

August 29, 2008

Now that the tickets of both major parties are set, it is clear that “faith” will continue to be, at the very least, an underlying issue in the 2008 Presidential campaign. The role of faith in this year’s election had already been established months ago, well before both candidates appeared at Saddleback Church to be interviewed by Pastor Rick Warren.

*There are diverse notions about faith among the presidential candidates, which I view as fortunate and also reflective of our country and much of the human population. Among the views not included in this small group are those expressed in books like *Letter to a Christian Nation*, by Sam Harris. The atheism he espouses is also a part of our American landscape of faith, especially where faith, according to one definition, is “the process of finding meaning and purpose in life.”*

Phrases like “blind faith” or “accepting a belief on faith” may lead some people to conclude that faith means affirming a principle or idea despite the evidence at hand or contrary to what science or nature shows us to be true. That would make “faith” a synonym of “uncertainty.”

*The Hebrew word that comes closest to the “faith” is *emunah*. Edith Samuel, in *Your Jewish Lexicon*, explained that *emunah*, in Judaism, does not call to mind any particular dogma or any one theological principle. The verb from the same root, *he’emin*, means to trust, have confidence, or be steadfast. In addition to faith, *emunah* can mean trust, confidence, firmness and reliability. This is close to the synonyms for the English word “faith” listed in a common thesaurus: confidence, reliance, assurance, conviction, commitment, dedication, trust, and loyalty.*

*We could apply the word faith to the conviction of any one candidate, the dedication of an individual voter to a party or to his or her views, or one’s commitment to a cause. One word that is not listed as a synonym of faith is passion, which we often affirm when we say that we respect “the courage of a person’s convictions” (even when we disagree). In his *Thirteen Principles of Faith*, Moses Maimonides (12th Century) repeated the phrase, “I believe with complete faith/*emunah*” as he set in writing the Jewish convictions of his time. Moses Mendelssohn, the 18th Century philosopher, suggested that we should translate Maimonides’ formula not as “I believe” but, rather, “I am firmly convinced!”*

*The word with which we are most familiar related to *emunah* is “Amen,” meaning “so be it” or “it is so!” It is our way of showing affirmation or agreement to what we hear. The book of Deuteronomy, which we will read throughout the coming month, defines *emunah* in terms of our relationship with God and, especially, how we act, declaring that we should walk in divine paths, revere creation, observe appropriate limits to our behavior, listen for guidance that can lead us to goodness, give thanks and praise for life, and cling to the higher purposes and values for which we strive.*

Even with the diverse meanings and notions of faith that we will witness in the coming months, let us hope that our conviction that we are all connected and responsible for one another will lead us to openness, understanding and positive choices in the New Year.

**-- L'shalom,
Rabbi Larry K.**