

“In every man’s life there are moments when there is a lifting of the veil at the horizon of the known, opening a sight of the eternal. Each of us has at least once . . . experienced the momentous reality of God. . . . But such experiences . . . are rare events. To some people they are like shooting stars, passing and unremembered. In others they kindle a light that is never quenched. The remembrance of that experience and the loyalty to the response of that moment are the forces that sustain our faith. In this sense, faith is faithfulness, loyalty to an event, loyalty to our response.” (loc. cit. 165)

How do we access the power of our past “events” of faith, Heschel asks? Not just through private reflection, but by coming together in community. We gather on the High Holidays to remember together the possibility of faith. To create sacred space, sacred time, and a sacred assembly—a *mikra kodesh*, in the words of the Bible—that lets us reaffirm, collectively, the parts of ourselves that want to believe.

“Not the individual man, nor a single generation . . . can erect the bridge that leads to God. Faith is the achievement of ages, an effort accumulated over centuries. Many of its ideas are as the light of a star that left its source centuries ago. Many songs, unfathomable today, are the resonance of voices of bygone times. There is a collective memory of God in the human spirit, and it is this memory of which we partake in our faith.” (loc. cit. 161)

The Rosh Hashanah liturgy quotes the prophet Isaiah: “A great horn shall be blown; and they shall come that were lost in the land of Assyria, and they that were dispersed in the land of Egypt; and they shall worship the Lord in the holy mountain at Jerusalem.” (27:13) Today, too, we return from our dispersal when the horn, the shofar, is blown. We gather in our synagogues to lift one another up spiritually and give each other permission to pray with our complete selves—both the faithful and doubtful parts of us. The High Holidays, then, are the very time for us to wrestle with our faith, to acknowledge and give space to our doubts, rather than shying away from them as we so often tend to do.

May we each find ourselves in a High Holiday community that allows us to simultaneously hold our doubts and also the faith and traditions that are so dear to us. May it be a season of forgiving ourselves for the doubts we may have—and of celebrating those doubts for giving us the opportunity to nuance our faith, so that we may rediscover it time and again when we least expect it.

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The Value of Doubt

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The more one invests in trying to have a meaningful and genuine High Holiday prayer experience, the more one stands to lose if the words of the mahzor fall short of one’s aspirations. The mahzor is conceptually and theologically dense. If one takes the time to meditate upon the assertions of the prayers as they go by, one is sure to eventually encounter a text that rings false, problematic, or even alienating.

The piyyut (liturgical poem) *Vekhol Ma’aminim*—written by Yannai, the 7th century master of classical piyyut—features straightforward Hebrew, a regular meter, and, often, upbeat melodies, such that people might end up singing it enthusiastically without reflecting deeply on its content.

And all believe that God is faithful.
And all believe that God is good to all.
And all believe that God is omnipotent.
And all believe that God answers the silent prayer.
And all believe that God is just and righteous.
And all believe that God’s work is perfect.

This text celebrates universal faith in a beneficent God. But is it really true that “all believe” these statements? While some might experience this piyyut as a jubilant affirmation of their theology, its words might stop others in their tracks. After all—it’s not even the case that “all believe” in God at all. Even putting aside people with entirely different religious beliefs, or those with no interest in religion—the fact is, even those committed to attending High Holiday services do not “all believe” each of the claims of *Vekhol Ma’aminim*, and the other texts of the mahzor that proclaim and assume complete and perfect faith.

While many people feel firmly anchored in religious belief, and see their own faith reflected in the liturgy, there are also many people who bring questions about their faith with them to High Holiday services. Many have had life experiences that awakened a powerful, instinctive belief in God; and yet, they also hear a different voice inside asking if this liturgy can be taken at face value. Most of us—even as we

follow some intuitive or learned impulse to attend Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services—have had at least some moments of doubt.

What does it mean to sing *Vekhol Ma'aminim* and similar texts knowing that there are people around you whose faith waivers? Who sometimes doubt God's omnipotence, or goodness, or very existence? What does it mean to sing this piyyut if you are one of those people yourself?

The Maggid of Mezritch, an 18th century Hasidic leader, taught: "When a person says the words of prayer so that they become a throne for God, an awesome silent fire takes hold of him . . . as he ascends beyond the world of time." What a powerful image of prayer! But how often—even on the holiest days of the year—does any of us experience such all-consuming spiritual connection when reciting the words of the mahzor? What if we don't feel that our words "become a throne for God" when we pray?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote:

"Faith will come to him who passionately yearns for ultimate meaning, who is alert to the sublime dignity of being, who is alive to the marvel of the matter, to the unbelievable core within the known, evident, concrete . . . By foregoing beauty for goodness, power for love, grief for gratitude, by entreating the Lord for help to understand our hopes, for strength to resist our fears, we may receive a gentle sense of the holiness permeating the air like a strangeness that cannot be removed. Our crying out of pitfalls of self-indulgence for purity of devotion will prepare the dawn of faith." (*Man Is Not Alone*, 89-90)

But is it not true that one can follow all of these prescriptions and still struggle intensely to find and keep faith?

The private writings of Mother Teresa, published posthumously in *Mother Teresa—Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the "Saint of Calcutta,"* reveal her desperate struggle to find the faith that she professed and embodied, but did not always feel. "I call, I cling, I want, and there is no one to answer, no, no one. Alone. Where is my faith? Even deep down . . . there is nothing . . . I am told God loves me, and yet the reality of the darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul." Mother Teresa—a paragon of religiously-inspired service, who thought of humans as "pencils in the hand of God"—could not have followed Heschel's instructions more completely. If even she failed in her quest for faith, where does this leave us?

Perhaps we should flip the question and ask: *Is doubt really a bad thing?* Or, is doubt potentially healthy and productive for one aspiring to faith? From the biblical Moses to Moses Maimonides, some of our greatest leaders have wrestled with faith. Maybe being a person of faith goes hand in hand with being a person of doubt.

In fact, some of our earliest texts seem to take for granted the phenomenon of failing to find God. We see this in the Psalms. "My God...why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my call?...I cry...but you do not hear" (22:2-3). And in Psalm 27, recited throughout the High Holiday season: "Do not hide your face from me; do not thrust aside your servant in anger... Do not forsake me, do not abandon me." The Bible seems to understand a despairing, futile search for God as a commonplace, even fundamental, human experience. Perhaps the compilers of our liturgy, who paired Psalm 27 with this time of year, felt that giving voice to the tenuousness of faith was critical to this season.

Contemporary scholars have noted the centrality of doubt for people of faith. American writer Mary Gordon, a practicing Catholic, spoke about the value of doubt on Bill Moyers's *Genesis* series: "The ability to question, the ability to take a skeptical position, is absolutely central to my understanding of myself, and my understanding of myself as a religious person." She even argues that "faith without doubt is just either nostalgia or a kind of addiction." When asked if doubters have anything to offer believers, Gordon responded: "If it weren't for atheists and agnostics, there would be no Enlightenment, for example. ... Many of the ideas which I most prize as an American, as a woman, as somebody living in a relatively free society have come to me from people who were agnostic or atheist."

John Cornwell, an English scholar of religion and a Christian, describes the inevitability of doubt for those aspiring to belief. Reflecting on his own struggles with faith, he writes: "Faith is a journey without arrival, complicated by false turns, breakdowns, dead ends and wheel-changes. Faith, like love, is seldom entirely constant; nor is it irrevocable." (*The Importance of Doubt*) He prefers the novelist Graham Greene's articulation of faith as "doubt of doubt," rather than faith as an unshakeable certainty.

If doubt is an integral part of religious life, then, perhaps passages like *Vekhol Ma'aminim* are not the uncomplicated declarations of faith that they seem to be; maybe their inclusion in the mahzor is meant to validate and address our intense need for assurance in the face of our doubts. For all we know, when Yannai was writing back in the seventh century, belief in God was no less difficult or complex than it is today.

Still, the endless God-language of the mahzor may overwhelm, exhaust, or push away someone who finds themselves in a less faith-full place in their lives. In such a situation, how might we approach High Holiday services without putting on ourselves the burden of expressing a faith that we may not always feel?

Heschel offers an alternative understanding of faith that may answer that question. "To believe is to remember," he writes. We can look to our prayer services to access not a bedrock of perfect faith, but rather echoes of the moments in our lives that made faith seem possible—even if only momentarily: