

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Why Faith Matters

by

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PRELUDE

1. In the Prelude, Wolpe shares a personal event that was both life-changing and faith-affirming. He expresses how in the midst of sadness and grief one can find profound moments of spiritual connection and even joy. He writes, “As with all meetings of the spirit there was not one who gave and one who took; there were two who stood with each other and before God, and even in their sadness, felt blessed,” (p. xv). Have you experienced a similar meeting of souls in your life? Are you able to see light in times of profound sadness? Or do you have a different

point of view than Wolpe when it comes to how you learn and survive in such moments of loss?

2. It is obvious that this encounter was a life-changing event for Wolpe. Think of a time in your life that you consider a spiritual milestone. Looking back, would you say or do anything differently? Was it a spiritually fulfilling event or a missed opportunity?

Exercise

At the conclusion of the Prelude, Wolpe poses a series of pressing questions. Think about these questions in relation to your own life. Write down your answers and be true to your current state of mind and your feelings—unwanted as well as welcome. We'll come back to these questions again at the conclusion of the book.

CHAPTER 1: FROM FAITH TO DOUBT

1. On page 3, Wolpe writes, “Losing one’s faith is stepping off the planet to find oneself spinning in a new orbit.” Was there a time in your life when you felt you had lost your faith? Do you consider yourself a person of faith now? What does that mean to you?
2. In Chapter 1, Wolpe explores doubt. He quotes the theologian Paul Tillich: “Doubt isn’t the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.” Do you recall a time in your life when you experienced doubts about your faith? Were you embarrassed or ashamed by your

doubts or were you able to discuss them openly with people around you?

3. On page 18, Wolpe explores Einstein's idea that there are two ways to see the world: "as if everything is a miracle or as if nothing is a miracle." Naturally we all waver back and forth between seeing the world around us as miraculous or mundane. Which are you naturally inclined toward? Is there a specific incidence that comes to mind in which you can clearly remember seeing everything around you as miraculous? What was that moment like?

CHAPTER 2: WHERE DOES RELIGION COME FROM?

1. In Chapter 2, Wolpe explores the possible origins of faith. One idea is that religion stems from humanity's fear of death. He writes, "I am afraid of dying. While this hardly makes me unique, it does make me suspicious. Is my faith a longing for immortality? Has religion less to do with the existence of God than with fearing my own nonexistence?" What are your answers to Wolpe's questions about mortality? How would you defend or explain your faith to someone who posed these questions to you?
2. On page 32, Wolpe tells the story of Marcelino de Sautuola's daughter, who helped her father discover the ancient cave paintings at Altamira by daring to look up. Recall a time from your own childhood when you experienced that sense of uninhibited wonder and awe. Is this something you have been able to revisit again as an

adult, perhaps vicariously, through a child or grandchild? What were the circumstances and how did it make you feel?

3. Wolpe believes that each of us has a specific call from God. He writes that his became clear to him when he was going through testing for lymphoma. Do you agree with Wolpe? Have you heard your call? If so, what is God calling you to do?

CHAPTER 3: DOES RELIGION CAUSE VIOLENCE?

1. On page 43, Wolpe contends, “The trigger of violence is found less in sacred books than in human nature.” And on page 49 he elaborates by writing that “a world without religion is liable to be as violent, or more violent, than a world with faith.” Do you agree with Wolpe that the same human violence, and perhaps even more extreme cruelty, would exist if we took religion out of the equation? Why or why not? Would humanity simply find a different vehicle for persecution and war, or would a world without religion alleviate violence?
2. Using examples from history, Wolpe makes an argument for the grave dangers of leaders who lack faith or religion. He asks, “What remains when you drain transcendence from a society and leave it with the worship of human beings?” Wolpe argues that the leader replaces God; and because human nature contains innate violence, pain, suffering, and evil will inevitably follow when there is no God to be accountable to that. Do you

agree with Wolpe? Can you think of an historical or current example that negates this theory?

3. A recurring theme in Chapter 3 is the argument of whether humans are born innately good or innately malicious. At the conclusion of the chapter, Wolpe writes, “Inside of every human being is a battle against the pettiness and malice that thread through our character.” Wolpe doesn’t present it as a black and white issue, but one that he sees as a constant internal human battle, and one, he believes, that cannot be overcome without faith in God. Do you agree with Wolpe or do you think it is a black and white issue? Are humans born innately good or innately malicious?

CHAPTER 4: DOES SCIENCE DISPROVE RELIGION?

1. Throughout Chapter 4, Wolpe relates stories from both sides of the spectrum—those of people who believe science and religion are complementary and those of people who believe that they simply cannot co-exist. Wolpe makes his own opinion obvious. After reading this chapter, what is your opinion? Is there room for God in modern science? And, more specifically, is evolution compatible with faith?
2. On page 102, Wolpe writes, “Since there can be no certainty that God does not exist—the most one can say is that there is no evidence of God—why are some so adamant in denying the possibility?” How would you answer Wolpe’s question about why some people are so

determined to deny the possibility that God exists? Even though Wolpe would argue that there is no possible way to actually prove the existence of God with evidence, are there any instances in your own life that you would consider proof or evidence of the existence of God? How would you articulate this proof to someone who was challenging your beliefs?

3. Do you think that believing in God helps science make more sense? Could God be the way to explain the things that science has labeled “unexplainable”? Can you think of any specific scientific holes where the existence of God might help explain the gap in knowledge?

CHAPTER 5: WHAT DOES RELIGION REALLY TEACH?

1. On page 112, Wolpe explains divergent schools in philosophy that he refers to as “lumpers” and “splitters.” Are you a lumper or a splitter? If you are a lumper, what do you think is the greatest similarity between monotheistic faiths? If you are a splitter, what do you think is the greatest difference? How does your orientation as a lumper or a splitter affect your faith?
2. In Chapter 5, Wolpe raises an age-old question: Are we alone? As in, are humans the only life forms of our kind in the universe? Do you think this is a relevant question to your personal faith? If we found out tomorrow that humans are not alone, would that change your faith or your views on God and religion?

3. Wolpe writes that faith's worst enemy is not evil, but indifference. He fears passionlessness more than anger. Do you agree? Have you ever felt indifference toward God or your faith or have you witnessed a loved one express indifference toward religion, God, or their faith? If so, was someone or something able to reach through to you or were you able to reach your loved one?
4. On page 117, Wolpe writes, "Beauty, coherence, and hope are the gifts of belief. Believing opens our eyes—how we approach the world determines what we find in it. [. . .] Love rarely finds the one encased in armor." Do you agree with Wolpe that our mindset determines how we perceive the world? Or is the world more static than that? Think of a time when you found love. Can you remember feeling open and vulnerable? What was the outcome? What about a time when you felt discouraged, lonely, or "armored"? Can you recall any possible missed opportunities during that time?
5. A main theme of Chapter 5 is human suffering and how we can hold on to our faith in the face of it. Wolpe writes that there is no doubt that the world is unfair. After posing the question "If God is all good and all powerful, why would God permit suffering and evil?" Wolpe offers two explanations: free will and moral growth. Do you agree with Wolpe's views on suffering? Do you agree with Wolpe's idea that the question of evil is less about why or if it exists than what we as individuals can do to create more good in the world? Is Wolpe's explanation satisfactory or does it leave the door open for doubt?

6. On page 140, Wolpe explores the topic of prayer. Do you pray? Have you found prayer to be transformative? If so, in what ways specifically? Do you feel closer to God when you pray? Are you ever insecure about your ability to pray “correctly”? Do you believe that prayer is something that can be improved by practice?
7. Traditions are important in all religions and cultures. Do you see the value of tradition, both religious and nonreligious? What are your favorite religious traditions? What are your favorite family traditions that are not necessarily religious? What do these traditions add to your life?
8. The afterlife is discussed in Chapter 5, starting on page 149. Does the afterlife play an active role in your faith? Even if the idea of an afterlife plays a small role in our daily lives, we have all spent time imagining the possibilities of what might happen after we die. Describe what you have imagined, even if, as Wolpe says, it might seem “silly.”
9. Wolpe closes Chapter 5 with a few paragraphs on creation care. Do you feel that creation care is a legitimate aspect of your faith, or do you think it is alarmist or just another scare tactic?

CHAPTER 6: READING THE BIBLE

1. On page 158, Wolpe writes, “The Bible is not written for one era or generation. It has survived because it speaks anew to each receptive spirit, in each successive age.” How do you view the Bible? Do you see it as a living

book or a static text; the word of God to be taken literally or a teaching tool meant to be interpreted based on the situation?

2. Wolpe warns on page 163 of the dangers and misunderstandings that may arise if Bible verses are taken out of context, “. . . the Bible is not *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations*, a place where a single verse can be isolated from all that precedes and follows it.” Have you ever witnessed someone interpreting a Bible verse out of context? What was the situation and were there consequences?
3. Toward the end of Chapter 6, Wolpe discusses two ways of reading the Bible: for factual support or for illumination. How were you taught to read the Bible? Do you read for facts or for illumination? Wolpe clearly favors reading the Bible for illumination. He writes, “as the Scottish poet Lang said about facts, some people use them as a drunk uses a lamppost, more for support than for illumination. You can find much in the Bible to support any reading of it, but if you read it for illumination, the world changes.” Do you agree with Wolpe? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 7: IS RELIGION GOOD FOR YOU?

1. In Chapter 7, Wolpe states his opinion, citing scientific studies to back it up, that religion is not only good for the people who practice it, but also for society as a whole. Do you agree? Can you think of a specific example that would negate this claim?

2. Wolpe writes that “one of the best ways to understand whether religion is beneficial is to look at people who once were not religious and who became religious. Did it help their lives?” Are you one of these people? Describe your personal religious or spiritual journey. Compare your life as a person of faith to when you were a non-believer. Would you say one was better?

CHAPTER 8: WHY FAITH MATTERS

1. On page 189, Wolpe writes, “The purpose of this book has been to clear away the cynicism, to suggest that the usual objections to faith—that science disproves it, that it is dangerous, that it is irrational—are simply not true.” In your opinion, did he succeed? Why or why not?

Exercise

Revisit the questions at the end of the Prelude. Without looking at the answers you wrote down when you started the book, answer these questions again. Once you’ve completed your answers, compare them to your original answers. How are they different? Have any of your ideas or opinions changed? Is your mindset different than it was at the beginning of your journey with Rabbi Wolpe?