

I knew as a teenager that I wanted to be rabbi. Next to my Senior picture in my High School yearbook, I wrote in "rabbi" under "future plans." No one really took me seriously. Being a bit of a prankster in those days, most assumed this was just one more practical joke. My intentions, however, were sincere. Although there were many days in college when I was not sure my facility with Hebrew was good enough to get into rabbinic school, I never had any doubts about what I wanted to do.

My first crisis of doubt about the path I had chosen came years later. I was already in my third year in rabbinical school and I had already been working as a rabbinic intern for nearly two years. I felt no less sure at that point than I ever had about the rabbinate. In fact, working at an institution with emotionally troubled children only reinforced my sense that I was doing the right thing.

Then, as so often happens in life, reality intruded. The dark spot of doubt came from an unexpected corner, from news about someone I did not even know. Someone I had grown up with had an older brother whose wife was pregnant. During the birth there were complications. Thankfully, the baby survived. The mother – in her 20s – did not.

I had no personal connection with the young mother who died, but the unfairness of her fate led me to question the very foundation of my faith. How could God do this? And if God was not here, what difference did faith mean anyways? It is not as if this was the first loss in my life. My father died nine months before my Bar Mitzvah. I remember how sad I felt when the dog that was in my life since I was born had to be put to sleep. I am still not entirely certain why the death of this woman – someone I did not even know – rocked my faith as profoundly as it did. Unexpected as was this crisis of faith, however, once it entered it nearly led me out of the rabbinate. It was not that I lost my belief in God, but I suddenly confronted whether having a faith in God made any difference in life, whether belief in God mattered. And if not, would I not

be a phony as a rabbi, affirming faith, but inwardly feeling it had no impact on our lives? What kind of religious life is that?

The dark despair of that moment led me to seek the advice of my professors, my wife and my friends. The faith I eventually came to was different from the one I had prior. No longer did I expect God to be the One who solves all problems. My faith in God was transformed into the One who has a scope different than ours, present in the birth of the baby and in the death of the mother. All, for me, was one in the Holy One.

I do not want to characterize my faith prior to this incident as naïve. Rather, through the questioning emerged a different, more complex understanding of life – and of God.

The notion of faith as something which is strengthened through doubt is hinted at both in this week's *parasha* and in the rhythm of the Jewish calendar.

In this week's portion uncertainty grips not only Moses, but the people of Israel. The Torah portion opens with God promising Moses that the people will be redeemed. Moses speaks to the Israelites, but they pay no heed. Why can they not believe? What bars them from faith in a God who will be with them? The Torah merely states that "their spirits (were) crushed by cruel bondage." Is there a connection between the lack of spirit and the inability to hear God? In my life that certainly has been the case.

The despair and emptiness of the people have a profound affect on Moses. He goes back to God – "They won't listen to me, how will Pharaoh listen to me?" (Exodus 6:12) It is not that Moses denies God; it is simply that his people's despair leads him to cynically question whether God can really do what is promised. Rabbi Mordecai Finley tells a story of Rabbi David Hartman, contemporary philosopher and educator, who once astutely observed: "A person told his rabbi that he doubted whether he believed in God anymore. His rabbi asked how this loss of faith would change his life. The person reflected a moment and said:

'Not much, really'. The rabbi said: 'Then you never really believed in God in the first place.'

If belief in God does not change you, then you are probably just affirming a set of theological propositions. Faith is something deeper. It is a willingness to be challenged by your doubts and establish a purpose and goal for living.

The Hebrew word for faith – *emunah* – is related to the Hebrew word *ne'eman*, meaning "reliable, loyal, steadfast." An *ish emunah* is not one who affirms theological propositions, but rather is one who is steadfast in the search for meaning. We see this in English, as well. "Faith" is from the Latin "fides" – loyalty. "Belief" is related to the German, "beliebt" – "beloved." "Creed" is from two word roots – "heart" (as is French, "coeur") and "give" (as in Latin, "donate"). In Hebrew and English, then, the assumption is that whatever faith we have, it must be grounded in the sense of a God who matters, a God that changes the very nature of our lives.

The assurance that doubt is part of faith is found, as well, in the Hebrew calendar. Today is *Rosh Hodesh* – the first day of the Hebrew month. There is something strange about the way the Jewish months begin. Rather than in something we can see – like sunset or sunrise – the months are marked by that which is unseen. The Hebrew month begins when it is a new moon – in essence, when the moon is not visible. It is true that the first day of the month was, in ancient days, affirmed by the sighting of the sliver of the moon in the western sky at sunset, but the astronomical marking of a new month is actually when the moon is, from our perspective, absent.

Perhaps the rationale in this is to remind us that even in the darkness there is a beginning, even in doubt something that has meaning. As a new month begins, therefore, we offer a blessing – seeing the Holy One in the darkness of the heavens and in their light. Just as each new month brings something different, so in the cycle of darkness and light in our lives can we be transformed by times of grief, doubt and skepticism.

The new moon challenges us to look for more than one way of coming to a sense of blessing. Consider it another way. While you may prefer one season to another, is there really one that is better? Some like the warm breeze and smell of fresh cut grass in summer. Others wait with eager anticipation for the first snow (evidenced by the squeals of joy from our early childhood students yesterday as they saw snowflakes wafting in the wind). Are the colorful leaves of autumn less than the blossoms of spring?

So it is in our lives. We move through different seasons of faith and experience. The power of faith is seeing the joy in each stage – and accepting that our doubts are as natural to us as the waning of the moon in the sky.

What a profound teaching this is for us in our moments of despair. Instead of abandoning God in times of uncertainty, it accepts that such moments of darkness are built into the very warp of the world. True, steadfast faith is not, then, a lack of doubt. The very opposite! Our hesitations can lead us to a different kind of faith, more consonant with the experiences of our lives. We accept that people change in physical ways. Modern psychologists, such as Lawrence Kohlberg, taught us that human beings go through moral development as they mature. Why should our faith not change, too?

Our spiritual development, therefore, is fostered by all that happens to us – the times of exaltation and the moments of doubt, days of plenty and times of loss. My colleague, Rabbi Janet Marder teaches that “Mature faith understands that thoughtful people have doubts and must live with uncertainty ... It does not make grandiose pronouncements or give absolute assurances. Mature faith respects the world's complexity; it acknowledges that there are many paths to truth; it does not seek to denigrate or dominate others through dogma.”

How, then, do we move from doubt to faith? Perhaps the way our ancestors observed the moon can guide us. In ancient days the sages did not declare a *Rosh Hodesh* until two witnesses came to say they saw the sliver of the moon. There are two important aspects of this teaching: first, the something new only

occurs when the hint of light is seen and second, no single witness alone is sufficient.

So it is in our lives. We all have doubts. It is the willingness to hope – even against all odds – that light will come that opens for us that possibility of something new. And we cannot ever really do it alone. Only by relying on others do we find our way towards the light.

In the Torah portion, when Moses says no one will listen to him, God answers that his brother, Aaron will go with him to Pharaoh.¹ Aaron has never been mentioned before. Why now? Perhaps to teach Moses that his way to be strong before Pharaoh and his people, his assurance of faith in God and himself, cannot be established alone. Faith is not, for the Jew, the lonely search for meaning. It is fostered, instead, in the connections we make and in the support we receive from others.

The God I believe in is not a God unwilling to hear our doubts, no less than God listened to those expressed by Moses our Teacher. Let us not, therefore, stifle our doubts or those in others. Let us not feel we must defend God against the slings and arrows unleashed by people in pain. May we, instead, open ourselves to our doubts and the questions of others; and let us use those doubts to nurture a different kind of faith – a mature, steadfast assurance that our life, with all its complexity, does meaning and that we are not alone.

¹ Thus, Rashi, *Midrash Sekhel Tov* and others quoted in Norman Cohen, *Moses and the Journey to Leadership* (Jewish Lights, 2007)