

CLASS 1

PATHWAYS TO FAITH



VINCENT BATAULT/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

FRAMING

People have many ideologies and beliefs they shape their lives around, both consciously and unconsciously. People hold beliefs about many issues—social, political, economic, moral, religious, and otherwise—that so fundamentally represent who they are that these can actually be described as articles of faith.

CLASS STRUCTURE

This class consists of four texts.

- 1 The first text is the opening faith narrative of the Bible, God's call to Abraham. It offers us a foundation for asking such questions as:
 - What makes people choose to commit to certain beliefs or faiths?
 - What is the role of received wisdom?
Of rationality? Of relationship?
 - How certain are people of their own beliefs and what they commit themselves to?
- 2-4 The following three texts offer three different orientations to answering these questions:
 - Mystery (Zornberg)
 - Rationalism (Maimonides)
 - Experience (Heschel)

Source 1



Genesis 12:1-9

The goal of reading this text together is to examine the Bible's case of the original believer. In offering their own interpretations of this narrative, participants can examine their own ideas about what a journey to faith entails.

BACKGROUND

- This is God's first call to Abram, telling him that God wants to make him into a great nation.
- This story marks a transition point in the Torah—from the more universal narratives of creation and the flood to the particular story of the Jewish people.
- This is the Bible's first instance of someone who chooses faith as a way of life for themselves.

KEY IDEAS

- The story is opaque. It does not explain why God chose Abram or why Abram chose God.
- Scholars have read this story many ways, and those different perspectives reflect different ideas of what faith is about. The plain meaning of the text describes Abram as being radically obedient, going somewhere without knowing the final destination. But others may read this narrative quite differently.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why does God choose Abram? And why does Abram heed God's call?
- In what ways does the mystery of the story mirror the experience of faith itself?
- Faith can encompass a lot of things, not just one's relationship to God. How do you think about your own relationship to faith? If you were to tell the story of your relationship to faith, what would it include?

Source 2



Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (1996), 74, 76

Sources 2-4 offer three different approaches to the question of how people come to faith. Each of these passages can be read as offering an interpretive lens to the Abraham story, whether explicitly or implicitly.

BACKGROUND

- Dr. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg is a contemporary Bible and Torah scholar.
- She lives in Jerusalem, lectures around the world, and has written a number of books on reading and rereading the Torah.

KEY IDEAS

- In the early chapters of Genesis, characters experience journey as exile—a banishment for something they have done wrong. It is significant that Abram is the first biblical character invited to go on a journey that is a way of seeking God and developing a covenantal relationship rather than a punishment.

- Zornberg emphasizes the element of seeking and trust in the faith relationship. She does not believe that Abram knew what he was undertaking, but that he only sought to find something beyond himself, even if others thought his journey was absurd.
- Abram trusted God enough to take a totally undetermined journey, even though he seemed foolish or ignorant. One person's convictions may seem foolish to others. The subjectivity and trust itself may always be a part of what faith means.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How have you experienced journey in your own life? As displacement? Adventure? Seeking? Something else?
- Zornberg emphasizes that faith brings one beyond simply their own self-awareness. How do you understand that idea?
- Why would anyone undertake a journey that is absurd? Do you find her description of Abram's faith origin story compelling? Why or why not?
- Have you ever embarked on a journey that others have thought absurd but that you pursued based on your own sense of conviction about its worthiness and truth?

Source 3



Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Idolatry 1:2-3

BACKGROUND

- Rabbi Moses ben Maimon was a 12th-century rabbi, legal scholar, rationalist philosopher, and doctor. He was a major Jewish philosopher of the medieval period.
- This is part of Maimonides's legal opus, the *Mishneh Torah*, in which he took laws that appeared in rabbinic literature and categorized them by topic.
- This section is part of the laws of idolatry, but it also serves as a larger reflection on faith and theology.

KEY IDEAS

- Maimonides interprets Abram's journey very differently than Zornberg does. Rather than emphasizing the uncertainty of faith, Maimonides asserts that Abram's faith is born out of logic and reasoning rather than blind acceptance of God's command.
- According to Maimonides, Abram must have already had figured out that there was only one God, so God's call was an affirmation of what he already knew rather than a first step toward monotheism.
- For Maimonides, faith must be grounded in logical reasoning.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- In Maimonides' day, the idea of rational faith meant formally proving God's existence. What does the idea of rational faith mean today?
- This reading of Abram is radically different from Zornberg's description of faith. How do you understand the relationship between religious faith and reasoning? Do you think they are in harmony with each other?
- We have presented two models of the faithful: the trusting seeker and the rational analyst. How might a person live their life differently based on these different models?

Source 4



Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (1951), 165

BACKGROUND

- Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was a leading Jewish theologian and philosopher of the 20th century.
- He served as a professor of Jewish mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and was an activist on social justice issues, including civil rights and opposition to the Vietnam War.

KEY IDEAS

- Rabbi Heschel introduces an experiential component to how people come to faith.
- The handing down of tradition from generation to generation is insufficient for faith. Rather, people come to faith and sustain it as a result of experiencing God's presence even for a moment.
- Heschel's image of faith is about sustaining the reality of momentary experiences that move us beyond the empirical world.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What do you think Heschel means by experiencing the "momentous reality of God"? Have you ever experienced this in your own life? What made you consider that event to be an experience of God?
- Heschel's understanding of faith is deeply subjective. In what ways does that subjectivity strengthen the notion of faith? In what way does it weaken that notion?

CLASS ENDURING UNDERSTANDINGS

- There are many pathways to faith in God.
- Some pathways emphasize the elements of trust and mystery in faith.
- Other pathways attempt to rationalize faith.
- Still others focus on personal experience and wonder as a source of faith.

For Further Reading:



Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (1998), 3–4

This source offers perspective on how the idea of journey inspires broader religious trends relating to institutional versus individual spirituality.

BACKGROUND

- Dr. Robert Wuthnow is an American sociologist who studied American religion.
- In this book, he describes what has changed about American religious life, broadly speaking, over the course of the second half of the 20th century.

KEY IDEAS

- There is a difference between the spirituality of dwelling and the spirituality of seeking.
- The spirituality of dwelling emphasizes the stability of a life of faith, including certainty and belonging.
- The spirituality of seeking emphasizes the search. By definition, the spirituality of seeking involves less certainty.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Read together, Zornberg and Wuthnow both emphasize the relationship between faith and seeking—a journey rather than a clear destination.
- In what ways do these ideas about faith resonate with you? How much do you feel as though you are seeking or journeying in your faith and how much do you feel at home in your faith?
- **Optional:** *As an interfaith couple, how do you experience seeking and dwelling in the case of faith commitments?*



CLASS 1 PATHWAYS TO FAITH

Source 1



Genesis (Bereshit) 12:1-9

- א וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-אַבְרָם לֵךְ לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָךְ.
- 1 The LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you.
- ב וְאֶעֱשֶׂךָ לְגוֹי גָדוֹל וְאֶבְרַכְךָ וְאֶגְדַּלְךָ שְׁמִי וְהָיָה בְרָכָה.
- 2 I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing.
- ג וְאֶבְרַכְךָ מִבְּרַכְיָךְ וּמִקְלָלְךָ אֲאָר וְנִבְרַכְוּ בְּךָ כָּל מִשְׁפַּחַת הָאָדָמָה.
- 3 I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you."
- ד וַיֵּצֵא אֲבְרָם וְלוֹט בְּנֵי אִמָּתוֹ וְסָרַי אִשְׁתּוֹ וְכָל הָאֲשֵׁר רָכָשׁוּ וְאֵת הַנֶּפֶשׁ וַיֵּצֵאוּ מִחָרָן וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן.
- 4 Abram went forth as the LORD had commanded him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran.
- ה וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָם אֶת שָׂרַי אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאֵת לוֹט בֶּן אָחִיו וְאֵת כָּל רְכוּשָׁם אֲשֶׁר רָכָשׁוּ וְאֵת הַנֶּפֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ בְּחָרָן וַיֵּצֵאוּ לְלֶכֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן.
- 5 Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed, and the persons that they had acquired in Haran; and they set out for the land of Canaan. When they arrived in the land of Canaan,
- ו וַיַּעֲבֵר אַבְרָם בְּאֶרֶץ עַד מְקוֹם שְׁכֵם עַד אֵלוֹן מוֹרֶה וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי אָז בְּאֶרֶץ.
- 6 Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, at the terebinth of Moreh. The Canaanites were then in the land.



ז וַיֵּרָא ה' אֶל אַבְרָם וַיֹּאמֶר לְזַרְעֲךָ אֶתְּן אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת וַיְבַן שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ לַיהוָה הַנִּרְאָה אֵלָיו.

- 7 The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “I will assign this land to your offspring.”
And he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him.

ח וַיַּעֲתֶק מִשָּׁם הַהָרָה מִקְדָּם לְבֵית אֵל וַיֵּט אֶהָלָה בֵּית אֵל מִיָּם וְהָעִי מִקְדָּם וַיְבַן שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ לַיהוָה וַיִּקְרָא בְּשֵׁם ה'.

- 8 From there he moved on to the hill country east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and he built there an altar to the LORD and invoked the LORD by name.

ט וַיִּסַּע אַבְרָם הַלְוִי וְנִסְוַע הַנְּגַבָּה.

Source 2



Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (1996), 74, 76

Here begins the journey of *Lekh lekha* (12:1)...For the first time, a journey is undertaken not as an act of exile and diminution (Adam, Cain and the dispersed generation of Babel), but as a response to a divine imperative that articulates and emphasizes displacement as its crucial experience.

For what is most striking here is the indeterminacy of the journey. What is left behind, canceled out, is defined, clearly circled on the map of Abram's being; but his destination is merely “the land that I shall show you”: from “your land,” the landscape of your basic self-awareness, to a place that you will know only when the light falls on it with a difference...

Midrash Tanhuma espouses this view of Abram's first trials: “Is there a person who travels without knowing to what destination he travels?” A journey without apparent destination: absurdity at each step. The midrash gives us mocking voices that weave through Abram's consciousness as he travels: “Look at this old man! Traveling through the country, looking like a madman!”



Source 3



Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Idolatry 1:2-3

- ב...והחכמים שהיו בהם כגון כהניהם וכיוצא בהן מדמין שאין שם אלוה אלא הפוכבים והגלגלים שנעשו הצורות האלו בגלגלם ולדמותן. אבל צור העולמים לא היה שום אדם שהיה מפירו ולא יודעו אלא יחידים בעולם כגון חנוך ומתושלח נח שם ועבר. ועל דרך זה היה העולם הולך ומתגלגל עד שנולד עמודו של עולם והוא אברהם אבינו:
- 2 ...The wise men among them would think that there is no God other than the stars and spheres for whose sake, and in resemblance of which, they had made these images. The Eternal Rock was not recognized or known by anyone in the world, with the exception of a [few] individuals: for example, Hanoch, Metushelah, Noah, Shem, and Ever. The world continued in this fashion until the pillar of the world - the Patriarch Abraham - was born.
- ג כיון שנגמל איתן זה התחיל לשוטט בדעתו והוא קטן והתחיל לחשב ביום ובלילה והיה תמה היאך אפשר שיהיה הגלגל הזה נוהג תמיד ולא יהיה לו מנהיג ומי יסבב אותו. כי אי אפשר שיסבב את עצמו. ולא היה לו מלמד ולא מודיע דבר אלא משקע באור פשדים בין עובדי כוכבים הטפשים ואביו ואמו וכל העם עובדי כוכבים והוא עובד עמהם ולבו משוטט ומבין עד שהשיג דרך האמת והבין קו הצדק מתבוננתו הנכונה. וידע שיש שם אלוה אחד והוא מנהיג הגלגל והוא ברא הכל ואין בכל הנמצא אלוה חוץ ממנו. וידע שכל העולם טועים ודבר שגורם להם לטעות זה שעובדים את הכוכבים ואת הצורות עד שאבד האמת מדעתם. וכן ארבעים שנה הכיר אברהם את בוראו.
- 3 After this mighty man was weaned, he began to explore and think. Though he was a child, he began to think [incessantly] throughout the day and night, wondering: How is it possible for the sphere to continue to revolve without having anyone controlling it? Who is causing it to revolve? Surely, it does not cause itself to revolve. He had no teacher, nor was there anyone to inform him. Rather, he was mired in Ur Kasdim among the foolish idolaters. His father, mother, and all the people [around him] were idol worshipers, and he would worship with them. [However,] his heart was exploring and [gaining] understanding. Ultimately, he appreciated the way of truth and understood the path of righteousness through his accurate comprehension. He realized that there was one God who controlled the sphere, that He created everything, and that there is no other God among all the other entities. He knew that the entire world was making a mistake. What caused them to err was their service of the stars and images, which made them lose awareness of the truth. Abraham was forty years old when he became aware of his Creator.



Source 4



Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (1951), 165

Authentic faith is more than an echo of a tradition. It is a creative situation, an event. For God is not always silent, and man is not always blind. In every man's life there are moments when there is a lifting of the veil of the horizon of the known, opening a sight of the eternal. Each of us has at least once in his life experienced the momentous reality of God. Each of us has once caught a glimpse of the beauty, peace and power that flow through the souls of those who are devoted to Him. But such experiences or inspirations are rare events. To some people they are like shooting stars, passing and unremembered. In others they kindle a light that is never quenched.

The remembrance of that experience and the loyalty to the response of that moment are the forces that sustain our faith. In this sense, faith is faithfulness, loyalty to an event, loyalty to our response.

For Further Reading



Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (1998), 3-4

The thesis of this book is that a profound change in our spiritual practices has indeed taken place during the last half of the twentieth century but not in the usual sense. My focus is not on laws against reading the Ten Commandments in classrooms or on how many people belong to religious organizations. I am interested in the more subtle reordering that has taken place in how Americans understand the sacred itself. In brief, I argue that a traditional spirituality of inhabiting sacred places has given way to a new spirituality of seeking—that people have been losing faith in a metaphysic that can make them feel at home in the universe and that they increasingly negotiate among competing glimpses of the sacred, seeking partial knowledge and practical wisdom... A spirituality of dwelling emphasizes habitation: God occupies a definite place in the universe and creates a sacred space in which humans too can dwell; to inhabit sacred space is to know its territory and to feel secure. A spirituality of seeking emphasizes negotiation: individuals search for sacred moments that reinforce their conviction that the divine exists, but these moments are fleeting; rather than knowing the territory, people explore new spiritual vistas, and they may have to negotiate among complex and confusing meanings of spirituality.