

## **Rosh HaShanah evening, 5772: Faith**

### **Rabbi Brian Field**

This is one of the few times over the year that so many of us are together. There's something about what we do that has attracted so many people to keep coming back and telling your friends. So I'd like to invite you to take a peek behind the curtain with me, and share with you some of how we approach spirituality in general and how we think about Judaism in particular.

Tonight I want to talk to you about faith.

There's a story in the Torah we read every Rosh HaShanah morning. It's a story where God asks Abraham to do something that is beyond belief, that violates everything that Abraham, and we, have been taught to believe about God and religion.

God tells Abraham to take his son to a designated mountain and offer him up as an offering, which Abraham thought meant, as a human sacrifice.

What is this story doing in the Torah? And of all the stories, why do we read this story on Rosh HaShanah? Over the millennia, many, many answers have been offered. Some of these answers are psychologically powerful, intellectually creative, emotionally moving. In past years, I've offered my own thoughts. But there is a common theme to what most religious teachers resort to when one's moral and ethical and emotional sensibilities are deeply violated by a Divine commandment, such as this story – they say that it's a test of faith.

As if faith & morality are somehow mutually exclusive. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

What is faith?

Here's what Wikipedia says:

*Faith is trust, hope and belief in the goodness, trustworthiness or reliability of a person, concept or entity.*

Wikipedia continues: *It can also refer to beliefs that are not based on proof (e.g. faith that a child will grow up to be a good person). Religious faith is a belief in a transcendent reality, a special person, a set of teachings or a Supreme Being.*

*Faith is a belief that "things will turn out well in the end."*

What do you all think? Does that sound about right?

It doesn't sound all right to me.

Tonight I'd like to offer a different perspective, an approach that I think works whether or not you believe in God, whether or not you consider yourself religious. It's an approach that draws from two different spiritual perspectives – Jewish Reconstructionism and Buddhism, the latter articulated in a book by Sharon Salzberg - [Notes on Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience](#).

At this moment, it's important to acknowledge my colleague, Rabbi Maurice Harris of Eugene, Oregon who made me aware of Sharon Salzberg's book and gave me the idea for this talk.

When Wikipedia says that: *Faith is trust, hope and belief in the goodness, trustworthiness or reliability of a person, concept or entity... it is a belief that "things will turn out well in the end.*

I think this is wrong.

**Faith is not a belief that everything will turn out the way we hope, that everything will turn out all right.** “I have faith that God will heal my dying son.” “I have faith that God will make it all turn out according to the ordained plan, which will be for the best in the end.” Faith is not superficial or sentimental. What will ultimately happen to each of us individually, and what will happen to planet Earth and the universe are, ultimately, unknowns. We just don’t know.

And that’s where Sharon Salzberg makes a distinction between having faith and holding a belief.

**Beliefs** carry an assumption of correctness, - this is what we believe. Beliefs try to make a known out of the unknown. They make presumptions about what is yet to come, how it will be, what it will mean, and how it will affect us. Beliefs try to exert **control** over an outcome. In that way, beliefs are **closed**.

But when a religion hands us beliefs that contradict our own experience, our own minds, our own truth, when a religion asks us to believe something that can’t be proven, and then when we ask “How do you know?” and religion responds, “Have faith.” That’s where problems arise, that’s when real harm can be done.

As human beings, we have to wonder, to doubt, to try things out. For so many of us ... “lack of faith” simply meant having questions, being uncertain. And too many of us were denied the right to discover the truth for ourselves. In truth we didn’t lack faith; we lacked the opportunity to verify our faith by examining the beliefs we were asked to hold and testing them against our own experience.

And this is where faith gets a bad reputation, for when religions separate faith from intelligent inquiry, as opposed to making faith a result of intelligent inquiry, it casts faith as a practice of the gullible. And the tragedy is that for those of us who don’t want to be gullible, we never get to experience faith.

And I hope that for some of us, coming here today will support us to have that experience.

Many people say, many deeply educated Jews say that Judaism is not a religion of faith. It's a religion of behavior. It's a way that Jews distinguish Judaism from Christianity. But that's simply not true. Faith is very much a part of Judaism. And based on what I've seen, behavior is very much at the heart of being a good Christian.

So what is this experience called faith?

First of all, the Hebrew word for faith: emunah. It means trust. In fact, it's where the word "Amen" comes from.

Trust what?

Salzberg says faith is "a way to trust our potential," to "take the next step, to launch a journey."

Salzberg adds: "With faith that trusts our potential to take the next step, we are able to **move** into the unknown, openly meeting whatever the next moment brings."

And that takes us to a second insight, from Salzberg:

**"Faith is a verb, an action.** Faith is not a singular state that we either have or don't have, but is something that we do. We 'faith.' [Faith] is not just the willingness to take the next step, to launch a journey, it's the actual taking the next step, it's the journeying."

So where do we get this kind of faith, to take the next step, to step into the unknown?

One place is our Jewish stories. For what is the Torah but story after story of people journeying to the unknown? Abraham and Sarah take that journey "to a land that I will show you." Two generations later, Jacob and his family take that journey. A few hundred years later, Moses and Miriam and Aaron lead the Israelites on that journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land. We call the beginning of that journey the Exodus and it's so important that we have a whole holiday dedicated to telling that story: Passover.

All these stories are versions of one story: leaving old paradigms behind that no longer help us grow, and journeying towards the promise of something more spacious, something freer, something more purposeful.

But Judaism is not simply asking us to believe in this story. Judaism is not a set of beliefs, a creed, a doctrine **about** a story. Rather Jewish faith is **participation in** the story. As the Passover Haggadah says: It's incumbent on each person to see him or herself as if they personally came out of Egypt. So Jewish faith is not simply a belief that it happened, but that it is happening all the time, and it's happening to you, even now.

Judaism says: You have the potential to take the next step. You can move into the unknown. You can openly meet whatever the next moment brings.

Here's a third insight about faith from Salzberg:

**"Faith ... opens us to the possibility that our lives can be different."**

In fact, right there is the core of these High holidays: our lives can be different, our habits and mind habits can be interrupted. New choices can be made. Negative patterns can be reversed. Change is possible. Change is inevitable. You know what Judaism calls that faith? teshuvah.

Going forward, taking a step, with emunah, with trust, with faith.

This is not easy. That's why we devote this whole season to working on it.

Let's go back to the Exodus story. When Moses first came to the Israelite slaves with the promise of freedom, they could barely consider the possibility that their lives could be different. And even after they became free and were living in the wilderness, think about how many times they expressed fear that they would not have the capacity to handle the experience of change and freedom.

And think about Moses at the burning bush when God speaks to him about going back to Egypt. In effect, God is saying to Moses, "Return again. Return to your family, to your people, to the place of your birth. Return to the home of your soul." But Moses resists. He's scared. Moses does not have faith. And he gives reason after reason for why he can't do it: Moses says he doesn't have the ability, the skills, the resources or the personal credibility to lead.

He even says, God, I don't even know your name. I don't have a relationship with you. I don't know who you are, and if I don't know who you are, how can I trust you? And this is what God says: Ehyeh asher ehyeh." "I will be what I will be." Not "I will be what I was." Not even "I will be what I am." But "I will be what I will be." Possibility. Change.

Here's a thought. If God's name is change. And we are created in God's image. Then faith is not simply believing that our lives can be different, it's knowing that our lives will be different. And faith is trusting that we can walk into the change.

The Hebrew word "Shanah" in Rosh HaShanah means change. Shinui. L'shanot. To change.

So what is faith?

Let's look ahead to the story we're about to hear in the Torah. When God tells apparently Abraham to do something monstrous, Abraham simply says, Hineini, here I am. When his son Isaac asks him an unanswerable question about what is next, Abraham simply says, Hineini. Here I am. And when the angel speaks to him with a message of life and hope and possibility, once again, he responds, Hineini here I am.

Faith is not a belief. Faith doesn't carve out reality according to our preconceptions and desires. It doesn't decide how we are going to perceive something. Faith is not about knowing something.

Rather faith is the ability to move forward even **without** knowing. Faith is not a received answer, but an active, open state that makes us willing to explore. While beliefs come to us from outside – from another person or a tradition or heritage – faith comes from within, from our alive participation in the process of discovery.

So faith is comprised of three components:

1. An acknowledgement that we don't know what is next,
2. A trust that we can step into the unknown
3. An open mind that believes that truth is ours to discover & experience

Faith is the very act of taking the next step

The Torah is example after example of ordinary people becoming extraordinary because they were willing to step into the unknown.

Jewish faith is seeing our stepping into what's next as our participation in this story.

And that's how I invite you to hear the story in the Torah that we'll be reading tomorrow: trusting the possibility that by taking the next step, that we might see differently, that we might recognize the resources that are there, that our lives might be changed.