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Emunah: Rebuilding Faith in An Era of “In Nothing We Trust”

On December 14th, 2012 Noah Pozner and 25 other victims were murdered at Sandy Hook elementary school. Noah was a sweet, vivacious, six-year-old Jewish boy. We remember this horrifying news day well.

In the years since, conspiracy groups have claimed that the Sandy Hook massacre was a hoax. Noah's parents, Lenny and Veronique, have been in a constant battle with Facebook and other social media platforms, seeking protection from unending harassment.¹

This summer, Mark Zuckerberg said that Facebook would act more quickly and decisively to remove harassing posts that spread lies and endanger families. But in the very same interview, Mr. Zuckerberg said that Facebook would not remove posts that deny the Holocaust.²

This is our world. A Jewish CEO of the world's largest media company apologized for not cracking down on vicious libel and chilling threats, while simultaneously rationalizing Holocaust denial as harmless false information.

Some days it can feel like truth is elusive and morality is fungible. Sure, politicians and talking heads have always been known to “spin”. But now we are hearing that truth is subjective and facts are in the eye of the beholder. This is a cynical outlook that blindly elevates self-interest and personal ideology above reality. Falsehoods have become viewed as fact, particularly when they serve our own purpose.

This kind of assault on truth is having a deleterious effect on society. When we can no longer discern what is true, we lose public trust. Indeed, recent polling has shown wide-spread declines in the trust that people have for the individuals and institutions that weave together the social fabric of society.³ Some have suggested that our new motto should be: “In Nothing We Trust.” Even with a booming economy, trust in government, banks, business, and even social service institutions is at an all-time low. As a result, people feel anxious and disconnected.⁴ We don't know what or whom to trust.

Losing faith isn't new. The biblical commentator Rashi explains that in the Torah, Noah and his family only entered the ark after the storm waters became dangerously high. Why? Rashi

¹ [An Open Letter to Mark Zuckerberg: our children died at Sandy Hook, why let Facebook's lies hurt us even more?](#)

² [Recode's, Kara Swisher, Interview with Mark Zuckerberg.](#)

³ Robert Putnam writes about this in *Bowling Alone*. So too, does Russell J. Dalton, in The Social Transformation of Trust in Government.

⁴ Edelman Trust Barometer.

explains that even Noah, who heard God's instructions to build the ark, questioned whether God would create the flood. Rashi explains this using a play on the Hebrew word, *emunah*, "faith." If *emunah* sounds a lot like *amen*, that is no coincidence. The two words share the same root, *aleph-mem-nun*. When we say, "amen" we are saying, "So may I have some faith, too."

According to Rashi, Noah: "*He-emin, vilo he-emin.*" Noah both had *emunah* - faith and he didn't have faith at the same time. He wanted to trust that the God who commanded him to build a boat would also bring forth waters. Noah didn't have faith that God would actually follow through. And understandably so.

Consider the society in which Noah lived. Noah saw loved ones suffer, children struggle, the poor trampled upon, and hope dashed by indiscriminate violence. People were self-centered and cruel. Because they didn't care for each other, they couldn't trust one another. Noah lost faith in the world and he lost faith in the God who created it all. Maybe the flood waters would come. Maybe things would just stay the same. Noah stayed outside the Ark and waited to see if God would follow through.

Noah had real questions and doubts. And despite his question and doubts, Noah built the ark and got everything ready to go. Rashi is saying that having *emunah* – having faith to build and grow does not require having blind or ultimate faith or total assuredness that everything will work out in the end. Rather, what we need is confidence in our own power to make change. The act of building the ark, of caring for his family and the animals, slowly began to restore Noah's faith in God and the potential of the future – and in building the ark, Noah did, indeed, preserve the world and the foundation upon which a new order could grow. Noah rebuilt his *emunah* – his faith - with his hands and his actions.

When it feels like the flood waters of uncertainty are rising, when the *terra firma* of trust is at an all-time low, we have an opportunity to act like Noah and to be partners in the renewal of the world, in the restoration of trust and faith. Like Noah, we want to safeguard our future. Living with *Emunah* – with faith – is not saying that the world is fine, but rather saying that the broken world needs us and that our efforts matter. How we choose to live our lives, matters. So, we *build* faith with our hands and our hearts using the best resources we have: each one of us.

Our Relationships

In an immediate gratification world, it's easy to be driven by our own needs, our own confirmation biases, and our fears. We only want to hear opinions that reflect our deeply held beliefs and suspicions. So we dig ideological trenches, ready to defend ourselves from or attack that which is different from what we see in the mirror. Social scientists have shown that this tendency actually makes us more fearful and mistrusting and therefore more vulnerable.

Noah teaches us that we don't build a raft made for one, focusing only on the self, the me, and the I. Because it is our relationships that sustain and support us that help us create and strengthen the spiritual commodities of friendship, loyalty, love, and trust.

A few years ago, I co-led a trip to Israel with an Ultra-Orthodox rabbi whom I hadn't known well prior to our departure.⁵ And to be honest, I was extremely nervous. We couldn't have been more different: from our upbringing, to our views about women in religious life, to our personal Jewish practices, or our political beliefs. As we traveled around Israel and visited ancient and modern sites, we had in-depth conversations. We laughed. We shared. We questioned each other honestly and respectfully. We found common ground, even when we reiterated our differences of opinion. When we cultivate face-to-face friendships with people who are not like us, we discover that they are just people, like us. And it is often the people who aren't like us who help us to grow, learn, and see the best within ourselves.

Emunah is the faith that most people are trying to do good. We may disagree with each other. Different people can have legitimate differences of opinion. Building relationships, assuming and looking for good will and intent, and inviting people to join with us as we navigate the currents of life, will help us repair and rebuild the fractures of faith and trust.

Our Actions

Rebbe Shneur Zalman of Liadi, who lived at the end of the eighteenth century, taught that there will come a time in everyone's life when we are like Noah – when we lose faith in people and in God. "If you want to restore faith," he explained, "go take care of someone who is sick. Go visit someone who is lonely. Go do an act of *tzedakah* – of charity or of *hesed* – of kindness. You will feel God in your hands and your faith will be restored." Leading a faith-filled life is about turning our deepest fears into actions that give sacred purpose to our lives.

As my mentor, Rabbi David Stern, taught, "Jewish faith cannot only be a matter of the heart. Jewish faith may *begin* in our hearts, but it can't stay there. Jewish faith may be personal, but it isn't private. Jewish faith is manifest in community, in deed, in tangible actions in the world."⁶

To have *emunah* also means to partner with each other and with God in making our local community more vibrant and our world more whole. What good is our *amen* to the words of *hamotzi*, if we do nothing for those who go to bed hungry? Our choices have the potential to tip our world towards good.

I see *Emunah* happening all around Temple and in our community. And if you have or want some faith, too, I invite you to say "Amen" with me.⁷

Emunah is the faith that:

One song on Shabbat can spark a meaningful moment. *Amen*

One smile given to a stranger can begin a new friendship. *Amen*.

⁵ I am grateful for my friend, Rabbi Zvi Drizin.

⁶ Rabbi David Stern, Rosh Hashanah 5765. I thank Rabbi Stern for sharing his 2004 sermon with me and for his friendship and mentorship.

⁷ Adapted from an unknown poet

One hug can comfort a mourner and lift up a soul. *Amen*

One Hebrew letter taught in our religious school can build confidence and competency. *Amen*

One class can open the world of learning. *Amen*

One tree can start a forest in Charlotte or in Israel. *Amen.*

One trip can connect us with each other and to our homeland and her people. *Amen*

One meal made with love can welcome home a family with their newborn baby. *Amen*

One conversation can connect ancient wisdom to modern experience. *Amen.*

One volunteer with our Chevra Kaddisha can honor the memory of our loved ones through washing and cleaning the vessel that the soul left behind. *Amen*

One bag of food, filled, will help those who are hungry. *Amen.*

One visit to the hospital can mend a broken spirit. *Amen.*

One yizkor candle can give light to the darkness of loss. *Amen.*

One step, and then another, and another, can help us pray with our feet at PRIDE or at the Martin Luther King Jr. parade, as we advocate for dignity, equality, and equity for all. *Amen*

One non-Jewish seeker can participate in rebuilding the ranks of our people. *Amen*

One small group of Jews, living, learning, and laughing together, can help connect us to our community. *Amen*

This is why we do what we do at Temple Beth El: we are committed to rebuilding faith, because we believe that one heart and one life and one choice can make a difference.

Living with *emunah* requires real *chutzpah*. It requires us to take a purposeful and hopeful step, a suspension of cynicism, with an eye towards a future that may never come on a grand worldwide scale. I cannot guarantee you that living with *emunah* will fix the ills of the world. There will be bleak moments in 5779. There will be pain and despair, frustration and discouragement. Fake news and antisemitism aren't going away. None of us can predict what life may throw at us or those we love.

But even with these inevitable challenges, striving to live with *emunah* will draw us towards the sustaining relationships and the enduring goodness that we can create, each and every day. We can make an impact right here – in our lives, in our homes, and in our community.

As Jews, when the going gets tough, we have faith in a Higher Power that is calling out to us: boldly build faith through meaningful relationships and purposeful action. That's what generations of Jews did when they faced challenges far greater than what we are facing today. They took a "leap of action."⁸ We can build trust and make our lives count through the ways we relate and act in the world.

May our hearts be filled with *emunah*, with the faith and trust in ourselves and the willingness to have more faith and trust in the goodness of others. May our hands be filled with *emunah* – that our actions and deeds can help repair our faith in God's world. *V'nomar amen*: let us have more faith, and let us say, Amen.⁹

⁸ [Abraham Joshua Heschel](#)

⁹ I am profoundly grateful to Rabbi Ana Bonnheim, Julia Bonnheim, and Rabbi Dusty Klass for their insights and recommendations throughout the writing and editing of this sermon.