

Yom Kippur 2017 Rabbi Chai Levy
Three Principles of Faith for Turbulent Times

So I didn't write a rock n'roll sermon for you this Yom Kippur.
The truth is, I didn't do much song writing this past year.
Like many of you, I'm sure, I spent much of my discretionary time
Obsessively reading the news, trying to keep up with the crazy,
mind-spinning pace of the news cycle and
worrying about our country, worrying about our planet,
and worrying about the future of human civilization on earth.

I don't have to tell you. There is a lot to worry about.
The deep divides in our country,
the threat of nuclear war, climate change.
I personally haven't lived through a more frightening time,
when the future seemed this uncertain.
Living in these turbulent times can take a toll on our souls.
On this day of spiritual reflection,
we consider how we can be our best selves.
For me, the spiritual question of these times (and maybe of all times) is:
How to have faith in the face of so much to fear?
How do we live with hope when the world is such a mess?
It's the same question we might ask ourselves on the personal level
when our lives are in turmoil:
What does it mean to have faith in times of uncertainty?

Faith is a funny word,
and it means different things in different religions.
When I hear people say "you're of the Jewish faith,"
I always squirm a little and feel uncomfortable,
like faith isn't really the word we'd use.
We're a people of action, of mitzvot, of deeds; but "faith?" –
that feels a bit foreign, doesn't it?

“Faith” is used in English to mean “belief in something,” but The Hebrew word for faith, *Emunah*, means less “belief” and more “firmness” or “steadfastness,” as in perseverance. Jewish faith doesn’t require a certain set of beliefs. Yes, Maimonides wrote his Thirteen Principles of Faith in the 12th century, but they were not universally agreed upon, and his Principles are more theological axioms, such as: “God has no physical body.” With all due respect to Maimonides, one of the greatest Jewish thinkers of all time, his axioms aren’t exactly going to get us to the hope-kind-of-faith that we need in these frightening times.

So, for Jews, faith is not belief in a certain dogma. Quite the contrary, what Jewish tradition loves is multiple, contradictory viewpoints - that’s what all of our holy books are filled with - *makhloket*, disagreement, which we consider sacred conversation, We hold certainty to be hubris, arrogance.

For Jews, faith is not certainty. But what is it? In the tradition of Maimonides, I’d like to lay out Three Principles of Faith, that is – Three Principles of Faith *for Turbulent Times*. The first is: Faith is being uncertain, maybe even being afraid, but having courage anyway. Instead of falling into despair, it’s taking a step forward into the unknown, but into new possibilities. It’s being in darkness, but walking forward anyway.* That is our Jewish story.

Our story began with Avram hearing God's call of Lech Lecha – go forth,
 Leave your land and your parent's home and everything that is familiar, and go into the unknown.
 Avram heeds this call, and in doing so, he becomes the role model for the Jewish people.
 That's what we mean by faith.
 Not certainty, but going forward into the unknown with courage.
 And for what purpose? God says, *V'heyeh bracha* – to be a blessing to the world.
 Yes, the future is uncertain, but the Jewish path since the beginning of our people, is to Lech Lecha – To go forward into that unknown future with courage and to try to be a blessing.

This is what so many of our immigrant ancestors did
 When they came to this country.
 They left behind everything they knew, and with not much more than the clothes on their backs, they *lech lecha'ed*, they went forth into the unknown.
 And with courage, created new possibilities, along with all the other immigrants from around the world who have built this country.
 Think about your own family's *lech lecha* journeys.
 This is the first principle of Jewish faith in turbulent times:
 The opposite of faith is not uncertainty, the opposite of faith is despair.**

Every day, our liturgy reminds us of how we crossed the sea of Reeds when we left Egypt.
 Imagine the moment just before the sea split.
 We've fled Pharaoh and slavery, and we've got the Egyptian army behind us with their chariots and weapons.
 And in front of us, the sea.

There is nowhere to go. We don't have any good options.
 It's the archetypal and familiar moment
 of being completely stuck, of being afraid;
 what are we going to do in this situation that seems impossible?

The rabbis imagined that one courageous Israelite named Nachshon
 led us all, and walked right into the sea,
 and it was only when the water was up to our noses,
 that the sea miraculously split.

Faith is not certainty. We were at a moment of terrifying unknowns.
 But faith is walking forward anyway, with courage.
 Perhaps it's feeling despair,
 but not letting it let it stop us from moving forward.
 And it is this faith that turns an impasse into a miraculous opening.
 You never know what can happen when we have the courage
 to *lech lecha* into new possibilities.

Which brings me to my second principle of Jewish faith in turbulent
 times: What happens as we cross the sea?
 We sang the Song of the Sea, and
 the Torah tells us that Miriam led all the women
 in dancing and singing with their timbrels.
 Now wait a minute, where did they get timbrels from? Tambourines?!
 We just escaped slavery and didn't have time to let our bread rise!
 (Remember, matzah?)
 But all the women thought as they were fleeing slavery:
 "let me grab my tambourine" - ?!
 Again the rabbis explain: The Israelite women had so much faith that
 they packed their tambourines because they knew there would be
 reason to celebrate.
 The second principle of faith is:
 Things will get better. Pack your tambourine.

That things will get better is the master narrative of the whole Torah:
That is, an enslaved people's liberation
and journey to the Promised Land.

When God shows up at the burning bush to tell Moses to go to Pharaoh
and free the Israelite slaves, Moses asks: "who shall I say sent me?"
God answers by saying: "*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*, 'I will be who I will be' –
Tell them '*Ehyeh* sent you.'" *Ehyeh*, "I will be."

God's not being cute or cagey here
in this awesomely important moment in all of human civilization.

No, in fact, God is hinting at the very meaning of God's name, YHVH,
Which is made up of the past, present, and future forms
of the Hebrew verb "To Be."

God is revealing God's essence that is central to the Exodus
and indeed to all of Jewish thought and faith:

Ehyeh is the future tense of the verb "to be," meaning,
This God is the power that can change
what IS into WHAT COULD BE.***

The God of the Torah is the Divine power of POSSIBILITY,
of change, of transformation.

This is Judaism's unique offering to the world.

We may take this notion of the possibility of change for granted
Because it's so integrated into our thinking,
but this idea comes from Torah.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, "to be a Jew is to be an agent of hope
in a world serially threatened by despair.

Judaism is a sustained struggle against the world that is,
in the name of the world that could be, should be, but is not yet."****

So my first two principles for faith in turbulent times are:

First, faith is not certainty,
but it's having hope and courage to move forward

in times of uncertainty,
and second, it's believing that change is possible,
and things will get better. (So pack your tambourine)

And the third principle is:

Faith isn't waiting passively for the God of possibility to do something.
It's being an agent of possibility.

You know the joke about the man who is drowning and says,
"God will save me! God will save me!"

Rescuers come and throw him a life preserver,
and he says, "God will save me! God will save me!"

A boat comes by, and they say, "Get in!"

And the drowning man says, "God will save me, God will save me!"

A helicopter flies overhead and throws him a rope, and he says,
"God will save me! God will save me!"

And the man drowns and dies and he says,

"God, I had faith in you, why didn't you save me?"

God says, "I sent you a life preserver, and a boat, and a helicopter!"

Jewish faith is not "God will save me!" It's not passive.

Jewish faith requires us to be active *agents* of hope and faith.

There's a passage in the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 31a)

Where one of our Sages, Rava, imagines the various questions that a
person is asked at the gates of Heaven: Did you study Torah?

Were you honest in your business dealings?

The kind of questions you'd expect.

But one question is a bit surprising:

before the heavenly gates, the person is also asked:

Tzipita LeYishua? Did you have faith in redemption?

Or, did you have hope for the future?

Various commentators try to tease out exactly what this means,
tzipita leyishua.

Tzipita is a verb that means watching, vision or seeing.
Yishua is salvation, redemption,
 fancy words that express the idea that: The world will get better.
 So, *tzipita leyishua* means:
 did you hold the vision that the world will get better?

One commentator, Rav Kook,
 the first Ashkenazic chief rabbi in pre-state Palestine,
 explains why the word *tzipita* was used rather than the word “to hope.”
 It might have been more natural to say, “did you hope for salvation?”
 Rav Kook explains that this faith in the future
 is different than passively hoping.
Tzipita leyishua, he writes, means not:
 did you hope for salvation?
 But: Did you act in the world to bring salvation?
 Did you take responsibility to make the world better?
 Did you agitate others to take action too?
 This is the question that we are asked.
 This is what faith means – it’s active hope.
 It’s not saying “God will save me!”
 No, it’s being the one out there
 with the boat and the rope and the helicopter.
 It’s being an agent of hope.
 It’s activating hope and faith through our actions.

This active faith means for example:
 instead of despairing about climate change,
 Do something. Show up 2 weeks from Sunday, Oct 15,
 here at Kol Shofar to join with our Green Team and Marin Interfaith
 Climate Action to get involved locally with Resilient Neighborhoods to
 reduce our carbon footprint, to create neighborhood EcoTeams to
 prepare for emergencies, and be part of the Climate Solution.

That same weekend, on Shabbat afternoon, we're hosting the CEO of IsraAID, Israel's humanitarian aid organization to hear about getting involved in the amazing work that they do. They have teams on the ground right now in Houston, Florida, and Puerto Rico helping with the aftermath of the hurricanes; they're in Mexico helping out after the earthquakes. They've got teams of Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims working together in Europe with Syrian, Iraqi, and Yazidi refugees. Some of you know I had the privilege of traveling to Greece this past year with a Jewish-Muslim group to see firsthand the work that IsraAID is doing with refugees there. What these teams are doing – this is what I mean by active faith.

It's being an agent of hope.
 It's being part of that force that transforms what is into what could be.
 And notice from these examples that active faith means
 Joining together with others to be that force.
 Despair and cynicism isolate and separate us, but
 Jewish faith involves joining together with others to be agents of hope.

The concept of faith is challenging, especially for Jews, I think, because we often misunderstand what the word means for us. People sometimes use the word "faith" to mean: not doubting, not questioning, obedience, turning off our rational minds, or believing in a certain doctrine. Listen to me: those are *not*, in my opinion, the Jewish definitions of faith.

The root of the Hebrew word for faith, *Emunah*, is Aleph-Mem-Nun, as in: Amen.
 Saying "Amen" underlies all three principles of faith in turbulent times. It's say Amen to life.
 Affirming life and goodness and hope and possibility, even when things are a mess. (Can I get an Amen to that?)

Every day during these holidays,
 starting last month at the beginning of Elul,
 we recite Psalm 27,
 and express our prayers for hope and courage in the face of fear.
 At the end of the Psalm, right before we say Kaveh el Adonai,
 There is an interesting verse about faith.
 It says: *Lulei He'emanti* (note that root of "Amen")
Lirot betuv Adonai B'erez Hayim, which means:
 Had I not had faith in seeing the goodness of God in the land of the
 living... (dot, dot, dot) the Psalmist's voice trails off.
 It's an incomplete sentence.
 Had I not had faith in the ultimate goodness of life... what?
 What's the end of the sentence?
 It's too unspeakable for the psalmist to mention –
 Perhaps if we didn't have faith in the ultimate goodness of life, then:
 We'd just give up hope and resign ourselves to cynicism and despair,
 and that is not an option!
 Look at Jewish history.
 Our people has survived so much over the millennia,
 Unfathomable tragedy, loss, trauma, and reason to despair,
 but after thousands of years, miraculously, we are still here
 because we have continued to say Amen,
 continued to affirm life, to say *L'chaim*,
 to keep our hope and courage and faith, despite everything.
 Our anthem is *Hatikva*, "the Hope," because we believe that
 things can get better because we help make them better.
 (Can I get an Amen to that?)

This is Jewish faith, and this is the faith we assert on Yom Kippur also.
 It's a day of profound hope,
 in which we envision a better version of ourselves.
 Year after year, we confess our sins, again and again,

and we keep affirming the faith that we can be better.
 We acknowledge that we mess up, but we don't despair,
 we keep saying Amen to life, we affirm our faith in new possibilities.

So the next time someone speaks of the "Jewish faith,"
 I will not bristle. I will think:
 Yes, I am of the Jewish faith!
 Not because of dogma or certainty,
 but because even in these frighteningly turbulent times
 of existential fear for our world and for our future,
 I say *Lulei He'emanti Lirot betuv Adonai B'eret Hayim*,
 I affirm our faith in the power of goodness and life and
 the Possibility of Changing what is into What Could Be.

Because Jewish faith, *Emunah*, is:

1. having hope and courage to move forward in times of uncertainty,
2. believing that change is possible and that things will get better.
3. Being an active agent of possibility

Can I get an "Amen"?

Ken Yehi Ratzon, so may it be.
 Amen.

Thanks to these writers and their work for these ideas -

* Estelle Frankel, [The Wisdom of Not Knowing](#)

** Sharon Salzberg, [Faith](#)

*** Rabbi Michael Lerner, [Jewish Renewal](#)

**** Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, [Future Tense](#) (and thanks to Rabbi Audrey Marcus-Berkman for pointing me to this source)