

Great is Your Emunah – Faith in a Fragile World
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Alephonsion Deng is one of the “lost boys” of Sudan, young boys who fled their villages to escape death or slavery during the savage civil war in southern Sudan.

These boys helped each other survive as they wandered toward refugee camps through arid, dangerous territory. Along the way, the older boys would help protect the younger ones, keeping watch at night, guarding against wild animals, and foraging for food and water. They were so desperate that at times they resorted to eating mud. Many died of starvation and thirst.

This is Alephonsion’s story:

In 1989, when he was 7 years old, government troops attacked his village. He ran barefoot and naked into the night, beginning a journey that would last for several years.

At one point during his journey, Alephonsion had been walking and walking for days on end, without food or water. He was having trouble continuing to walk, and his vision began to blur. He knew this was a sign that he was only a few hours or days away from death.

He saw a tree in the distance.

Something inside him pushed him to make it to that tree – this inner voice told him that if he could make it, he could rest, and then he might be able to move onward and find some food.

He made it to the tree.

When he got there, he desperately wanted to close his eyes and go to sleep. But the voice returned – warning him that he had seen this happen to other boys – they lay down to rest and never woke up. He knew that he had to go on. His mind blurred by hunger, he had no thoughts outside of the simple refrain “keep going,” “keep going.”

He picked himself up and walked on until he finally reached a refugee encampment. Barely conscious, he threw himself on the ground by a man and woman who were cooking some food on a fire.

This couple had lost all of their children to hunger. The woman was angry and resentful and didn't want to share her food with this strange boy. Why should she help, when her own sons had been taken from her? Her husband urged her to give him some food. Alephonsion gratefully ate.

After a few moments, his vision cleared, and he saw a mango tree in the distance. His strength regained, he went to the tree, climbed it, and picked an armload of mangoes. He shared the fruit with this man and woman and ate some for himself. Revived, he continued on the journey that eventually brought him to the U.S.

When describing what it was that kept him going when he was on the brink of passing out from hunger Alephonsion speaks of a voice inside him that wouldn't let him give up. He seemed to know that the next step, or the next day always held new possibility if he could only keep putting one foot in front of the other.

There seemed to be a sense of trust that things could change – things could get better – the world was not always and everywhere full of violence and hunger and thirst. Somehow he would find his way to a better time and place.

Alephonsion is now a young adult, studying in community college in the U.S. He is very well-spoken and is on his way towards making a life for himself here. He has clearly been traumatized, but his inner strength shines through.

There is a word for this feeling of trust in the world and in the future– that word is “faith,” “emunah” in Hebrew.

In our culture today, we hear this word “faith” a lot. Politicians from across the spectrum call themselves men and women of faith and we have “faith-based” initiatives.

The word has taken on the connotation of blind belief - of going with your gut rather than taking data into consideration. Or else, it conjures up a naïve idea that if only we believe, God will then swoop in and save us from harm.

In the language of Jewish spirituality, “faith” or “emunah” has a much deeper meaning than blind belief in God or a stubborn attachment to unchanging principles or ideologies.

Think about “Old Faithful,” the famous geyser in Yellowstone National Park that shoots a scalding curtain of water upwards of 75 feet into the air. It got its name “Old Faithful” because we can depend on it to shoot up at certain times of day – currently every 20 to 30 minutes, on the clock.

In Judaism, we speak of people or things, or even God as being faithful – having “emunah” – when they are reliable, dependable, steady and secure. The Hebrew word itself is related to the word “amen,” which means “it is so.” Other words from the same root carry the meaning of firmness or solidness.

For Jews, emunah is the basic trust that, although today the world might feel very fragile, there is reason to hope that the world will be there tomorrow, that things can change for the better, and that human beings can help to bring that change about.

According to Rabbi Larry Kushner, “faith can either be arrogant, constantly flaunting and proving one’s spiritual mettle, or it can be humble, confident in one’s abilities and one’s world. The former conceals anxiety and insecurity, the latter conceals only itself.”

A sure sign that a person has faith is that he doesn’t flaunt it but walks in the world with quiet confidence and gentle trust.

Alephonsion Deng was not saved by a miracle. God did not intervene and rescue him. But faith did play a key role in his survival.

He knew that the PROBABILITY of survival was not high. At the same time, he trusted that the POSSIBILITY of survival was REAL. That insistent voice that repeated, “keep going” – that voice of faith allowed him to see the possibility in the world for his future.

Irshad Manji is a young Muslim woman, scholar, journalist and activist, who has risked her life to write a book called, *The Trouble with Islam Today*.

This is Irshad’s story, which some of you heard me preach about this summer:

Irshad is the Canadian daughter of Ugandan refugees. She grew up going to public school during the week and Muslim Saturday school (madrassa) on the weekends.

In madrasa, Irshad began to notice major discrepancies between what she was being taught and what she saw in the modern world outside. She was taught that women could not lead prayer. Women couldn't be leaders, but in the secular world she had role models of powerful female leaders. When the teacher would lecture about the Jewish conspiracy, Irshad would ask for evidence that the teacher could not provide.

At a certain point she realized she was not being educated; instead, she was being indoctrinated. Eventually she was kicked out of madrasa for asking too many questions.

At this juncture, many people would give up on their faith and choose a secular life for themselves. Irshad, on the other hand, rejected the madrasa, but continued to study Islam. She continued to have faith that her religion contained important values for a modern Muslim's life.

She researched the oppression and human rights abuses in Muslim countries. At the same time, she discovered liberal streams of thought within Islam that would support equality for all races, genders, religions and sexual orientations. She found Islamic texts and interpretations that promote rights such as freedom of speech, rule of law, due process and freedom from torture.

As she learned more, she was confirmed in her belief that Muslim values have a greater purpose in the world than mere tribalism or at worst, the spreading of an ideology through violence. Irshad saw that, similar to Judaism, there were ways to read the Qur'an

such that a Muslim way of life and a peaceful, democratic, modern way of life did not have to conflict with each other.

So Irshad decided to write a book about how Islam has taken the wrong path today but can be reformed and reclaimed. Her book has been translated into Arabic, Farsi (the language of Iran,) and Urdu (spoken in Pakistan) and is available on the web.

Where does this kind of faith and courage come from?

Irshad Manji often refers to her mother. She carries a card with her that her mother wrote to her after the Imam in her childhood mosque preached that Irshad was more dangerous than Osama Bin Laden.

Her mother wrote her daughter about how proud she was of her, ending with the words, “you go, girl.” Irshad’s faith in herself was grounded in her upbringing – her mother believed in her, and she told her as much.

Irshad speaks of her trepidation in translating her book into Arabic. She was afraid that giving Arabic readers access to the book would only bring more hate mail and death threats than she already had received. But hundreds of emails from young Muslims around the world begged her to translate the book and put it on the web so that they might download it onto their computers, read it a bit at a time, and then safely delete it, without being seen with the book in public.

For Irshad, these emails, along with dozens of in-person round table discussions that she has had with Muslim university students in the Middle East and Africa – all of this dialogue adds up to evidence that there is an underground reform Muslim movement taking root among young people across the Islamic world.

Faith comes from knowing that there is a community that needs you to succeed.

Irshad had the opportunity to meet Salman Rushdie, the author of *The Satanic Verses* who had a bounty on his head from the Ayatollah in Iran. She asked him how he coped with the threat against his life. He answered that the message he was bringing to the world was more important than the length of his life on earth. Rushdie teaches Irshad and us that faith comes from having a sense of purpose or mission that goes beyond ourselves.

We in the West are currently living in a political and intellectual climate in which fear of terrorism and other threats are causing many people to question basic, time-tested religious and secular values. Our leaders are experimenting with the boundaries of what is acceptable – things as foundational to our democracy as due process and a universal ban on torture. Those who believe in protecting these principles for the sake of our democracy's long-term health and moral stature are considered naïve.

I don't think Irshad Manji or we are naïve in thinking that Western democratic and modern religious ideas make a real difference in the world. The PROBABILITY of success may not seem very high right now. At the same time, we must trust that the POSSIBILITY of making a difference is REAL.

The same voice of faith that spoke to Alephonsion and to Irshad speaks from the Torah at this season as well. In congregations that celebrate two days of Rosh Hashanah, the traditional text for the first day, from Genesis 21, tells about Abraham's handmaid Hagar and their son Ishmael. It, too, is a tale of faith on this day of renewal.

You may remember that since Sarah was barren, she had given her handmaid Hagar to Abraham in order that they might have a son through her. Later, in their old age, Sarah and Abraham miraculously have their own son together – Isaac.

One day, as Sarah watches her son Isaac playing with his half-brother Ishmael, she becomes concerned about preserving first-born status for Isaac. So she convinces Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael from their camp.

In a very painful moment, Abraham reluctantly places a skin full of water and some bread on Hagar's shoulder, hands their young son Ishmael to her, and sends them off into the wilderness.

Hagar and Ishmael wander for several days, probably headed towards Hagar's homeland, Egypt. But they get lost, and their provisions run out. Hagar's eyes begin to blur from hunger and thirst, and she only has enough strength to make it to a nearby tree. She places Ishmael under the tree and sits by herself a distance away – she can't bear to watch him die of thirst. She lifts up her voice and cries out in anguish.

After a few minutes, Hagar notices another sound in addition to her own weeping. The voice of God's messenger pierces her consciousness. The messenger tells her that God has heard Ishmael crying. God urges her to take hold of Ishmael's hand and keep going.

Hagar picks herself up, takes Ishmael's hand, and with renewed energy and confidence she continues to put one foot in front of the other. Her blurred vision clears, and she sees what lies just ahead of them on the path – a well of water. Hagar and Ishmael drink from the well and are able to continue on their journey. This journey culminates in Ishmael's growing up to be a successful leader with a large family and legacy of his own.

At the beginning of this story, Hagar and Ishmael's world is falling apart – the basic structure of their lives that they took for granted – food, shelter, a sense of home and family – all of this is gone. They don't know what the future holds and are on the brink of death.

But Hagar hears a voice urging her not to give up. She pays attention to the voice and survives. A quiet unrelenting faith keeps her going.

We do not have to read this story as one of magical divine intervention. God's voice doesn't enter the scene on its own. Hagar cries out first, and the fact that she cries out at all shows hope that someone was listening. And God is listening – not only to Hagar's loud cry, but to the silent cry of Ishmael's heart as well.

Faith is not necessarily what causes God to speak to Hagar, but faith is what allows Hagar to *hear* God's voice within her.

Not only does Hagar have an internal kind of trust, but she also has Ishmael. As she takes Ishmael's small warm hand in hers, she remembers someone outside of herself is depending on her. She remembers that her existence matters. This too gives her faith.

The well of water is not a supernatural phenomenon either. According to one Jewish tradition, the well was there all along. Faith does not make the well appear. Faith is what allows Hagar to see the water and to see that her life does not have to continue to be one of despair. The possibility of survival is real, the possibility of change is real.

Thank God, most of us are not fighting for physical survival like Hagar and Ishmael or the lost boys of Sudan. Although, we did witness this kind of desperation last year, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. And we saw it during the attacks on September the 11th. Those experiences gave us an all-too local glimpse into the human struggle for survival.

Even though we may not all be fighting every day to take that next physical step forward, many of us do struggle to hear that voice of faith when the world so often seems to be deteriorating into an arid, unforgiving wilderness.

Each morning we wake up to news reports of the latest suicide bombing in Afghanistan; the latest car bombing in Iraq. This summer we were shaken to learn of the kidnapping of Israeli soldiers, in Gaza and in Lebanon, and to watch in horror as Hezbollah missiles smashed into Northern Israel. We continue to wait and watch for news of another terrorist attack against our own country.

Sometimes it really does feel like our world is falling apart.

And then there are the more personal deserts that many of us wander through daily. The no-man's lands of depression and of families that are broken or under great stress; the wilderness of illness, of loss, of financial hardship. Many of us have our own personal stories of survival.

As we walk through the world today, we are all looking for a tree to give us shade, a well to give us water. Especially as we look towards a New Year, we are listening for that voice of faith. We want to know where faith comes from, how we instill it in our children, and how to hold onto it once we have it. The stories of Alephonsion, Irshad, Hagar and Ishmael can lend some insight into those questions.

Alephonsion describes a childhood in which he felt secure and loved, and Irshad's mother continues to support her in her struggles as an adult. Hagar and Ishmael both had experiences of being cared for in Abraham's camp. A sense of confidence in ourselves and in the world comes from having had the experience of knowing that someone cares for us.

Every time an infant cries and her needs are met, she acquires a measure of faith. Hagar and Ishmael's cries don't go unheard. When we find that others are listening to us, taking us seriously, and responding to us, our faith grows.

Alephonsion trusted that his existence mattered in the world. The younger boys in his group needed him and the other older boys to protect them. Hagar only needed to remember that Ishmael was depending on her in order to gather the strength to take his hand and keep going. An entire generation of young Muslims is out there reading and discussing Irshad's ideas – they need her unique voice in their lives.

When we know we can do something for someone else; when we receive inner satisfaction from the work that we do, and when others confirm that who we are and what we are doing matters, our faith is strengthened.

In this world of ours that so often feels like it is about to implode, stories of people like Irshad, Alephonsion, Hagar and Ishmael can keep all of us going. Their faith can fortify our own trust that the well of water and the shady tree are just down the path.

Upon waking every morning it is traditional for Jews to recite a blessing.

It says “Modah ani l’fanecha, melech chai v’kayam; she-hechezarta bi nishmati b’chemla. Rabbah emunatecha.”

“I gratefully acknowledge You, living and enduring Ruler, for returning my soul to me; great is Your faithfulness.”

This prayer is rooted in the belief that when we go to sleep each night it is as if we have died and our soul has departed. We thank God for returning our soul to us in the morning and allowing us to live another day. In this way we acknowledge what a miracle it is that we can even wake up in the morning.

But this prayer is about something deeper than a miracle. It ends with the words, “rabbah emunatecha,” “great is Your emunah – Your faithfulness.”

Really, we are saying: “Oh God – You and the world you have created are so dependable and trustworthy. The world is so full of grace and possibility that we can more or less count on it. How wonderful it is that we can rely on the sun rising tomorrow bringing with it a renewed chance to make this world better.”

This hopeful prayer is even more striking because it quotes from the saddest book in the Hebrew Bible – Lamentations. Lamentations mourns the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and grieves over the exile of the Jewish people in Babylon. But it has this hint of hope when it says, “the kindness of the Eternal One has not ended; God’s mercies are not spent. Rabbah emunatecha - Great is your faithfulness.”

The world that the Jewish exiles knew and loved was destroyed. They felt that they were not only exiled from their homes but from God’s very Presence. If our ancestors could continue to have faith that they might someday return to Jerusalem and regain God’s favor, so much the more so can we have faith that God and the world are dependable.

And so, as we enter this New Year, we trust in all of the possibilities that it holds. As we wake up to this New Year, we open our hearts to that voice of faith and say:

“Modim anachnu l’fanecha; she-hechezarta banu nishmateinu b’chemla. Rabbah emunatecha.”

We thankfully acknowledge you, living and enduring and dependable Ruler, for returning our souls to us for another year, for giving us the possibilities of life, of peace, and of healing our broken world– Great is Your faithfulness.” ---Amen