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Inspired by the Faith of Tzadikim

(Midot Hara'aya, Emunah piska #32)

"The great spirits of the world raise *emunah* (religious faith)...This is the vocation of the great *tzaddikim*, the world's mighty men of righteousness - to raise religious faith from its lowly state, to purge it of its dross, and to bring it to its authentic character." (Midot Hara'aya, Emunah #32)

In the above passage from *Midot Hara'aya* Rav Kook emphasizes the distinctive role of the *tzaddik* (saintly individuals) who is the paradigm of faith and "the entire world is illuminated by his glory." (Ibid)

The first time that the Torah records a person's *emunah* is in regard to Avraham: *Ve'he'emin b'Hashem* - "And he believed in the Lord" (15:6). This is also the first time the word *emunah* appears in the Torah. Avraham epitomizes deep devotion. God's command to leave his birthplace for a foreign land and to offer his beloved son as a sacrifice are two exquisite examples of our forefather's willingness to surrender his will to the will of the Almighty.

AVRAHAM'S FAITH ILLUMINATED THE WORLD

Avraham is a paradigm of genuine faith.

Rabbi Yitzchak Twersky zt"l, the Talner Rebbe and the eminent son-in-law of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik zt"l emphasized Avraham's



Rabbi Isadore Twersky zt"l

remarkable devotion to God's command. At the Third Meal on Shabbat in his Beis medrash in Brookline, he cited the verse in Yeshayahu (51:2) "Look to Avraham your forefather...". Simply put, we are charged to emulate Avraham. (Torah of the Mind, Torah of the Heart, Divrei Torah of the Talner Rebbe, Twersky, p. 43-45)

Rabbi Twersky also cited the Rambam's Mishne Torah (*Hilchot Teshuva* 10:2) in which Avraham's love of God and deep faith is considered to be the gold standard which a Jew must strive to emulate: "Whoever serves God out of love, occupies himself with [the study of] Torah and [the fulfillment of] mitzvot, and walks in the paths of wisdom impelled by no external motive - prompted by neither the fear of calamity nor the desire to obtain benefit; rather, he does what is truly right because it is truly right... This standard is indeed a very high one; not every sage attains it. It was the standard of **Avraham Avinu**, whom God called His lover

because he served only out of love...”

The Rambam depicts Avraham Avinu as the quintessential believer in God. In a similar vein, The Talner Rebbe offered a novel interpretation to the Mishna in Avot (Chapter 5):

Avraham Avinu was tested with ten trials and says the Mishna, *amad bekulam* - “he withstood all of them.” The Talner Rebbe suggested that the word *amad*, is also a term for prayer, like *amidah* recited daily. The Mishna is teaching that Avraham prayed to God as he confronted his many challenges - indicating the degree of his love and faith in God. (Torah of the Mind, Torah of the Heart, p. 45)

RABBI AKIVA'S PHENOMENAL FAITH

Of the many eminent sages who dot the pages of the Talmud, the personality of Rabbi Akiva is arguably the most enthralling and inspiring. The Talmud debates the issue of including the book of *Shir Hashirim* in the Tanach. Apparently the Sages grappled with the explicit language and erotic allusions found in the holy book. Rabbi Akiva argued in favor of including *Shir Hashirim* in the Tanach (*Yadayim* 3:5). Rav Kook, in his introduction to *Shir Hashirim* (*Olat Re'iyah* 2:3ff) points out that Rabbi Akiva's love of God and profound faith had the capacity to transcend the personal and the scope of his love was all inclusive. Rav Kook urges us to recall the martyred Rabbi Akiva whose love of Torah transcended fear of death and whose love of God transcended the pain of torture so that as he declared God's unity he was able to let go of his worldly life (*Berachot* 61b). This is Rabbi Akiva, overflowing with love that transcends his personal situation, who sees holiness in every word of *Shir Hashirim*.

One of the most striking stories in the life of Rabbi Akiva was the time that he was able

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to laugh when peering at the ruins of the Beit Hamikdash. His heart was filled with faith and he held fast to a vision of a blissful future when Israel would return to glory and the love that filled his heart could transcend the present sorrow and desolation (*Makkot* 24b).

RAV KOOK'S PROFOUND FAITH

Rabbi Akiva's remarkable ability to see sparks of redemption even in times of darkness was also a hallmark of Rav Kook's outlook. In one of Rav Kook's most well-known dictums he teaches that a Jew always forges ahead with optimism and the confidence to make things better and more holy:

“The purely righteous do not complain about wickedness, they increase righteousness; do not complain about heresy, they increase faith; do not complain about ignorance, they increase wisdom.” (*Arpilei Tohar*)

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Rav Kook didn't just "talk that talk - he walked the walk." He moved to Israel in 1904. He took a small rabbinic post in Yaffo and took responsibility for addressing the multiple needs and issues facing the fledgling Jewish community throughout Palestine.

Not only did Rav Kook believe with his heart and soul that the prophecies of the *Tanach* were tangibly unfolding in his time, he took the notion of prophecy a step further. He deeply believed that the pipelines of prophecy that had been blocked for so long in the long-draw-out exile were now being renewed and revitalized with the return of the people of Israel to her homeland.

"The imagination of the Land of Israel is pure and clear and suited for the appearance of decisive truth, for garbing the lofty, exalted will of the ideal direction that is at the height of holiness; **ready for explication of prophecy** and its light for the shining of divine inspiration and its brightness." (Orot pp. 91-92 in Naor, English translation)

STRIVING TO BE A TZADIK

With a sense of deep humility, Rav Kook, in a letter to an eminent rabbinic colleague, writes that he considers himself to be on the level of a *beinoni* (a Jew who is neither a *rasha* (wicked) nor reaching the level of *tzadik*) and strives to achieve the coveted level of being a *tzadik*.

"Due to my imperfection, I do not deserve the name *Tzadik*. If only God would give me the ability to say with sincerity: "For example,

I am a *Beinoni* / ordinary person" (*Berachot* 62b). Nonetheless, there is no doubt that with the help of God the way that I am trying to follow is the path of *Tzadikim*. Those who follow me and connect to me in the way they study Torah and serve God; those who follow me sincerely with a real faith in the Sages, will eventually merit to see the light and truth within this righteousness." (*Igrot Ha'raaya* 2, p. 197, translation The Spiritual Wisdom of Rav Kook, Schwartz, p. 98) [This excerpt is taken from a letter written to the Ridvaz, Rabbi Yaakov David Wilovsky, a renowned Talmudist, author educator and Rosh Yeshiva in Tzfat, June 9, 1912].

Rav Kook is encouraging each Jew to strive for living righteously and embody the spiritual life delineated by the Torah. There is indeed a "Tzadik" within each individual waiting to be uncovered. For Rav Kook, the word "Tzadik" should not be seen as some lofty unreachable title, but rather used as an archetype and ideal way of living that each individual can and should aspire toward.

Life Lessons:

- Make a commitment to saying even one line of prayer (for example *Poteach et yadecha* from the *Ashrei* prayer) with proper intention.
- Read biographies of Gedolei Torah which will inspire you to lead a richer Jewish life.
- Become a role model. Grow yourself for the sake of the world and inspire others. ■


