

*Reclaiming Faith – Erev Rosh Hashana 5783*  
*September 25, 2022 – 1 Tishrei 5783*  
*Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester*  
*Rabbi Howard J. Goldsmith*

A priest, a minister, a pastor and a rabbi walk into a synagogue. No, this is not the beginning of a bad joke. This is what happened back in June when about 40 people from different faith communities gathered in our Susan Schweitzer Family Learning Center. Greek Orthodox and Catholic, Episcopalian and Jewish – they represented the religious diversity of our wider community. I sat at the front of the room with the other clergy for a panel discussion titled “How religion can help to heal our world.” An ambitious topic, to be sure, but one reflective of the enthusiasm of the ICLC, the Interfaith Congregational Laymen’s Committee, that organized the panel. This is the same group that organizes our annual interfaith Thanksgiving service – a truly lovely annual event.

Over donuts and coffee, we clergy offered our perspectives on the topic, each pointing to the good that religious groups have done in the world: building hospitals, alleviating poverty, feeding the hungry, educating the poor, those kinds of direct services that really do ease suffering. We looked at one another along the dais nodding our heads, smiling, and feeling good about the shared ethics and morals that our communities use to better the world. When we opened it up for questions, the discussion took a quick turn away from ethics and to theology when a community member asked his priest, “Father, isn’t the real problem in our world today a lack of faith? People just don’t believe any more. They just don’t come to church and make their kids come to church. So they don’t have faith and that’s where all the problems in our world start.”

Up and down the dais my clergy colleagues nodded gravely, honestly agreeing with the man’s sentiment. And then, in turn, each of them spoke of the problems with a lack of faith. How failing to believe leads to the degradation of morality. How the next generation just lacks the discipline that comes with “real faith”. Several members of our congregation looked at me, waiting for how I might respond to the sentiment. “Well,” I began, “belief is a great comfort to many people. And, as we discussed earlier, it can inspire great deeds of compassion. But I think we need to recognize that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, religion exists as but one idea in a very full marketplace of ideas. It is up to us to make sure that our message, our beliefs, resonate in that marketplace. It is a different time and we need to have a different way of speaking about faith, of living faith, if we are to inspire the next generation.” Most of the people in the room were NOT particularly happy with my response. They were not happy with the way that I spoke about faith.

We don’t use the word faith very often in synagogues. Usually that word floats around in hospitals and battlefields and churches and religious radio stations. When we hear the word faith we imagine a supernatural power, an afterlife, a destiny, we picture God as that old man with a flowing white beard sitting on a cloud deciding the course of the world and all that is therein. We picture all of that and, most of us, most of us think, “Faith is not for me. I do not believe in all of that. Faith is for my well-meaning neighbor down the street or for those Christian fundamentalists I see on TV or for that nice Chassidic man I did business with that time.” We

say, “Faith? Naaaaahhh. I’m rational and scientific and evidence based and so faith is not a word for me because I can’t test it and prove it and, anyway, I’m in charge of my destiny, no one else.”

I get it. I used to have the same reaction to that word more or less. I thought that a strict dichotomy existed: I have faith or I do not. I believe in an all-powerful deity or I’m an atheist. I’m an Orthodox Jew or I’m a less than Jew. Complete with the hand motions showing Orthodox Jews as somehow higher and “just Reform” Jews, as clearly lower.

Folks, I’m here tonight to say that the dichotomy is false. While we live in a society that tries desperately to make every issue, every idea two-sided, nearly all ideas or issues have endless shades of gray and countless mysteries that no one really grasps. And that includes faith.

Jews, generally, are bad at talking about faith. It just has never been a serious focus of Judaism. Sure, there is plenty of God talk in our prayers, but for most of Jewish history, we were really only interested in what Jews DID and not what we believed. Medieval philosophers talked about faith. Maimonides famously had 13 principles of faith – we’ll sing some of them in Yigdal tomorrow morning. The later kabbalists were deeply invested in mystical questions of cosmology and God. But these discussions of faith always took a backseat to study and doing mitzvot, following the commandments. Afterall, Jews have never been judged for what we believe, only for what we do.

I was confronted by the lack of faith in Jewish life in a profound way on my trip to Israel this past spring. The Westchester Jewish Council and UJA-Federation of New York organized an interfaith clergy mission for about 18 rabbis and Christian clergy from all over the county. We left at 11pm on a Sunday night and got back early Friday morning. But the short trip forged incredible relationships among those of us lucky enough to participate. I’ll never forget one particular stop in the excavated ancient city of Magdala on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Our guide took us to the excavation of the site’s ancient synagogue and explained that a lintel stone found at the site had a menorah carved into it. This, then, is the only synagogue uncovered with religious symbols as part of the design from the time of the ancient sacrificial Temple in Jerusalem.

The rabbis on the trip got very excited, “Well,” we said, “if you consider that symbol and take into account the dating of the find, then if you add in what we know of sacrificial worship in the second temple period and the scant discussion of religious life outside the temple in various Talmudic and extra-canonical sources, then we can assume that at some point, a Jew probably prayed here!” The Christian clergy in our group looked at that same menorah, realized that that synagogue is where Mary Magdalene would have prayed, and they said, “Praise God!” We rabbis went straight to our analytical minds and they went straight to their spiritual hearts – full of faith.

Now, to be fair, for Christians, faith is central. Faith is, literally, what it means to be a Christian. So, their easy access to it makes sense. But our distance from it, the immediate jump to our analytical, cerebral approach, threatens to cut us off from faith that is deeply human and deeply meaningful. So, how can we authentically access faith in the context of our world view and fundamental beliefs?

My teacher and mentor, Rabbi Larry Hoffman, helps us understand how to expand the notion of faith in a way that allows us to authentically adopt it. He writes, “Faith need not imply dogmatic belief. The word ‘faith’ has many other meanings as well. We can put our faith in someone; we can have faith that something will happen; we can show good faith of our own. We can be ‘faithful’ and believe nothing whatever. If our conversations about faith are to get us anywhere, we need a new way of talking about it... Faith is not something you have; it is a strategy you follow.”<sup>1</sup>

If the last two and a half years have reminded us of anything, it is that life is not easy. Ups and downs, challenges and hardships, financial reversals and relationship travails, sickness and recovery, death and mourning. We all develop strategies to cope with life. Some of them are destructive: drinking or drugs or anger or, God forbid, abuse. Some of them are constructive: friendship, therapy, Shabbat, exercise. And most of the time, our strategy is to just show up. We suit up and do what we need to do to get the family fed and the kids to school and the deliverables delivered and the house cleaned and the bills paid – we Just Do It.

We all use a variety of strategies to face life and one of them can be faith, not the narrow faith of the televangelists or fundamentalists, but an expansive understanding of this vital human trait. The Oxford English Dictionary lists these as some definitions of faith: “The quality of fulfilling one's trust or promise; fidelity, loyalty, trustworthiness; the duty of fulfilling one's trust; firm trust or belief in or reliance upon something; a set of firmly held principles, ideals, or beliefs; in truth, really, truly.” Nothing in there about a man on a cloud with a beard pulling all the strings. Rabbi Hoffman says it well, “I find optimism better than pessimism; trust better than suspicion; truth better than falsity; kindness better than cruelty. The world is a glass, half full and half empty, but I customarily do better when I live with the half-full part. ‘Faith’ seems to me an eminently apt name for all of this.”

There is plenty of room in this conception of faith for God. Indeed, there is plenty of room in this conception of faith for any theology of God. But God is not a prerequisite. No matter what we believe about God, we can still claim faith for ourselves. We can use faith as one of our strategies for getting through life, for finding joy in life, for creating meaning in life.

Can we find other, more secular, words to describe this strategy for living? Of course we can: hope, resilience, strength, optimism, and confidence to name a few. But I think, especially heading into these Days of Awe, I think that the word faith is more apt. Reclaiming and using the word faith allows us to tap into religious experience, it allows us to see our lives refracted through the great traditions and depth of our Jewish heritage so much of which comes to us with the language of faith. When we embody an expansive faith, we can know that we live authentically as Jews. We can lean on faith and communities of faith. We can reclaim a word that has been used by others as a hammer instead as a source of meaning. Hope is a part of faith but lacks the richness, the ritual, the connection to our heritage, the depth of faith. Reclaiming the word faith elevates our self-understanding and our approach to the challenges of life.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/howyourfaith>

Over the summer I asked my friend Lee what he would want a rabbi to preach about during the High Holy Days. “Hope,” he said, “the events of our day make it hard to find hope.” And, indeed, this sermon started as a piece on hope. Hope is a beautiful and good thing but I think that the horizon for hope is too short. Hope is about our expectation for a positive outcome in the moment. And, as we all know too well from this world around us, that is not always possible and deluding ourselves only causes more heartache. But faith can help us when hope eludes us. Even when things go wrong over and over again, when hope is out of reach, faith can help sustain us. Faith comes with millennia of ritual and prayers and holidays and festivals that allow us to find meaning in our lives and in our world, even when things don’t turn out the right way. Faith comes with the comfort of knowing that it sustained all of our ancestors for thousands of years. Reclaim that word, reclaim it as a strategy for living, and we get to claim its many gifts.

I have to admit that I was jealous of the easy faith of my Christian colleagues in that ancient synagogue on the shores of the Galilee. And I know that I will never have that same faith. And that’s okay. I don’t really want their faith. I want my faith. Let us all claim that word for our experience of the world and its glory and the awe that it inspires in us every day when we pause long enough to look. Let us claim the word faith for the approach we take to those who celebrate and those who mourn, for the ways that we strive to treat our families and our friends. Let us call upon faith to guide us when waters are rough and we are uncertain. Let us call upon it without expectation that a hand will reach down from the sky to cure what ails us, but with the expectation that the world is full enough with wonder that we will be able to find a way forward and will ultimately find meaning in the vicissitudes of life – the good and the bad. I look around this sanctuary and I know that the faith I speak of is at the root of this community, deeply lived and embodied by the incredible people who fill this room and watch online, by each and every one of you if only we will call it faith.

I don’t know what God is. Any God worth worshipping could not possibly be understood by a feeble human mind. But I do have faith that together we can make this world more Godly. I have faith that together we can make our community more loving. I have faith that we can meet any challenge in our lives – hardship, sickness, struggle, even death – so long as we do it together, together as a community of faith. I have faith that for all our analytics and science and history and mathematics and all of the blessings they bring to us, I have faith that with all of that we can still find a rich and true faith to elevate our lives. And, finally, I have faith that these High Holy Days, will create the space and the time and reflection that each of us need to return the truest version of ourselves and that when we do, we will find wellsprings of faith to sustain and elevate us in the year to come.

כן יהי רצון

May this be God’s will