

SECTION 1

# A PURPOSEFUL LIFE

# 1

## BELIEF AS A RELATIONSHIP

*The source of my well-being, according to Judaism, is the knowledge that, since God created me, my existence is purposeful; since He is unique, He created me unique; since He created me to love me, I am intrinsically lovable; since He is all over, He will protect me everywhere.*

*Mrs. Shlomtzy Weisz<sup>1</sup>*

### THE MULTIFACETED RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

It takes a lot more than simply believing that God exists in order to have a relationship with Him. Just as our relationships with our fellow humans have multiple aspects, so too, we need to explore multiple relationships with God. We need to approach Him through prayer and through the study of Torah, through the celebration of the Shabbat and through the awareness of His continuous Divine Providence. God will be the first Being we naturally turn to when we are in trouble. We may be angry with God or happy with Him—grateful, hurt, or perplexed—but, like in all true relationships, we maintain a connection.

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1 “The Inevitable Emuna Workshop.”

That connection triggers God’s response in turn. King David stated, “God is your shadow.”<sup>2</sup> He set up the world so that He responds to the contours of a relationship that we must initiate.<sup>3</sup> He waits for us to do His will so that He, in turn, can exercise His will, which is to do good for us.

The prophet Habakkuk gave us a key to unlocking all of Judaism: “A *tzaddik* (righteous person) lives by his faith.”<sup>4</sup> One reading of this verse tells us, “Even if you are not righteous in everything, in faith you should be righteous. Be a *tzaddik* in faith.”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps we can be mediocre in acts of kindness, in self-restraint, or in not being materialistic. But in faith we must excel. In faith, we must all be *tzaddikim*.

Let’s not get this wrong. Habakkuk is not telling us to take a blind leap of faith. Faith is not a zero-sum game. It is not a case of either believing or not. There are many levels and facets to faith and many starting points:

- There is the God of comfort—the Being I turn to and talk to.
- There is the belief that God is involved in our lives, that He creates challenges for us that are just what we need—the God of Divine Providence.
- There is belief in the fact that He gave us the Torah at Sinai, and that He will unfold the Messianic Era when His unity will be revealed. This is the God of history.
- There is belief in the God of the covenant, resulting in the unique obligations of the Jewish People. The very nature of a covenant is a mutual commitment—in this case, God with the Jews.

These are just a few approaches. Faith, in fact, spreads a vast canopy that impregnates everything we do.

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2 Psalms 121:5.

3 Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, *Nefesh Hachaim* 1:1.

4 Habakkuk 2:4, as brought by the Talmud, end of Tractate *Makkot*.

5 Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen. According to this reading, the comma comes after the second word, “*Tzaddik Be’Eminato, Yichyeh*—A *tzaddik* (righteous man) in faith, will live.” It is in faith that he is a *tzaddik*.

## FAITH AND FAITHFULNESS

Of all the expressions of faith, the most important is faithfulness. When we are faithful to someone, we don't try to do things behind their back. We are loyal. We do things that we think will benefit them and don't try to harm them. We try to make them happy and to relate to their concerns. We try to nurture our connection and to take it forward. Being faithful to God is not much different. It too is a relationship. And while we can neither harm nor benefit God, we can be loyal and respond to what He wants without dreaming of cheating behind His back (so to speak).

If faith does not translate into faithfulness, it is meaningless. "Belief *that*" must translate into "belief *in*." "Belief *that*" is an abstract belief. It is the awe of God's grand cosmos. It may lead to respect but not to trust. "Belief *in*" turns my faith into a personal relationship. When I believe in someone, I must be faithful to my belief. I must show that I trust the person. And through that, I become deserving of *their* trust. In Hebrew (as in English), the two words are similar: *emunah* for faith, *ne'emanut* for faithfulness.

Believing in God is the background context in which we live; the meta-principle on which everything is based.<sup>6</sup> That is why the first of the Ten Commandments is in the form of a statement of fact, not a commandment: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."<sup>7</sup> God is not commanding us to believe. Rather, He is telling us that if we don't accept Him, then nothing else in the Torah is going to make sense. The first of the Ten Commandments is really an introduction to all the commandments. "I am the Lord your God."

Stated this way, the opposite of faith is not atheism. It is rather a state when one has no relationship with God and no attachment to Him.

*I cannot love someone  
I don't trust, and  
I cannot trust someone  
I don't respect.*

6 *Ramban*, glosses (*hasagot*) to Maimonides' *Sefer Hamitzvot*, positive mitzvah 1.

7 Because the wording is not in the form of a command. In fact, one of the commentators, the *Behag*, does not count belief in God as one of the 613 commandments.

## WHEN TRUST BREAKS DOWN

Many of us believe in God, but we don't know how to have a relationship with Him. We believe *that* God exists, but we don't believe *in* Him. We don't know how to trust God, how to really feel that He loves us, believes in us, and is looking for us to love Him in turn. Some of us believe in God but think of Him only as this scary being, as *Malkeinu*, "our King," who sits in judgment and punishes us if we sin. But, in Judaism, we always say *Avinu Malkeinu*—"Our Father our King." We always put *Father* before *King*.<sup>8</sup> The relationship of a father to a child is God's starting point in reaching out to us.<sup>9</sup> "Every human soul that has lapsed...is His loss!"<sup>10</sup>

We have all kinds of relationships—with parents, spouses, children, friends, and colleagues. We can sometimes feel close to them and sometimes quite distant. If our connection with the other person goes deep enough, it will carry us through disagreements and disappointments. Even when we are hurt, we will remain committed to the relationship. But when trust breaks down, it is a different story. Trust is a precious commodity. It is hard-earned and easily lost.

What causes trust between people to break down? Often, there is an incident or series thereof—of infidelity or deep disappointment. We feel that our trust in that person was not reciprocated by his or her trustworthiness. Our trust threshold, however, will also be a function of other factors. We may have had other relationships that went sour that have made it more difficult for us to trust anyone but ourselves. Or we may live in a culture that tells us continuously to watch out for ourselves and to presume that everyone else's motives are selfish. Or we may suffer from an era when relationships are mainly superficial and hence not fully authentic.

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8 *Avinu Malkeinu* is a famous set of appeals we repeatedly make to God on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

9 So too, in the silent prayer, the *Shemoneh Esreh*, in the middle section of requests, we turn repeatedly to God as our father: "Return us, our Father..." "Forgive us, our Father..."

10 Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, Passover Haggadah.

Our ability to sustain a relationship with God will be impacted by the types of relationships we have with others. If we had a poor relationship with our parents, we will have to struggle harder to have a healthy relationship with God. We won't have matured our relationship skills.

Moreover, our trust in God is a lifelong process. We may experience things along our sinuous path through life that don't make sense to us. We will then need to draw on a lifetime of faith that translates as faithfulness to our God, even in these trying times.

*We don't need Torah to teach us the God of Einstein, the impersonal God who is behind the wondrous universe. We need it to teach us how to have a relationship with Him.*

#### THE TASTE OF FAITH

King David told us *taamu u'reu*—"taste and you will understand (lit., see)."<sup>11</sup> Judaism requires engagement. It requires tasting. It can never be fully understood by the detached mind. I cannot explain to someone what ice cream tastes like by describing its ingredients. So too, I cannot explain the experience of the Shabbat by a verbal description.

It is one thing to show that Judaism is a rational faith. It is quite another to show the grandeur of Judaism, its profundity and acute relevance to our lives, its sophistication and depth. Only "tasting" Judaism will fully open that doorway to us. I believe in my Judaism—and in my God—in part because I have experienced both. And I have seen the effects of that experience on countless others. My Judaism works for me. And hence my faith, though it has strong intellectual components, is like an old friend.

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11 Psalms 34:9.