

“Faith: The F Word”
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5778 RH morning, September 21, 2017

I want to talk to you today about the f word. It's a dirty word that we don't say very often. Sometimes, when people are really frustrated it might slip out, but then it quickly gets shushed. Uttering this word, especially in public, makes heads turn.

Today I want to talk to you about the f word: F. A. I. T. H. FAITH. I am here today to break the silence. I am here today to put a crack in the armor and to charge each of us to acknowledge, process, and act in faith.

At the very least, faith involves the realization that there is something greater than ourselves. This something that we come to realize pushes us to better ourselves and aims us at a better world. But more than only realizing, faith requires us to be active participants in fashioning the messianic age. It starts with each one of us as individuals and grows like ripples in a pond.

This concept of a messianic age is not a new one; it's changed over the course of our history and I see this as a about complete peace—in our world and in ourselves.

Elie Wiesel, z”l, noted author and holocaust survivor, memorably expresses much of what I have in mind regarding this process when he wrote *Ani Maamin*, which translates to ‘I have faith’, which I have slightly altered to make more gender neutral:

Ani maamin, ani maamin. [I believe]
We believe, O God,
In you first of all,
In you above all.
And also in—
HaMashiach.
You will send Mashiach,
Ani maamin.
It will come,
Ani maamin.
In spite of us
In spite of mashiach,
It will come [this age of goodness]
...
That is our faith, O God.
Two words,
A cry,
Ani maamin.

...
Be worthy of it, O Lord.
Be worthy of us, O Savior.
Ani maamin, ani maamin.
For you, O Lord.
With you.
In you.
Against you.
Ani maamin, ani maamin.
Hear us, O God, hear us.¹

Ani maamin. I have faith. But what does this mean: to have faith? Can you walk into Sherman's and buy faith; I don't think it's sold in the stores. We cannot walk into McFarlans and say, 'I will take two cookies, a challah, and some faith.' It doesn't work that way.

Faith is a kind of knowing which cannot be explained. It just... is. Take for example water. One or two molecules of water in the palm of our hand is not going to feel like water.

How many molecules are necessary before we have the experience of "wetness?" Now, I could assert that I don't "believe in" wetness, because there's no wetness there at all, just molecules. And yet, none of us in our right minds could deny that there is such a thing as the experience of 'wetness.' Why do we know this?

At some point, when we've experienced the right number and right configuration of molecules, we just...know. ²"

We then ask the question again, what is faith and how do we know? Is the concept of faith only relegated to our relationship with the Divine? I don't think so; faith can certainly be about God or spirituality, which is different to you than to me. It can just as easily be faith in other Jews and those relationships. It can even be a part of the dialogue in interfaith relationships. And finally, we can have faith that we can do good.

First, a bit about the usual understanding of faith. Some people ask, "how can I have faith if I do not believe in God?" This is a good conversation and I might start that conversation. In response, I would quote one of my rabbis, Josh Rose. He often retorts: "in which God do you not believe?" The God in Jewish liturgy, especially now, has seemingly contradictory characteristics. In the autumn and during the Jewish New

¹ From the book "*ani maamin*" by Elie Weisel

² <http://adasisrael.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Why-Jews-Should-NOT-Believe-in-God.pdf>

Year, Rosh Hashanah, we repeatedly recite “Avinu Malkenu”, which literally translates to “our Father, our King” but could be rendered, “our parent, our sovereign”. This invocation calls upon various traits of God, such as loving and close like a parent; or distant and harsh like a ruler. This is just one view of God—a theme we will explore in more depth on Yom Kippur.

Then we have the God of the Torah. This God has no one single quality, except for maybe vengeance. If anyone has read those 300 pages, there’s a lot of vengeance. The earth opening up, people just sort of vanishing because they lit the wrong incense. The God of the Talmud is so varied that none of the Sages can agree what the Divine is either. If you, like me and like I suspect most of us, go through phases of not believing in God, I charge you to question which God it is in whom you do not believe.

However, faith does not only deal with the belief in the existence of God. Faith requires a certain level of ownership and investment. A steadfastness if you will. This idea of steadfastness as faith comes from our Torah, first in the Book of Exodus. As the Israelites try to defeat the Amalekites, some of their mortal enemies, Moses holds up his staff in order for Israel to win. It’s very supernatural. He’s got this magic staff, and he’s standing there holding it up; and he says ‘as long as I hold it up we win, if I don’t we lose.’ Insert theory of relativity. How heavy is the staff? Depends how long he’s holding it up. It is what it is, but it is our experience which makes the difference and our text knows this.

However, this text says, “But Moses' hands grew heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it...” (it is much easier to exercise while sitting. Don’t believe me, try it. That is why people chair dance).

“...while Aaron and Hur, one on each side, supported his hands; thus his hands remained steady until the sun set.³” ... Because he had his community and steadfastness.

“*vayehi yadav **emunah** ad-bo hashamesh.*” *Emunah* means steady. This sentiment is echoed in Isaiah: “*im lo ta’aminu, ki lo **tay-ah-may-nu***”... “If you do not stand firm in your faith, surely you will not be established.⁴”

Religions in general, and specifically speaking, Judaism, can provide us with a variety of ways to find spiritual steadfastness. Perhaps we find it in the enjoyment of services. Or by studying a book of scripture. Or we might engage in *tikkun olam and tikkun middot*, repairing ourselves and repairing the world. For some, spiritual steadfastness can come individually by retreating into meditation. If we liken steadfastness and faith, we realize that it can be accessed in so many ways, but only if we are willing to try.

³ Exo 17:12 TNK

⁴ Isa 7:9 JPS (amended “ye shall” → you will”)

Speaking personally, *Ani maamin*. I believe. I believe in a power far greater than myself. I believe that the scripture and millennia worth of teachings make me a better person. I believe with perfect faith in faith. I have to believe that there will be more goodness in this world in years to come than what we find in the world today. As the Talmudic Sages of the fifth century say, “The Messiah comes little by little”⁵.

I believe that we can encourage a bit of swiftness in the arrival of the messianic age through our relationships with others.

We can also have faith in relationships. And the best place to start is at home, inside our own community. Also from the Talmud, it’s a really big book, we read: “All Israel are guarantors for one another⁶.” What does this tell us about our faith and practice? Quite simply that we are supposed to care **about** and care **for** one another.

In 2013, Jewish organizations in Cincinnati, where I did my seminary training, created programs throughout the year that each highlighted some facet of Israel in celebration of Israel’s 65th birthday.

I had no idea there were well over 40 Jewish organizations in town. I knew of six synagogues, and also of the Jewish Community Center, which doubled as my gym membership.

Why did I know about these in particular? Because that is where Hebrew Union College, my seminary, students worked as teachers, interns, or with fellowships. But the other three dozen places? I had never even heard of them. Perhaps that was a deficiency in my exploration or perhaps it was indicative of some larger systemic problem. We have a full alphabet soup of Jewish communal organizations here in Western North Carolina—do you know of them? Jewish Community Center, Jewish Family Services, Carolina Jews for Justice, Jewish Federation, Jewish Secular Collaboration of Asheville, Congregation Beth HaTefila, Congregation Beth Israel, Chabad, and Agudas Israel. And we are *tiny* here. This is our Jewish community.

I want to share another example of the Jewish community within itself, this time from year in Jerusalem Israel, 2010. There were neighborhoods from which we were encouraged to shy away, such as *Meah She’arim*, a very ultra-orthodox neighborhood known for its disdain for outsiders. One notable exception was when we had a field trip led by a person who used to live in *Meah She’arim*, but he had since moved away from that community. This particular trip stands out in my memory because he repeatedly pointed out what people wore and how that identified which shul and rabbi they followed. He could tell us about the difference between the solid tunic and the striped one. He could tell us what it meant if the men’s stockings were white versus how much leg they showed.

⁵ ???

⁶ B. Shevuot 39a

What I found most distressing about this commentary was the divisive undertone. We did not go into this neighborhood to understand our similarities—we went into it to point out our differences.

We were not acting as one Jewish people; instead we were acting as tourists, being exposed to what was altogether different and remote. It was heartbreaking. Because first and foremost we were all Jews. That makes us similar to 0.2% of the world and that alone should be enough to bring us together—99.8% of the world is different from we are, do we really need to point out the differences between ourselves?

The basic problem is famously illustrated by an old joke. It tells us about the Jewish man rescued from a deserted island with three buildings. When asked what the three buildings are, he replies, ‘That’s my home, and that’s my synagogue.’ And the other building? ‘Oh, that’s the synagogue that I would never step foot in!’

He was *alone* on a deserted island!

Go! Go to CBHT! Go to Chabad! Go to CBI! And come back. I’m not saying go forever. Go and come back and say wow, look at us. And it’s not just us. Go to URJ Biennial if you can. Experience *shachrit* with 5000 Jews. Go and experience because we are teeny tiny.

The lesson that I take from this is to encourage each of us to not be tourists with other people with whom we are grouped. We can celebrate our similarities and find unexpected connections. In the second century CE, Simeon ben Zoma asked: “Who is wise? One who learns from every person.”⁷ Let us all try to be wise. *Ani maamin*. I believe that building, honing, and honoring these relationships, within our own community will get us closer to that more perfect world.

Ani maamin...I believe with faith that Jews, and all peoples, can live as a peaceful people anywhere in the world. Going back to that last quote, you will note that ben Zoma said “*every person*”--he did not qualify or limit his answer by suggesting that we can only learn from our particular tribe.

We can have faith in interfaith relationships. We just enrolled our son in the Episcopal church preschool here in town. They do a chapel service which has a candle, wine, and bread. Kind of sounds like what we do here doesn’t it? Adrian sees very little difference. He started reciting the *kiddush* when they held up the wine. He comes home and says “peace be with you” and we reply “shalom aleichem”. It’s the same thing. Because interfaith dialogue is about finding our commonalities, not finding our differences.

Not only do we look at faith in the Divine, and also in our community, we also look at faith in the larger world and inter-faith relationships. This third and final implication that emerges from these reflections on faith came to light from a personally unforgettable experience.

⁷ Mishnah Avot 4:1

After a difficult summer of classes and a chaplaincy rotation, my husband and I realized that our backyard had been woefully neglected (I wish I could say times have changed—they haven't, we're just in a different house). There were weeds higher than the windows. There were vines suffocating the bushes. There were thorny roses gone wild. Even our under-the-deck residents, a pair of groundhogs, were too frightened of the jungle to come out. We dared not step foot into the yard without full protective clothing because the mosquitoes would have eaten us alive. Something had to be done. But we were only two people with black thumbs. And we were both students living on loans—disposable income was not a luxury we had. We called in reinforcements. From where did we find them? A church.

The relationship that made this possible started a few months earlier. A graduate student at my seminary, who also happened to be a southern Baptist minister from South Carolina, as well as a friend to both my husband and I, spoke so highly of the people at his church and fiercely admired his pastor. I wanted to know what was so appealing about it and he invited us for a visit. It was an incredible evening. The friendships, the respect, and the feelings of inclusion were palpable. It was this inclusivity which spoke to me loud and clear. Members of this church were from all walks of life. Some were recently married, some were recently baptized, and some were recently drug-free. Everyone was equal within those walls.

And so, we found ourselves in the jungle, formerly known as the backyard, not knowing what to do. We asked our friend if he thought members of his church would be willing to help *us*, essentially strangers, clear out the mess. In return, we would donate a modest amount to the church, and give them pizza and unlimited lemonade and undying gratitude. They were excited about this opportunity, and it was an opportunity in their eyes. The men who came were in a drug recovery program; they were on the fringes of society. Their pastor helped them realize their faith in God. Their congregation built their faith in each other. They showed us how faith in one another can help us live as a community.

For everyone one of us in this room, we Jews live among that 99.8% I spoke of earlier; we are the minority and we are in the Diaspora. The Biblical prophet Jeremiah long ago wrote instructions [I bet you didn't know that the Torah and the TaNaKh were the original how-to; go to the self-help section and it should be TaNaKh, the rest is just commentary]. He wrote instructions on how to be a Jew in the Diaspora. He said: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce...Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile and pray to God in *its* behalf; for in *its* prosperity, you shall prosper."⁸

⁸ Jer 29:5, 7

As we can see, interfaith relations do not have to be grand, they have to be part of everyday living. They come from tilling a garden together.

While we should not discount the value and necessity of formal conversations, this is only the tip of the iceberg. What we really need are acts of respect, kindness, and faith with individuals who follow a different religious path. *We* are where it starts. I invite you, I charge you, to go to an unfamiliar worship center—perhaps a church vastly unlike one you’ve ever entered—we have plenty in Hendersonville. Vastly different from what you’ve been to. I’m not talking First Congregational, or Unitarian or even Trinity Presbyterian, I want you to go to some place where you feel uncomfortable. Because that is when we say, ‘turns out, they have wine and candles and bread, just like we do.’ Despite our differences, there is value and importance in working together, in breaking-bread together. When one group has specific needs, which can be met by another group, we must act. In order to usher in a better age, we have to be proactive and not passive.

So, more than with our mouths, we must also get our hands, hearts, and souls invested too. *Ani maamin* means that inter-FAITH relations start with each of us.

Together, we can do good, and bring about even more good, within this world.

Ani maamin. I have faith.

Ani maamin...I have faith that each of us can make a difference in the lives of our neighbors.

Ani maamin...I have faith that as a Jew, I can be a guest, or a welcoming host, to every person.

Ani maamin...I have faith that though each of us is just one, I have faith that each of us matters.

I have faith because I have to. *Ani maamin be’emunah sh’lemah*. I have faith, a complete faith. I have faith because in learning again and again about what is worthwhile in life, I want to be steadfast in recognizing and realizing it. So we say with faith, *ken yehi ratzon*, may it to be so.