

Can I Have Faith Without G-d?
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Shabbat Service, Friday, November 21, 2008

Thirteen years ago this Torah portion was important for my father because he saw Abraham play a large role in finding a wife for his son. Today, I bet he feels the same way!

When I became a Bar Mitzvah, I thought it was funny that a servant had to make a promise to Abraham by putting his hand under his thigh.

Today, I understand that Abraham was making a plan for Isaac and for our people, by finding a wife who would continue our covenant. G-d told Abraham that he would make him a permanent people, but Abraham did not sit back and wait for it to happen. Instead, Abraham called in his most trusted servant, told him exactly where to find his future daughter-in-law and where not to go, where to bring Isaac and where not to bring Isaac. Now I realize this seemingly insignificant action is one of the reasons for our existence as a people. If Abraham wants Jewish descendants then he understands he must do everything in his power to make that happen. He knows Isaac cannot marry a woman who will bring him to her lifestyle, but rather a woman who is willing to accept his. The Torah says that Abraham made a covenant with G-d.

I do not know if I believe in G-d, I constantly struggle with that idea. How can I be Jewish if I am not sure of the existence of G-d? There is a famous passage in the Jerusalem Talmud that says: "Would that my people forsake me but keep my commandments." In other words, it is ok to struggle with G-d but still practice the traditions that have made us unique for thousands of years. To me, Judaism is not about G-d watching us from on high, but a combination of practicing our teachings, honoring our traditions and building our community.

As I study my Torah portion, I wonder: is Abraham following God's orders to create a new way of life, or does he realize that he does not want his children to grow up in a world of human sacrifice and lack of morality? Is G-d guiding Abraham, or is Abraham himself creating a new path? When I really think about it, it does not matter. Did Abraham lay the foundation of our people through G-d's inspiration or his own?

At this point in my life I don't know if I believe in G-d, but I do not think belief in G-d is necessary for me to be Jewish. Today, we do not see many miracles that we cannot explain. Floods and rainbows can be explained by science, most people don't believe the world was created with Adam and Eve but in some version of the Big Bang, and I would certainly believe someone is crazy if they came up to me saying they just heard God's voice. While G-d is central to Judaism, I try to live my life around G-d's lessons and not the hope of his presence. We know we have free will, but it seems people expect G-d to protect them. I do not think that if a drunk driver is behind the wheel of a Mack truck aiming for my car that G-d will whisk it away and protect me. No, if that car is aimed at me going seventy miles an hour I am going to die. That's just the way it is. Now, I will still probably pray to G-d in my last seconds hoping he misses but I do not expect him to save my life.

When I was in eighth grade living in Nashville, Tennessee I had discussions with a born again Baptist by the name of Christy Bearden. We were both thirteen and I happened to have a major crush on her. She believed I was going to hell because I was Jewish and I obviously disagreed. I asked her, "If I was the Jewish equivalent of Mother Teresa and I spent my life giving to the world but I didn't believe in Jesus then I'd still go to hell?" "Yes" she replied, "All you have to do is accept Jesus into your heart and you'll go to heaven." I said, "What?? You're telling me that I could be a serial killer jump off a thirty story building, and on my way down accept Jesus' love into my heart and I'll go to heaven?" Again, she said yes, and I said, "That's why I don't believe in Jesus."

As a Jew, I believe action is more important than belief. We can struggle with our certainty of G-d and still be Jewish. The foundation of our people is in our community and traditions and those are what have made us a great people. Some say we are chosen and that's why we have a third of the Nobel prizes while being point .05 percent of the world's population...I say it's because we study more. But that's what our tradition teaches.

My current philosophy on life and Judaism revolve around three separate quotations. One from a wise, old rabbi named Stephen Fuchs, and the others from two guys named Hillel and Aristotle. Rabbi Fuchs says, and you may have heard this one before, "Our goal as Jews is to make the world a more just, caring and compassionate society." Hillel says, "What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor." Aristotle says, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit." If I take these simple teachings and use them as the foundation of my life then I will be making the world a better place, one action at a time. Reform Jews understand that we are not here to wait for G-d to send down a messiah who will make peace in the world. If we want peace, we must work to create it. The combination of these quotations gives us an outline of our purpose, how to reach it, and how often we need to be working toward that idea. The goal is to create a just caring society; we do that by treating our neighbors as ourselves, and we continue to do it everyday.

Though I struggle with my belief in G-d, I absolutely consider myself a Jew. There are many reasons why I could or could not believe in the existence of a higher being. Some say that G-d is a creation of our imagination meant to quell our fears about the unknown. It is possible, that is true, and it is possible that G-d is a vehicle that gives our lives purpose and meaning.

Now anyone who knows me knows that my habits are not always excellent, my dealings with my neighbor are not always perfect, and there are definitely times when I have not done my part to make the world a more caring compassionate society. But I try. While I question G-d, I find deep meaning in our holy days. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur give me an opportunity to reflect on the people I've hurt and remind me every year that I need to ask for forgiveness from them. Passover is a time to remember the bitterness of our past and understand what we've gone through. Purim reminds us that we must take action when our enemies plot against us; we rejoice that we have been able to overcome that hate and then drink so much wine that we forget it all. Our traditions are vital not because of the role G-d plays in them but the human factor that has allowed us to overcome our adversity, prevent disaster, or just the times we are lucky enough to live through them. In quoting *Pirke Avot*, Elie Wiesel said: "Know from where you came, where you are going, and before whom you are destined to give account."

"Now, which of these," Wiesel asked rhetorically, "is the most important? The most important," he said, "is knowing from where you came!"

I love the community from which I come. I have had the benefit of advice from April Haskell, Richard Rubenstein, Bennett Pearl, Ron Schlossberg, Dr. Joel Deutsch of blessed memory, and many others in the congregation. Dr. Kagan has taken my X-Rays when I thought my ribs were broken after football practice, Dr. Maille took me to his office after services to put a splint on my finger after I sprained it playing basketball. Dr. Schutzer has helped me recover from the spraining of both of my ankles. (I got hurt a lot) Yvonne Goldstein took care of me when my parents went out of town while I was still in high school. Gladys Norman baked me brownies and Maxine Anglin baked Kugel every time I would come from the west coast. Even though I was raised in Nashville, I grew up in this congregation and am so lucky to be a part of it.

Thirteen years ago the story of finding a wife for Isaac was simply about a father wanting what's best for his son. Now, I understand the story is part of a struggle for the continuation of our people. As for me, I continue to struggle with my belief in G-d and I wonder where my struggles will take me thirteen years from now! ☺