of Israel would not exist today if all Jews had given up hope in World War 11 and said, "There is no help for us". It was Theodore Hertzl, the founder of modern Zionism who said, "If you will it strongly enough, it is not a vain dream". First comes the will, the faith; then comes the work towards fulfilling the dream; then at least there is a possibility of witnessing the reality, the fulfillment of the faith. One of the songs of the pioneers of modern Israel was, "heh-halutz l'maan ahvodah, the pioneer is meant for work"-work towards the fulfillment of the dream.

There is a story in our literature where Moses, once again despairing, turns to God and says, "You want us to build a Sanctuary here in the wilderness? How can we possibly succeed? We don't have any money. We don't seem to have the materials. How can we possibly do it?" To which God replies, "Only begin, and you will see that the walls will seem to erect themselves". Over and over again, Jewish sources make this point. Have the faith in good things, and start working towards their realization. You will not always succeed, but there are unseen forces that seem to come to your aid. Even if we assume, as some humanists do, that these unseen forces are only our personal (or group) untapped resources and that they do not come from outside ourselves, it is still valid to say that from the pragmatic point of view, faith in the possibility of change is the foundation of any real progress.

On Rosh Hashanah, our tradition tells us, the world was first created. For 4,000 years, we Jews have had the faith that the Power that makes for creation, God, is still at work around us and through us. Let us take heart from this assurance and become partners with God in refashioning ourselves and our world. Let us remake our life as God tried to fashion Adam, "bidmut Elohim", in the image of God.