

## **Sermon for RH Day 2 – 2018 – God Has Faith in You**

Since moving here seven years ago, each *erev* Rosh HaShanah I spend a few hours at the Ocean Front pondering the magnificent act of creation whose anniversary we celebrate today. I look out at the vastness of the ocean, the beauty of the way the light plays on the water, the incredibly concrete fact of my existence in this spot at this moment and every year I can't help but think to myself, why God? I fully comprehend what is in this amazing creation for me, but what's in it for You? I usually answer myself with the reasoning that God creates out of a desire to love.

Human beings are the same. Sometimes we create out of necessity, but sometimes we create out of a desire of being in relationships with people, organizations and communities. And it is lovely to believe, and I really do believe it, that God is a loving God, creating humanity and the world in order to be in relationships. But this year I was struck by another idea, another motivation for Creation. God has taken a leap of faith.

The Torah teaches us that God is "*El Emunah v'ain Avel* - A faithful God and never false." The simple meaning of the verse is that the God *we* have faith in is never false. The Alexander Rebbe, however, taught that El Emunah means that God has faith in us! That our creation – mine and yours – is God the parent creating us because God believes in us the same way we believe in the potential of our children. God made us an integral part of this universe, God gave us a purpose in it, and God believes that you are the exact right person to fulfill your purpose. In other words, God has faith in you. God believes in you! So why is it so hard for us to believe in ourselves? Why are so many of us plagued with self-doubt when it comes to our purpose? Or perhaps we fear that we have no purpose at all? I know that most of us here are familiar with the feeling of self-doubt, but you are not alone.

Just the other day I was reading a story about astrophysicist Jocelyn Bell Burnell who as an undergraduate at Cambridge University 50 years ago discovered pulsars, a special kind of star that no one had even imagined existed. It was an important discovery and though her advisor wrongly got the Nobel Prize for it, she was just awarded the very prestigious Special Breakthrough Prize in Fundamental Physics and the three million dollar prize that goes with it. How did she make the discovery? She says she noticed the unusual signal only because she suffered from impostor syndrome: the idea that you're

not good enough and at any moment, you may be discovered as a fraud. For her, it manifested as a fear she would be tossed out of Cambridge. So she took more data from the telescope and kept scouring. I can just picture her with reams and reams of data, not much more than squiggly lines running across page after page, but looking at them so closely that she could notice these repeating extra squiggles. It was fear of failure that gave her the ability to sit day after day, night after night, staring at those pages. In other words, her self-doubt was motivating, not debilitating. I can relate to that. I've had my share of imposter syndrome too.

How could I, a public school kid with no more than your typical afternoon Hebrew school education, possibly know enough or be good enough to merit the role I have. Being a rabbi is such a privilege. It is such an honor to be part of all of your lives and your most significant positive and negative life transition moments. Who am I to do all that? It wasn't until a couple of years ago that I really got comfortable in this role – I'd been doing it for thirteen or so years! The truth is though, that like Jocelyn Bell Burnell, that imposter syndrome feeling always motivated me to work harder, to be better. The doubt has not been debilitating; it's been an asset.

I now realize that self-doubt about our career, our role in our family, even our very purpose for being, is something almost everyone experiences. Maybe you've experienced something similar with work, or maybe you have had times when you can't imagine how no one gave you a test before allowing you to become a parent. Maybe it's suddenly feeling like the parent in your relationship with your father or mother or a friend confides in you and you're not sure you know the best way to help. For so many of us, these feelings of ineptitude are embarrassing or shameful and we cover them up, pretend we've got it all under control, even when our emotions are just the opposite. In the worst cases, that doubt consumes us and we stop trying. This feeling will always be with us, so how do we make our self-doubt an asset instead of an obstacle.

What we learn from this holiday, what we learn from the very fact that God created this world and gave us a part to play in it, is that the feeling of inadequacy is absurd. While the emotion may be unavoidable, the reality is that God thinks you are the one to fulfill your purpose, so who are you to tell God otherwise? God is your El Emunah. God has faith in you. And self-doubt, plus belief that this is your purpose, that's what keeps us moving forward. God is our captain, our cheering section and our coach all wrapped into one. God your captain assigned you a task because God believes

that you are the one to achieve it. And after assigning the task, God is your cheering section – reinforcing when you are on the right path with positive emotions and feedback and letting you know when you are heading the wrong way through that feeling you are lost or wandering. And God is your coach – God gave you instructions for achieving your purpose, the wisdom of Torah and the guidance of mentors and prayers for staying focused.

That is what made Abraham and Sarah special – not their good luck or their hospitality or their wealth or their persuasiveness. No, what made the first Jews special was that they had faith. God came to Abraham and said it is time to listen to me – I have a job for you. Was this the first time God called to anyone? Probably not, but Abraham and Sarah had the audacity, they had the faith, to listen! And why do we read the story of the Binding of Isaac on Rosh HaShanah when Abraham is commanded to sacrifice his son? Because Abraham has faith that it will all work out for the best, and it does.

Moses walked into Pharaoh's throne room at risk of his life and demanded the release of his people, because he had faith. But you don't have to be Moses. Moses wouldn't have been able to make it there if the Jewish midwives Shifra and Puah weren't risking their lives to save Jewish babies from Pharaoh's genocidal decree. If it weren't for the faith of Nachshon ben Aminadav, the Red Sea would not have split. Who is he? Exactly - not Moses. Yet, only after his act of faith to wade into the water until it was over his head did the waters part.

And Jewish history continues this way – we have our great, brave heroes like Joshua, Devorah and Esther, but also the nameless or less famous, who are just as essential – and it always comes down to faith. Take the Maccabees for instance. Most people will think of their act of faith as declaring war on the world's great superpower of its time and believing God would protect them. But there's a second act of faith.

It is the reason we have eight days of Hanukkah – the oil lasting only accounts for seven of them right? They had enough oil for one day. There was nothing miraculous about the first day! Rabbi David Hartman explained that the miracle of the first day is that the Maccabees had faith that if they lit the menorah, God would take care of the next week until they could make more oil. They believed they were following the purpose God had set for them.

That is the great link between the Maccabees and the early Zionists that motivated them to put the menorah on the Great Seal of the State of Israel. They looked around

nascent Israel and said there is no way we should be here. We came here with no knowledge of farming or fighting, we came with only our faith. That is why on May 14<sup>th</sup> 70 years ago when five hostile Arab countries promised to declare a war that threatened the State of Israel before it even started, the future Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion had a choice to make. He asked himself, am I Dovid Grun a Polish Jew from Plonsk whose father was a lawyer in the Russian Empire or am I David Ben-Gurion whose fathers were the Maccabees who lit the menorah as their act of faith. He chose to be the inheritor of the Maccabee's faith and read the Declaration of Independence publicly and left the fate of the people in the hands of God and the nascent IDF.

We are another link in the chain of a people of faith that goes back thousands of years. But if we want that chain to continue, we have to have faith too – faith in God and faith that God has faith in us. God gave us a *neshama*, a soul, to point us in the right direction and guide us on our path. But taking the next step on that path, just like every step we take, requires faith.

This season, these Days of Awe, are the time to do *teshuva*, to return to that path. We do it by reconnecting with our *neshama* and if you are feeling lost or like you can't sense your meaning or purpose? It happens. We all sometimes lose the ability to connect with our *neshama* and we feel lost. If you feel that way, come in and let's talk. Let's try to find our way back to the path together. Faith doesn't mean we don't have doubts, faith means that despite our doubts we press forward. And why?

Because we celebrate El Emunah – The God of Faith. Remember that God has faith in you, so you should have some faith in yourself. Then your doubt can be motivating because moving forward is not a choice, and you know God would not have given you this task if you weren't up for it. The task may be difficult, and that's why you are the only one who can accomplish it. May we all find the path to that purpose for which God created us and may we all remember on this celebration of the anniversary of Creation what a privilege it is to be part of God's great plan.

Amen.