

## Faith and Doubt

### What is faith?

A Few Ideas On Faith Over The Ages

“Faith is the bird that feels the light when the dawn is still dark.”

Rabindranath Tagore, Bengali Hindu polymath, 20th century

“Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase.”

Martin Luther King, Jr., American civil rights leader

“We are never defeated unless we give up on God.”

Ronald Reagan, POTUS, 1981-1989

“That deep emotional conviction of the presence of a superior reasoning power, which is revealed in the incomprehensible universe, forms my idea of God.”

Albert Einstein, Jewish scientist, 20th century

“Pray as though everything depended on God. Work as though everything depended on you.”

Saint Augustine, Christian theologian, 4th century

“Faith is a passionate intuition.”

William Wordsworth, British poet, 19th century

“Love, hope, fear, faith - these make humanity; These are its sign and note and character.”

Robert Browning, British Poet, 19th Century

Question for discussion: Read these ideas together. Can you find a common theme among these great people?

### **Rabbi Sacks On Faith**

“How do you live with the constant threat of violence and war? That takes faith. Israel is the people that has always been sustained by faith, faith in God, in the future, in life itself. And though Israel is a secular state, its very existence is testimony to faith: the faith of a hundred generations that Jews would return; the faith that led the pioneers to rebuild a land against seemingly impossible odds; the faith that after the Holocaust the Jewish people could live again; the faith that, in the face of death, continues to say: choose life.”

### **Israel – Home of Hope**

“One who asks for proof before he or she is willing to have faith does not understand that faith always involves risk. It is always possible to live without it, but such a life is, in Macbeth’s words, ‘cabined, cribbed, confined, bound... [by] doubts and fears’. Without faith in people, I become a cynic. Without faith in financial institutions, we stop investing and economies founder. Without faith in our fellow citizens, democratic freedoms die. Without faith in God, the Universe slowly becomes meaningless. Life ceases to have an objective purpose. Human life is no longer sacred, nor are our promises, duties and responsibilities. Cultures that lose their religious faith eventually become individualistic and relativist. People become self-seeking and self-sustaining. At first this is experienced as a great liberation, but ultimately it leads to a breakdown of trust, and without trust, societies suffer entropy: a loss of energy and order, leading to decline and decay.”

The Power of Ideas, pp. 127-178

“Faith is not certainty. It is the courage to live with uncertainty. Faith is never easy. The great heroes of the moral life, like the great artists and scientists and thinkers, like anyone who has undertaken to live a life of high ideals, know failure after failure, disappointment after disappointment. What made them great is that they refused to despair. Like Jacob wrestling with the angel, they said to fate, ‘I will not let you go until you bless me’ (Genesis 32:26). Judaism is built on that faith. Jews refused to let go of God, and God refused to let go of them. They wrestle still. So do all who have faith.”

The Great Partnership, Chapter 4, p. 86

“Abraham performed no miracles, commanded no armies, ruled no kingdom, gathered no mass of disciples and made no spectacular prophecies. Yet there can be no serious doubt that he is the most influential person who ever lived, counted today, as he is, as the spiritual grandfather of more than half of the six billion people on the face of the planet.”

“His immediate descendants, the children of Israel, known today as Jews, are a tiny people numbering less than a fifth of a percent of the population of the world. Yet they outlived the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and Romans, the medieval empires of Christianity and Islam, and the regimes of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, all of which opposed Jews, Judaism or both, and all of which seemed impregnable in their day. They disappeared. The Jewish people live.”

“It is no less remarkable that the small, persecuted sect known as the Christians, who also saw themselves as children of Abraham, would one day become the largest movement of any kind in the history of the world, still growing today two centuries after almost every self-respecting European intellectual predicted their faith’s imminent demise.”

“As for Islam, it spread faster and wider than any religious movement in the lifetime of its founder, and endowed the world with imperishable masterpieces of philosophy and poetry, architecture and art, as well as a faith seemingly immune to secularisation or decay.”

“All other civilisations rise and fall. The faith of Abraham survives.”

The Great Partnership, Introduction, p. 12

**Question:** What are the fundamental points in Rabbi Sacks’s view of faith in the modern age?

For Rabbi Sacks, what does a faith based outlook on life lead to personally, and socially?

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## Doubt

### A Few Ideas On Doubt Over The Ages

“One of the painful things about our time is that those who feel certainty are stupid, and those with any imagination and understanding are filled with doubt and indecision.”

Bertrand Russell, British Philosopher, 20th Century

“The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt.”

Sylvia Plath, American novelist, 20th century

“The only limit to our realization of tomorrow will be our doubts of today.”

Franklin D. Roosevelt, POTUS, 1932-1945

“I love it when people doubt me. It makes me work harder to prove them wrong.”

Derek Jeter, New York Yankees Captain, Shortstop and Hall of Famer

“Inaction breeds doubt and fear. Action breeds confidence and courage. If you want to conquer fear, do not sit home and think about it. Go out and get busy.”

Dale Carnegie, American author

“Our doubts are traitors, And make us lose the good we oft might win, By fearing to attempt.”

William Shakespeare, Measure For Measure

Question: Doubt, as expressed by these various cultural icons, can often lead to great things? What are they? Do you agree? Can you think of any examples from history or literature?

### Rabbi Sacks on Doubt

“To ask is to believe that somewhere there is an answer. The fact that throughout history people have devoted their lives to extending the frontiers of knowledge is a compelling testimony to the restlessness of the human spirit and its constant desire to go further, higher, deeper. Far from faith excluding questions, questions testify to faith – that history is not random, that the universe is not impervious to our understanding, that what happens to us is not blind chance. We ask, not because we doubt, but because we believe.”

Jonathan Sacks Haggadah (Essays), p. 106

“I have sought God, not through philosophical proofs, scientific demonstrations or theological arguments; not through miracles or mysteries or inner voices or sudden epiphanies; not by ceasing to question or challenge or doubt; not by blind faith or existential leap; certainly not by abandonment of reason and an embrace of the irrational. These things have brought many people to God. But they have also brought many people to worship things that are not God, like

power, or ideology, or race. Instead I have sought God in people – people in themselves seemed to point to something or someone beyond themselves.”

The Great Partnership, p. 89

Question: It seems from the above citations from Rabbi Sacks, that doubt can often be a springboard to something else. Can you see what that is? Have you ever experienced this?