



WITHIN YOUR GATES

בשעריך פי אָבֻדִּים

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## Faith and the Language of Empathy

**Author(s):** Meir Kraus

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Can the language of faith meaningfully contribute to creating empathy among people, nations, and communities? Does it bring people closer, enabling them to listen, respect, show compassion, and perhaps even build brotherhood and solidarity? Or does the language of faith, at times, create distance, exclusion, and blindness, even intensifying enmity between peoples?

The concrete question before us is whether, and how, it is possible to use the language of faith—or rather, the various languages of faith—as a foundation that enables us, Israelis and Palestinians alike, to see, to listen, and to speak to one another. Such a foundation is essential on the path toward resolving the conflict between us.

The reflections that follow are only initial thoughts—a first step toward what I hope will become a profound conversation, a preface to critical dialogue for those who seek reconciliation and peace. This introduction may raise more questions than it answers.

The power of any language to shape the consciousness of its speakers lies in how it carries within it a particular faith, culture, tradition, and historical memory. I write from within the Jewish religious and cultural tradition of which I am a part, and only from within it can I speak authentically.

The Jewish tradition encompasses a wide range of genres— theological concepts, myths, philosophy, halakhic rules and practices, midrash, historical memory, and modern Jewish art and literature. Together, these intertwine to shape Jewish consciousness and contemporary Jewish language. This language, in all its layers, infuses concrete historical circumstances with theological, religious, national, mythical, and historical meanings. For these reasons, when referring to the Jewish dimension, I prefer to speak of *the language of Jewish tradition* rather than simply “the language of faith.”

These layers of language can at times grant us a broader moral and spiritual perspective on historical events, helping us see beyond painful and bloody realities and remain true to our

ethical commitments. They call us to pursue our vision even in times of great trial. Yet in other moments, these same layers bind our experience within an ideological, spiritual, and moral framework that locks us into hatred and hostility, leaving no room to move forward toward empathy. Both possibilities, as we shall see, arise from the very nature of that language.

In addition to exploring the elements within the Jewish tradition that can promote closeness, attentiveness, respect, and solidarity, I also wish to reflect—honestly and painfully—on how we sometimes misuse this same language, allowing it to distance us from empathy in this conflict.

The elements that can serve as a platform for brotherhood are not unique to Judaism; they are universal and exist in Christianity and Islam as well.

Core principles in the language of faith that nurture empathy and solidarity:

- Creation: In the language of faith, there is a Creator. God created the first human being, from whom we all descend. Humanity is therefore one family.
- Divine Fatherhood: God is not only the Creator but also the Father of us all. If He is our Father, then we—all human beings—are brothers and sisters.
- The Image of God: All people are created in the image of God, each as they are. This gives every person intrinsic worth, demands dignity and respect, establishes freedom, moral responsibility, and equality, and endows human life with meaning.

Even Islam, which for theological reasons rejects the anthropomorphic notion of the “image of God,” fully shares the idea that human beings have intrinsic value as God’s creations. In Judaism, this concept is not abstract—it carries concrete halakhic implications in how we treat our own bodies and the bodies of others.

- Ethical Divine Order: God governs the world ethically. He is merciful, forgiving, compassionate, and kind. We are therefore obliged to live ethically, and the true test of that life lies in the social realm—in how we treat one another. The Jewish tradition calls upon us to imitate God: “Just as He is merciful, so you must be merciful; just as He is gracious, so you must be gracious.” Religion thus entails not only moral obligation but also an emotional response of love, compassion, and fraternity.
- Repentance: Faith teaches that human beings err, yet they can repent, correct themselves, and begin anew. This belief shapes our attitude toward others: since they, too, err, we must forgive them as God forgives us, allowing the possibility of renewal.
- A Hopeful Future: History has direction. The future will bring a better world—morally and physically—a world of abundance and peace. Isaiah’s vision may be

eschatological, but the value of peace is beyond question. The sages even said that “Peace” is one of God’s names.

All these principles—creation, divine image, common parenthood, ethical duty, repentance, and messianic hope—facilitate a moral framework that encourages empathy and solidarity.

The Israeli poet Zelda, writing from faith, invokes this shared creation and common Father to call for human brotherhood:

*Isn't there one Father for us all,*

*Isn't there one God who created us?*

*Why should we betray one another, brother against brother?*

*Why should we destroy each other?*

*Are not the babies across the canal also human—  
like vines and figs?*

*And is there not an old woman whose head aches,  
an old man with failing eyes*

*who walks carefully down the street*

*until he reaches the gate of the horizon, the gate of nothingness?*

*(“The Spirit of the Mountains,” from And to Love Life with a Broken Heart)*

If faith indeed provides such a foundation for empathy and solidarity, why then does it so often appear to foster alienation and violence? One might expect that the language of faith would utterly reject war—yet history proves otherwise. Wars have been waged both by believers and in the name of belief. Faith’s language has often served to distance, erase, and demonize the other. Why?

I wish to demonstrate this phenomenon within the Jewish religious-cultural space, showing how elements of Jewish language have been used to interpret and even sanctify contemporary war. I will present how we use religious metaphors to intensify hostility and how we frame the war through a mythical-historical memory.

Twice a year, we read in the synagogue the biblical story of Amalek—the war described as God’s war. Because of Amalek’s cruelty, the Israelites were commanded to “wipe out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.” Over centuries, Jewish interpretation recontextualized this commandment as a call to oppose ultimate evil in any form, rather than to destroy a real nation. Amalek became a symbol, not a people.

Now, after the horrific massacre of October 7, “Amalek” has returned to Jewish discourse. Hamas has been rightly cast as the embodiment of ultimate evil, the Amalek of our

time. Yet when we cite “Remember what Amalek did to you,” does Amalek remain a mythic symbol—or has it once again become flesh and blood, a real people? Once we equate Amalek with Hamas, the step to calling this “God’s war” is very short, and then can any empathy survive for the innocent civilians of Gaza?

Similarly, during Passover, we recall the journey from slavery to freedom and read in the *Haggadah*: “In every generation they rise against us to destroy us.” This refrain, rooted in undeniable history, has also become mythic, transformed into “Esau hates Jacob,” eternally. In this view, the Palestinians become simply the latest Esau. The conflict, rather than a territorial one, becomes part of an eternal, mythical struggle—one that admits no resolution.

Living within what Heschel called “the architecture of Jewish time” endows our lives with deep spiritual meaning, but it also confronts us with grave moral challenges. There is no way for Jews/Israelis to ignore the meanings embedded within the tradition that has accompanied them for thousands of years. How modern Israel should relate to the problematic texts and deal with the moral challenges is at the center of Israel’s main internal disputes. In times of crisis, the challenge is becoming even harder. Amid the trauma of October 7, even God, the merciful Father of all nations, is invoked as a God of vengeance: “God of vengeance, O Lord, God of vengeance, appear!” (Psalm 94:1).

These examples are drawn from within my own Jewish tradition, and I offer them in sorrow. Yet the broader question—how the language of faith shapes empathy—is universal. Every nation, ethnicity, and religion must undertake its own self-examination within its cultural and linguistic framework.

At the heart of this reflection lies a crucial paradox: the very religious foundation that affirms universal human solidarity—the recognition that all are God’s creations—collides with the boundaries we draw between different ethnic groups, national groups, and religious ones. These distinctions define who belongs within our circle of empathy and who remains outside of it—often leading to dehumanization and moral blindness.

Can we dismantle these boundaries and realize the universal potential of the language of faith? Can we, as human beings, transcend our particularity? It is tempting to answer “yes,” as in the song *Imagine*, yet can we truly shed our differences?

Human difference is a fact. The challenge is not to erase it but to resist chauvinism. Solidarity and empathy must be pursued not by erasing the differences but through them.

The Hebrew Bible commands care for “the stranger” no fewer than thirty-six times. “The stranger who dwells among you” must be seen, heard, and treated equally. The Torah does more than command justice; it calls for love: “You shall love the stranger, for you were

strangers in the land of Egypt.” The memory of suffering should awaken empathy—and compel us to ensure that others do not suffer as we once did.

Yet can the language of faith truly ask us to transform our emotions toward our enemies, as it asks us to love the stranger? I am not sure. But perhaps what faith can—and must—demand is control over our actions, even toward those we perceive as enemies. That, I believe, is achievable.

Does the Hebrew Bible’s repeated concern for the stranger reflect God’s supreme valuation of the Other—or does it acknowledge humanity’s persistent failure in dealing with outsiders? I do not know. But I do know this: empathy, closeness, and solidarity remain profound challenges—even within the language of faith. Let us work on them.