

Shimini 2016

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 4/2/16

I'd like to speak to you today about what it means to have faith, particularly to have faith in troubling times. I think faith is a widely misunderstood concept, and as a result many people lose faith far too easily. We lose faith in our political system, we lose faith in the integrity of our institutions, we lose faith in our leaders, we lose faith in relationships that we thought were iron-clad and forever; we lose faith in healing and in the promise of a bright future. And it's a real problem, a problem that can really gnaw at our souls. But I think part of the problem is that we simply don't understand what "faith" means. I believe that a truer understanding of what faith really is will help us to find more peace in our personal lives and in our relationship with the world around us.

I think many people (and rightfully so) associate faith with religion, but not all "religious faith" is the same. The dictionary definition of faith is: "complete and unwavering trust or confidence in someone or something" but I don't think that's what Jewish faith is really all about. Jewish faith is almost always balanced with doubt. In Judaism faith and doubt actually go hand in hand, and this is an important and timely lesson for all of us. Faith and Doubt go hand in hand, and always should.

We can look to this week's Torah portion for a clear illustration... It should have been the greatest day of their lives. After five Torah portions on how to build it, and two more on how to use it properly, the Mishkan - the Tabernacle, is finally dedicated. And in the beginning of the portion all looks sublime. Moshe and Aharon perform sacrifices, emerge from the Mishkan, bless the People, and, as the Torah says, "The glory of Gd appeared to the entire People." Great!

But then tragedy strikes. Two of Aaron's sons make an offering that was not called for and a fire from the altar kills them on the spot. And while it is very tempting to share the Tradition's explanations for why they died -and there are many - it's what happens next that grabbed my attention. Moshe sees that his two nephews are dead and he tries to comfort Aaron by telling him, essentially, it is Gd's will. But the Torah says, "Va-Yidom Aharon." Aaron was silent. Was he comforted? It doesn't say so. Did that explanation, that it is essentially Gd's will, make him feel better? Hard to say. He was stone silent. And how did Moshe feel reacting to his brother's silence? Was he there with him to share the pain? I'm not sure. What Moshe does say is, "Go ahead now, you and your remaining family, and do your job; serve Gd. Have faith that everything has a reason." But Aaron and his sons don't do that. They follow their own script and offer the sacrifice in a different way. And Moshe challenges them: "Why didn't you play by the rules?!" And Aaron's response is powerful. He says essentially, "These are special circumstances and I doubt Gd would have wanted it to be business as usual." And Moshe's response? The text says simply, "Moses heard this and he approved."

What an unbelievable exchange! Why is this story here? To teach us that blind faith is what is demanded of us? No! At the consecrating moment of the Sanctuary we have an open debate about what Gd wants. One person argues: "This is what you must do"; and the other says, "I doubt that's what's right." This is not a magical moment, sublime. This is real life. Two titans of leadership disagree on what Gd wants, and in the end, one convinces the other that the contrary opinion is correct. At one of the most powerful spiritual moments a certain sense of

ambiguity is deliberately introduced. This is not a pious fable of unswerving devotion - it's an illustration of spiritual faith. The overwhelming emotion is not joy, rapture or ecstasy, it is sadness. Neither Aaron nor Moses are overwhelmed with conviction, but with emotion. It is a very human response, one that we can all relate to. It is the integrity of doubt that brings this scene and these heroes to life! It is that sense of doubt about exactly what Gd wants that allows us to see these characters in full light, as full-fledged human beings.

What this story, and so many others like it in the Torah tell me is that doubt is essential to faith. Abolish all doubt and all that is left is not faith but absolute, heartless conviction. And as Aaron says, "Is that really what Gd wants?" Absolute, unswerving certainty that you possess The Truth quickly devolves into dogmatism - a set of beliefs that must be defended at all costs. It is the arrogance of believing that yours is the only way. That's not faith, that's fanaticism. No questions, only answers. That kind of absolutism is the antithesis of true faith. Fanaticism is a safe refuge for those who cannot entertain questions, meaningful discourse, or alternative ways of thinking.

But that's not Jewish faith. Jewish faith is Jacob wrestling with the angel, knowing that he is responding to some inner calling, but struggling with it nonetheless. Jewish faith is Moses at the Burning Bush knowing deep inside that Gd is calling him, but demurring, questioning, and struggling nonetheless. It's Moses on the mountain top telling Gd, "If that's what it means to be the leader of these People, kill me now!" And Jewish faith is Moshe telling Aaron, "Buck up and get with the program," Aaron saying, "I'm not sure that's the right way to go about it," and Moses AGREEING. That's Jewish faith. It is the conviction that we can and will move forward, because we will not give in to despair. Despair is the antithesis of faith. Jewish faith is often two steps forward and one step back, but still moving ever forward, not ploughing forward regardless of consequence.

We need, all of us, that kind of spiritual faith, one that goes hand in hand with doubt and humility and struggle and perseverance in our lives outside of this building, too. We live in age (indeed it's every age) where black and white is easier than nuance. Where blind conviction is honored as much, if not more than careful consideration and deliberation. But doubt and deliberation, coupled with the determination to move ever forward, that's what real faith is all about. Doubt is what keeps faith awake and moving, and we need to embrace this. We need to be wary of the absolutes that are so facile. And we can use this spiritual understanding of faith in all areas of our lives. We can have faith in relationships that are not perfect. We can have faith in political process that is often flawed. We can have faith that peace and kindness and goodness will rule the day even when ample evidence exists to the contrary. Not only can we - we must. We must have faith or we will fall prey to ambivalence and despair and thereby negate our Jewish responsibility of Tikkun Olam.