

Keeping the Faith Yom Kippur 5777 / 2016

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In 1963 a 12 year old boy named David Komsa wrote a message in a bottle and threw it out to sea. Fifty years later, after Hurricane Sandy, the bottle washed up on shore not far from where it was thrown and the finders contacted him and returned the bottle to him. (They didn't even need to use the nickel that he had enclosed for postage.) I was intrigued by this story. It was as if he had sent the message to himself a half-century later. But what if we could send a message in a bottle back to ourselves from the future?

A few months after that story hit the press, I was running on a beach in Northern California, on a road trip up the coast with Avraham. Against logic, I cast out an imaginary message in a bottle. I send a message in my own heart back to myself a year before, one of the hardest times in my life and my family's life as Avraham was recovering from a stroke. I let myself know in my darkest hour, not that things would be the same again, but that life would unfold and we would once again know joy.

What if I could send that message in a bottle farther back in time, to my great grandmother and great-great-grandmother for whom I am

named? Could they have conceived of me as a woman rabbi, living in a democracy, having a family *and* getting a Ph.D., traveling over the ocean in a magic bird, going to Yoga classes, driving around in my driving machine? My life is unimaginable to my ancestors just as future generations' lives are probably, certainly unimaginable to me. As the Holiday prayer *Unetaneh Tokef* emphasizes, we are all only mortal and see just a little of the big picture.

My other Great-grandmother Rose, whom I mentioned on the Eve of Rosh Hashanah, was born in a Polish *shtetl* where the big news was a neighbor who went to Warsaw and saw a wonder: a flush toilet. But grandma lived to cross the vast ocean to a free life in America and eventually one day to turn on a magic box and see a man setting foot onto the moon. Who knows where future generations will journey? You have to have faith. Shimon Peres, in his farewell speech on leaving the Israeli presidency quoted Israel's first Prime Minister who said, "There are no experts for the future, only experts for the past," to which Peres added: "Indeed, the future requires believers, not experts."

In a sense: faith is a message in a bottle: a message of hope from the future, a message of wisdom from the past, a message of courage in the present. It is not just something for the devout; like oxygen, we all need faith to live.

Biblical faith was not a set of beliefs for the pious. When our father Avraham had faith in the Lord; and He counted it to him for

righteousness" [Genesis 15: 1-6], when the children of Israel at the sea, ðhad faith in the Lord and His servant Mosesö [Exodus 14:31], it was not a doctrine or belief that was meant, but rather an expression of trust, of faithfulness. Rabbi Louis Jacobs wrote, ðWhen the Bible and rabbinic literature use the word *emunah* (faith) for man's relationship to God, it always denotes not belief but trust in God. It never signifies belief that God exists. It is an emotional and responsive term rather than a cognitive one.ö The Hebrew word for faith, *emunah*, has connotations of ðto affirm,ö to be faithful, to be loyal and committed. The word *Amen* is related and suggests, ðI uphold it, I affirm it.ö When someone says a blessing or prayer and we want to sign on, we reply, *Amen*.

In the Medieval period, as Jews had to explain and justify our tradition in contrast with powerful majority religions, the word ðfaithö began to have that secondary meaning of ða belief, a creed.ö Maimonides wrote his famous Credo, the *Ani Ma'amin*, ðI believe with a perfect faith,ö in which he outlined what he saw as the proper Jewish beliefs. Even then, not everyone agreed with him that Jews must hold a certain set of beliefs, but they all affirmed that we need to have faith.

Having faith doesn't imply that one has no doubts. One of my favorite commentators is the Maharal, Rabbi Judah Lowe ben Bezalel of 16th Century Prague. The Maharal challenged me when he wrote that faith is not knowledge or certainty [Gevurot Hashem, Perek 10].

In fact, for the Maharal, the opposite of faith is not doubt; *the opposite of faith is certainty*, and acting from faith is on a higher, more transcendent level than acting from certain knowledge. At first I thought this was irrational and somehow un-Jewish, as if it minimized the importance of using our minds. But later I came to see it in a different way entirely. Using our minds is crucial, but we need faith to affirm our most important commitments in life, inner commitments to a future about which we can never be certain, which may may never even see. Therefore, my definition of the Jewish meaning of faith is: affirmation in the face of uncertainty. It is saying *ōAmenō* to life, despite our doubts.

For me faith is not the same as belief. We may all have different beliefs about God and Torah, but we can be equally *faithful* to our heritage and our people. Faith is also not the same as hope. I hope that things will go well and go my way, but I have faith in a divinely given purpose and meaning to life, in creation's essential goodness, even when they aren't going my way. And my faith tells me that my actions matter and that having faith in the future obligates us to act in the present.

In the Modern period, I think that this definition of faith as *keeping the faith* becomes even more potent. When the song *Ani Ma'amin*, I have complete faith in the coming of the Messiah, was on the lips of martyrs in the concentration camps, it was not just a theological statement. At the worst time in Jewish history it was an audacious affirmation of our undying faith in a better future.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg points out that Jews in the post Holocaust world have kept our faith even after the greatest destruction. With our classical ideas of collective divine reward and punishment in shambles like broken tablets at our feet, we have voluntarily renewed our Covenant with God, through the establishment of the state of Israel and the renewal of Jewish culture around the world. We have kept the faith through our actions. The late great Rabbi David Hartman of Jerusalem, said something similar: that I don't know what God's plan is, but I do know that the affirmation of the Covenant by building Israel after the Holocaust is an important religious event. For Hartman as well, participating in the rebirth of Israel and the renaissance of Jewish life in the diaspora are acts of faith of the highest degree.

My teacher Reb Zalman, of blessed memory, told a joke about two pious Jews who are discussing the coming of the Messiah, which the prophets say will involve the resurrection of the dead and the restoration of animal sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem. One of them shudders at the very thought of such a scene, and the other tells him not to worry. "God saved us from Pharaoh. He saved us from Haman. Maybe he'll save us from the Messiah as well."

Few non-Orthodox Jews have such a literal idea of the Messiah, but we remain a Messianic people in our faith in future, our hope for a time of peace, sharing, and harmony on earth, a Messianic Era. That powerful faith, that affirmation of our trust in the future, has led Jews to

the forefront of social justice movements throughout history. Some of those movements, like Socialism, have let us down. Others, like Zionism, most of us heartily affirm even as we argue vigorously amongst ourselves about how it should unfold. But ultimately, our Jewish mission on earth remains making the world better for all created in the divine image, so we never give up on our faith in *Tikkun Olam*, mending and healing this world as a godly kingdom on earth.

Let's learn a little Talmud: There is a controversy in the Talmud about when the Messiah will arrive. Rabbi Eliezer said that redemption will come to the Jews in the month of Tishrei, at Rosh Hashanah, while Rabbi Joshua contended that it would take place in the month of Nisan, at Passover [Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashanah 10b, Sanhedrin 97b]. In other words, Rabbi Eliezer believed that our people must do *Teshuvah* to merit God's redemption, while Rabbi Joshua felt that God would make it happen for us with grace, as he did at the Exodus. Centuries later, none other than Maimonides declared that Rabbi Eliezer was right, that Israel will be redeemed through our own efforts, not by divine fiat. Centuries later still, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the leader of American Modern Orthodoxy, concluded that this means that in order to have faith in God's redemption, we must also necessarily have faith in *Am Yisrael*. To believe in God we must believe in God's people.

But Rabbi Soloveitchik confessed that it was very hard for him to keep his faith in the Jewish people. He often awoke in the night, worried

about our future. He feared for the physical survival of Jews in Israel, but he agonized even more about the spiritual survival of American Jews, who have become so very secularized that few make Judaism the guiding force in their lives. Still, he felt obligated to believe, to keep his faith in *Am Yisrael* alive, because that is the only way to have faith in God's redemption.

Taking this to the level of all humanity, Reb Zalman talks about the seminal images of the last century, including the atomic mushroom cloud on the one hand, the ultimate image of the human capacity for destruction, contrasted with the picture of the earth from space: Gaia, glowing blue, alive, and vital in a vast sea of blackness, the global vision of our mutual inter-dependence and responsibility to preserve our sacred home. It is a dichotomy as stark as the words Moses conveyed from God in the Torah: Life and death are set before you this day, blessing and curse, therefore choose life!

Reb Zalman also teaches we can no longer say, like Maimonides, "I believe with a perfect faith" but now we have say *halavai* (if only!) I can believe. We are living at a time of prosperity and opportunity, undermined by our great anxiety about the future. We don't know for certain that the Jewish people will be a light unto the nations, or even if our culture and religion will survive assimilation. Beset by divisions and distrust, we don't know which direction our great country is headed.

We don't even know if the human race will do the *Teshuvah* needed save our species' future on the planet.

But has it ever been easier? Faith today, like faith in every era, demands a perfect blend of complete uncertainty and unwavering commitment. *Halavai she-ani ma'aimin*. Oh, God, help me to keep the faith, to continue to affirm in the face of uncertainty, to act for changes that may be far beyond the horizon, to believe in myself, my people, and your human family.

To which I hope you can reply: *Amen*.

Notes & Acknowledgements

The life facts about my Great-Grandma Rose were described like this in an essay by my mother of blessed memory, Betty Hilton.

Thanks to Dr. Micha Goodman of the Hartman Institute, for speaking about the Talmudic debate and subsequent commentaries on the subject of when Redemption will come.

As I was preparing for this Devar Torah, I opened Reb Zalman's wonderful book, *Jewish With Feeling: A Guide to Meaningful Jewish Practice*. Of course, the book opened exactly to his chapter on faith, and more surprisingly, he wrote about the same idea that I had that day on the beach. If one believes that "the divine spark in each of us is not bound by restrictions of time and space," then on some plane a more fully realized version of ourselves, is in fact calling to us, sending us that message in a bottle.

He writes, "Every so often, in an especially *she-hechyanu* moment" thank you so much, God, for sustaining me to see this day!" I have remembered a day when I was so despairing, so lost, and sent a care package back to the self I was then, saying "Take a glimpse of where I am right now, in your future. Don't give up hope. I have visited myself at my bris. "Nu, Zalmaleh, someday you're gonna be a rebbe. Relax, it's all right, you will get over it." And I believe that a future, even more fully realized Zalman [*and by this he draws on kabbalah that teaches that we evolve through spiritual journeys and reincarnations that transcend this physical lifetime*] is sending me care packages, too."

If you are a mystical bent like me, Reb Zalman's vision may work well for you. But even if you are a humanist and a rationalist, you can picture a more fully realized humanity of the future, our future generations that are our physical reincarnation, sending us back a message of our communal future, the future that we are creating today.

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