

## The Case for Faith

My niece is taking a college course in Morality. Her most recent assignment was to read Richard Dawkins' The God Delusion. I found this out on her Facebook page, when she noted that she found him so compelling that she could not imagine any counterargument. When I posted a response, she used it as an opportunity to ask her professor about Reconstructionist Judaism. His response to her is one I hear so often I can only laugh. He asked, "Aren't they the ones who don't believe in God?"

I want to take this holy time to talk about God and why I do believe in God. In the past three years, I have been meeting monthly in group spiritual direction. Over time, my relationship with God has been altered dramatically. When I began the process I have to admit I was quite resistant to the notion of finding God. As a Reconstructionist, I believed, my idea of God had to be rational. I did not accept the existence of a personal God. I did not believe I could either speak to or hear from God. That was supernaturalism. That was magical thinking. I could not conceive of that kind of God.

If you were to ask me **what** God is, I am drawn to the metaphor I learned from Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, the son-in-law of Mordecai Kaplan, who built the institutions of the Reconstructionist movement . I would tell you that God is a force, similar to electricity. Unseen, yet powerful. But like electricity God has no mind, no will. Just as electricity does not jump out of the outlet and choose to turn on the air conditioner or the computer, God does not act on us. Like electricity, God is always there, but can only help us if we plug in.

What has changed? Through spiritual direction I have learned to look for more outlets. Once a month, I meet with three women rabbis and our spiritual director as we tap into our unique relationships to God. Through listening to their experiences, I have witnessed a variety of ways that others plug in to God. That has opened my eyes to see beyond my own limited experience, .and farther than my own meager mind can comprehend.

I understand that when I talk about God, some of you may nod in approval while for others your eyes may cloud over. The first rule about experiencing the holy is that it cannot be translated into words. The prayers on the page, the passages in the Torah, personal testimonies reify the experience, turning it into a human creation. Yet we try anyway.

The second rule about experiencing the holy is that other people's notions of God can get in the way. Fundamentalists of all faiths have given God a bad reputation, at least among progressives. I have struggled with both of these problems my entire life.

I found a helpful answer from Rabbi Brad Hirshfield, in his book [You Don't Have to be Wrong for Me to be Right: Finding Faith Without Fanaticism](#): "We can walk away from faith because it is absurd (ridiculous at best, dangerous at worst) and leads people to fly planes into buildings and blow themselves up in the name of God. Or we can grapple with the reality of what it means to be human. Faith is wrapped into our history, values, aspirations, and dreams. Because faith can be irrational and extreme is no reason to think we should evolve beyond it, any more than we might think that we should—or could—evolve beyond our capacity for love. Love can also be terrible or wonderful, creative and life-affirming or soul-shattering and suicidal. We don't walk away from love because it defies reason. And we shouldn't walk away from faith either.... Faith is a fire that burns inside us: it can be used for both good and ill." (p.64)

So allow me to talk to you about my faith.

As a rabbi, I have the distinct privilege of witnessing the power of teshuvah, tefillah and tsedaka, of holiness and goodness, to transform people's lives. From my vantage point, I am reminded almost daily of the power of faith to carry people through pain, loss, and fear. I have seen people overcome insurmountable odds. And I am left with a sense of wonder at what human beings can endure.

Recently, I was reminded of a song that I learned a long time ago at summer camp: *ani ma'amin*. We were told that this was the song Jews sang in the death camps. From that context, and from the somber melody I always thought it was a song of suffering.

*Ani ma'amin, Ani ma'amin, Ani ma'amin be'emunah shlemah  
Bevi'at hamashiach, Bevi'at hamashiach ani ma'amin.  
Ve'af al pi sheyit-ma-may-hah im kol zeh ani ma'amin.*

I believe, I believe, I believe with unending faith that a Messianic time will someday arrive. I believe it. And even if—*ve'af al pi*—it takes a very long time—even so, I believe.

I came to a new understanding of this song while listening to a member of the congregation talk about his mother's life. He described how his mother had lost her own father and then her own mother before she turned thirty. And then as he spoke about the kind of rich and loving life she went on to live he added, "despite it all..." *Ve'af al pi*. Even if. Even so. Despite everything that happens. No matter what we have to live through. And I realized, faith is about living, despite it all. *Ve'af al pi*.

#### Despite death and loss.....

Death is the harshest reality we have to face. Whether contemplating our own end or surviving the death of a loved one, there is no explanation for why a good God would allow anyone to die.

And yet, we continue on, despite death. I have found God in the comfort that visitors bring to a mourner, or in the condolence messages people send. I have heard God's voice remind me of all the good things that I received from my parents, washing away lingering doubts and old resentments. Death makes living all the more precious.

At every funeral, I hear the wistful longing of the mourners as they recount the unfinished business of their loved one's life. He was planning a trip, she wanted to live to see her great-grandchild, they had so much life in them.

I felt this sense of unfinished business keenly this summer at the death of Ted Kennedy, who died before seeing his life-long dream of universal health care fulfilled. Kennedy's passing reminded me of Moses, who died before entering the Promised Land. And I realized, perhaps for the first time: very few of us get to see a world fulfilled in the ways we have hoped and worked for all our lives. That means that the contributions we make must outlive us. It adds urgency to the job of the survivors, to all of us, to fulfill the dreams of those who came before us. It also adds meaning to our existence, knowing that we have the power to carry on a legacy, to bring the world closer to the Promised Land. I am reminded of what Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." That gives me faith, despite death. Faith means taking the long view.

Despite sadness...

I've learned how to talk to God when I'm sad. When someone I care about is in the hospital after an accident or a stroke or a heart attack or having kidney failure, I turn in prayer, please heal him! When a child is missing and a parent is distraught, I pray, please help find her! And when the crisis passes, when healing comes, I am filled with gratitude. Not that I believe that God chooses to save some and not others. Not that my prayer has any effect on God. I pray because I need to voice my sadness and to express my joy. I don't know where my prayer goes. I don't have the chutzpah to believe that any prayer I have uttered has merited a reply. But when I send it out to the universe, I feel touched to my core and comforted in my soul.

One of my favorite verses from the Psalms is a line we sing in the Hallel service:

ζ□"η χ▷◆φ♣ρN□χ η°β | "β□ ϑγ ζ•"H ηf,τ▷◆ρ◆ε ρ□□  
μ∞N♥©ω□ifv

Out of the narrow place I called to God, the answer brought me into an open space.  
 (Psalm 118:5)

When I'm sad, or disappointed or frustrated, I find God in the quiet moments of prayer that help me accept the tragedies and the joys of being human. Despite sadness, I know I will find my way. Faith means finding the open places when our choices seem limited.

### Despite loneliness...

Have you ever had the experience of connecting with another person deeply and intensely, knowing just how your friend feels, understanding exactly what he or she is saying. Martin Buber would call that an "I-Thou" experience. It is that rare moment when the person you are talking to is no longer an "it," an object, a means to an end, an other. In that moment, I find God.

In the Reconstructionist siddur, at the very end of the amidah in the private prayer, I have found a line that gives me pause every time I read it:

ΥβχχΙξη σξφ ωπχ φψΙχω

The one who trusts in God finds *hesed*, unconditional love, all around.

For a long time, I read this line as a promise—if you believe in God, you will find God's love everywhere. But lately I have come to understand it in the reverse. One who surrounds herself with love can trust that God's presence dwells there. When we greet each person as a Thou, with love, God is present. Despite loneliness, God's presence is always near at hand. Faith means continuing to love.

These days I think about God as often as I can. I still cannot answer the question what is God? However, I am less concerned with that question. Mordecai Kaplan, who is too often misconstrued to be an atheist, did believe in God. He believed in a functional theology. He taught that what is most important about belief in God is to live *as if* there is a God. We waste too much effort trying to describe God, when we could be looking for how God can influence our lives. Or as Rabbi Harold Kushner has taught, the question is not what is God, but when is God.

I have discovered that I can come closer to God through my experiences and relationships. I can feel God's presence at times when I am anxious or overwhelmed.

I know that God is always calling to me, if only I would listen.

Knowing that connection is always with me is a source of comfort.

It is also a source of hope. When life is unfair. When life is unjust. When the world takes too long to arrive at what is right.

Anne Lamott once wrote this very simple statement of faith.

Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch and work: you don't give up.

*Ani ma'amin be'emunah shlemah.* I believe with unending faith. Faith means never giving up, *af al pi*, despite it all.

Let me close with a prayer written by Mordecai Kaplan:

God is in the faith

By which we overcome

The fear of loneliness, of helplessness,

Of failure and of death.

God is in the hope

Which, like a shaft of light,

Cleaves the dark abysses

Of sin, of suffering, and of despair.

God is in the love

Which creates, protects, forgives.

It is God's spirit

That broods upon the chaos we have wrought,

Disturbing its static wrongs

And stirring into life the formless beginnings

Of the new and better world. *Mordecai Kaplan*

*Rabbi Barbara Penzner*  
*Kol Nidre 5770*