

## How to Practice Faith

Rabbi Daniel Nevins, Former Pearl Resnick Dean of the Rabbinical School, JTS



Watch a world-class athlete do something extraordinary, like somersault and twist through the air from a high diving platform or serve a tennis ball so fast down the line that it seems fired by a cannon. Watch and wonder how long it took to get that good. Frequently we forget that this skill took intense effort and tens of thousands of tries to develop. Even if a person has “natural” talent for an activity, it requires persistent effort to develop into a champion.

This makes sense—great skill requires great effort. In [Pirkei Avot \(5:23\)](#), we read that “לפום צערא אגרא” (according to anguish is reward). Or, as Jane Fonda summarized it, “No pain, no gain.” Only by practicing and practicing some more can we develop proficiency in a skill. Repetition is boring—I imagine that most athletes become bored with their sport at some point—yet the pursuit of excellence motivates continued effort.

Why, if this is so obvious, do most people expect that another proficiency will come quickly and without effort? I refer here to faith. Many people think that religious faith is something that one either has or doesn’t have, and that it is acquired in an instant. You should just feel God’s presence the minute you open a prayer book or light the candles. We are impatient with faith and don’t invest the effort needed to develop it. Popular stories of sudden conversions foster the expectation that faith is a gift requiring no effort.

That expectation, however, is neither realistic nor productive. Faith is, in fact, a skill that requires effort and develops in stages. These stages are evident in a gem of a verse in chapter 13 of Deuteronomy. Verse 5 reads (my paraphrase),

1. Walk after the Lord your God
2. revere God

3. guard God’s commands
4. listen for God’s voice
5. serve God
6. cling to God

There is a history to interpreting each phrase of this sentence so that it refers to another activity. In the midrash known as Sifrei, the clauses mean the following:

1. Perform the positive commands
2. show reverence
3. avoid the negative commands
4. listen to the Prophets
5. worship in the Temple
6. separate from idols and stick to God

When I read this sentence, however, I see each phrase as a stage in religious development. The first stage in cultivating faith is to make a decision to act differently—to walk after God. This means relinquishing some of our autonomy and seeking to satisfy a higher will. The second stage is to cultivate reverence. While this might seem primary, it takes time to develop the psychological awareness of God’s commanding presence. This prepares us for a third stage: to observe the commandments. Sure, many people keep some commandments without even knowing what they are. But this verse speaks of “guarding” the commandments. Only with proper intention can one become a guardian, a *shomer mitzvot*.

As the mitzvot become integrated into our daily life, we become ready for a spiritual breakthrough. At this point can

we begin to listen for the Voice. Mitzvah consciousness seeps into our daily routines, affecting our habits, our relationships, our homes and offices. God's voice becomes audible through the mitzvot. Only now can our worship be described truly as *avodah* (service). Until we reach this stage, Jewish practice can be self-serving. But once the mitzvot have started to make us aware of the Voice, it becomes possible for our religious practice to become service.

The final stage in this progression is hardest to achieve, much less sustain. It says that we are to cling to God. Clinging to God implies releasing some of our grasp on the world. I don't know if a normal life can be lived while clinging to God. People with highly developed faith may have moments of clinging to God. But this stage of faith may elude us until death, when the soul returns to its source.

Just as a world-class athlete requires years of practice to master his or her sport, so too does a person of faith require practice to walk after God, feel reverence, guard the mitzvot, hear the Voice, serve God, and cling to the divine.

True, even an amateur athlete can sometimes serve an ace, and anyone can have a suddenly intense awareness of the Almighty. In the Talmud ([Avodah Zarah 18a](#)), Rabbi Judah exclaims at the end of a famous martyrdom tale, "Some acquire the world to come in a moment, and some in many years!" But this story and the entirety of the Torah point to a deeper truth: that it takes will and effort and devotion and inspiration to learn how to cling to God.

This Shabbat, we bless the new moon of Elul. For the following four weeks, we will blow the shofar each morning and prepare to stand before God in *teshuvah*—as those who have returned. The Rabbis teach that Elul is an acronym (in Hebrew) for the words in the verse, "*Ani ledodi vedodi li*" (I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine; [Song 6:3](#)). By walking in God's ways and attending to our faith, we can feel God's love and cling to our Creator.

You and I may never be world champions in any sport or other celebrated skill. But we each have a soul that was designed for challenges and that is waiting for attention.

Let's use this month to practice—to walk after God, to feel reverence, to guard the mitzvot, to listen for the Voice, to serve, and to cling. With God's help, our practice will lead to great joy and love.

*This piece originally appeared in 2014.*