Yirah: The Spinal Column That Straightens & Strengthens

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In 1965 there was a lawyer named Andre Raffray who was eager to secure a property that belonged to woman named Jean Calment. Month after month he would visit her to persuade her to sell. And month after month, no matter the offer, she would refuse. Finally, when home-owner Calment was 90, Raffray, then 47, agreed on what he was certain was a clever deal. He would pay 90-year old Jean a "rent" of $500 a month until she died, on condition that he would inherit her house, when she passed away. In the end, he paid her three times the amount of her property over the next 30 years and died at 77, 4 years before ***she*** did. 120-year-old Calment, known for being one of the oldest women ever, went to *his* funeral and said, “We all make some bad investments”

This story was shared with me this past summer while spending a week of professional development at the Chautauqua Institute. Some describe Chautauqua as Disneyland for adults. Others know from their time traversing the extraordinary grounds, learning in the diverse and top-notch classes offered, enjoying the music, dance and film opportunities, listening to world-renowned lecturers and worshiping with thousands at a time, what an extraordinary place it is. With its Methodist roots, “The Institution “originally the Chautauqua Lake Sunday School Assembly, was founded in 1874 as an educational experiment in out-of-school, vacation learning. It was successful and broadened almost immediately beyond courses for Sunday school teachers to include academic subjects, faith-based studies, music and art.

Some may say of Chautauqua that it has come a long way from being a predominantly Christian retreat center and closed community, unwelcoming and even hostile to Jews in its early years, to “today, where the name Chautauqua lingers in American consciousness and has become synonymous with ‘open discussion’ and serving a mix of intellectual and religious fare to a nation hungry for learning.” (Letter from Chautauqua, Nadine Epstein, Moment Magazine February 2013). As a now self-proclaimed Chautauqua-groupie, the week was superb, and I aspire to return to study, consider, and pray with friends, new and old, again.

Each week of the 9-week summer schedule is dedicated to a specific theme for exploration. The theme when I attended, was, “The New Map of Life: How Longer Lives are Changing the World — A Week in Collaboration with the Stanford Center on Longevity.” In classes, lectures, and worship, we gave thought to the societal, political, biological, financial, emotional, ethical and spiritual implications of living longer, and how we might do so, smarter and better. What we now know is that longer lives are, at once, among the most remarkable achievements in all of human history and the greatest challenges of the 21st century.

In the 1950s the average lifespan was 65. Today, that number has increased to almost 79 years of age. The average age span in 2070, only 50 years from now, could likely be closer to 120. The data and trends are compelling. Living to age 79, as current statistics indicate, most of us can appreciate. Knowing a centenarian, someone 100 or older, someone like the remarkable Lillian Courtheoux, founding member of Temple Sinai, is an honor, and far less common. With the trajectory of a lifespan that is increasing, we are already faced with new challenges and given new opportunities to re-consider what we want to do with those potential extra 20-30 years?

Jean Calment ultimately died at a remarkable 122 years and 164 days old, and yes, Andre Raffray’s was tireless in his attempts to buy a home, in the end a very costly home, in which he would never live. What can we learn from both of them? More than merely perseverance. And more than extraordinary length of days. We can learn, how vital it is to have a vision and to invest the future. And we learn that we cannot achieve what we cannot envision.

*Avinu Malkeinu Kotveinu b’Sefer Chaim*, we pray –

*Avinu Malkeinu*, write us in the Book of Life.

Each year we say these words, sing these words, have shivers hearing these words, and we are called upon toask ourselves: what will be written in that Book and what we do we ***aspire*** to have written? Will our tale be dull and prosaic or an inspiring story, filled with meaning and content? As we usher in the year 5780, the liturgy, the powerful call of the shofar and our current state of affairs, all implore us to be truthful in our self-examination and our examination of the world – and to see what repair is needed. We must use this time, this season, to become clearer about what was and what yet could be.

This year from the East coast to the West, and from the North to South, there has been heated debate this year amongst my colleagues. Politics from the pulpit or no politics? Pastoral sermons or prophetic calls to action? There has been no debate however, that heading into this New Year, things are radically different. The very creation of this world which we gather to celebrate, is at risk.

Greta Thunberg, the Swedish environmental activist and countless others addressing climate change, know this. Rabbi Jeffrey Meyers shot during the Tree of Life massacre knows this. Those who protest, educate and advocate for the welfare of families and children, know this. And we who sit here this evening, know this. What should be a time for reflection, repair and renewal, begins with enhanced security measures but needn’t be defined by them. What should be a time for prayer and music intended to stir the soul, a wake-up call can become speculation about the Rabbi’s sermon topic but need not. What should be a time for editing our chapter in the Book of our Lives, can become a debate whether the Book is literal or figurative, but need not.

Dualistic thinking: this or that, black or white, us or them, right or wrong, stands in the way, is a husk, a shell, a barrier between what is and what could be, blurring our vision. Alan Morinis, founder of the Mussar Institute, writes: “…that we humans can't understand the meaning of our lives any better than fish in an aquarium can understand their own. Confined to our own environment, we cannot escape to an outside vantage point from which to look onto and make sense of our existence. Still, we humans do have an advantage over the fish. We come equipped with another way of knowing: through the heart. By attending to the lessons of our hearts, we can glean insight into the meaning of our lives.

In Jewish thought, the heart has many functions. *Kohelet Rabbah*, the rabbinical commentary on Ecclesiastes explains that the heart sees and hears, stands and falls, feels and knows, breaks and heals. Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz, the late spiritual supervisor of the Mir Yeshiva, says the heart is like a seismograph, recording every tiny tremor that passes through us, even if our conscious minds remain unaware of the impact.” (What Your Heart Can Teach You, Reform Judaism). Paying careful attention to the heart must be a part of deeper, more profound understanding and to a more prolific envisioning of a future in which we and our children and our children’s children would like to live and grow. That envisioning ensures that the planning, the action, will be sound.

There is a word in Hebrew, *yirah* which can mean “**awe**” or can mean “**fear.**” It is found 41 times in the Torah:

* In the final verse of the book of Ecclesiastes (12:13), where we read:

“The end of the matter, all having been heard, *yirah* God, and keep G-d’s commandments, for this is the whole of man.”

* Psalm 112 states: “Happy is the person *l’yirah* the Eternal.
* From the Book of Job (28:28) we read: “Behold, the *yirah* of the Eternal is wisdom.
* Psalm 11:10 teaches us that: The *yirah* of G-d is the beginning of wisdom.
* Leviticus 19 where the word is used to communicate reverence: "Every person shall *yirah* his mother and his father."

And finally, we can see from the captivating story from the Book of Kings, when Solomon determines which of two women is the real mother of a child by watching how they react to his threat to cut the baby in two, we see from the verse which says, "When all Israel heard the verdict the king had given, they had *yirah* of the king, because they saw that he had wisdom from God."

“Fear” and “awe” seem to be unrelated and even at odds with one another, though not according to Jewish teachings. Our Sages suggest that when we can acknowledge *yirah*, those moments when we are fearful and/or when we are in awe, that we remove, as it were, a film from our eyes allowing us to see more clearly. *Yirah* informs our hearts. It is at times unpleasant, unwelcome, and can keep us distanced from the source. *Yirah* however, is not anguish, not pain, not bitter anxiety. So, to what may *yirah* be likened?

Rabbi Elya Kaplan, says, “to the tremor of fear which a father feels when his beloved young son rides his shoulders as he dances with him and rejoices before him, taking care that he not fall off. Here there is joy that is incomparable, pleasure that is incomparable. And the fear tied up with them is pleasant too. It does not impede the freedom of dance … It passes through them like a spinal column that straightens and strengthens. And it envelops them like a modest frame that lends grace and pleasantness … If a person is sure that the “bundle” of his life’s meaning is safely held high by the shoulders of his awareness, he knows that this bundle will not fall backwards, he will not forget it for a moment, he will remember it constantly, with *yirah* he will safe keep it. If every moment he checks it—then his heart is confident, and he dances and rejoices … (*In the Footsteps of Yirah*, Rabbi Avraham Elya Kaplan)

Gathering as we are, as I look out, I am struck that this time next year, will be radically different. What many of you have known, what you like, what is familiar and meaningful – in a good way(!), will have changed. Quite frankly, what ***I*** have come to know over these last years, what I like, what is familiar and meaningful….in a good way(!) will have changed. And I am struck by a deep sense of *yirah*. *Yirah,* aweat what has been built at Temple Sinai. *Yirah* at the unwavering commitment to be inclusive, diverse, principled and deeply committed to *tikkun* *olam*, to repairing the broken. *Yirah*, at the depth of commitment to Jewish learning and living, and to prayer that is honest, thoughtful, joyful and profound. And *yirah*, awe, to be a part of, and to serve in this community.

So too am I struck by a sense of *yirah*, of fear to know that my colleague, my friend and my rabbi, will be stepping aside. *Yirah*, that his wisdom, his knowledge, his understanding of this community and the fullness of your stories, your hardships and your simchas will not be a walk down the hall-way-away. And *yirah*, fear of making mistakes, which I can guarantee. And so too, do I have *yirah*, that you may not yet know that what he and you have envisioned, built, fortified and loved, will continue to be respected and nurtured. I am coming to appreciate that this *yirah*, both the awe and the fear are welcome. Not easy, but welcome. That like the parent dancing with their child on their shoulders, that my obligation, our obligation is to notice the *yirah*, to let it inform our hearts, and to let it pass through us like a spinal column that straightens and strengthens.

These Yamim Noraim, these Days of Awe as Alan Morinis says, are like standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon and looking down into the beautiful gorge cut by centuries of water that falls away right before you, and the beauty and immense awe you feel while the sheer drop terrifies you and your heart sings a song of praise. If we are open, if we are attentive, he writes, when a human being experiences *yirah*, that experience directly awakens a spiritual consciousness just as an alarm clock awakens a sleeping person. Compared to moments of *yirah*, we may, indeed, be asleep much of our lives. When aware of *yirah*, we experience a tremendous spiritual reality that is ordinarily hidden from us. *Yirah* can give us a direct experience of the Transcendent in that very moment, pointing our hearts directly to the divine Presence. It awakens us. Itcan be disruptive and unsettling. But it can also be breathtaking and spectacular. But y*irah* awakens us only if we refrain from hitting the snooze button.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel teaches us that, “When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendors of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion, its message becomes meaningless.” He reminds us not to ignore the crisis of today, not to become inured in the name of faith.

We pray the words, וּנְתַנֶּה תֹּקֶף קְדֻשַּׁת הַיּוֹם כִּי הוּא נוֹרָא וְאָיֹם We lend power to the holiness of this day. For it is tremendous and filled with **awe.** You don’t need me to say how many of us have been awakened by deep fear or to describe how the current climate of divisiveness and vitriol foments – frightening increases in anti-Semitism, xenophobia and sexism. You don’t need me to describe the alarming rate at which our climate is changing, or the horror of children separated from their parents and put into cages. We have been awakened. And the awesome responsibility of address is ours. Mark Twain wrote, that, “The two most important days in your life are: The day you were born and the day you find out why.” This is the day that our world was born. This is the day that step forward and answer why.

*Eloheinu v’elohay avoteinu v’imoteinu*, Our G-d and G-d of our ancestors, as we gather to usher in the year 5780, and pray for length of days, may we notice with great care moments of *yirah*, of fear, of awe -may they awaken us from any slumber, shape our vision, guide our work and be revealed for good, in our deeds. May we push ourselves and the world a little closer, in whatever way we are able, toward betterment, toward justice, as we understand you O God, would have it. And like the parent with their child on their shoulders - may we ensure that the precious “bundle” of our life’s meaning is safely held high by the shoulders of our awareness.