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Trust is fundamental to faith

FEBRUARY 21, 2015, POSTED BY LINCOLN SHLENSKY



How is religious faith related to human trust? I have often pondered this question in my religious practice as a Jew and in my social activism. To get at the question's nub, let me start with a true story.

At the end of the eighteenth century, in England, a remarkable grassroots political movement took shape. Facing off against deeply entrenched business and government interests, a small group formed the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade.

What allowed the twelve members of the Committee to surmount the overwhelming odds they faced in rousing public sentiment to this historically unprecedented effort to secure the rights of others? It wasn't the morality of their cause, which, we know, is no guarantee of political success.

Thomas Clarkson and the other English abolitionists recognized two key factors that would be crucial to their success. First, they needed to connect their concern with the distant issue of slavery in the Americas to local conditions in England. "The abolitionists' first job," Adam Hochschild tells us in *Bury the Chains* (2006), "was to make Britons understand what lay behind the sugar they ate, the tobacco they smoked, the coffee they drank."

Just as importantly, these activists, whose hard-won victory unconsciously informs much human and civil rights advocacy today, understood deeply the importance of fostering trust.

The Committee members realized that the only way they would succeed

as a group was to form key interdenominational alliances among Quakers and Anglicans and, above all, to place trust in each other.

Most strikingly, for a group composed of twelve prominent personalities, they also agreed that a quorum for making decisions would be only three people! This is the most remarkable evidence of the unity of their goals—and of the enormous trust they felt it necessary to invest in each other.

It took the abolitionist movement some twenty years to achieve the aim of ending the British slave trade and another thirty years to succeed in abolishing British slavery itself. But the extraordinary perseverance required to sustain the Committee's work during the many years in which the cause of abolition seemed hopeless was made possible by the extraordinary sense of trust these activists placed in each other.

In my own activist work as part of a newly formed Jewish peace group in Victoria, *If Not Now, When?*, I have observed the vital importance of interpersonal trust. The name of our group is drawn from a phrase used by the Babylonian Jewish sage Hillel, who said: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am for myself only, what am I? If not now, when?" Hillel's words are a resounding call to both self-reflection and action.

The self-reflection that Hillel invokes requires us to notice that our place in the world is secured only through our participation in communities that we support through acts of reciprocal generosity. We cannot act in our own best interests, in other words, if we cannot risk trusting and cooperating with others.

In Hebrew, the word *emunah*, usually translated as "faith," actually is closer in meaning to the English word "trust." *Emunah* is etymologically related to a number of Hebrew words, including *amen*, the common denominator of which is the idea of support. Ancient Hebrew thus reinforces a vital idea of our lived world: trusting others, which inevitably puts us in a position of some vulnerability, is also key to affirming or supporting ourselves and our communities in a turbulent world. The abolitionists knew well the importance of vesting faith—beyond all empirical evidence—by trusting others.

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This article was published in the print edition of the Times Colonist on Saturday Feb 21 2015

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