

faith with a lower-case f

We are here tonight to think about big things: about a world full of cruelty but ruled by compassion; about a realm where sin abounds but forgiveness is stronger; about a flawed universe with a moral arc that somehow bends, over time, over the very, very long term, toward justice. How can we imagine such things? With all of the experiences we bring to this night, with all that we've seen in the past year, with all that is going on in our world, how can we affirm a great scheme of meaning that can give shape to our losses, salve our wounds, and bring nourishment to the tiny tendrils of hope that we would like to cultivate in ourselves? To see evil and believe in goodness, to see shameless misbehavior and believe in change, to see a chaotic storm of disaster seemingly overtaking our world and believe in the future – this seems to require enormous, overwhelming, unquenchable faith. Faith with a capital F. The kind of faith that, the Christian Bible says, can move mountains.¹

Now, you've probably heard me say before that whenever someone refers to me as a "faith leader," whenever they call this a "faith community," and whenever they talk about Judaism as a "faith tradition" – and I have to say that this happens constantly – I always get a little uncomfortable. Ok, maybe more than a little uncomfortable. I say to people all the time: Rabbis are not faith leaders; we are teachers. This is not a faith community but a Jewish community, and our tradition is not one of faith but of belonging, feeling ourselves to be part of the Jewish people, and seeking to find ways to act, informed by thousands of years of tradition, that bring us and the world to a better place. But faith? That's not what we base ourselves on, not how we organize ourselves, not how we think about our identity.

But there's something ringing false to me about that explanation this year. I'm finding myself thinking a lot about faith. Faith exists in the gap between what is and what could be, between fact and promise, between reality and hope. If I say to you that I'm going away and I'll be back in a minute, it doesn't take much faith to believe that I'll actually come back. You'll see the results right away, after all; you'll know. But if I say that I'm going away and I'll be back in forty minutes, or forty hours, or forty days, or forty years, now we're getting into the realm of increasing amounts of faith that are required to believe what I say. And if I say that yes, the world is in terrible shape, but if we put in an enormous effort, it will be so much better in a few decades, or a few generations, or in a messianic age far, far off in the future, now we're talking about that very high level of faith, faith with a capital F.

I don't know about you, but I am finding myself very short on capital F Faith these days. And I don't think I'm alone. And when I look at Jewish history and Jewish texts, I find plenty of company among the Jewish people in every age, who also felt they were lacking that kind of faith. Our ancestors doubted. They didn't have Faith with a capital F. Just like us, they had a hard time believing that the gap between their reality and the fondest hopes and ideals of their

¹ Matthew 17:20-21.

hearts could ever be bridged, in their time or in ours. But even as they doubted, they lived, they studied, and they acted. Why? I think it was because they had a different type of faith, a type that helped them not only get through the day but also still struggle for what was right and live lives of meaning. Theirs was not a cosmic, gargantuan faith. It was a small faith, faith with a lower-case f.

That's what I want to explore with you tonight: faith with a lower-case f. I want to talk about what it is, how we can find it in ourselves, and how we can use it to help us not only get through the day, but also to love this life we have, the only one we have, and to restore our hope in the future. I think it'll be worth a few minutes of your time. But you'll have to trust me on that one.

First, what is faith with a lower-case f? It is analogous to what we call in theatre the suspension of disbelief, what the poet and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who coined that term, also called "poetic faith."² faith with a lower-case f is the force that allows us to maintain belief in a thing, person, or concept without any obvious support from our experience, or even in the face of experiences that seem to contradict that belief. It is actually closer to the meaning of the Hebrew word often translated as faith, *emunah*, which denotes a conviction or belief that transcends—but does not ignore—reason, that is not necessarily based on the available evidence of our senses. This is not a blind faith, putting our trust in something or someone without thinking about it, giving up our rational faculties. It is not faith that is demanded of us by some institution or authority. Instead it is a faith that is innate, part of our constitution and spirit, something without which we wouldn't be fully alive.

Although it sounds abstract, faith with a lower-case f is a common part of our every day. Many years ago I was a graduate student at Penn, living in Center City. A man approached me as I was nearing home one night with a sad story about a lost wallet and a missed train, and with a plea for what, to a graduate student, was a significant amount of money to enable him to go home to his family. Although I was skeptical, I also had this strong belief that I should help people in need. After all, I said to myself, maybe his story is true. I gave him the money and went home. Later, of course, friends told me that they had met the same man and heard the same story on previous nights, and that I had been scammed. At first I was angry that I had been taken in by an old ruse. But as time passed, I thought about it differently. Although I definitely became more skeptical about encounters like that on the street, that negative experience ultimately did not change my belief that helping people in need was important. That is faith with a lower-case f, the ability to maintain our belief in something even in the face of contrary evidence, not because we stubbornly refuse to see the truth of things, but because something more important is at stake.

² See Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria: Or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (New York: Leavitt, Lord & Company, 1874), p. 175. Coleridge was talking about the use of this idea in theatre and poetry; I am extending the use to our experience of our own lives.

faith with a lower-case f may seem irrational, but it is a key, even necessary part of human experience. We are born and come into a world filled with vast forces that act on us, forces that are both beyond our control and beyond our ability to perceive them. As babies, we pull up to stand for the first time, and then we fall back to the floor. Although we can't see any force pulling on us, and we certainly can't formulate or understand the abstract idea of gravity, from that day onward we act as if that force exists. As we grow, we start to rely more and more on these forces we can't see or explain, orienting our lives toward them, from the rising and setting of the sun and the progression of the seasons to the growth of seeds in the soil that nourishes us. Although we may think it rational to assume that these forces will continue to function as they have in the past, philosophers will remind us that assuming that something that happened in the past will continue to do so in the future is the operation of faith, not rationality.³ When we rely on the unseen forces of the world and build our human lives around them, we are exercising our capacity for faith with a lower-case f.

We do the same thing in living in a society full of people whom we don't know personally but who nonetheless take key roles in our lives. We rely on strangers to grow our food, to prepare it, and to transport it to us. We depend on people we don't know to make sure our water is pure, our air is clean, our land is unpolluted, and that we have power to heat and cool our homes and to run all of the devices that we use to work and to play. And when we travel, for short or long distances, we put our lives in the hands of untold, unknown others to keep us safe, as GJC's own Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg acknowledges in her beautiful travelers' prayer:

A prayer for the journey
We could say it every day
When we first leave the soft warmth of our beds
And don't know for sure if we'll return at night
When we get in the trains, planes & automobiles
And put our lives in the hands of many strangers...⁴

The power of Rabbi Weinberg's words is her reminder to us that we put our lives in the hands of strangers every day.

Yet we also have to acknowledge that our everyday reliance on those we don't know sometimes fails us. Our food is sometimes contaminated in its processing, sometimes adulterated in its preparation, and sometimes spoiled on its way to us. Our water is sometimes polluted, our air sometimes unsafe to breathe, and our land sometimes damaged with toxins. Our power sometimes goes out. And the trains, planes, and especially automobiles on and

³ See most famously David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects* (1739–40), although the problem of induction was raised by ancient Greek and Indian philosophers as well.

⁴ From *Kol Haneshamah Limot Hol* page 174.

around which we travel sometimes crash, through mechanical or, more commonly, human error. What do we do? Do we stop eating, stop drinking, stop breathing? Do we stop relying on power, or stop traveling outside of our homes? Of course, we don't. Even though relying on strangers sometimes fails us, we continue to do it. Here is where we really see faith with a lower-case f coming to the fore. Our faith in strangers is so core to our existence that even when we are confronted with experiences that seem to justify abandoning it, we don't. Our lower-case f faith is resilient; we trust, and even though we sometimes see that trust betrayed, we trust again. Some might say this isn't wise, that experience teaches us that we should never entrust our safety to those we don't know, but putting our faith in strangers is actually necessary to our existence. In a very real sense, faith with a lower-case f is something we can't live our lives without.

This is true even more so in our closest, most intimate relationships. We entrust the care of our hearts and souls to our friends and those we love, as we care for them in return. In the Bible, this is captured in the descriptions given for the closest relationships. Jacob is so connected to his son Joseph that, we are told, "*nafsho k'shurah v'nafsho* – their souls are bound together."⁵ Jonathan and David are such deep friends that "*va-ye-e-haveihu Y'honatan k'nafsho* – Jonathan loved him like his own soul."⁶ And Naomi and Ruth, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, forge such a bond that Ruth makes a powerful declaration of love and loyalty when Naomi urges Ruth to leave her after the death of Ruth's husband, Naomi's son:

Ruth replied, "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may the Lord do to me if anything but death parts me from you."⁷

Although we often think of the soul as something we carry within us, these texts suggest that it is those we love whom we trust to actually carry our souls with them, the part of us that makes us who we are. The amount of trust we place in those we love is truly staggering.

Yet we know, sadly, that sometimes that trust leads to disappointment and even heartbreak. Friends can grow distant, slowly fading from our lives as the support we get from them trickles away. Or, more rarely, an argument or dispute may blow up a friendship we thought would last forever. Family members can have fallings out, and lines of communication and love may become blocked or severed entirely. Lovers or spouses can change in ways that make the partnership between them hard to sustain, and breakups and divorces may follow. Or friends, family, or beloveds may grow ill and die, no longer able to carry our souls as we are no longer able to carry theirs, and our hearts can be torn to pieces by grief and loss. The pain of

⁵ Genesis 44:30.

⁶ I Samuel 18:1.

⁷ Ruth 1:17.

these breaks in relationships is magnified by their previous intimacy, and it can sometimes overwhelm us. What do we do? Do we cease to love? Do we stop making connections with others and no longer open our souls to such deep bonds with other souls? One of the gifts of living in community is seeing how those around us endure such losses and then go on to love again, to entrust others with their soul again. We connect, knowing the chances that we will be hurt, and yet when it happens, we still, after some time, reach out once more to connect again with someone else. We continue to believe in believing in others, even when we have experienced the most pain that we can suffer. We still turn toward other people and toward the future with hope. This, too, is faith with a lower-case f.

Another aspect of this faith is the traditional Jewish belief in devoting ourselves to activities whose benefits we will only see in the future. This includes the Jewish focus on education, both the teaching of Jewish texts and traditions and secular education that prepares us to contribute to society. We know that even in ancient times the rabbis advocated for full-time study to continue at least to age 18 or 20 at a time when there was little to no universal education.⁸ With the advent of modernity, due to the antisemitism that kept many professions closed to Jews, Jews became heavily overrepresented in those that were open to them, including those that required long years of study, like academics, law, and medicine. In our time we still commonly see young people in Jewish communities committing to seven, ten, fifteen, or more years of schooling after high school to prepare themselves for future careers in those same fields. Such a commitment to extended education requires a strong, if small-scale, belief that the future in which the benefits of all of those years of study will finally accrue will actually come to pass.

Yet we know that even when we put in the time preparing for something diligently and with good intent, it does not always come to pass the way we think it will or at all. As you all know, my own somewhat winding path through education—for the record, let’s just say that there were, ahem, nearly 20 years of post-high school study involved—perhaps proves this point too well. Things don’t always turn out the way we think they will. What do we do then? The familiar story of Jacob and Rachel provides the Torah’s guidance on this point.⁹ Having fallen in love with Rachel, Jacob asks her father, Lavan, if in place of a dowry he can substitute working for Lavan for seven years in order to marry Rachel, and Lavan agrees. So Jacob worked for Lavan for seven years, “and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her.”¹⁰ Romantic, right? But then, when it comes time for Jacob and Rachel to marry, Lavan pulls a fast one with the veiled bride. “When morning came, it was Leah [whom Jacob had married]! He said to Lavan, ‘What is this you have done to me? I was in your service for Rachel!’”¹¹ Jacob has put in the work diligently for seven years, but he has not gotten the promised outcome. Lavan unabashedly offers that Jacob can work another seven years to

⁸ See Pirkei Avot 5:21.

⁹ See Genesis 29.

¹⁰ Genesis 29:20.

¹¹ Genesis 29:26.

actually marry Rachel. You might think that Jacob would say, “Forget it! I clearly can’t trust this guy. What’s the point?!” But instead, the Torah says, “*Va-ya’as Ya’kov ken* – Jacob did just that.”¹² While this is an extreme example, I have seen similar reactions from many people, and I guess I have to include myself, when the years of work we have put in for a future benefit don’t turn out the way we thought they would. We regroup, rethink, and, very often, set another goal that requires a similar degree of commitment and work over a similar time period. Our faith in the future is so strong that we shrug off the instances when it doesn’t work and go right back to it. That’s faith with a lower-case f.

And then there is the Jewish faith in action, the idea that what we do matters, that the acts that we perform every day are significant, not only to us but also to the world. This is the essential idea behind the rabbinic concept of *mitzvot*, the specified actions that we are advised to do or not do. I’ve always been fascinated by the fact that the idea that there are 613 *mitzvot* long predates anyone specifying how you get that number from what it says in the Torah. It was important to the ancient rabbis that there were *mitzvot* and that they had value, but they really didn’t agree on exactly what they were; the lists of *mitzvot* that we refer to today came centuries later. What the rabbis wanted to get across more than anything else was that our actions as human beings have ultimate significance; indeed, they placed them at the center of the mattering map. As I said on Rosh Hashanah, they saw tremendous power in our hands. In a teaching from Maimonides that I’ve quoted many times, he puts it this way:

A person should always look at themselves as equally balanced between merit and sin and the world as equally balanced between merit and sin. If they perform one sin, they tip their balance and that of the entire world to the side of guilt and bring destruction upon themselves. If they perform one *mitzvah*, they tip their balance and that of the entire world to the side of merit and bring deliverance and salvation to themselves and others. This is implied by [the verse in Proverbs], “A righteous person is the foundation of the world” [Proverbs 10:25], meaning that the one who acted righteously tipped the balance of the entire world to merit and saved it.¹³

The remarkable thing about this idea of the power of performing a single *mitzvah* is that it doesn’t depend on what actually happens as a direct or even indirect result of our action. The practical effect of performing a *mitzvah* is irrelevant to assessing its value. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel went even further, teaching that being attached to the effects of our actions could actually nullify the very *mitzvah* that we were trying to perform. Only if we could do an act for its own sake, not for the sake of any effect it might have on us or on others, he argued, could it truly be called a *mitzvah*.¹⁴ Maimonides taught that while we might be able to intuit logical reasons behind some of the *mitzvot* – *ta’amei ha-mitzvot* – that logic does not capture

¹² Genesis 29:28.

¹³ Maimonides, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:4.

¹⁴ See Heschel’s *God in Search of Man*, Chapter 30, “The Art of Being.”

the full meaning behind each *mitzvah*. Similarly, although we might be able to trace some of the consequences that performing a *mitzvah* has on the world or on us, that does not capture the full meaning behind the *mitzvah*. The Jewish approach to action is that doing the right thing is worthwhile in itself, even if we don't see its effect in the world right away or ever. The belief that our actions are powerful and meaningful, independent of whether their consequences are ever known to us or anyone, requires exactly the lower-case f faith we've been talking about.

The last aspect of this faith I want to talk about is the one that characterizes this time of year and this night, Kol Nidrei: our belief in our own ability and the ability of the world to change. On Rosh Hashanah I talked about ways we can change the world. But how can we believe that the world can change? In truth, to say that it can is a faith statement all its own. Too often, most of the evidence points in the opposite direction, toward the stubborn ability of the world to resist efforts to change it. We see steps forward followed by more steps back on so many fronts. The inevitability of a world moving ever closer to freedom, equality, opportunity, and dignity and respect for all seems to be called into question everywhere we look. And how can we believe that we, as individuals, can change? Each year as we recite Kol Nidrei I can't help but hear the echoes of all of the Kol Nidrei eves past, all of those previous times when we gathered together and made renewed promises to ourselves to change. And too many times, when we gather the next Kol Nidrei, what do we find? That we're still working on many of the same things in us that need changing, that we have been too stiff-necked, too ready to succumb to the pressure of the momentum that is taking us in the wrong direction.

The amazing thing is that when the world resists our efforts to change it, we keep trying. We saw a victory for freedom at the Sea of Reeds, but that was not the last time we would face a Pharaoh. We came up against oppression again in the east and in the west, in Europe and in the United States, and so we have kept pushing for freedom in every generation as we do now. We keep trying to change the world as it shows again and again how resistant it is to change. And the amazing thing is that when we as individuals and as a community resist our efforts to change ourselves, we come back every year on Kol Nidrei and try again. Where do we get the determination? Where do we get the energy? Where do we get the vision? From faith with a lower-case f.

I've spent our time together tonight giving you all of these examples of what this lower-case f faith is all about and how it operates in our lives in order to show you how much access to it we already have and to encourage you to use it, to rely on it, when things are hard, when we can't summon capital F faith and yet need to go on, to live, to act, to dream, with joy in this one life we get to live. I hope it is useful to you on the journey we're all making together. I don't know for sure that it will be. But I do have faith.

G'mar hatimah tovah.