What is Jewish Faith?
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
Temple Sholom – Vancouver BC
December 6, 2020

One of the most transformative and insightful things I learned about studying the Torah I learned from a Catholic Priest – well a catholic Seminary Student who like me was in his finally years of study before ordination.

Brother Daniel was my counterpart when I served as a chaplain at City of Hope Cancer Hospital in Southern California. At the urging of our supervisor, we would have a bible study once a week during our internship.

As we sat down to study our only shared text, the Hebrew Bible, also referred to as the Old Testament, we started with the familiar and seemingly ecumenical stories of Genesis, similar to the story of Jacob that we read this morning.

It was impossible. With all sensitivity and a desire to respect and support each other in their core interpretations of the text we could ultimately never agree on anything of consequence. We would acknowledge the other's perspective, we learned where they were coming from and ultimately understood how it informed doctrine, ritual and belief – but we could not agree.

One day, both of us frustrated, one of us asked the other the question, I don't recall who, "When you read the bible what are you looking for?" Brother Daniel, said he was looking for answers and I said, "I am looking for questions".

It was then that I learned the difference between exegesis and eisegesis. If those words sound like a something you once knew and have since forgotten don't feel any shame, 25 years ago as a rabbinical student I had never really considered them either.

Eisegesis is the process of interpreting text in such a way as to introduce one's own presuppositions, agendas or biases. It is commonly referred to as reading into the text and I learned from Brother Daniel it was how he and many Christians read the Hebrew bible, trying to find evidence of the prophecy of Jesus.

Exegesis is the critical interpretation of the biblical text to discover its intended meaning – it is to extract meaning FROM the text, usually through challenging the text and asking questions of it. It is how Jews read the bible. It is to ask the question, "what does this story or commandment require of me?"

A light bulb went off for both of us; we went back to our supervisor, explained our newfound insight and why we thought this was a fruitless exercise – neither of us wanted to convert the other of course. Our supervisor, said, "you don't need to study together anymore as you have

already learned the lesson, now when you visit patients of each other's religion you will understand the look in their eyes because it is informed by how they see their faith."

To overly simplify it the note I wrote in my journal that day for my hospital rounds was, "Christians are looking for answers from God, Jews are asking questions of God."

But all of this raised a bigger question for me, "what is Jewish faith?"

My colleague Rabbi Noah Farkas framed it this way.

"In this week's Torah portion, *Vayishlach*, we see one of the patriarchs of Judaism, Jacob, struggle with this very question. Jacob is no theist. He does not follow God's command like Noah or Abraham, nor is he quietly following the faith of his father, like Isaac. While many of the ancient Rabbis wanted to color over Jacob's tensions, saying that from the moment of his birth he wanted to go to synagogue, (Bereishit Rabba 63:6) the plain sense of the text teaches us that Jacob takes after his mother Rebekah, who questioned faith during her pregnancy, or even his grandmother Sarah, who laughed at God. Jacob was skeptical of faith, while always living in conflict."

In this week's Torah protion, Jacob's journey through faith includes a test of God, saying, "If God is with me on my journey...then the LORD shall be my God." (Genesis 28:20-21). The expression of Jacob's faith is formed in a question; in the potential that there might be a God and that God might take notice of him, watch over him on his journey.

Jacob proceeds on his journey with no assurance that God will watch over him and protect him, because either way he cannot stay where he is, trapped on one side of the river with his family on the other, his perhaps vengeful brother's army bearing down upon him. Jacob walks with or without God propelled by necessity and by the question, what will be from a life that has led me to this moment?

Rabbi Farkas sums up Jacob's life this way, "nothing ever came easy [for Jacob], no guarantee was ever found. In his youth Jacob was in conflict with his brother Esau over the birthright. In his emerging adulthood, [he was in conflict] with his father-in-law Laban. With his wives, Leah and Rachel, through the struggles of love. Later in life with his children, whose near murderous rivalry brought the whole family into hundreds of years of exile in Egypt. There was never a moment in Jacob's life that was free of tension and uncertainty. In Judaism, spirituality does not come easy and faith is no leap across an abyss.

Faith is struggle.

There is a concept in Judaism that we actually thank God for our struggles, that struggles, questions, challenges are a blessing. The thinking goes that if things come too easily, if we don't wrestle with the question it has less meaning, we don't own it but rather inherited it.

Inherited things still have value, but their value is what they meant to someone else and in our safeguarding of them. Think family heirlooms, like your shabbat candlesticks or your Hanukkah Menorah. Yet we know as much as we appreciate and even cherish what we have inherited, it those things that we struggled for, worked hard for, fought for have a different value, maybe a deeper sense of ownership. Life lessons learned are the most obvious of examples.

How we act in a situation, how we guard and protect our relationships – if we are wise, those rules to live by are informed by all the times before we failed to learn the lessons or follow our own rules.

If you have ever attained something or salvaged something you worked so hard for you know what I am speaking about.

That is the faith of Jacob our biblical ancestor and the progenitor of Judaism.

Judaism is a religion for the searcher and the struggler. Jacob struggles with an angel on the banks of the Jabbok and is renamed "Israel," meaning those who struggle with God. (Genesis 32:29) Jacob later receives the name again, this time from God's own voice and not through an angel. (Genesis 35:10) We take our name and our faith from him.

Again, my colleague Rabbi Farkas sums it up so well, "We are the "Children of Israel" - not of Abraham, Moses, David, or anyone else. Judaism finds joy and meaning in the immortal questions of life. We pour over them day and night repeatedly in learning and conversations in pushing for a more just and redeemed world."

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks (z'l) summed up Judaism this way, "To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope in a world serially threatened by despair. Judaism is a sustained struggle against the world that is, in the name of the world that could be, should be, but is not yet."

I've visited a lot patients in hospital rooms since those days more than a quarter century ago when I was a young rabbinical student who thought I had more answers than questions. Whenever I enter the room, I am aware of at least two things:

First, no matter who I am there to visit if there is another patient in the room and their curtain is open, I will stop by their bed as well to introduce myself, say hello and offer a prayer for healing if they want one.

The second thing I am sure to do more than anything else is listen, I listen for questions and I listen for answers – because ultimately my faith, like Jacob's has been enriched by learning what I don't know; be they questions I didn't know to ask or answers I didn't know to heed.