

Study Guide

by Rabbi Leora Kaye

How is faith an active experience? What do you have to do in order to have faith? Does faith have to be about God? How does what happens in your life affect your faith? And, really, what makes you think that the next time you reach out your hand to someone, they will shake it back?

Faith, while often used to describe religious belief, goes far beyond theology. At its core, faith is the ability to trust life while actively taking the next step. As opposed to sitting back and waiting for life to happen, we can choose to trust that life will educate us if we engage with it. Through this active engagement, faith allows us to connect to the present moment, and become a participant in creation itself.

① Ability to Trust Life While Taking the Next Step

People often define faith as believing in something even if you have no "proof." Hanan's father points him in a different direction, telling him that faith is really about trusting in life and taking active steps, an idea which echoes thousands of years of Jewish thought.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935, Latvia), a prominent 20th century rabbi commonly known as Rav Kook, comments on the ability to trust life:

A man must trust in his life, must believe in his physical materialistic abilities and his moral ethical strengths together.... When a man believes in his spiritual life, he finds satisfaction with the labors of his soul, and he continually grows and ascends.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, Orot HaEmuna, Introduction

Hanan's father speaks about the same idea:

DADDY: I never said that faith is about making sense. Faith is about **trust**. Faith is our ability to **trust life**.

1. What does it mean when Rav Kook and Daddy say you have to "trust life?" When has that been easy for you? When has it been challenging?
2. Like Rav Kook's encouragement to believe in a person's physical materialistic abilities, Daddy talks with Hanan about how believing in logic and science are not incompatible with faith. Is it easier for you to trust in concrete experiences, or more spiritual metaphysical experiences? Why do you think one feels more comfortable than the other?
3. Does trusting in life feel unpredictable? If so, does it hold you back from being able to do so wholeheartedly? Do you feel you have grown more when you have been able to trust in life the way Daddy suggests?

Episode Nine: "Faith"

Hanan asks Daddy if "trusting life" means we're supposed to simply "let whatever happens, happen." Daddy counters:

DADDY: No! I never said faith was passive. On the contrary! Faith is active! That's the point! Faith is experienced **through** life. It's about **delving into** the **experience** of life....Faith is our ability to trust life while taking the next step.

Judaism is an experiential religion which requires active "doing," as opposed to simply "believing." In order to identify as a Jew, one must engage with the *mitzvot* (מצוות, "commandments"), and while there are numerous ways to do so, a *mitzvah* is ultimately only fulfilled through action. Jewish concepts and ideas come to life through behavior. Similarly, Hanan's father tells him that *faith* cannot be passive.

4. Do you find it is more exciting or more frightening to take next steps when you have no way of knowing what the outcome will be? How often do you do so? How does taking those steps feel like faith to you?
5. When have you "waited for something to happen," and when have you "trusted life and taken the next step?" Which feels more comfortable to you?

② Letting Life Educate Us

When Daddy summarizes faith as the ability to trust life while taking the next step, Hanan becomes concerned:

HANAN: But what if things don't work out the way I want in life? How am I supposed to have faith then?

DADDY: Faith is about letting life educate US, instead of trying to solve life in terms of what we expect life should be.

Judaism is rich with teachings about embracing what life throws at you. Life experiences, whether perceived as good or bad, are all opportunities to receive, grow, and learn.

"The people kept their distance but Moses approached the fog where God was" (*Exodus 20:17*)—When a person...wants to go in the ways of God, the attribute of judgment denounces that person and prevents them from going in God's ways. It also places obstacles before them. Yet, God "is one who desires kindness" (*Micah 7:18*) and hides Himself, as it were, in this obstacle. Thus, someone who is wise will look at the obstacle and uncover within it the Creator, blessed be His name....This is the explanation of the verse "The people kept their distance"—For when they saw the mist, the obstacle, they kept their distance. **"But Moses approached," into the obstacle, which is precisely where God was hidden.**

Likutey Moharan I, 115

Why was he called Nachum of Gamzu? Because whatever befell him he would declare, "This too is for the best"

Note: *Gamzu* (גָמֹז) means "this too" in Hebrew.

Taanit 21a

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1. What happens when you try to solve life? Do you think people are more or less successful when they try to direct what happens in their lives? How does seeing something sacred in an obstacle feel different than trying to direct your life?
2. How frustrating is it when you think you will be able to change an outcome but can't? How does that differ from when you just "experience life," as Daddy says?
3. Sometimes life isn't so easy. What do you think about Nahum of Gamzu's way of living? How realistic is it to say that a person should see the good and the bad as equally beneficial? Can you learn from everything?
4. What are the best things you have learned through life? How have they strengthened your ability to experience faith? What is the difference between the hard and the easy experiences?
5. When obstacles come up in your life, how do they create opportunities to learn?

③ Faith is NOW. Connecting to and Creating the Present Moment

Ironically, while Hanan teaches Daddy about being present and the "reality of expectations" when it comes to being grateful (go watch You Can Dance, on the theme of Gratitude if you haven't!), it is hard for Hanan to understand a similar idea when it comes to faith. He needs Daddy to clearly explain that faith is not about what happens the "next time" or what has happened in the past, it is about connecting to (and participating in creating) the present moment.

Jewish teaching is filled with the idea that the ultimate spiritual experience can only come through connection to the present moment.

So he went to him [R. Joshua b. Levi went, on the instructions of Elijah the prophet, to meet the Messiah who was residing at the gates of Rome]....He asked: 'When will you come, Master?' 'Today' he [the Messiah] answered. On his [R. Joshua b. Levi] return to Elijah, Elijah enquired, 'What did he say to you?' — 'peace Upon thee, O son of Levi,' he [R. Joshua b. Levi] answered. Elijah observed, 'He thereby assured you and your father of [a portion in] the world to come.' 'He spoke falsely to me,' he [R. Joshua b. Levi] rejoined, 'stating that he would come today, but has not.' He [Elijah] answered him, 'This is what the Messiah said to you, "Today, if you will hear His voice" (Ps. 95:7)'!

Sanhedrin 98a

But doesn't religion usually teach that it is all about what happens in the future? Where I will go when I die, based on what I did while I was here? Not Judaism. Judaism doesn't just say today is important, Judaism says it is the *most* important. Don't worry about the future. Connect with the present.

On the verse in Psalm 95 "Today, if you hear His voice" (Ps. 95:7). This is a fundamental principle in the service of God: one should not consider but that [single] day. Just like in the pursuit of a livelihood and one's needs, one must not focus on one day to the next, so too in the service of God, one must focus only on that day and that moment. Since in this world, a person has only the very day and very moment in which he finds himself as tomorrow is a completely different world.

Likutey Moharan I, 272

1. Why do you think Judaism places such importance on the present moment? Do you agree that faith is about being in the present moment?
2. When do you find yourself losing the ability to stay rooted in the present? What kinds of things pull you away from being in the "now?"

Daddy also talks about how connecting to the present moment, through faith, allows us to become participants in creation itself:

DADDY: When we make a choice with faith, it's an **internal** choice, a **creative** choice - we are actually **creating the present moment**, WITHOUT fear of the future or regrets about the past.

The application of this teaching is elucidated in *Sichot HaRan*, a compilation of texts from Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav (1772 – 1810, Ukraine), in which Rabbi Nachman illustrates how obsessing over mistakes in the past can prevent a person from creating a new life in the present:

"The wicked are filled with regrets" (based on *Nedarim 9b*). Man's obsession with his past errors prevents him from being free and open to the changes and his ability to correct in the present. The mistake focuses us on who we once were; and as such, it exists in our lives as a substitute for responsibility and a rejection of renewal and freedom [in our lives].

Adapted interpretation of Sichot HaRan 10 by Tali Kahana

3. How often do past successes or failures affect your present choices? And, how often do your present choices change depending on what you think might happen in the future? Do you see any benefits to focusing on the past or future?
4. What do you think Daddy means when he talks about "creating the present moment?" How does Rabbi Nachman's quote strengthen the concept of "creating the present moment?"
5. How much of what happens in your life do you think is happening "to you," and how much are you "creating?" How does your personal concept of God fit into this balance, and how does this relate to faith?