

The Yanov Torah and our Fragile Faith  
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We are taught that after the destruction of the Second Temple, *Yochanan ben Zah-kai* undertook the task of writing down the oral law, an endeavor that at the time was considered profane. He defended his transgression by saying that sometimes we must profane Judaism to save Judaism. He did what was necessary to save Torah in his generation.

Thousands of years later in the Yanov work camp at a time when hope was nearly impossible, when the greatest horrors imaginable had been exceeded, when hunger had reached its ultimate agony, a small community risked everything in order to smuggle in a *Sefer Torah*. These inmates risked not only their lives but also the enduring shame of sinning against God. They desecrated the *Torah* by tearing it into pieces.

Yet, they acted in the face of these risks, in order to be comforted by the *Torah's* light.

Just as Ben Zah-kai profaned Judaism, so too in Yanov, when all seemed lost, the inmates made the difficult choice to profane Judaism in order to save Judaism. The Yanov *Torah* was not responsible for Judaism's survival through the *Shoah*, but for the inmates in Yanov, this Torah kept Judaism alive in their souls. This Torah served as a *Ner Tamid*, of hope and faith in the darkest days of our people's history.

Because this Torah was dug up from a cemetery and torn into pieces, traditional *Halacha* teaches us that it is not a *Kosher Sefer Torah*. Yet, the *Halacha* of our hearts disagrees.

Indeed, this might be the most *Kosher Sefer Torah* in Jewish history.

This is a *Torah* that was hidden column by column in bedposts, inside pipes, under floor boards, anyplace where it might be safe. Its discovery would have certainly meant the death of its stewards, but its presence was also their life-force. After the liberation, it was lovingly patched together by the lonely fingers of people who had lost everything but their tradition. Like the lives of the survivors, this *Torah* would never be the same, stitched back together yet bearing its physical scars forever.

Receiving this Torah on the eve of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kristallnacht, during *Parshat Lech Lecha*, is not without significance. This week we read of *Avram* receiving a divine call to journey not only physically to the land of Israel, but also spiritually inward to his soul. As we are taught by the Chasidic masters, *Lech Lecha* can mean go to yourself.

Often we consider these two interpretations separately.

We marvel at *Avram*'s brave physical journey and we ponder the meaning in his spiritual journey. But the Yanov Torah represents the symmetry and connectedness of both journeys. From the cemetery, through the hands of those who smuggled it into the camp, to its stay in Russia, to its safety with Rabbi Erwin, zichrono l'vracha and Agnes Herman, and now to us, this Torah's travels from captivity to freedom, from brokenness to repair, from hopelessness to faith, can inspire us to attempt a spiritual journey akin to the one God demanded of *Avram*.

Avram's willingness to leave everything behind and journey to the unknown suggests that he possessed a powerful faith in God. We, however, often struggle with our faith in God; we are often afraid to admit to ourselves and each other that after answering God's call to us "Lech Lecha," to travel inward, all we found were unanswered questions.

How can I lead a faith community if my faith in God is a work in progress?

How can I ask others to journey if I'm afraid to take the first step?

How can I ask others to believe, if I'm screaming inside with questions?

Is God listening or am I praying empty words?

These doubts can paralyze us on our personal journeys of faith as we struggle with God and our own humanity.

PAUSE-

Rabbi Aryeh Leib of Ger wrote, "The effects of any earthly struggle with God must also affect God. The battle is not between us and some independent power. The struggle goes on inside God. It is a part of God; it is a part of ourselves."

Thus, even when we struggle, we journey.

It may seem to be a struggle that takes us away from God, but rest assured it is also a Way To God. The Rabbi of Ger is trying to teach us that the struggle with God is a profound act of faith. To struggle with God is to have faith in God. How can that be?

I often close my eyes during *T'fillah* in search of God, only to be confronted with doubts:

Is God really listening to me?

Do I really experience God in a sunset, or is it just something I say to a questioning congregant?

Is God there and I am the one who has been hiding?

These thoughts come to me during prayer, during meditation, during the moments when I seek to connect with the divine! How do I not scream with rage, "I don't Believe!"

In these moments of doubt my tradition and broken faith temper me.

PAUSE

The Baal Shem Tov taught: "In all the thoughts of human beings the reality of God conceals itself. And when we are engaged in prayer and an outside thought arises, it comes in order that we may redeem and elevate it."

Rather than conceal our brokenness or our questions, the Baal Shem Tov teaches that we can accept our doubts as tools from the divine, and incorporate them into our faith.

Doubt is a profound element of our humanity. We doubt each other, we doubt ourselves and when we look at the destruction and disorder in the world and we can't help but doubt God.

But when we allow our doubt and struggle with God to become a part of us, when we embrace our doubt we become one step closer to the divine, one step closer to faith. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught us that faith is not the same as belief. Whereas belief occupies one part of

who we are, faith is an act of the whole person, of mind, will and heart. So when we suppress our doubt, we suppress a part of who we are, and thus we suppress our faith. Rather than viewing faith as the feeling we get when we conquer doubt, our faith can be viewed as the process of dealing with doubt. Faith is not a constant, faith comes and goes; like the Yanov Torah, our faith is stitched together imperfectly as a reminder of the brokenness life has shown us.

As heirs of this Torah, we are reminded and comforted that our faith comes from generations who have journeyed and struggled before us.

One generation asks, Do I answer God's call and journey to the land unknown?

One generation asks, Do I write down the oral law?

One generation asks, Do I dig up and cut up this Torah?

Our generation asks, Do we stash this Torah in a museum and conceal its brokenness or do we read from it, teach from it, and allow its scars to strengthen us on our difficult journeys?

By accepting our doubt and the constant need to repair our broken faith, we realize that our faith is fragile. But this is not something we should fear.

After all, how do we carry something that is marked fragile? We handle with care. We wrap it in softness, carry it close to our bodies, and give it our undivided attention.

How do I care for my fragile faith? Day after day I engage in T'fillah, seeking to understand and feel connected to God.

I go to the ocean, I marvel at the mountains and try to appreciate God's wonder. And yet I find myself alone, wrapped in a Tallis, holding together my faith that at times seems so vulnerable, I wonder if it might unravel at any moment.

The struggle of faith can be a lonely experience, especially within these walls and the walls we will one day occupy. We are the ones to whom people come for answers, we are the prayer leaders to whom people look for guidance, we are the Jews in whom people place their faith. But where do we put our faith? What do we do when our faith challenges us?

We breathe, we step back and we remember that faith comes and goes but we continue the journey. Every struggle, every question, every broken thought or doubt does not detract from our faith but serves as another stitch in our faith, holding it together.

Twenty some years ago, Rabbi Herman took this torah to Temple Beth Solomon of the Deaf. As Rabbi Herman was talking about the Torah, a man from the congregation stood up in the middle of the Rabbi's address and began walking toward the Torah. As he approached, in sign language he said over and over again, "That's my Torah, That's my Torah." Ludovic Wurmfeld, *Zichrono L'vracha*, was an inmate at Yanov. Because he was deaf, the Nazi guards thought he was dim-

witted. More than the other inmates, Ludovic was allowed to leave the camp regularly because the guards did not perceive him as a threat. Every time Ludovic returned from the town, he was wrapped in the words of Torah. Columns of Torah were curled around his legs and sewn into his jacket. Decades later, he lived to see them again, stitched back together in a shul in Los Angeles.

Faith can lead us on unimaginable journeys, from light to darkness to light again. With each journey, like the Yanov Torah, we acquire new physical and spiritual scars that we carry with us forever. These scars are the reminders both of our fragile faith and the need to mend it. When we hold this Torah, when we read from it, we cannot help but think of the courage, strength and enduring faith of its previous caretakers. May their legacy inspire us to journey inward to discover our own courage, summon our own strength, and fortify our own faith in our tradition which is sewn together with the threads of beauty and struggle. Through our journeys, through our brokenness, and through our attempts at repair, we too will be able to stand up, carry close our fragile faith and say, “That’s my Torah, That’s my Torah.”