

Sometimes, a single question can change your world. The right question at the right moment can be transformative. My sister Cathy asked me a question which completely changed my thinking for what I needed to say to you tonight. Cathy has been studying Mussar, a Jewish practice of spiritual development and personal transformation through the study of middot, a Jewish practice of developing positive traits and values.

She asked, “What’s the difference between Emunah and Bitahon, two different expressions of faith?”

She asked me this question several weeks ago as I was preparing to put my son Harry on a plane to Israel to do a birthright service trip in the Tel Aviv area. A missile had been launched from Yemin to Tel Aviv a day earlier, the Gaza war was ongoing, and the tensions with Hezbollah on the Lebanese Border were heating up. She was wondering what role my faith played in keeping me calm and balanced, and what differing roles Emunah, faith, and Bitahon, trust, might play.

My sister’s question about two of the words for faith in the Mussar tradition stayed with me. I couldn’t get it out of my head, as I prepared to send Harry into a country at war, having faith that he would return home safely nine days later. Faith is complicated and nuanced. Most faith is not binary. I can believe something in non-absolute terms. I can believe with my head and I can believe with my heart, and these are two different modes of being, believing, and thinking.

Judaism doesn’t focus so much on faith, although to say that faith is not a part of our tradition would be incorrect. The Yigdal that we’ll sing at the end of the service is a poetic restatement of Maimonides’ thirteen principles of faith. Faith in God, faith in the truth of Torah, faith in the immortal nature of the soul to survive the death of the body, faith in a messianic era in which the world will be perfected, all of these things support the system of mitzvot, Jewish practice and action, that forms the core of a Jewish life.

I think of this kind of faith, Emunah, as a head-based middah. I believe in God. I believe in the coming of the messiah. I believe in heaven, I believe in the world to come, I believe in the resurrection of the dead. These beliefs are fairly black and white. Judaism believes in them, but isn’t dogmatic about them, despite Maimonides. Judaism doesn’t claim that if we don’t believe in this set of concepts that we are inherently bad Jews. A good or a bad Jew is defined by behaviors more than beliefs. My beliefs in God, the world to come, the messiah, don’t really affect my daily life so much. No matter what I believe, I can still live by the standard that Judaism asks of me; that is, more than anything else, to be a good, decent, and kind person. Mitzvot are just the way we navigate through the world to try to achieve this goal. So Emunah is really secondary to the way I live my life as a Jew.

Bitahon is different, because it is a different kind of faith. It comes from my heart. It is trust, and it is also hope. I trust, have faith, that something will happen, that things will ultimately turn out OK, that everything will work out for the best. When Marisa and I found out we were having triplets, I had faith that the pregnancy would work out the way it was supposed to and that we’d have the family we wanted. It didn’t work out as we had hoped. When our daughter died, I continued to trust that our two sons would grow up healthy and typical. When it became apparent that Sol would have little or no vision, I continued to have faith, bitahon, that he would successfully learn to navigate through the world. Later, I had bitahon that our attempts to enlarge our family would be successful, and that Marisa’s second pregnancy would result in healthy children. Our children are healthy. But if there is such a thing as a typical family, I’m not sure that ours fits the mold.

The things that prompted these expressions of hope, trust, and Bitahon were not rock-solid aspects of a fundamental world-view, but rather smaller, although important, elements of a life that I wanted to live. Like most people, the life that I thought I'd live when I was 10, 15, 18, 21, or 30 is not the life that I have ended up living. *Men trakht und Gott lockht*, We plan and God laughs. Life has always thrown random chance at us.

Turning to Cathy's question, I had Bitahon that Harry would be far enough away from the fighting in South Lebanon and Gaza that he wouldn't be affected, that missiles and rockets wouldn't reach him. And that missiles coming from Yemin or anywhere else would be shot down by the Israeli defense shields like Iron Dome and David's Sling and Arrow and that he would have enough time to get to a sheltered place if he heard a siren. And I had bitahon that the staff at Ramah Tikvah and Birthright Israel and the tour agency would make wise decisions about where to go each day to stay out of the most dangerous areas. They did, in fact, take the group out of Tel Aviv and move them to Jerusalem for the final night of his stay, and the day after they left Israel, Tel Aviv was attacked and there were sirens over the entire metropolitan area.

It's not that I wasn't worried about Harry, and that my worry was not sharper and more specific than the general sense of worry I've been waking up every morning and living with since October 8 of last year. It's just that my sense of faith and trust was strong enough to allow me to function around my concerns. I trusted that we, and Harry, had made a good decision about traveling to Israel and had chosen the right organization and tour operator to ensure his safety.

Incidentally, bitahon is the modern Hebrew word for insurance. It's a good word for something that is partially, but not completely, under our control. We can see a doctor regularly, get exercise, and eat a healthy diet to reduce our chances of using our major medical insurance. We can take care of our homes and cars and practice good defensive driving techniques to reduce the chances of a house fire or a car accident. But sometimes accidents, floods, weather disasters, and unexpected medical problems happen and and we are thankful that we have bitahon, insurance.

Aside from the specific event of Harry traveling to Israel or my upcoming trip to Israel in December, my emunah, my faith in God, keeps me connected with a Jewish practice and a Jewish community that keeps me spiritually centered; and my bitahon, my trust and faith, keeps me hopeful and flexible and helps me recover my balance when life throws me off-kilter.

We live in an uncertain world. We live in a world of instability and change, socially, professionally, financially, technologically, environmentally, and politically. It is a world in which there are fewer and fewer constants. Old institutions are crumbling or simply becoming irrelevant, and new institutions are born, grow dominant, and die or become irrelevant in a heartbeat - see AOL and Yahoo, MTV, and Blockbuster. To put our trust in the rock-solid institutions of Chrysler, U.S. Steel, General Electric, RCA, Kodak, IBM and Bell Telephone seemed to make sense in the 1960's and 70's. They offered the stability of lifetime employment and retirement, and produced the most important products in the world. But the world has changed. The legacy companies have either radically adapted or been left behind. And there are no more lifetime employment guarantees. This makes bitahon all the more important.

Bitahon is not the blind faith of emunah in which one develops an unshakable belief in a core idea. Bitahon is a fluid sense that things may not turn out exactly the way I hope, and they may even not turn out for the best, but that no matter what happens, I will find the spiritual and emotional strength to cope and survive. Bitahon is the engine that fuels my optimism. In a world that guarantees change, having bitahon that we can roll with the punches and get back up again may be our only safeguard against despair.

By this, I do not mean that I believe in the aphorism “God doesn’t give you any more than you can handle.” This is nonsense, and I urge you never to say this to someone who is experiencing trauma. First of all, some people do in fact collapse under the weight of the trauma. Some people cannot handle the bad stuff hitting them. And second, those who are struggling to be emotionally resilient do not need to hear that God is piling on the bad stuff because they can handle it; that if they had only been a little more fragile, God would not have arranged for so many bad things to go wrong for them.

I trust that I will endure because I have a system in place to support me. I have a loving wife, I have a supportive family, I have friends I can call upon, I have a strong community around me, I have emunah in a power greater than me, and I have bitahon that when my life is beginning to collapse around me, the people around me will hold me up.

Your set of emunah-beliefs will help you build the interior framework of your life. They are the hidden supports that give you strength. We normally don’t even think about them. We take them for granted. Knowing and understanding your core beliefs can allow you to be intentional about decisions you make in your life that can strengthen your core interior.

Your bitahon-beliefs will help you distinguish when you should take a bit of wise action to make your desired outcome more likely, and when you can let go of your need for control, and trust that however events unfold, you will be able to handle them.

Both kinds of faith can be beneficial to you, forming a solid foundation of stability against the inevitable uncertain moments of life.

Vaclav Havel, the Former President of the Czech Republic, wrote:

“Hope...above all is a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul, It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons... its deepest roots are in the transcendental” [from “The Politics of Hope” in *Disturbing the Peace*, 1991]

What are your core beliefs, where is your emunah? Where does your belief live in your head, those beliefs in which your certainty is and will always be unshakable? How do those beliefs affect your daily life? If God is one of those beliefs, does that belief motivate you to engage in daily prayer, to keep kosher, to engage in any other acts of Jewish practice?

And what are those things you trust in which live in your heart, beliefs that give you hope, but are not quite so clearly defined as an emunah-belief? What do you hold in your heart as an article of faith and trust? What are your articles of bitahon that give you comfort and hope, but about which you are flexible?

This past year has been a difficult one from the perspective of Israel. These past four years have been difficult from the perspective of handling and recovering from a serious pandemic. These past eight years have been difficult from the perspective of handling elevated and divisive political differences. But we are a united people of Israel; and we are part of the United States of America. I am confident that we are spiritually strong and can handle the challenges to come.

May God bless us, our congregation, the people Israel, the nation of Israel, and the United States of America.

Amen.