



Dare We Hope?

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These days it seems as though there is a conspiracy against hope. It's hard to look on the bright side of life when newscasters constantly tell us that we are in danger of destruction, when we have seen that a few people can put an end to life as we know it, when might seems to prevail over right. Is it reasonable to still have hope in the face of all this? Or is it only logical to resort to despair, disbelief, fear and cynicism?

The awareness of the overwhelming and irrepressible evil in our world can often cause people to abandon hope and faith in a God who cares. We need only look 70 years behind us, to the Holocaust, to find an example of evil so great that it led some to abandon their faith. As one survivor put it, "I lost my faith and stopped believing in God when I saw the Nazis take pious Jews out to the courtyard and butcher and slaughter them..."¹

And yet, through even the Holocaust, faith and hope survived. A young Jewish girl wrote in her diary,

*It is utterly impossible for me to build my life on a foundation of chaos, suffering and death. I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness, I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too, I feel the suffering of millions. And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that this cruelty too shall end, that peace and tranquility will return once more.*²

It is recorded that men and women marching out of the Warsaw ghetto on their way to the death camps recited the Twelfth Article of Maimonides' affirmation of faith: "Ma'amin be-emunah shelemah, I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah." From such a horrific episode in our history, we see that hope can prevail over the worst of conditions.

To Hope or Not to Hope?

Today, though we struggle to comprehend the persecution our ancestors went through, each of us must individually grapple with the question of how to hope when all seems hopeless. Some have suggested that to keep our faith and hope alive, we must modify what it is we believe in. The publication of Harold Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* was prompted by the death of the author's son. Rabbi Kushner's answer to the question of why bad things often to happen to good people, is that while God is good, he is not all-powerful. Rabbi Kushner "remakes" God with limitations so as to make faith easier and tragedy more bearable.

But if our God is not all-powerful, then what reason do we have to hope? And if our hope is irrelevant, then why have faith?

After all, faith in God has traditionally been the source of strength that enables people who are immersed in adversity to overcome it. The faith that we are talking about is not primarily a belief that God exists. More than that, it is a personal trust in God and in his character, which has been revealed to us in our Scriptures. It is faith in a God who can not only part the Red Sea or make the sun stand still; it is

¹ Brenner, Reeve Robert. *The Faith and Doubt of Holocaust Survivors*. Jason Aronson: 1997, p. 114.

² Frank, Anne. *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*. Prentice Hall: 1993.



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belief in a God who knows us personally and cares for our well-being. Not just a god, but our God, who has said to us: "For I know the plans that I have for you...plans for welfare and not for calamity, to give you a future and a hope" (Jeremiah 29:11).

Indeed, the liturgy of the synagogue has at its heart hope and trust in an omnipotent God who loves and cares for us. "Adon Olam," the hymn sung in synagogues around the world since the 14th century, reads:

*Then in His hand myself I lay
And trusting, sleep; and wake with cheer;
My soul and body are His care;
The Lord doth guard, I have no fear.*

Jewish tradition holds that faith is essential for a right relationship with God. The Talmud speaks of the necessary virtues:

Seven qualities avail before the Throne of Glory: faith, righteousness, justice, loving kindness, mercy, truth and peace. These represent the crowning virtues, and the first place is assigned to faith, which indeed is declared to be the principle upon which the whole relationship of man with God ultimately rests. (Makkoth 24a)

The Sh'ma, the central affirmation of the Jewish faith, is a statement of belief in God's existence as well as a response of personal trust. But biblical faith is much more than words. It involves orienting one's lifestyle and attitudes based on trust and hope in God. Faith is rooted in hope and hope is rooted in an all-powerful God.

When we study the heroes and heroines of biblical tradition we can see that God did not abandon them during times of adversity, even when their circumstances seemed to indicate his absence. Prominent biblical figures such as Abraham, Joseph and Job all had their hope in God tested in various ways, and all were able to put their faith into action.

Abraham

Abraham, for instance, was motivated by faith to become a pioneer. He was born and raised in the cosmopolitan civilization of Mesopotamia, as rich in culture, sophistication and comfort as any city today. But God called him from that country:

Now the Lord said to Abram: "Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you." -- Genesis 12:1

Trustingly, Abraham obeyed God's command and set out on the arduous journey to Canaan, exchanging the urban life of Ur for a nomadic existence in an unfamiliar and hostile land. The supreme test of Abraham's faith, though, was evidenced in the story of the binding of Isaac, the Akedah. After false starts and years of waiting, Abraham finally had a son by Sarah. Yet God commanded that he offer up Isaac as a sacrifice. Again, Abraham obeyed even up until the final moment when God suddenly substituted a ram for the boy.



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Abraham didn't have to leave Ur. He didn't have to prepare to sacrifice his promised son as a burnt offering. But he did so, trusting that God knew what He was doing, even if it meant greater affliction for the time being. And what was God's response?

By Myself I have sworn," declares the Lord, "because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. -- Genesis 22:16-17

Abraham's faith was rewarded with a promise to him and to his progeny. It is on this promise that the hope of the Jewish people has rested for generations. Abraham can in fact be viewed as a "forerunner" of faith, for he set an example that would be remembered and followed long after he was gone.

Joseph

Like Abraham before him, Joseph is another man who spent a good deal of his life in afflicting circumstances. He simply got caught in the middle of jealousies and rivalries. His early years consisted of alienation from his own brothers:

And his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers; and so they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms....and his brothers were jealous of him....they plotted against him to put him to death. -- Genesis 37:4, 11, 18

...physical mistreatment:

So it came about, when Joseph reached his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the varicolored tunic that was on him; and they took him and threw him into the pit. -- Genesis 37:23-24

...and a virtual "kidnapping" arranged by the brothers:

Then some Midianite traders passed by, so they pulled him up and lifted Joseph out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. Thus they brought Joseph into Egypt. -- Genesis 37:28

At that point the story takes a turn for the better as Joseph rises in the Egyptian ranks. Soon, though, the wife of Joseph's supervisor attempts to seduce him. When Joseph maintains his integrity and refuses her, she turns on him with anger and lies, and he is put in prison. He is afflicted not because of any wrongdoing on his part, but because of his righteousness and loyalty.

Joseph's experiences could have destroyed him emotionally and spiritually. Instead, he continued to trust in God, and he was able to tell his brothers many years later, "And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive [by his position of responsibility in the Egyptian government]" (Genesis 50:20). Joseph's trust is proof that faith in God can overcome adversity.



Job

However, the supreme example of enduring faith through suffering is Job. In Job's case, it seems that initially his faith is precisely what led him into affliction. The biblical account portrays Job's calamities as arising from Satan's challenge to God to test the limits of his faith. Afflicted by Satan, the flesh and the world, Job is ultimately affirmed by God. Interestingly, one of the books most compelling moments consists of God reminding Job of who the Creator and Sustainer of the universe is. In response to this display of God's omnipotence, Job exhibits true uncompromising faith. He rejects the possibility that God is absent or impotent. Consider his words: "Though [the Lord] slay me, I will hope in Him" (Job 13:15).

Choosing to Hope

The Bible contrasts such shining examples of faith and hope with accounts of faithlessness and hopelessness. A typical instance is in the book of Numbers, where we encounter the story of the spies sent to survey the land of Canaan just before the Israelite conquest. Prior to this incident, God had already freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt—the Jewish people had seen many miracles of God. As if that weren't enough inducement to faith, they had it on God's own word that they were taking possession of the land, for he had promised it to Abraham many years before.

Yet we read this:

Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, "We should by all means go up and take possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it." But the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are too strong for us." So they gave out to the sons of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out...And all the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron; and the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness!" So they said to one another, "Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt." -- Numbers 13:30-32, 14:2, 4

Remember that these Israelites had witnessed the many miracles of redemption. They had seen how God could deal out plagues to their enemies. Yet their fear caused them to lose trust in God, and miss out on the blessings of faith.

God asks us to trust him, even when circumstances seem hopeless. How different our history would have been if we Jews had not obeyed out of faith and hope! What would have happened that first Passover if our ancestors had not heeded Moses' instructions? If we had counted 400 years of slavery against faith in God, then we can assume that not only the firstborn of the Egyptians, but also the firstborn of the children of Israel would have perished on that night.

So questions like "Why is God allowing this to happen?" and "Where is God during this crisis?" are not new.

People have been wrestling with them for ages. We must ask why these accounts of faith are recorded in the Scriptures for us. Is it not so that we can remember that our God parted the Red Sea, fed us with



manna in the wilderness, and brought us into the Promised Land? So that we can be reminded that our God is all-powerful?

The Scriptures also teach us that God is more than simply all-powerful. He is all-good, all-caring, all-loving. And he does share in our suffering. He who is all-present, all-feeling and all-knowing must suffer with each victim of sin-caused grief. He must mourn with every person who loses a loved one and suffer with everyone who is sick. Because of this, even if there is no explaining evil, there is a reason for hope. Knowing that God suffers with those who suffer gives us reason to trust him and love him even more. He knows what we are going through and he has not abandoned us.

The Ultimate Reason for Hope

The biggest proof we have of God's constant presence and strength is in our Messiah who bore our grief and burdens. Those who have been faithful throughout our history have rooted their trust in an expected final justification of faith, when evil will be dealt a crushing blow. "Ma'amin be-emunah shelemah, I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah."

For thousands of years our people have trusted that God would send his promised Messiah to a grieving and suffering planet. Through every difficulty we have traditionally looked for the Messiah to destroy evil and vindicate our faith in God. It is this hope that has nourished our faith.

Yet this hope is rapidly disappearing in the contemporary Jewish community. At best, only a vague "messianic age" is to be hoped for. But our Scriptures speak of a personal Messiah who would come. In fact, among his many titles is the "Suffering Servant," as if to imply that the Messiah himself knows all too well the meaning of pain and suffering.

Isaiah the prophet wrote of him:

Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted. -- (Isaiah 53:4)

The Messiah, the son of David, not only suffered with us, he suffered for us. Isaiah goes on to declare:

By his [the Messiah's] scourging we are healed. -- (Isaiah 53:5)

Y'shua (Jesus) knew suffering from first-hand experience, and he expressed solidarity with people who suffer. He made it clear that he was the one for whom our people have hoped for ages. Those who believe that he is the promised Messiah can have hope in the face of a world trying to defeat it.

What Now?

Nobody's life is free from pain or anxiety. Should we therefore give in to despair or fear and cynicism, or re-fashion our God into an image that seems more palatable? Or can we allow for the possibility that Y'shua is the promised Messiah, that he just might be the one who ultimately gives hope and brings healing?



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The 18th century poet, Moses Ephraim Kuh, penned these words:

*We trust a star to guide our way
Upon the open sea.
Why trust we not the Lord of stars
On earth our Guide to be?*

There's no reason to lose hope. Faith and hope that survive adversity are stronger than faith and hope that have not been tested. Trust in God and seek him for the answers.



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