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THE SOURCE OF FAITH IS FAITH ITSELF¹

“Who prop, thou ask’st, in these bad days, my mind?” Thus opened Matthew Arnold an early sonnet, *To a Friend*. I believe that, unlike the Rambam, I do not generally experience the days as bad; and I am quite certain that if I did, Arnold’s choices – Homer, Epictetus and Sophocles – would not provide the requisite solace. But as to the formulation of the question: In my case, at least, the critical factor is indeed “who” rather than “what.”

Without question, during my formative years and, to a lesser extent, beyond, the source and bulwark of my commitment was not so much a cluster of abstract factors or arguments as key persons. This may make my response less valuable for readers who have no access to my sources of strength and inspiration. Moreover, such a response raises obvious questions about determinism and inequity which, in a different context, would need to be addressed philosophically. But any other response would be not only partial but false.

I refer, of course, to those who, in the words of the Mishnah, put me on the path to temporal and eternal life: my parents *zts”l*, who were also my primary (in several senses of the term) teachers, and my *rebbeim*, of whom three – Rav Hutner *zts”l*, the Rav *zts”l*, and Rav Ahron Soloveichik *zts”l* – stand out far above the rest. At home, I received trust and strength, imbibed (although did not always implement in youth) a work ethic, and initially breathed an atmosphere within which a balance between criticism and rootedness was consistently maintained. Both of my parents, each in his own way, habitually raised serious questions about the religious world or about various textual or philosophic aspects of Torah – but always radiated a sense of profoundly engaged commitment.

The impact of my *rebbeim* was obviously varied. That of the first two is presumably self-evident. They – the Rav, as *rabbi muvhak*, in particular – both limned the contours of my religious and intellectual universe and filled it with content. In addition, they communicated a powerful sense of

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relation to the past, immediate and distant, of *k'illu kiblah mehar Sinai*, of being and becoming a link in the unbroken chain of the *mesorah*. Perhaps more needs to be said, however, about my relation to Reb Ahron. From him too, I learned much, but above all, he served as a role model. The *Rosh Yeshiva* (as his *talmidim* invariably called Rav Hutner), *gavra d'mistafina minei* par excellence, simply overwhelmed. The Rav overawed. I could entertain no rational illusions about attaining their status or stature. But Reb Ahron, while an inspiring vision, yet somehow seemed within reach, and truly presented a model. It wasn't so much what he said or did. I was simply enthralled by what he was – a remarkable fusion of mastery and simplicity, of vigor and humility and, above all, a pillar of radical integrity. To an extent probably far beyond what he knew or could even have imagined, he was to me, for many years, a polestar. Upon attaining fuller maturity, I came to realize that the notion that I could attain his level was pretentiously vainglorious. But his hold upon me, and the ambition and commitment it generated, have not waned to this day.

What I received from all my mentors, at home or in *yeshivot*, was the key to confronting life, particularly modern life, in all its complexity: the recognition that it was not so necessary to have all the answers as to learn to live with the questions. Regardless of what issues – moral, theological, textual or historical – vexed me, I was confident that they had been raised by masters far sharper and wiser than myself; and if they had remained impregably steadfast in their commitment, so should and could I. I intuited that, his categorical formulations and imperial certitude notwithstanding, Rav Hutner had surely confronted whatever questions occurred to me. Later, I felt virtually certain the Rav had, so that the depth and intensity of their *avodat Hashem* was doubly reassuring.

Newman has emphasized the difference between difficulty and doubt, noting that of all his beliefs, the existence of God was the most fraught with philosophical questions, and yet none was borne in his mind and heart with greater certitude. This is the crucial distinction between judging faith and its tenets as an outsider or probing its contents while firmly ensconced within. The bulwark of my mentors' support assured that my own situation would be the latter; and the motto I inscribed in my college notebook was David's plea: *Tuv ta'am ve-da'at lamdeni ki be-mizvotekha be'emanti* (Tehillim 119:65). Answers, I of course continued – and continue – to seek, and have found many. But commitment has not been conditioned upon them. I have never been attracted to fideism and I regard Tertullian's *credo quia absurdum est* as alien to the spirit of Judaism. Clearly, however, faith cannot be contingent upon having all the answers. Its essence is implied in Rav Yohanan's rejoinder to a student who had initially ridiculed a palpably

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implausible statement but who then recanted upon finding empirical support for it: “Ne’er-do-well, had you not seen, you would not have believed. You ridicule the words of the wise” (Bava Batra 75a).

The source of my support was not confined to my immediate *reb-beim*. At one point, during my late teens, I was troubled by certain ethical questions concerning Amalek, *ir ha-nidabat*, etc. I then recalled having recently read that Rav Chaim Brisker would awaken nightly to see if someone hadn’t placed a foundling at his doorstep. I knew that I slept quite soundly, and I concluded that if such a paragon of *hesed* coped with these *halakhot*, evidently the source of my anxiety did not lie in my greater sensitivity but in my weaker faith. And I set myself to enhancing it.

That faith has been persistently reinforced by Jewish history. And this, in two respects. First, I have envisioned Providence as revealed and refracted through the uniqueness of Jewish history, in the spirit of the response Hazal ascribe to *Anshei Knesset Ha-gedolah*: “These are His awesome effects, for were it not for awe of God, how could one nation survive among the nations?” (Yoma 69b). Of course, I realized that, from a purely logical standpoint, one could rejoin with an analogue to Newman’s statement that he saw design in nature because he believed in God, not vice versa. But given the substratum of faith, our singular history had provided much reinforcement. Secondly, Jewish history has served as a corpus with which – to some extent, even through which – to identify, and on which behalf to continue. That sense has received added impetus through the Holocaust. Some may regard this as paradoxical; but it is thoroughly genuine – and from my perspective, not paradoxical at all. The theological philosophic difficulties posed by this frightful *hester pan-im* are self-evident. They are, however, so insoluble and intractable that a person of faith is led to look beyond their sheer magnitude to evoke and formulate a practical response. For me, that has meant a redoubled commitment – a sense of mission to take the flickering torch from my predecessors and move with it toward our common goals.

The greatest source of faith, however, has been the *Ribbono shel Olam* Himself.

At the level of rational demonstration, this is, of course, patently circular. I hold no brief for Anselm’s ontological proof, and I recognized the theoretical possibility of self-delusion long before I had ever heard of Feuerbach. Existentially, however, nothing has been more authentic than the encounter with *Avinu Malkeinu*, the source and ground of all being. Nothing more sustaining, nothing more strengthening, nothing vivifying.

The encounter, of course, has been varied. In part, it has been channeled – primarily through *talmud Torah* (this is no doubt an aspect of *maor she-bah*, “the light within it,” of which Hazal spoke), but also through *tefillah* and the performance of *mizvot*; or, if you will, by the halakhic regimen in its totality. In part, it has been random – moments of illumination while getting on a crowded bus or watching children play in a park at twilight. Obviously, it has also been greatly varied in intensity. In its totality, however, whatever the form and content, it has been the ultimate basis of spiritual life.

This will obviously provide little guidance for those to whom attaining encounter is precisely the problem. To those “struggling to develop faith,” one can, however, proffer first the reassuring assertion of the religious significance of the quest *per se*, as, in the footsteps of *Avraham Avinu*, they have already become *mevakshei Hashem*; second, the prospective hope of successful resolution, as “The Lord is good unto them that yearn for Him, to the soul that seeketh Him” (Eikhah 3:25); and third, the counsel to focus persistently, in terms of Coleridge’s familiar distinction, upon faith rather than belief, upon experiential trust, dependence and submission more than upon catechetical dogmatics. Intellectual assent is normative and essential; but, at the personal level, it is generally not the key. In the final analysis, the primary human source of faith is faith itself.