

Rosh Hashanah 5773-Practicing Faith  
September 18, 2012 (2<sup>nd</sup> day)

The sun was bright and shining in our eyes. It was challenging to look straight ahead but that is where we were directed. Moist air, rush of sounds. Enthusiastic Crowds. Participants. Visitors. Secular and Observant. Onlookers. Leaders. Musicians. A varied group---joining together in prayer; wonder; amazement; awe. What were we all seeking...holiness; God; community; connection; the sweet taste of Shabbat...

On the first Friday in July, I welcomed Shabbat on the Port of Tel Aviv worshipping with Congregation Beit Tefilati Yisrael which holds services at the beach in the Summer. It was a spiritually uplifting experience with hundreds of Israelis and foreigners; Congregants and visitors; Colleagues and strangers. I marveled at the diverse group assembled. What drew people there? Was it the music? The view? God? Their faith?

I was fortunate to spend time in Israel this past Summer, mostly in Jerusalem, to learn at the Shalom Hartman Institute's Rabbinic Seminar. Hartman scholars are leaders in their fields and affiliated with major universities in Israel and America. The topic for the seminar was: "Dilemmas of Faith: God and Spirituality in the Modern World." During the seminar, more than one of the 130 colleagues noticed my nametag, smiled and asked--is that really your name? Really, Faith Joy? Yes it is. No, I did not change my first two names.

Today I will share an explanation of the Hebrew word for Faith; how we may experience moments of complete faith; having faith along with doubt; pursuing faith through obstacles; and mindfulness as a faith practice.

In Hebrew, the word for faith is *Emunah* and the infinitive *L'ha'amin* means "to believe." Hartman scholar Moshe Halbertal explains to believe is to take a stance. It's a proposition. There is a difference between **believing**, thinking a certain proposition is true, and **knowing** the outcome of certain rational procedure.

We often say "I believe that..." something is true. But in Hebrew, we say *ani ma'amin b'*... I believe in....

Believing **in** is stronger than believing **that**...

Other words from the same root are *Omenet*—truster; *Omenet* in the Tanakh is the one who cares for a baby. *Imun* is a practice. It makes someone trustworthy. *Imunim* are practices in the Israel Defense Force. An *Uman* is someone who is a pro; someone who can be trusted.

Trust enables us to move forward. Philosopher William James explains that belief or *Emunah* gives one the ability to take action only on the basis of a mere hypothesis on something that is not easy to reverse.

One of the greatest acts of *Emunah* is to give birth to a child. I recall 11 years ago, on September 10, 2001, my husband and I were thrilled with a healthy sonogram of our fourth child. Our hearts were full of excitement and wonder for the potential this new life would bring to our world. One day later on 9/11, in addition to mourning those who were lost, I faced the fear of bringing a child into this new world. Everyone's faith was challenged.

To believe does not mean one lacks sense. One diagnosed with an illness, evaluates the medical options. If surgery is experimental, one can enter surgery optimistic that it will definitely work or with a pragmatic approach that there is at least a chance this will help. It is an act of faith to believe in trying something even if there is not absolute certainty.

The poet Zelda wrote: "There are those who think that if a person is religious, then their faith, as it were, sits in a box. They don't understand that every single day, the believer must renew his/her faith."

From his first encounter, Moses had many questions about God and his faith was challenged. When Moses asked God's name the response was "Eh'yeh asher eh'yeh—I will be who I will be." Ehyeh is a verb in the future tense. As we live and breathe, our relationship with God evolves.

How many of us once thought that God was a man with a beard sitting in the sky? The questions we ask reflect our belief in God. There's a story of a young child who asks his parents if he can be alone with his newborn baby sister. The parents are concerned. Is he jealous? Is he going to hurt his sister? The boy persists and finally the parents agree to give him a few moments with her but listen through the baby monitor. The young boy approaches his sister and asks her, will you please remind me how to talk to God? I can't remember anymore. Is God still there? Please help me.

Young children aren't afraid to mention God. When I carpooled my youngest son and niece to school for a year, they often needed extra time to get ready to "make sure God was buckled." They were comfortable with their belief in God.

There are moments in our lives when our faith is secure and we can truly sense God's presence. Significant events such as birth, B'nai Mitzvah, marriage and death, are spiritually charged and heighten our awareness of life. Magnificent as well, **simple** acts are sweet, gentle reminders of all that **is** and nurture our faith.

Israeli poet, Hamutal Bar-Yosef captures this sense in her poem  
**In Those Moments**

In those moments when I believe in god  
I see him gliding on the hot wind  
In the whiteness of butterflies which have just now emerged from their cocoons  
And that same day is their wedding and their death.

Or I see Him in a dandelion puff  
while I sit on the warm steps and a wind  
suddenly disperses its seeds like soft snow  
and one seed floats into my lap - and there it rests.

...

We've all had these moments. We can be stuck in traffic and look up to notice a gorgeous cloud formation. We find one tomato growing on the vine that was weak. We watch a toddler take her first steps. Precious moments we pause to note.

Chassidic master, the Baal Shem Tov, (1698-1760) also suggests that we can experience God everywhere, in his poem **Sacred Worship** based on a verse from Psalms

“The earth is full of God’s glory” (quote from Psalms 24)  
and nothing –big or small—  
is separate from God  
because God exists in all existences

Therefore the complete person  
can bring unity to the upper worlds  
even in earthly acts such as  
eating, drinking, sexual intercourse,  
business and in one’s mundane talk with friends.

The Baal Shem Tov implies that God is part of everything.  
Wherever we are and whatever we are doing, there is no separation from God.  
He suggests a “whole” person is always aware of God’s presence.  
If God is always present, then our quest for deepening our faith is available wherever we are. But as wonderful and straight-forward as this may sound, it is not simple.

[Faith with doubt]  
We often have doubts.

Hartman scholar, Melila Hellner-Eshed, discussed the topic of Practicing Faith. “Faith is a lived experience. It is a process. And not being 100% certain is part of faith.” As the theologian Paul Tillich wrote: “Doubt isn’t the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.”

Moses’s response from God, ‘Ehyeh asher ehyeh,’ invites us to see God with uncertain faith.

[Pursuing faith through obstacles]

Faith can be strengthened or tried during our personal challenges. Our ancestors traveling in the desert with Moses did not have as many books to read or any internet searches to explore while questioning their faith.

And even with all of the sources available to us today, often, our vision is clouded. There are obstacles we face. How can we overcome them? Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav wrote "God in the Thick Cloud" as a commentary to this verse from Exodus:

*"So the people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was" (Exodus 20:18).*

**God in the Thick Cloud RABBI NACHMAN OF BRASLAV (1772-1810) LIKUTEI MOHARAN 1:115**

(transl by Jonathan Slater and Sheila Weinberg)

"...This is the meaning of the verse "So the people remained at a distance." When they see the thick cloud, namely the hindrance, they remain at a distance: But Moses, who represents the quality of awareness for all of Israel, *"approached the thick cloud, where God was,"* namely: he approached the hindrance, where the blessed God is actually hidden.

...

Through the hindrances themselves, in fact, one might draw closer to God because that is where God is hidden. And this is the meaning of *"Moses approached the thick cloud"* that is, the hindrance, for that is *"where God was."*...

We face the New Year with hope and excitement—it is ripe with potential. Yet, each day overflows with obstacles. We persevere and our faith is nurtured. If we avoid the hindrances, we may miss an opportunity to spread holiness in our world. While spending time in Israel this Summer, I met with colleagues fighting for religious freedom. Standing **up** for equality, I sat **down** in the front of the bus on one of the illegally segregated bus routes in Jerusalem and enabled other women to sit in the illegitimate "men's" front of the bus.

Rabbi Miri Gold, the first non-orthodox rabbi in Israel to be granted a salary by the State, will be here Shabbat morning October 13 to share her story of working through the hindrances. On a tiyul, a trip day, entitled Geopolitics of faith, I met a person from Ateret Kohanim. This is a group that believes in Jews' rights to own land anywhere they choose. We visited a Jewish house in the Arab Quarter of the Old City, overlooking the location where Ariel Sharon purchased a home in 2006. Israelis don't have the luxury of waiting for the dark clouds or hindrances to clear to begin their work for peace.

Individual Hindrances may include Health challenges; un- and under-employment; failed relationships, death of a loved one, standing up for justice and more. The cloud that Moses entered was a pausing place for him yet we have to function on cloudy days.

We need to stay with the hindrance and not try to avoid it because the hindrance itself reveals the contours of what we are searching for. Moses went into the cloud and we are invited to be like Moses.

When the thick clouds form in the sky and the thunder begins to roll, a natural instinct is to gather the children. Find safety. Ominous, dark black clouds can be too thick a fog to push through. But the majority of the time, there will be clouds or fog through which we **can**, no, we **must**, push forward. In the midst of our challenges we might be able to pause and notice the shape of the clouds and marvel at them as well. Yes, life is full of adversities and we live with and through them, step by step, with an opportunity to embrace holiness along the way.

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira wrote about the challenges of faith while living in the Warsaw ghetto. He explains that Emunah is not just for the good times but is for the dark nights. This is when cultivating the inner life matters.

Mindfulness meditation has gained attention in recent years and spread from silent retreats to business school curriculum. The practice of paying attention is a way of developing one's faith and can raise our awareness of holiness in the world.

Rabbi Shapira guides us in the practice with this passage from Conscious Community:

[Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, Rebbe of Piaseczno 1889-1943

\*Conscious Community transl. by Andrea Cohen-Kiener]

13. "We have formed this community in order to transform each of our members into a person of spirit and mindfulness, to convey a new way of thinking and perceiving. Your mind will observe with new depth and clarity. As you resist the distractions of your physical surroundings, a sense of focused spiritual concentration will unfold within you. When you recite, "*Blessed are You Holy One, Master of all creation,*" you visualize the "*You*" and the "*Master of all creation.*" Your eyes observe the Presence of God, which animates and surrounds everything, including yourself. As you look around at all the physical world, what you see is the Holy Presence of God, pulsating and shimmering in everything. "You are the Master of all creation"; you are swept up in the pleasure of this understanding...

14...When you constantly impress this idea on your mind, you will begin to internalize it. Essentially, you force yourself to comply with the reality of the thought. ...When you remind yourself repeatedly that all the world is divine, your feelings and consciousness inevitably begin to comply with this point of view, which already corresponds with the perspective of the soul. The soul sees and knows in just this way, but the body is an obstacle to such perception. When you predispose your body to the perspective of the soul, she will naturally emerge and state her point of view. You may not always carry this perspective, but you will certainly experience many fine moments of understanding. Our sages have taught that one hour of knowing God in this world is more valuable than eternity in paradise."

Eemunah is faith. Ani ma'amina b'....I believe in God. I have faith. There are times in our lives when our faith feels certain and complete. There are also times when our faith is uncertain and doubt is part of faith. Ever present hindrances challenge our faith yet we find God in these challenges. Mindfulness is a helpful faith practice.

Moses asked what was God's name and God responded-Ehyeh asher Eheyeh. I am being that which I am being. Moses' relationship with God grew over the years. Our faith grows; it changes; it is strengthened; it is challenged; it is personal; it is our faith.

...

We faced the sun and it hurt my eyes. But, that is the direction we were guided to look. I turned away and I looked forward, knowing it was okay to look towards holiness. The sun faded, turning bright shades of red, orange and then pale purple. Within the hour it sank over the water. The waves crashed, the music continued, a plane's fly-over was a dramatic ending for the Kiddush. Peals of children's laughter coursed along the boardwalk. The service ended. Our hearts were full. We felt a sense of connectedness to one another and to God.

Amen.