

"THE GOD-MAN CREDIBILITY GAP"

Ve'khol maaminim she'hu El emunah. "And all believe that He is a God of faith."

What a strange statement! "All have faith that He is a God of faith," or "All have belief that He is a God of belief." Does that make sense?

Yes, it does -- and in an unusual sort of way. For hidden in these words is a marvelous idea that usually escapes detection. The phrase El emunah, which we translate "a God of faith," comes from the Torah, in Haazinu, and is interpreted by the Rabbis in the Yalkut as: She'maamin bi'veruav -- He believes in His creatures. What we are saying, therefore, is that we believe in a God Who believes in us!

On the two days of Rosh Hashanah, the days of judgment, and on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, we come to the Synagogue not to debate religion or to affirm our belief in any dogma or even to discuss or encourage our own faith in God. Nothing of the sort. On the contrary, we have come here to speak of God's faith in us, to find out whether God still believes in us, whether we have let Him down or not, whether we have disappointed Him, whether we are still credible in His eyes, whether we have allowed a "credibility gap" to grow between Him and us. Coming to the synagogue confronted by the idea that God has faith in us, we are expected to ask ourselves whether or not we have done anything to

justify that faith.

Tantalizing as this sounds, it is really quite simple and basic to all of Judaism and its outlook upon man and the world. We believe that man possesses free will, that to some extent he can determine the ethical quality of his life. With the creation of man, therefore, a new element entered into the cosmic picture. At the moment that God created a being that can think for himself, control by himself, decide for himself, the destiny of the world became unpredictable, unknown even to God Himself. By creating man in freedom, God had to restrict His own will, His own choices, and had to leave the future at least partly to man. In other words, God willingly embraced certain risks; He could only instruct man how to act, could only hope that he would act properly, and therefore the very act of the creation of man was an act of -- divine faith!

Of course, in the light of the history of our times it is questionable how well spent God's faith was. Historically we live in the age of Auschwitz, an age no better and probably far worse than the generation of Noah and the flood, when va-yinahem ha-Shem, "the Lord repented" or was sorry that He had created man. We seem to have double-crossed Him. These last twenty years do not always seem to have been better. As Jews, we know that this is an age when the State of Israel has been betrayed by some of its "best friends" -- from DeGaulle to the U.N. and -- who knows? -- maybe the United States. Yet, ve'khol maaminim she'hu El emunah, we

believe that God is One Who believes in man -- but what a "credibility gap" has grown up in our days! And it is on this credibility gap between God and man that we are judged, on Yom Kippur: have we or have we not let God down? It is on this, essentially, that God judges not only individuals but nations as well. We say it every Friday night, in reciting the special psalms for that evening: Yishpot tevel be'tzeddek, "He will judge the world in righteousness," and ve'ammim be'emunato, "and the nations with His emunah, faith." He judges peoples by the extent of their credibility gap, by the extent to which they have vindicated or frustrated God's faith in them.

As individuals, this idea of a God she'maamin bi'veruay, who believes in us, is little short of amazing. All day long we recite an imposing list of our shortcomings -- the al het confession; we protest our inadequacies, we declare ourselves worthless, nobodies, filled with shame -- and then we say: ve'khol maaminim she'hu El emunah, we believe that He believes in us! What a trusting God He must be, to let His confidence leap over that credibility gap between Him and us!

Yet it is a fact: she'hu El emunah, that He is a faithful God. Just as it is sometimes hard for man to believe in God, almost to the point of absurdity, but we believe anyway -- so is it hard sometimes for God to believe in us, beyond the point of absurdity, yet He believes: ve'khol maaminim she'hu El emunah. For

this is the essence of Yom Kippur: God stretches His patience, His confidence, His faith in us, and is willing to wait until we change, we turn back. Ki lo tahpotz be'mot ha-met, ki im beshuvo mi-darko ve'hayah -- God does not desire that we die, as often we surely deserve to, but He is willing to wait on the chance that maybe we will leave our wrong ways, turn back to Him, and live. That is the expression of God's faith.

What does all this mean personally for us, existentially? This idea possesses for us, I submit, four major implications.

First, it means that no matter how painfully we recognize our own moral and spiritual shortcomings, there is really something substantial in us that is worthy and deserving and redeemable. When a banker decides to grant a loan to a client who has little financial resources, he does not do so on blind faith, but as an expression of an intelligent and enlightened faith. He acts on the basis of confidence in his client's talent, his business ability, his integrity, his initiative. Similarly, if despite all our shortcomings and our failures, God has faith in us, it is not a blind faith. It means that He as our Creator knows us better than we know ourselves, and that we possess resources we ourselves are unaware of, that we have power and strength and talent for self-transcendence that make His faith in us a risk worth taking.

Sometimes, as the result of a discussion, a man will say to me, "Rabbi, I'm not really religious." When I hear that, I

confess that I invariably smile tolerantly, patiently, sardonically. Every human being is religious in the sense that he believes in something -- either God, or money, or power, or science, or humanity. I subscribe to the somewhat irrational Jewish notion-- which I cannot explain psychologically or sociologically, but which commends itself to me from experience and history -- that every Jew believes in God even if he doesn't know it himself. This does not mean that he is actively devout. The religious drive may be dormant and in eclipse for five or ten or fifty years - or three or four generations. But it is there, ready to be aroused and called into life.

We each of us have religious potential, moral possibilities, the hint and the promise of spiritual greatness -- whether we know it or not. We Jews are, after all, a people who in our lifetime has built a State of Israel, who has provided the most marvelous model of charitableness in constructing such organizations as UJA. We have in this country built Yeshivot, we have molded Jewish communities. We are people who frequent and support synagogues and day-schools, raise Jewish families and try to bring up our children as Jewish and humane and kindly and decent. Sometimes we slip and do things that are wrong, or fail to do things that are right. Sometimes we even do things that are ugly and disgusting. But apparently God has looked deeply into us and He has decided she'maamin bi'veruav, that He believes in us.

Is that flattering? Yes, it is -- but it is much more than that: it is a burden, a holy burden laid upon us to vindicate that faith that our Creator has expressed in us. In giving us another year of life since last Yom Kippur, He has extended His faith in us, like the banker who gives additional time or credit to the client. He has added to our credit by giving us time. Apparently, He trusts that we will yet come to our senses, that we will increase our credibility and narrow the gap. For we can do it -- that much is definite by the very fact of our existence here today.

The second implication of this idea of God as an El emunah, is the additional insight that it gives us into failure. If our existence and our life is an act of divine faith, then our failure to live up to His demands and goals for us, is not just sin, al-het, but something far worse: it is betrayal, treachery! It means ashamnu, that we have acted guiltily, and that therefore bagadnu -- we have betrayed God, we have let Him down! A sin, a violation of Torah and Jewish law, is therefore more than disobedience; it is a double-cross, treason, and on Yom Kippur we must summon ourselves either to teshuvah or to begidah, to repentance or to betrayal: if we do not turn to Him, then in effect we have turned against Him. If this year we fail to improve the religious quality of our lives, if our Shabbat will not be a full Shabbat, if we will be careless in our kashrut, if we will ignore praying with kavvanah,

if we will make a mockery of our services, if we will fail to act decently and humanely towards family and friends and every other human being, then we will have betrayed His confidence, we will have caught Him short, we will have let Him down, we will have double-crossed Him by making a shambles out of His faith and trust and confidence in us. Bagadnu!

The third implication of this idea is that if God has confidence and faith in man, so must we -- in imitation of Him. We must not be cynical, pessimistic, or too "realistic" -- certainly not more than God Who knows the world. It means that we have no right to give up on any human being. We have no right to despair of any Jew and to abandon him forever.

The Halakhah gives legal and eminently practical expression to this idea of the faith that we, like God, must have in every human being. We are told that if a man married a woman conditionally, and said to her: harei at mekudeshet li, "Behold, you are married to me," al menat she'ani tzaddik, "on condition that I am a tzaddik, a completely pious and righteous individual," then, afilu rasha gamur mekudeshet -- even if he knows and we all know that he is not only not a tzaddik, but he is a rasha gamur, a totally wicked, non-observant, cruel, Godless man, nevertheless mekudeshet, the marriage is valid! We must proceed on the assumption that he is indeed a tzaddik, a pious man! The reason? -- shema^m hirher be'teshuvah, for it is possible that at that very moment when he proposed marriage on condition that he is a tzaddik,

that at that moment he indeed intended to act like a tzaddik, that a hirhur teshuvah, a thought of repentance, flashed through his mind and seized his heart, and therefore at that one precious moment he was transformed into a tzaddik.

There is nothing more sensitive in Jewish law than the law of marriage. And if we regard as valid a marriage proposal on condition that a man is righteous, on the possibility that at that moment he may have turned righteous, then it is an expression of Judaism's indomitable optimism and confidence in man, a faith derived from divine faith in man, that teshuvah always remains an active possibility that cannot be ruled out.

Let us therefore never give up on another human being. There are those who tend, in their pessimism, to despair of the major part of the Jewish community. We do not have the moral right to do so. There are those who in dark moments, contemplating all the work they put into children, in giving them a Jewish background, and then seeing them leave the fold, are ready to declare their hopelessness, prepared to be reconciled with their children's having left permanently and enduringly. Heaven forbid! No parent, no person, no Jew, may ever ever do that! No one is beyond redemption. All that is needed to begin is a hirhur, a single thought, a solitary motion, the beginning of a gesture, and a man may well be on the road to recapturing his original integrity, on the way to becoming a tzaddik of sorts.

If, indeed, ve'khol maaminim she'hu El emunah, we all believe that God has faith in us, then we must practice the great Jewish ethical principal of the imitation of God, and we too must have faith in ourselves and in our fellow men.

And from this flows the fourth and final implication of the idea of God's faith in man, and man's challenge to avoid a credibility gap. Just as God believes in us, and therefore we must not betray Him, so must we believe in our fellow men and they in us -- and we must not betray them, we must vindicate the faith that others have in us. Just as we must justify God's believing in us, so must we justify the faith of other human beings in us.

No man is an island unto himself. We are members of society, and especially that most important of all societies, the family. And the family is preeminently a community of confidence, of reciprocal trust and faith. As such, each of us is a repository of great faith and untold confidence in us and in our characters and personalities. Parents usually are unaware of the extent and the intensity of the unquestioning trust that their children have in them, the simple but enormous faith that a child has in a parent. I recently heard the story of a child who offered a prayer to God, saying, "God, make me a great and good man, just like my father." But the father had overheard his child, and so the father turned to God in prayer and said, "O God, make me the sort of man my son thinks I am!" It is a lifelong task to become the sort

of person children think we are, to vindicate their faith and their trust.

That faith of children in parents normally, and unfortunately, does not last too long. Much more enduring and sophisticated, and therefore more challenging, is the faith that parents had and everlastingly will have in us. We know from our own experience in raising our own children, and must learn to extrapolate and infer from this experience, the kind of faith that our parents had or have in us. Every parent has a picture of what he would like his or her child to be. These are not only goals for us to strive to realize, it is also a faith for us to vindicate. When Joseph, as a young lad in slavery in Egypt, was tempted by the seductive advances of his master's wife, he restrained himself by seeing in his mind's eye the face of his father Jacob. He knew that his father had a certain faith in him, and he could not bring himself to break faith with his old father, to invalidate his confidence, to pervert his trust.

What do parents and grandparents ask of us, from the great beyond? They want, it is true, simply to be remembered -- but they really expect much more than that. They expect us to become a certain kind of person, a certain kind of Jew, possessing a certain kind of inner dignity and nobility. They had faith in us. It is now up to us to determine that we shall not betray them, that we shall not invalidate their lives and their confidence.

The Jewish tradition maintains, as part of the explanation for the Yizkor service, that this is an instance of ha-hayyim podim et ha-metim, the living redeeming the dead. What does it mean to redeem the dead? It means, I believe, that by the way we live we redeem or fail to redeem the faith our predecessors had in us. We are called upon at a time of this sort to justify their confidence, to vindicate their faith.

These, then, are the consequences of our belief in El emunah, a God Who believes in us. First, it means that we do have the resources to live the right kind of Jewish life. Second, it means that when we fail to lead this kind of life we are guilty not only of sin, but of betrayal, of letting God down. Third, it means that we, like God, must have faith in others, that we must look for the good even in the rasha gamur, and search out the possibilities of a hirhur teshuvah, a glimmer of repentance. And finally, it means that we must vindicate the faith in our selves by our own children, by our spouses, and most of all, by our parents. It is this last point that is the meaning of Yizkor which we shall shortly recite.

Ve'khol maaminim, for this we all believe, whether we know it yet or not, whether we affirm it yet or not, she'hu El emunah, that He is a God of faith, she'maamin be'veruav, Who believes in us. This year, may we learn to rally all the forces of Jewish creativity within us, to vindicate His faith in us, and the

faith of past generations in ourselves. And then, our reward will be that, with the help of God, our faith in God will be vindicated by Him, as He grants us a year of health and peace, and our faith in our own children will be vindicated by the^m, as they make possible for us a year of "nachas" and joy and satisfaction.