

The Faith of Abraham

The Faith of Jacob¹

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There is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. This is the same God. But that does not mean that Abraham and Isaac and Jacob had exactly the same the same faith in God. I am going to contrast the faith of Abraham with the faith of Jacob. Do these faiths differ? Is one better than another? First, we should discuss what faith is.

Faith

Sometimes faith in a proposition is contrasted with faith in a person. We might believe something with little or no evidence. That would be having faith in a proposition. Someone might believe that someday the world will be at peace. Sadly, there is insufficient evidence for this. To believe it, is to take it on faith.

Or one might have faith in a person. This is trusting that person. A friend offers me a business proposal. I don't have the expertise to judge whether the proposal is sound. But if I trust my friend, I might be convinced to accept the proposal. I would be showing faith in my friend.

Having distinguished these forms of faith, let us examine them. Is having faith in a proposition an intrinsically good thing? If I am told that in a sealed envelop is a sheet of paper with a sentence written on it, should I be prepared to believe what that sentence asserts? If faith *per se* were intrinsically good I should. But obviously it would be foolish to believe a proposition before knowing what is being asserted.

Even if I know what is being asserted, faith *per se* is absurd. It leads contradiction. If I am prepared to believe any proposition I understand on faith, then I am prepared to believe both that it is raining now, and that it's not raining now. That is absurd.

If believing propositions on faith is a good thing, it must be a good thing only for certain beliefs. Generally, it probably is better to believe that the situation one finds oneself in is not hopeless even if there is little evidence for that. Believing the situation is hopeless will increase the chance that things turn out badly, by reducing the motivation to look for solutions.

If faith in propositions is not intrinsically good, what about having faith in individuals? Is that intrinsically good? You meet a person. You know nothing about that person. Should you be prepared to trust that person? I suppose a minimal

¹ This raises the obvious question: What is the faith of Isaac? How does it differ from the faith of his father and his son?

amount of trust is required for a society to function. It's hard to see driving would be possible unless we trust people to drive on the proper side of the road.

Let's make the situation a bit starker. You meet a stranger. He invites you into his house. Are you prepared to go in? If he asks, will you take narrow stairs that lead to a dark basement from which suspicious sounds are emanating? You see where I'm going. We may start with a certain basic level of trust, but then we need to know a person before we extend our trust further.

We trust a stranger to stop at red lights. We may trust a friend to look after our child. A beloved spouse will be trusted to make medical decisions when we cannot do so. So like faith in a proposition, faith in a person is not good *per se*, it is good to trust certain people in certain situations.

It is often pointed that in Judaism faith in God is more like trust in a person than belief in a proposition. Dealing strictly with faith as trust, should God be trusted like a stranger, a friend, or a beloved spouse? Should faith in God be tepid or passionate, conditional or unconditional, leavened with doubt or unreserved?

The Faith of Abraham

Abraham's faith is uncompromising. When God asks Abraham to offer up his son, Abraham prepares to make that sacrifice. If Sarah had asked Abraham to kill Isaac he would have refused. But to an incredible extent, Abraham trusts God.

Abraham's behavior is disturbing. Put in the starkest terms, Abraham is asked to commit murder. He is asked to commit murder by the God we take to be the paragon of goodness.

Yet Abraham acquiesces. When God announced that Sodom and Gomorrah would be destroyed, Abraham argued with God to save any righteous who lived in those places. But when his own son, the son he loves, the son that he has been promised will continue his legacy is threatened; Abraham does not offer a word of protest. Instead he performs all the steps leading to the sacrifice to the point of holding the knife over Isaac. Only then does an angelic voice intercede preventing the filicide.

For many traditionalists Abraham did the right thing. He demonstrated his faith in God. He proved his obedience to God.²

² Other traditionalists take a different line. Yes, Abraham demonstrates his faith in God but the faith he demonstrates is that God will not in the end allow the sacrifice to occur. A third traditional view focuses on the Hebrew word *olah*. It is used to mean sacrifice but literally it means to raise up. According to this position, Abraham was merely being asked by God to raise up his son. Perhaps he was supposed to hoist Isaac skyward with symbolic intent. Perhaps the raising itself was meant to be symbolic. Either way Abraham erred when he concluded he was to sacrifice Isaac. If this was a test, it is one Abraham failed. The problem with these two views is that they are inconsistent with how the story ends. In the end God praises Abraham for his willingness to sacrifice Isaac. If Abraham knew that God would relent, it's hard to see what's so admirable in offering to do what he knows he will not have to do. And if God was merely asking Abraham to raise Isaac up, and Abraham erred in thinking he was to kill Isaac, there is nothing to praise. It was all just a misunderstanding.

There are also non-traditional perspectives. God was wrong to ask for the sacrifice, and Abraham was wrong to acquiesce. Abraham should have argued as previously had argued with God. Or he simply should have refused to do what God asked him to do.

If one is horrified by the notion of God commanding a parent to kill a child a non-traditional interpretation seems more tempting. But a question remains: why would the Torah include such a story? Are we only learning to criticize God and Abraham?

I think there is more we can learn from the story. First we must consider the faith of Jacob.

The Faith of Jacob

After Jacob dreamed of a ladder on which angels were ascending and descending, he uttered a vow:

“If God remains with me, if He protects me on this journey I am making, and gives me bread to eat and a clothing to wear, and if I return safe to my father's house -the Lord shall be my God.”

What is striking is that this vow is conditional. Jacob does not say come what may, God will be his God. He says if God is good to him, then God will be his God. The possibility is left open that if God does not protect Jacob, God will not be Jacob's God. Jacob seems to trust God like someone he is getting to know.

Those who admire blind, unconditional faith may find fault with Jacob's seemingly weak assertion of faith. But was Jacob wrong to vow cautiously?

Surely, Jacob had heard mad people ranting about encounters with the divine. There are people who have delusions. They see and hear things that are not there. They have uncorrectable beliefs that bear almost no relationship to reality.

Jacob is protecting himself against the possibility that he is deluded, crazy, or merely has had a vivid dream. He is also protecting himself against the possibility that he has been in contact with a being more powerful than human but less powerful than God.

When hearing a voice or having a vision, how is one to know the force behind it is God? What would be sufficient evidence? Suppose miracles were produced: oceans drained, mountains moved, the sun brought to a halt. Would that be evidence enough? Such things, if they were not imagined, would be impressive. But are they so impressive that only the creator of the world could have performed them?

Could there not exist a being short of God capable of such magnificent feats? Perhaps the most powerful being in a particular solar system, galaxy, or cluster of galaxies can do such things. So performing apparent miracles would not prove that something created the world. Nor would it entail that being's goodness.

If we consider the traditional philosophical definition God as a perfect, infinite being, it seems that no finite evidence would be sufficient. Suppose someone tells me they can correctly add any pair of numbers no matter how high. How could someone prove this to me? Suppose they carried out all operations on number pairs from one to a million. Does that mean they could do the same up to a googol? A googolplex? No matter how far the person calculates we can imagine calculations on numbers sufficiently higher so that the answers so far given represent the tiniest fraction of the answers not yet reached. Jacob could never learn God knows all of arithmetic, let alone that God is omniscient.

So Jacob could never know he was dealing with the God of the philosophers. And he cannot know he is really dealing with the creator of the world, and not some lesser but extremely powerful being. But if the being he encounters is good to him, then just like we learn to trust a friend over time, Jacob will come to have greater faith in that being.

Jacob's faith is pragmatic.

Pragmatic Judaism

There are pragmatic grounds for religion. Religious folk congregate. They make friends. Prayer, like meditation, may reduce stress. Belonging to the Jewish people is meaningful to many of us, as is positing the hope of a messianic era.

I will elaborate one specific aspect of Judaism that is pragmatically beneficial: literature. Jewish literature is vast and deep including the Torah and the Tanakh, the Talmud, the Midrash, the Hasidic tales, and the Jewish stories people continue to write. To be a practicing Jew is to privilege this astounding literature. Leaving aside whether these stories are true –for some God may merely be a character in a book–engaging with these stories can make for a more meaningful life.

Making for a more meaningful life is the heart of pragmatic Judaism. There are even movements that seem to reflect Jacobs's pragmatism. The Reconstructionist movement talks of God but hardly in the full-throated way more traditional Jews do. Humanistic Judaism dispenses with God altogether. But both of these movements find much in Judaism worth preserving because it enhances life. Both movements tend to justify their positions philosophically, sociologically, and historically, but surely they are also being pragmatic.³

³ Obviously, other faith traditions could be reinterpreted in similarly "pragmatic" ways.

Jacob's pragmatism grounds these movements in the Torah. Jacob will accept God if God proves good. Similarly, Reconstructionist and Humanist Jews embrace those parts of Judaism that have proven good.

Some traditional Jews might bristle at the grounding of what they consider dangerous, even heretical tendencies, in our holiest book. But according to Midrash we all stood at Sinai. That means the Haredi and the Reform, the Hasid and the Humanist, the traditional and the irreverent all stood at Sinai. And, if Midrash is correct, even the heretic and apostate stood at Sinai.

Reclaiming the Faith of Abraham

Forgive me speaking personally, but most of my life; I have been speaking to God. Several times a day I pour out my heart to God. For me God is a psychological given. Of course I realize it possible that I am wrong, that there is no God, and that my relationship with God is a psychological peculiarity. So I keep my assertion of God modest. Jacob's example roots this intellectual modesty in the tradition.

God asked Job if he was there when the world was created to remind Job of his humble status. The same question should render all of us humble in our assertion of faith. We were not there when the world was created. We may believe, but we cannot testify that God created the world. We must avert the risk of believing passionately but not thoughtfully. We can learn that from Jacob.

But as I said God is a psychological given for me. I know there is a risk of zealotry, but in avoiding it, I don't want to be left with a religion that is uninspiring. I do not want to relate to God *merely* as a character in the Torah. I want a Judaism that is deep, bold, and even demanding. I need to understand the sterner faith of Abraham.

God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son. Why is this terrifying story in our holiest text?

Suppose you are a police officer and your child is about to kill innocent children and the only way to prevent that is to kill your beloved child. What should you do?

Many would spare their child, though it means that others would die. As a father I understand why someone would act that way. But is it the right thing to do? Is it what God, who loves all children, wants?

I know God asked worse of Abraham. Isaac in this case is the innocent child. Still, we live in a world of vast, terrifying complexity. To do the Godly thing, to do the right thing, may sometimes mean putting someone we love in mortal jeopardy. The story of the binding of Isaac prepares us for that possibility.

Of course we hope and pray that such a time never comes. We console ourselves that in the end Isaac was spared. But we can now begin to understand why the story was told.

The faith of Abraham taken too far can become zealotry. If a voice tells me to kill, even if I think the voice is God's, that is not reason enough to kill. The faith of Jacob, if taken too far, can dissolve into disbelief. If I can never be certain, why should I believe at all? But taken together they are vital and complimentary. That is why both forms of faith are demonstrated in the Torah. They both teach us aspects of how to have faith in God.