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My Liberal Faith

The beginning of wisdom is neither the sum nor the end of it

HEN I WAS 18 and a second-year student at the University of Chicago, I enrolled in a seminar on the Book of Genesis taught by the bioethicist Leon Kass. The class changed my life. Never had I been in the company of smarter peers, a more interesting text, or a wiser teacher. I discovered, after a religiously indifferent upbringing, that Judaism has profound things to say about our place in the cosmos, the origins of society, divine and human justice, family obligations, and the duties of upright men. I learned that close textual study of the Bible can reveal layers of meaning I never would have noticed otherwise. To this day, my proudest boast is that you can find a reference to a midterm paper of mine, on the war of the nine kings (Genesis 14), in Kass's landmark book, *The Beginning of Wisdom*.

And then I put Genesis down and moved on. To books that shaped my political philosophy: Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Locke's *Sec-*

ond Treatise, Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, the speeches of Abraham Lincoln, the anti-totalitarian writings of Hannah Arendt, Friedrich Hayek, and Czesław Milosz. To novels that shaped my inner life: Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Conrad's *Lord Jim*, Mann's *Magic Mountain*, Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian*. To a career in journalism that took me from anti-globalization protests in Sweden to the hinterlands of Pakistan, and from a stalwart neoconservatism to a more middle-ground type of politics. The beginning of wisdom, I learned over time, was neither the sum nor the end of it.

I discovered my faith at the University of Chicago, but it wasn't religious. It was a liberal faith.

What is a liberal faith? There are specifically political ways of addressing that question — that is, faith in a liberal order that puts the protection of individual liberty, conscience, and initiative at the center of its concerns. That's a faith I share, even if I don't subscribe to the more common understanding of "liberalism" as a program of big-government responses to economic and social problems.

But what I'm writing about here is something more personal: liberal without the "ism." This is liberal as an attitude toward life; an openness to new ideas and different ways of being; a readiness to accept doubt, ambiguity, uncertainty, and contradiction; an ability to hold a conviction while occasionally allowing it to be shaken; a right to change your mind and reinvent yourself. It is the belief that, at its best, a liberal faith can be a more honest, interesting, and rewarding approach to life than alternatives based in tradition, dogma, or ideology.

My liberal faith is rooted in three well-known lines that have stuck with me over the years. Thomas Jefferson: "the pursuit of Happi-

ness." Learned Hand: "The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right." And Pericles: "Happiness depends on being free, and freedom depends on being courageous."

The pursuit of happiness —

It's the thought that animates Elizabeth Bennet, the heroine of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, when she tells off the pompous, interfering Lady Catherine: "I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to you, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me." It's the idea that persuades Philip Carey, the unlucky protagonist of Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*, finally to stop living "by what he thought he should do and never by what he wanted with his whole soul to do." It's the conviction that life comes with the God-given right to live for ourselves, rather than for the sake of social expectation, cultural convention, or the demands of the more powerful.

What makes the pursuit of happiness so compelling to billions of people around the world is its combination of radical universalism and equally radical subjectivity. To whom does the right to pursue happiness belong, according to the Declaration of Independence? To everyone. Who gets the last word in defining your happiness? You — and you alone. The novelist (and later Nobelist) V.S. Naipaul — who migrated in the 1950s from colonial Trinidad to England, where he rose to the summit of the literary establishment — gave what I think is the best description of what the pursuit of happiness meant in a 1990 speech to the Manhattan Institute. "It implies a certain kind of society, a certain kind of awakened spirit," he said.

> I don't imagine my father's Hindu parents would have been able to understand the idea. So much is contained in it: the idea of the

individual, responsibility, choice, the life of the intellect, the idea of vocation and perfectibility and achievement. It is an immense human idea. It cannot be reduced to a fixed system. It cannot generate fanaticism.

In a liberal society, it is easy to notice the ways in which the pursuit of happiness can go astray: in pleasure-seeking, greed, or disdain for ancient wisdom and long experience. But it shouldn't be hard to see, also, the good that comes when people's imagination and initiative are freed so that they may pursue their notion of happiness — or when they learn to accept that their pursuit must find ways to coexist with everyone else's. The result is a kind of squaring of the circle: In giving each person a fair shot at fulfilling his heart's desire, the liberal faith generates respect for the right of others to do the same. Instead of teaching selfishness, it enlarges our sympathetic imagination.

The spirit which is not too sure it is right —

The line is from a lapidary speech that Learned Hand, the legendary jurist, delivered in 1944 for "I Am an American Day." It goes to the core of the liberal faith, which is the check against certitude and the despotic mindset that certitude spawns. It also entails a paradox: The liberal faith asks us to be certain about our lack of certainty, to commit ourselves to being, in a sense, uncommitted.

This attitude is why democracies generally allow illiberal parties to compete in free elections, while crossing fingers that the bad guys don't win. Sometimes the results have been catastrophic — it's what made possible Hitler's rise to power — but it also denies those illiberal parties the ability to claim that they are victims of a hypocritical system rigged against them.

But the more important point is personal: To be "not too sure" we are right isn't to say we are wrong. It isn't a recipe for crippling self-doubt. Instead, it's an invitation to a productive middle ground between confidence and skepticism, between having enough of the former to move ourselves forward and enough of the latter to revisit our assumptions and admit our mistakes.

It isn't easy to live with an inner tension between impulses that pull in opposite directions. But just as religious faiths impose certain disciplines, such as abstaining from some foods, so does the liberal faith. It does so in the service not of holiness but of intelligence. It asks us to subscribe not to a belief, per se, but rather to a method, a practice of advancing our thoughts the way a person climbing a mountain slope of loose rock advances his steps — one step up and a half-one down — until the ground settles securely underfoot. The nagging doubt of being not too sure we are right may be tiring, but it keeps us mentally fit and intellectually honest.

It also allows us to keep an open mind. To be not too sure we are right is to adopt the spirit of John Maynard Keynes's famous riposte: "When the facts change, I change my mind — what do you do, sir?" That could usefully serve as the motto for any university where certitude has replaced skepticism as the dominant intellectual attitude. For that matter, the motto works for any institution that seeks to process all new information merely as confirmation of its prior assumptions. Certitude is a road to intellectual stagnation and the mistakes that flow from it. It's the path of personal and social decay.

A final point: To be not too sure we are right strengthens our minds, but it also softens our hearts. To preserve a touch of self-doubt means looking for extenuating motives before we make hard-and-fast judgments, looking for complexities where others insist on pitiless simplicities. The liberal faith does not insist that we "judge not, that ye be not judged," because judgment is also a part of wisdom. But it

does insist that we judge more carefully — which will, in most cases, move us to judge more kindly.

Happiness, freedom, and courage —

Pericles's Funeral Oration, delivered around 430 B.C.E. in memory of the war dead and recorded by Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, tells us that the liberal faith is not for the faint of heart. This is true in at least two senses.

First, the liberal faith is not "self-evident"; it has external enemies. The world is filled with people who do not want you to speak your mind, pursue your bliss, express your individuality, and maintain your freedom of action. They are numerous, willful, and usually aggressive, whether they sit in Russian Army APCs, fundamentalist religious institutions, or university DEI offices. Because their aim is to impose themselves, they tend to leave liberals with no option to ignore or avoid them. The liberal faith is therefore one of unsought, but unavoidable, opposition. It takes courage.

Sometimes the courage is martial. On July 14, 1861, Sullivan Ballou, a 32-year-old major in the 2nd Rhode Island Infantry, penned a famous letter to his wife Sarah on the eve of the Battle of Bull Run. "If it is necessary that I should fall on the battlefield for my country, I am ready," he wrote. "I have no misgivings about, or lack of confidence in, the cause in which I am engaged, and my courage does not halt or falter." Ballou's leg was shattered by a Confederate six-pound cannon ball; he died of his wounds two weeks later.

At other times, the courage is moral. Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat on a bus in segregated Alabama is a famous example. More often, the courage goes unsung or belittled. When I think of moral courage, some of the names that spring to mind today are Abigail Shrier, for questioning transgender ideology, and Hadley Freeman,

for calling out the Left's antisemitism, and Masih Alinejad, for fighting for women's freedoms in Iran, and Lionel Shriver, for her amused and determined indifference to every politically correct piety.

But the external enemies of the liberal faith are only half the story. The other half is the story of the enemy within each of us: the inner voice that whispers a preference for conformity, or that wishes others would make our choices for us, or that seeks to avoid the moral accountability that goes with personal liberty. As the proto-totalitarian character Leo Naphta says in *Magic Mountain*, "It is ultimately a cruel misunderstanding of youth to believe it will find its heart's desire in freedom. Its deepest desire is to obey."

Liberal faith is the faith that inspires us to resist that grim analysis. It's the faith that tells us to summon our courage, to vanquish those who would have us submit, to still the inner desire to surrender. It's the faith that gives us freedom not only for its own sake, but also for what it chiefly offers: the chance to pursue our happiness.

So where does all this leave my Jewish faith?

The answer is: more or less where I left it after that unforgettable seminar with Leon Kass. I think of my Jewishness as an identity, a sensibility, an inheritance, a fate, a gift, a weight — above all, as a fundamental responsibility. "A Jew I am, and a Jew will I remain" is what one shipwrecked Jew (described in the *Shevet Yehudah*, a 16th-century record of the persecutions of the Jews in different countries and times) supposedly cried out after the loss of his whole family. It's a good enough motto for me.

Still, I will continue to raid the proverbial cupboards of Judaism to reaffirm my liberal faith. The iconoclasm of Abraham. The freedom-seeking of Moses. The warts-and-all humanity of our prophets

and heroes. The monotheism that undergirds the ethical universalism and, ultimately, intellectual rationalism without which liberal faith could not exist. The commitment to universal literacy and education. The joy of argument and respect for dissent.

That Jewish faith whose rituals I rarely practice and sometimes disdain nonetheless laid the foundation stones on which my liberal faith is built. For that, I remain deeply grateful. One day, perhaps, the gratitude will blossom into something more. ✳

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