

Elul WhatsApp / Telegram Messages

17th Elul – 17th September

The place of doubt in Judaism is very interesting because most people define faith as certainty. I define faith as the courage to live with uncertainty. We don't for a moment believe that the existence of God is so obvious and overwhelming that you've got to be crazy not to believe in God, and this is dramatised in the early chapters of the Book of Exodus. There's Pharaoh who doesn't believe in God; and God sends plague after plague, sign after sign, and he still doesn't believe in God. I love the mediaeval interpretation, that phrase that "God hardened Pharaoh's heart." Most people say that means God took away Pharaoh's free will, but one commentator says, "No, God had to keep giving Pharaoh free will. He strengthened his heart." Because otherwise God would be on him like a tonne of bricks and he'd have no place to doubt, and God wanted Pharaoh to be free to doubt His existence, so He strengthened his heart.

The truth is, it's pretty obvious, that you can look at the world and find it meaningless; you can look at the world and find it meaningful. If you're looking for a life without doubt, without risk, and without uncertainty, stop living because you cannot really live without taking risks. In fact, the Bible makes it pretty clear that God took a massive risk when He created humanity, and that risk didn't play out terribly well because by Genesis chapter six God regrets that He ever created man in the first place, and it grieved Him, to His very heart, a key sentence for me.

One of the most beautiful in the whole of Judaism occurs early in the Book of Jeremiah. We say is on Rosh Hashanah, "*zacharti lach chesed neuraich*," I remember the kindness of your youth, the love of your betrothal. "*leich teich acharei bamidbar be'ereetz lo zerua'ah*," how you were willing to follow me into an unknown, unsewn land. Jeremiah is saying God loves the Jewish people because they had the courage to take the risk to go into a place they've never seen before, with no map and no roads, just the pillar of cloud and the pillar of... Judaism means the courage to take a risk. If you lack the courage to take a risk, you will never get married; if you get married, you will never have a child; if you're a businessman, you will never start a new business.

The whole of life is facing the unknown; because even though we can look up to the heaven and see a hundred billion galaxies, each with a hundred billion stars, and when you can look within us at the human genome where there's 3.1 billion letters of genetic code, we can know everything, but there is one thing we will never know: what tomorrow will bring. We face an unknown, an unknowable, future; that means that every single course of action we take, every commitment, has its underside of doubt. It's the ability to acknowledge that doubt, and yet say, "Nonetheless, I will take a risk." That is what faith is: not the absence of doubt, but the ability to recognise doubt, live with it, and still take the risk of commitment.