

Parshat Lech Lecha – Sermon delivered by Cantor Scott Buckner
October 27, 2017

What is faith?

Cantor sings "Take me out to the ball game...."

We are now in the middle of this year's dramatic conclusion to the long season of the Great American pastime. I'm speaking, of course about the World Series. As a devoted fan of the game, I have been enjoying the drama of October baseball, and have been following the action, even though my team was eliminated from contention early on, by the New York Yankees, again. But I'm not angry. I'm not bitter. I wouldn't let our Minnesota Twins manager walk away either, like the Yankees are doing with their manager. It's not because of my faith in the team, although I believe with all my heart that they are on the way up, and you will hear from them again, next year. They have talented young players and they will be back, mark my words! But that's not the reason I'm not depressed, angry or bitter. I'm not bitter, because of my faith in the game itself. You see the game is larger than any one team,

than any one player and it's larger than any manager, owner or even the commissioner of baseball himself.

This year's playoffs have featured many great moments, exceptional plays, and many games that are sure to become instant classics. But it isn't the great plays and dramatic finishes that have left an indelible impression on me. My continued faith in the game is partly fueled by the incredible display of athletic excellence. But, even more so, its deeply rooted in the story of hope, struggle, faith, resilience and honor that is such a part of the game, in spite of the way the game, and many other professional sports today, have become big lucrative businesses. What really moves me watching the TV broadcasts, are the shots, the camera angles showing the fans in the stands. You know, the camera focuses in on a fan with their hands like this, in a position of prayer. The emotions of the moment broadcast on their faces. Hats turned inside out, hopes and prayers, for their pitcher to throw one more strike, or their batter to get that one hit that changes the course of the game. The moment seems bigger to me, than their team or that particular time and place. It's the game

itself, it's a microcosm of the game of life, and the hopes and dreams we all have for ourselves and our loved ones. It almost feels like a moment of eternity right in the middle of the game that is just a pastime. Or is it?

For that fan in the hopeful, prayerful pose, faith is tied to something bigger than themselves. Faith is trust, and trust is built over time. But what is it trust in? That fan may be praying to God for the tide to turn for his team. But God probably doesn't care and I don't believe God works that way either. Faith is trust. Trust in the next hopeful moment of our lives. How does Judaism approach faith? What does it mean for a Jew to have faith? Many religions seem to require an unwavering faith as an entrance into religious life. Judaism has a different approach.

Rabbi Daniel Gordis writes in his book, "God Was Not in the fire"

"Judaism, more than any other major religious tradition does not see skeptics as second-class citizens... Judaism does not require faith statements as a sign of legitimacy. Judaism does not ask Jews to give up their questions or to deny their doubt.

In Jewish spiritual life, faith is not the starting point of the journey. Uncertainty is not the enemy of religious and spiritual growth. Doubt is what fuels the journey. Indeed, as we will see, the Torah goes to great lengths to reassure the searching Jew that skepticism is healthy, legitimate, and even celebrated in Jewish life. Fundamentalists [of other religions] may regard anything short of absolute faith as religiously insufficient; Jewish tradition does not share their reliance on certainty."

Our Torah portion this week begins with the words, "*God says to Abraham, Lech Lecha, go forth to a land that I will show you, to a place you do not know.*" Abraham and Sarah pack up their things and leave everything they know, and venture into the unknown with all the faith they can muster in God's promise for them. But after a few trying adventures, Abraham starts to question the journey. "*God, You say I will be a blessing and the father of a huge nation,*" "*but I'm old and don't have any children. Its just not going to happen!*" There is frustration in his voice – there is doubt, fatigue and confusion.

It's clear in the end that God does not demand perfect faith from Abraham. That the Torah is a document reflecting real human lives with struggle and doubt. For the baseball fans, it's faith in the game, with trust and hope that next year will bring good things. If you talk to my family, my kids especially, they'll tell you that hope reins eternal with me and my teams, but it's more than just me being an unrealistically optimistic fan, hoping against hope that the next year will be different. It's not just the naïve optimism when spring training comes around. It's more than that. It's faith in the game itself. Not just the game of baseball, but the game of life. Faith, trust, even in the face of doubt. Judaism acknowledges and even celebrates doubt. It's a tradition that constantly questions, even questioning God, as we witness with Abraham himself and other heroes in our Torah. The Torah portion says, *Lech Lecha*, go forth to a land you do not know. Abraham wavers. He doubts. But he goes forth, and in the going and the struggle even in the uncertainty, he discovers faith. He learns to trust.

In our tests in life can we go forth with faith in God; faith in the universe? That faith is actually, trust in ourselves. Its trust in ourselves, because we in fact contain God, and we contain the universe within us. And as Abraham wavered but confronted his doubt, by going forth and testing himself against life, so may we approach life in this way.

A Jewish definition of faith from the Mussar scholar, Alan Moranis: he writes that trust (bitachon), “gives us the capacity to act from a place of no fear. A heart cannot hold both fear and trust at the same time. When we cultivate trust, we inevitably loosen the grip fear holds on our heart.”

Trust, faith is required, and is the only antidote to fear. Trust in ourselves, even in our doubt, gets us moving, taking a step toward a new land – Lech Lecha. Go forth. In this way, we exercise our freedom and show our bravery.

Singing: “O’re the land of the free and the home of the brave!”

Play ball!