

People of Developing Faith
Kol Nidre, 5777

*Make me too brave to lie or be unkind,
Make me too understanding, too, to mind
The little hurts companions give, and friends,
The careless hurts that no one quite intends,
That I might add my courage to their own.
May I make lonely folks feel less alone,
And happy ones a little happier yet,
May I forget
What ought to be forgotten, and recall,
Unfailing, all
That ought to be recalled, each kindly thing,
Forgetting what may sting.
To all upon my way, day after day,
Let me be joy, be hope.
Let my life sing.*

["A Prayer For Everyday," by Mary Carolyn Davies]

When I was in high school, my mother gave me a book of poetry called, *Best Loved Poems of the American People*. It is an anthology of some of the greatest American poets and their master works, categorized and arranged by theme, and originally edited together in 1938. This poem, "A Prayer for Everyday", by Mary Carolyn Davies is the my favorite one from this book. For anyone who, like me, might need some inspiration or emotional insight, it is a wonderful collection of thousands of poems spanning almost 200 years.

But that's not why I love this book so much, why I have dog-eared nearly half the pages, and why I go back to it year after year after year. My mother got this book as a gift from her mother, who wrote, in the front cover, "To my Darling Daughter,

Love, Mom,” and dated it February of 1965, when my mother would have been only slightly younger I had been when she passed it on to me. Every time I open the book, I hear the voice of my Nonny, see a smile from my mother, and feel a sense that I am at once connected to all of the people who have helped shape my life, and yet at the same time alone with the deepest and most isolated part of my being.

It is in moments like those, when I can take a breath and give myself a brief State of the Universe address, that I often look with trepidation toward the future. In fact, one of the reasons I go back again and again to the poems in this book, is because I always find one that makes me feel a little more grounded in who I am and the life I am living: the feeling of being blown away by the depth and craft of Edgar Allen Poe’s *The Raven*, rereading the poem that first expressed in words what love felt like to my heart, or still, after flipping through the hundreds of pages more times than I can count, finding some new words that spark something unexpected deep within me. Even just holding the book, smelling its slight must, brushing dust off the yellowing pages, makes me feel calmer and more reassured, as if all of a sudden I have faith that everything is as it should be.

Most of the time, we don’t pay attention to those things that give us a sense of connection and enhance the meaning in our lives, but there is a term for someone who feels a deep sense of profound connection with the world: a “person of faith.” We use it all the time to describe people who are members of a religion, any religion.

Though for many of us this term smacks of any number of faiths that are distinctly not Jewish, I want to argue that this idea is inexorably linked to our Tradition.

To be completely clear, I do not equate being a person of faith with believing in God or observing every *mitzvah*, or even with the most traditional understanding of Jewish law and practice. I furiously dislike when people describe themselves as “more religious” or too often, “less religious” than other people. Within the modern Jewish People, there are many strains of Jewish expression. And while some may be more focused on traditional halakhic observance, or may bring a person to the synagogue more often, those people are absolutely NOT more religious. To me, a religious Jew is simply one who is in conversation with their religion, the texts and rituals of our Tradition, their Jewish community, their inner selves, and *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, the One who is the Creator and Source of Blessing. So, when I talk about a person of faith, I don’t mean necessarily a pillar of the synagogue community or someone who knows the order of the prayer services like the back of their hand or even someone who believes in God. Instead, I am trying to describe something at once more universal and still more focused than that.

We are all here today, at the start of Yom Kippur, looking at ourselves and the lives we have led. The questions that come up each year – *Have I done all I can? What will the next year be? How can I make a change?* – can inspire us to action, or can shake us to our very core. But since we are here, sharing in the start of a new

year, adding our petitions and supplications, our meditations and prayers and hopes to the innumerable words of the Machzor, it might also be worth it to try to examine where the concept of being a Jewish person of faith comes from and why we many of us may shy away from connecting to this idea.

The idea of being a person of faith can be found in the earliest sources of our Tradition. The word faith, אמונה, appears early in Torah, and retains its place in modern Hebrew as well. If we think about a person of faith in Torah, we often go back to Avraham, father of the Jewish People, who first breaks onto the Biblical stage by leaving his home when God commanded “*Lech Lecha m’artzecha*, Go from your homeland, to a land that I will show you,” and even, as we read last week, even seemingly being prepared to offer up his beloved son Isaac as a sacrifice at God’s request.

But neither of these are examples in which Avraham is described in the Torah itself as being faithful, or a person of faith. Where do those descriptions come? Only after he has left his home, after God has promised him he will be a great nation, and he finds himself still childless in his old age. And in his sadness he cries out to God, questioning God as to how all that God promised could possibly come to be. And God reassures him, not with proof, or with evidence, but simply a promise, a covenant that they ratify together in Chapter 15 of Bereshit, often called Brit ben HaBetarim. And it is only here, as God repeats his pledge to make Avraham’s children

as numerous as the stars in the sky and to give the Land of Canaan to his children's children's children throughout the generations, that we are told וַיִּחְשַׁבְהָ לֵוֹ, וְהָאֱמוּנָה בְּיַד צְדָקָה, *“And [Avraham] believed in God, and he knew that righteousness belonged to God.”*

This is why it is so jarring when, a mere 3 chapters later, God tells Avraham his plans to destroy all of the cities Sodom and Amorrhah, and Avraham asks the question, *“Far be it for You to do something like this, to sweep away the righteous with the wicked; it would be shameful for You. Must not the Judge of all the Earth act justly?”* Just after Avraham understands that God is the one from whom justice and fairness emanate, God reveals a plan of action to him that seems incomprehensibly unjust, so he raises questions, he seeks to understand, and so God enters into a conversation with him, a back and forth about the nature of the universe.

All throughout our Tradition, we are implored to seek, to learn, to strive for a depth of understanding with the hope of gaining wisdom day by day over the years of our lives. We are told, again and again, *“When something does not make sense, ask questions. When the world around you does not seem right, speak out. When we are tired, afraid, uncertain, call out and seek reassurance.”*

But how do we rediscover our faith in an age where God's voice no longer seems to ring out clearly, where we don't see miracles or Divine intercession? Rav Joseph Soloveitchic, one of the greatest Jewish thinkers of the 20th century, tried to

answer this very question in his work *The Lonely Man of Faith*. He dove headfirst into the very heart of the issue, responding to the problems of developing a personal faith in the modern age not by talking about God, but rather by explaining the nature of humanity itself, using the most ancient descriptions of human beings that we possess: the stories of Adam and Eve.

The first two chapters of Bereshit differ slightly in their accounts of the creation of human beings. Soloveitchic argues, however, that these are not incongruous retellings of creation, but rather accurate descriptions of the dual nature of each and every human being. In the first chapter of Bereshit, Adam and Eve are created at once. There is no description of their how they are formed but, much like plants and animals and the sea and sky, God simply calls man and woman into being with words. There is, however, one notable exception: God gives human beings tasks to complete, to care for all of the other creatures and created things, and to subdue and dominate the earth. As such, this first account of Adam and Eve represents our most cerebral and goal oriented selves. There is no mention of their bodies or how they were formed, merely a description of the work they are to accomplish. They are thinkers and workers, asking questions that lead to action: **How** do I accomplish this tasks that are set before me? **How** can the earth be made to grow food? **How** can I be safe and secure?

On the other hand, Adam and Eve's physical creation and formation are described in detail in the 2nd chapter of Bereshit, coming out of the dust, the physical raw material of nature, and with each being given God's own breath, the animating force of the universe, to enliven their being. Thus from their very beginnings, Adam and Eve are made to understand that they were created from the very basest materials, that they were merely dust in the scope of the vast universe around them. And yet, they share their lives with the Source of all Life. The paradox of all human existence is that we are at once so small and singular, and yet we are a part of something infinitely larger and grander, so much so that we are built to consistently look for new sources of meaning to which we can attach ourselves. We long to connect with people around us, to sources of meaning, and yes, to the Creator of the Universe and to the depths within our own minds and souls. And this aspect of our human nature asks the question, "Why?" **Why** are we here? **Why** am I doing this work? **Why** do I feel isolated or afraid or happy or in love or depressed? **Why** me?

It is by asking both of these questions, "How?" and "Why?", that we begin to unravel the meaning of faith. Because even though we may not always realize it, BOTH of these questions are inherently unanswerable. While we may find answers to some pieces of how the world around us works, we will never understand how everything comes together. Anyone who has done scientific research will tell you that there will always be more questions, and that discovering how one thing works

often open up new questions, ones we didn't even have enough information to ask before. Take the food we eat. For thousands of years, people have been cultivating plants for food, tilling the earth, planting seeds, caring for them, harvesting them. And yet, no one can force every individual seed to grow, nor even predict with complete and total accuracy which seeds will develop into healthy plants. Some things, even after so much investigation, still remain outside the grasp of our comprehension.

All the more so when we ask the big Why questions. Why was I brought onto this earth? Why do terrible things happen? Why does justice seem to be so often overturned, righteousness so seldom rewarded, and remorseless guilt so often ignored? In what are we expected to have faith when, at times, it seems as though nothing and no one are reliable?

I do not believe that there is an easy solution or a trick that can cultivate or strengthen our faith. But let me offer you a more evocative image of a person of faith. When the Jewish People were under attack by the Amalekites, shortly after they began wandering in the wilderness, and were in danger of being completely overrun in the heat of battle, we see Moses, standing on a hill overlooking the battle. And as he raised his hands, and kept them held high, the tides began to turn and the Jewish People started to fight back, but each time his hands fell, they started to

weaken. So Moses did his best to keep his hands raised, keep the Jewish People in the fight, but as the text describes:

וַיְדִי מֹשֶׁה כְּבִדִים, וַיִּקְחוּ-אָבֹן וַיִּשְׁימוּ תַחְתָּיו וַיֵּשֶׁב עָלֶיהָ; וְאַהֲרֹן וְחֹר וַתִּמְכוּ בְיָדָיו, מִזֶּה אֶחָד וּמִזֶּה אֶחָד, וַיְהִי יָדָיו אֲמוּנָה, עַד-בֹּא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ.

*But Moses' hands were heavy; and they took a stone, and put it under him, and he sat thereon; and Aaron and Hur pushed up his hands, the one on the one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands were **steady** until the setting of the sun (Exodus 17:12).*

Here, the word אֲמוּנָה is translated as steady, that is was not Moses who had faith, which kept him steady, but rather his hands were made steady by reaching out and being held by Aharon and Hur at his sides. This same use of אֲמוּנָה is used at the end of Psalm 100, when it describes “God’s mercy enduring forever and throughout every generation God’s faith is steady.”

Faith is not a belief, but an action, a force compelling us to reach out and pushing us to seek further down the path of meaning. People of faith are not those who shut their eyes, who believe dogma blindly in spite of the evidence, but those who, like Moshe, reach out their hands, who are constantly compelled by that inner steadiness to learn more, question more, seek more, and do more. Having certain set thoughts or feelings is not the goal, but rather part and parcel of a journey. To this day, the paragraphs of Shema and the V’Ahavta are described as “The Watchword of our Faith.” These words of prayer encourage us not only to love, but to act on that love: to renew our faith through our deeds daily, to display love by teaching our

children and others, to nurture our families, to build a home and make it a safe and sacred space, to give up idolizing that which is not really worth putting on a pedestal, and to connect ourselves, all our hearts, all our minds, and all of our innermost essence, with the people who surround us, the community of People from whom this incredible traditions springs, and God, who created and flows through it all.

A person of faith inspires faith. It is a person who remains steady, who returns, day after day, to live out their values in the world. Having faith does not mean having all the answers, or thoughtlessly following a pre-formed path, but rather returning to the questions again and again with renewed vigor. Being engaged in a spiritual life is not a decision made once, a life one chooses and then moves on, but a path that must be chosen every step of the way. We show our faith in our work by choosing to go in day after day. We show our faith in the people we love by reaching out to show them we care, by doing things to make them happy even when it means giving up what we might want in the moment. We show our faith in our children by supporting them with love even when they make it difficult, even when they yell and scream, make a mess, say they hate us, or do everything we have taught them not to do.

But in the end, it is our very displays of faith that maintain those ties, that help those relationships weather the deepest storms. We are compelled to keep faith with those people who show up and are there for us when we need them, who come back at every opportunity to demonstrate that they care, who do the work when it is

not easy, and who can be steady throughout all the storms of life. To show up even when it is not easy, even when we have other things we might want to do, even when we are uncertain or scared of completely full of doubt is what it means to be a person of faith.

I will leave you with the following thought. A little more than 25 years ago, the Conservative Movement published a statement of its principles, which was supposed to explain what the movement, as a whole, stood for. This text, which still exists and can be easily read online or in print, was called *Emet V'Emunah*: "Truth and Faith." It is not terribly long, about 40 pages, and it deals with God, Jewish Peoplehood, Revelation, and a host of other issues. But at the very end the rabbis, scholars, and lay-leaders who assembled this document describe their ideal person of faith as someone who is willing to see their Jewish identity as an integral part of who they are, someone who is constantly learning, and someone who is "a striving Jew." They end their findings with a description of that last term:

"No matter the level at which one starts, no matter the heights of piety and knowledge one attains, no one can perform all 613 mitzvot or acquire all of Jewish knowledge...Complacency is the mother of stagnation and the antithesis of Conservative Judaism. Given our changing world, finality and certainty are illusory at best, destructive at worst. Rather than claiming to have found a goal at the end of the road, the ideal Conservative Jew is a traveler walking purposefully towards 'God's holy mountain.'"

Faith is not a certainty in things that cannot be proven, nor is it a conviction of things neither heard nor seen. Rather, faith is that effort to walk along a path of

commitment to the deepest searching of one's soul, that most fervent devotion to the people in one's life, and that continual struggle to work to improve ourselves, our relationships, our lives, and our world. Faith is not a destination but the engine that powers the adventure that is life. Moving forward into the unknown future requires a faith in ourselves to handle whatever will come, a steadfast connection to the people who share the journey with us, and yes, a dedication to explore the deepest reaches of our souls, not to unravel the mysteries of the universe, but to merely to ask the questions that drive our own voyages of self-discovery forward.

Even though it can be hard to have faith in much in this world, to come back again and again and ask the questions about our lives which confront us every Yom Kippur, know this: through the ups and downs of life, and no matter what may happen or what you may do, I have faith in you. Please have faith in one another. Have faith in our community. Have faith in yourselves. Be steadfast, and return, with your questions, with your problems, and especially with your doubts and we will walk the path of discovery together. Come as you are, each moment, each day, for above all, I have faith in all of us together. As we say throughout these Days of Awe, "Hazak v'Amatz Libecha" Be strong and steady in your heart. And above all, have a little faith.