

Yom Kippur 5773 Blind Faith  
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Blind faith is dangerous. People who believe without question are sometimes willing to do terrible things in the name of God. What makes it attractive is that this kind of faith removes all of life's uncertainties, and that is also why it is so dangerous.

The theme at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem where I study each summer was faith. What kind of faith can we modern, Liberal, Jews adhere to? Blind faith may be OK for a different kind of Jew, but what about us? What is real faith? What can sustain us on the journey? Or will we simply put matters of faith aside because if faith means believing in something we cannot rationally and scientifically prove, then it isn't connected to us.

I spent a lot of time thinking about faith and I want to share with you some of the texts that I found meaningful, but first I want to tell you about an experience I had that helped me redefine blind faith and what it means to be religious

One of the first things I do, right after landing in Israel each summer is to make my way up to the golf course Caesaria. I get to Israel a few days early to acclimate to the different time zone, and that also gives me a chance to spend some time with a few Israelis, speaking only Hebrew. We landed on Thursday, I settled in to the apartment, and then drove up to Caesaria on Friday. When I got to the first tee that morning there were two men sitting in a golf cart and another man waiting by the tee. He said to me: "you are in for a real experience today. One of the players in the cart is blind." Then, as we walked down the first fairway, he told me to look at him when I talked because he was deaf and was reading my lips.

Now, I know what you are thinking: "A rabbi, a blind man, and a deaf man, went out to play golf..." Is this some kind of joke?

But it is no joke, it actually happened! Mark, my new friend from Leeds had a Ph.D. in Environmental Science and is involved in the Med - Dead project, which is trying to bring water from the Mediterranean to the Dead Sea. The two men in the golf cart were Zohar Sharon and Shimshon Levy. Zohar is blind, and Shimshon is his playing partner.

I already know what your next question is: "who won?" Well, let's just say that Zohar is no ordinary blind golfer. (If there is such a thing!). Zohar is the 4 time world champion blind golfer. You can look him up on the internet: Zohar Sharon... and there is also a great You Tube Video of him playing in the championship this summer. This is Zohar's story:

He lost vision in his right eye in his 20's, while serving in the army. He was assigned to a unit guarding Israel's nuclear reactor in Dimona. He had no idea what the facility was and after opening a door, he was splashed in the face with some chemicals.

Undeterred by his vision loss, he redoubled his efforts and became an officer. During the 1973 Yom Kippur War, he served under Ariel Sharon in the Sinai. Right after the war, however, his eyesight worsened and he was discharged from the IDF. He had lost vision in his left eye as well. He wasn't even 30. Yet he was not going to let blindness overwhelm him: Zohar went on to become a painter, a runner, running 12 miles a day, he married 3 times and had children, and, when he was 47, he took up golf.

How does blind golf work? Each blind golfer has a partner who lines him up and when everything is set, the golfer swings away. When Zohar first took up golf he told Shimshon: "give me 10 years of practice and I will become the champion of the world." It only took 5 years! He was 52 when he won his first world championship in 2004. He has since won 3 more times, including the championship this summer.

As we went around the golf course, we had a lot of time to talk and we spoke about many things: family, faith, love, life, what it means to go blind and Beit haLochem, "Warrior's House," the organization that helps wounded soldiers in Israel. Both Shimshon and Zohar volunteer there and are a great inspiration for wounded soldiers.

Zohar told me about his faith. His wife, he said, follows Judaism out of fear. She feels that if she doesn't do everything just so, God will punish her. Not Zohar. "My God is the God of loving and hugging, not the God of fear," he said to me, "I don't go to Temple because I am afraid of God. I go because God loves me. I don't have anything to be afraid of. I didn't do anything wrong. I know that God loves me. That is my God!"

Simple and profound. And this from a man who could so easily have given in to depression and anger. He was all about love and hope and optimism. He was all about hugging and friendship and opening doors for others... for the wounded soldiers, for his children, for all of us.

Another blind person, Helen Keller, wrote: **"When one door of happiness closes, another opens; but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which has been opened for us."**

When the door of vision closed for Zohar, he looked beyond it and began opening other doors. As I drove back to Jerusalem, I remembered how the rabbis euphemistically call a blind person "Sagi Nahor," which means "overflowing with light." A blind person is a person who has so much light, it prevents him from physically seeing. Obviously that is not literally true, but in Zohar's case, I could see that he was overflowing with light. He was shining the way for others. Ironically, his name, in Hebrew, means "shining." The great book of Jewish mysticism is called the Zohar because it "shines light" on the mystery of God's presence in the universe. It begins with the verse, "The righteous will shine like the firmament of Heaven."

Zohar Sharon, the blind golfer, shined a light for me on what it means to have faith. He helped me redefine blind faith. Instead of thinking about it as belief with out question, I began to see faith for what it really should be. Faith is what gives us the courage to face and overcome adversity. That kind of faith can help us in our lives.

I know another blind man. I met him in Israel, too. His name is Shimon Brand: he is an orthodox Jew, a rabbi, and the Hillel director at Oberlin College. I study with him each summer at Hartman. It is an amazing experience. Because he is blind we have to read the texts to him. But Shimon already knows them all. We might be reading a text from the Bible, the Talmud, or Maimonides... we sit down to study, we begin reading and Shimon finishes the quote. You mention an esoteric book in Jewish history... Shimon has read it. And it isn't just the Hebrew texts: one day we studied, Jacques Derrida, the French Philosopher who gave the world "deconstructionism" (I'm still not sure what it is). Shimon can quote him. We studied William James, a theologian who taught at Harvard in the 1800's... yep, read him, too. Jewish or non Jewish, Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Christian, you name it... texts we struggled to understand, Shimon knows them all.

Shimon has a seeing eye dog whose name is "Pilot." Last year Shimon tripped and fell and broke his foot. He told us that he could only wonder what the people who live in Oberlin, Ohio, thought watching a him in an electric wheelchair being led by Pilot. Pilot had been trained to help Shimon while he was walking, not riding in a wheel chair, so the dog got confused and the people watching them were confused! When we gathered this summer, Shimon was better: no broken foot, not wheel chair, just Shimon and Pilot. One of my colleagues, a rabbi from Chicago, mentioned that watching the two of them is fascinating: you can't really tell who is leading who! Shimon is the only blind person who is guiding the dog, not the other way around.

Zohar and Shimon taught me that true faith really is blind faith but it is NOT "believing without question." True faith is that which gives us the courage to step forward without knowing for sure where we are going.

Even if we are blessed with sight, we need that kind of blind faith. For do any of us really know with certainty what will happen in our lives? Every critical decision we make is based, not on certainty, but on probability. Does anyone know with certainty what the result of going to this college and not that college was going to be? Can we be certain that we made the right decisions when we chose this career over that career? The decision to marry, to buy a home, where to live, when, and if, to start a family, to retire, to move, to make friends, or to not do any of these things... every one of them is made with hope that we chose wisely but without knowing the final outcome. In life, the best we can do is to put one foot in front of the other, and, like Shimon and Zohar, hope that we will make it to our destination safely.

Blind faith is real faith. It is not knowing the answers; it is living with the questions.

There are, I know, fundamentalist, ultra orthodox Jews out there, but I submit to you that Judaism is not a religion that gives itself over to certainty. The Talmud is filled with questions and answers and more questions and answers. Even when an answer is found, all the other positions that are rejected are preserved. Sometimes, the rabbis simply say: "Some day, when Elijah comes with the Messiah, this question will be answered." There is a certain "uncertainty" in the Talmud.

The rabbis teach that the Torah has to be interpreted and reinterpreted. Even God, they say, doesn't know the definitive meaning. We see this in a profound and dramatic story in the Talmud:

Moses once came upon God sitting, like a scribe, with a quill in his hand, writing a Torah. Looking closely, Moses saw that God was not just writing the Torah, God was affixing little crowns to the tops of some of the letters. On top of the Shin, three little crowns, on top of the Chet, one crown... Moses asks God: "Why are you doing this?" and God replies that one day there would be a rabbi who would give an interpretation to each one of these little crowns. Moses asks to meet him, and so God sends Moses down to the academy where the rabbi was teaching. The students were asking questions and the rabbi was answering. Moses became anxious because he didn't understand one word that the rabbi was saying. Finally, one of the students asked the teacher: "Rabbi, what is the source of this teaching?" And the rabbi answered: "It is a tradition going back to Moses at Mount Sinai." At that moment, Moses felt better. (TB Menachot 29b)

In this amazing passage the rabbis are saying that the Torah's meaning is not obvious: not to the student, not to Moses, and, not to God. The Torah needs interpretation! In fact, God built that into the Torah. Uncertainty, humility, and ambivalence, these are crucial aspects of Jewish faith. Turn it over again and again: the Torah's meaning will change over time and adapt to new circumstances.

So in our day, when someone says "I know exactly what God wants," Beware! He is going down a dangerous path. Speaking with certainty about God makes God vulnerable to error. What might be right today, may not be right in the future. Slavery was once legal, women did not have the right to vote, or to become a rabbi or to read from the Torah. But God had the humility to give us a Law that was flexible and could be reinterpreted as time went on.

In a world where fundamentalism is on the rise, giving humility and uncertainty their rightful place at the center of religion is more important now than ever before. It was this kind of humility and uncertainty that Abraham Lincoln expressed in his second inaugural address. The Civil War was raging, and Lincoln, speaking at the beginning of his second term posed this question: whose side is God on, the Union or the Confederacy?

Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes [God's] aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both [the Union and the Confederacy] could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. ... Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

Lincoln was saying: “have some humility, God cannot be entirely Union or Confederacy, Democrat or Republican, Liberal or Conservative.”

Maimonides invokes religious humility in his teaching. He instructs us that the only way a person can speak about God is in the negative. You can't say what God is, that would turn God into an idol. The only meaningful thing you can say about God is what God isn't.

We look about us and find religious people promoting violence. We see religious people covering up child abuse. We see religious people acting unethically. When we meet a person who is religious that is no guarantee that they are going to be a good, ethical, person. But it should be.

Today, the crucial question is no longer what a religion's theology teaches, the crucial question is what behavior it will not tolerate. I have no doubt that Islam is a religion of peace, I keep hearing that over and over again, but the crucial question is this: how much reactionary hatred and violence is it willing to tolerate? And the same is true of Judaism and Christianity.

In our day, in our lives, in our world, we Liberal Jews need a faith that gives us the courage to step forward into an uncertain future and bind up the wounds of our world, to care for the widow and the orphan, and to achieve a just and lasting peace. May God give us the courage to join hands, open our eyes, and walk that path together.