

Title: The Power of Faith

Faith in God, in others, and in ourselves makes life better.

Shanah Tovah!

There is one word we say more than any other word in High Holiday prayer services. It is a word we say so frequently we often forget what it means, and what we mean when we say it. That word, of course, is “amen.” We say “amen” after we hear a blessing or another statement we agree with. It means “I agree,” I support what has just been said. Yet “amen” has a deeper meaning as well. It voices support not only to the words said but also to the people saying them. It conveys that you firmly stand by their side. We are together in this project. We are one. Aymen to that means Aymen to you as well. The Hebrew root Alef Mem Nun, Amen, conveys trust, faithfulness, and loyalty. It means “I have your back.” I am somebody you can count on. Emunah is the Hebrew word for faith. You can hear amen in it. But when we say amen and when we live with emunah, with faith, we do not necessarily need to believe that x or y or true. Instead, emunah, faith, asks us to believe in x or y. And to be someone x or y can believe in.

Both directions are essential. We believe in God, and God believes in us. We rely on others, and others rely on us. No relationship can thrive if only one party is there for the other. Both must rely on the other. To be a person of faith, of emunah, means to trust and to be trustworthy, to have faith in and to be faithful to. To be faithful means to be there for someone. To have faith means you trust someone will be there for you. One of the best examples of faith is the faith of a flying trapeze artist. These acrobats possess tremendous faith, faith that their partner will catch them as they jump into the air from high altitudes. They count on their partner, and their partner is there waiting for them.

But, as we all know, life does not always work like a flying trapeze act. We find that those around us sometimes aren't there waiting to catch us. They sometimes do not fulfill their promises. They do not always embody emunah, trust and faith, towards us. It can be hard to have faith in those around us when we hear of a school shooting, of gunmen who attack students, and our own downtown. And when we confront people who struggle with poverty and homelessness, people who need help and aren't getting it. It is hard, they often say, to have faith in humanity. And, sadly, that sometimes includes ourselves.

As we undertake cheshbon hanefesh, the accounting of our own souls this High Holiday season, we realize that we too do not always embody emunah. We too have not lived up to our word. We too have fallen short. It can be hard, sometimes, to have faith in ourselves.

Even more disturbing is that when we examine our lives and our world, we may believe that God too cannot be trusted, that God too is not faithful to God's promises. Where is the justice in our world? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do children suffer illnesses that can't possibly be their fault? Why do good people die far too young?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in the Koren Mahzor notes how even our greatest prophets, people of faith in God, challenged God's faithfulness to God's promises. The prophet Jeremiah asked, "Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?" (Jer. 12:1). Lamentations states, "Ado-nai has become like an enemy" (2:5). The destruction of Jerusalem, and the millennia of exile and persecution culminating in the Holocaust, can make our emunah, our faith in God, appear, frankly, absurd. Our Torah reading for today, in which Abraham has faith in a God who asks him to sacrifice his own son, only adds to the seeming absurdity of our faith, and cautions us to be cautious in our faith.

Yet, through it all, our people has held onto our emunah, our trust and faith in God. Rabbi Yekutiel Yehuda Halberstam, who survived Auchwitz, said, referring to some of his fellow survivors:

"The biggest miracle of all is that we... after all that we witnessed and lived through, still believe and have faith in the Almighty God, may His name be blessed. This, my friends, is the miracle of miracles, the greatest miracle ever to have taken place."

As he said these words, Rabbi Sacks reports, he wept. But still he believed." (pg. 582). Why continue to believe? Why continue to trust in, have faith in a God who let this happen? Why trust anyone who has betrayed or hurt us? Why trust ourselves when year after year we repeat the same mistakes?

We trust because we must. Because we need to rely on somebody, despite their imperfection. And because, when we trust that another will be there for us, they are more likely to be. They are more likely to rise to our expectations, if we have faith that they will.

j

I would not be here today if not for so many people who have had faith in me, from my parents and teachers to friends and mentors. My Hillel rabbi, Jim Ponet, and his wife, Elana, gave me faith in my abilities as a Jewish leader. Rabbi Ponet had faith I could deliver sermons at Yale on Rosh Hashanah, and that my peers and I could create a meaningful service for students and faculty alike. His wife, Elana, had faith I could engage kids in a family service, though I had barely worked with kids before, and had a somewhat traumatic experience subbing in her Hebrew School. Their faith that I would be great gave me faith that I could be as well.

When we have faith that we can do it, we are more likely to be able to. Education researcher Carol Dweck has demonstrated that when students believe they can grow to new levels of intelligence with hard work, they were more likely to do so. Others have demonstrated that if you visualize yourself succeeding, you have a better shot at it. For example, when I played baseball in middle school, I was told to imagine myself hitting a home run. Just visualizing myself do it made it more likely to happen. (in full disclosure, I never hit a home run, but did make contact). When we have faith in ourselves, we are more likely to succeed.

This answers why have faith in ourselves, and in those around us. Our faith will help ourselves and our friends rise to the occasion. But what about God? Certainly, God

does not need our faith to become more faithful and our trust to become more trustworthy. Does God too need faith that God can succeed? Perhaps, yes. Before God forgives the Jewish people after the sin of the Golden Calf, God reveals God's 13 Attributes of Mercy and teaches Moses that these will elicit God's forgiveness at this moment, and for all time.

And indeed, we repeat these Attributes over and over on our High Holidays. "Ado-nai, Ado-nai, El Rachum V'chanun, Erech Apayim V'rav Chesed V'emet: God, God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and full of lovingkindness and truth." If God were eternally forgiving, why would God need this reminder? Our faith that these words are true help God live up to the Attributes God chooses to be known by. Our faith in God's faithfulness, our emunah in God's emunah, leads God to rise to our expectations. God responds to us in kind. "Return to Me, and I will return to you," says God according to the prophet Zecharia. Have faith in Me, God says, and I will have faith in you.

And God does have faith in us, in our goodness, just as we have faith in God and in God's goodness. This faith is what makes teshuvah possible. God's faith in us give us faith that we can change, that we can become better than we were before, that we can rise above the mistakes and bad habits that have plagued us, year after year.

Even a completely wicked person, our rabbis write, will be forgiven if he or she repents completely. God has faith in us, despite all evidence to the contrary. What if we strove, just for a few days, to do the same? What if we had emunah, trust and faith, that those around us can be better than they currently are, just as God does for us, just as my mentors did for me. What if we extended that same faith to ourselves?

On these High Holidays, we imagine that God, that everybody around us, that even we ourselves all believe that we can do it. Everybody is cheering us on. And yet, we may still fear that despite our best efforts, we will face an evil decree this year- from God, from others, from ourselves. Who will live and who will die, who will suffer and who will not?

The prayer Unetaneh Tokef suggests three actions we can take to avert the evil in our decree for this year. Tefillah-prayer. Tzedakah-charity. Teshuvah-personal return. I would like conclude by suggesting that faith can empower us to undertake each of these three actions. They can transform our perspective on what happens to us from evil to good. First, tefillah, prayer. Prayer is faith and trust in God's goodness, perhaps making it a reality. We contemplate the ways that God is Good, and learn to embody these in our lives. This brings us to our second action, tzedakah. Tzedakah, or charity, is presupposed on *emunah* in others, on faith in the recipient of our charity. We have faith that they will use our money or resources well- that they can be trusted with it, that they will use it for good. We have faith in their goodness, in their dignity, and in their potential. By extending this emunah, this trust to others, we may find it easier to have faith, emunah, in ourselves as well, to believe that we, too, are worthy recipients of the money, the resources, and the talents we are lucky enough to possess, that we, too,

can be trusted with it, that we, too, possess the good judgement and the potential to leverage what we have for the good of our world.

This trust in ourselves is the basis of teshuvah, our final action that averts the evil in our decree. While our teshuvah might involve reconciliation with others or with God, teshuvah is ultimately a personal process defined by our ability to live up to the commitments we make to ourselves. Did we follow through on our promises to live a better life? We will only succeed if we have faith that we can do it; if we have emunah in ourselves.

So there we have it. Tefillah- faith in God. Tzedakah- faith in those around us. And teshuvah- faith in ourselves. Emunah on each of these three levels leads to better relationships with God, with those around us, and with ourselves, since we trust and believe in the goodness of each, and benefit from each one's trust and faith in us. We see less evil and more good when we respond "amen" to the strivings of others, and others offer an "amen" to us. We have faith that we all can grow, that we all can be good, despite our imperfections. We believe- in God, in ourselves, and in others. Amen.