

Al Tir'ee – Do Not Fear

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“*Al Tir'ee*”- Do not fear.

These are the words that God tells Hagar to reassure her that she is not alone, that she can take care of her child and that she can move forward with her life after a very traumatic experience.

“*Al Tir'ee*” Do not be afraid- these words appear again and again in the stories of the Torah.

“*Al Tira*” God says to Avraham, assuring him that God will be a shield to him and promising that his offspring will multiply like the stars in heaven (Genesis 15:1-3).

“*Al Tira*” God says to Itzchak as he leaves his secure home searching for water, recommitting to the blessings Avraham received (Genesis 26:24).

“*Al Tira*” God says to Yaakov, who fears going to Egypt and the encounter with his son Yosef that he has not seen for over 20 years (Genesis 46:3). God reminds Yaakov as well of the promise made to his father and grandfather.

Time and again God says “*Al Tira*” to our prophets, when they fear that they are not up to the task of leading the people of Israel.

“Fear not, for I am with you,

Be not frightened, for I am your God” (Isaiah 41:10).

Beyond anything they might tell us about God, the words “*Al Tir’ee*” are a meaningful recognition of the fact that all human beings, including our ancestors and prophets had and have moments of fear.

Pema Chodron, a teacher of Buddhism, tells this story:

A friend was telling me about her elderly parents in Florida. They live in an area where there’s poverty and hardship; the threat of violence seems very real. Their way of relating to this is to live in a walled community protected by guard dogs and electric gates. It is their hope, of course, that nothing scary will enter. Unfortunately, my friend’s parents are becoming more and more afraid to go outside those walls. They want to go to the beach or the golf course, but they’re too scared to budge. Even though they now pay someone to do their shopping, the feeling of insecurity is getting stronger. Lately they’ve become paranoid even about those who are allowed through the gates: the people who fix broken appliances, the gardeners, the plumbers, and the electricians. Through their isolation, they are becoming unable to cope with an unpredictable world” (The Places that Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times).

This story touches on a concern that is familiar to many of us. Every one has fears; personal fears and shared fears. We fear for our personal safety, and for our family’s safety. We fear the loss of a loved one. We fear disappointment, and we fear for the future. We fear for this country and we fear for Israel.

As a parent I live with the fear that something will happen to my child or that something will happen to me and I will not be there for my child when she grows up. I work hard at not letting this fear make me an overprotective parent. I try to remember that there will be times that I won't be able to protect my daughter from harm. I also know, sadly from my own experience, that mom does not always come back home and that terrifies me.

“*Al Tir'ee*”- do not fear, says God to Hagar, after she is banished with her child from her home into the wilderness.

Our neighbor at KI, Rabbi Emma Kippley-Ogman writes: “In a moment of ultimate vulnerability, Hagar is reassured by hearing God's voice. The message, “*Al Tir'ee*” do not be afraid is powerful enough that her fear dissipates enough to allow her vision to clear” (*Dvar Torah* Rosh Hashanah 5772).

Our Torah-reading today, begins with Itzchak's birth and his naming. After weaning Itzchak, Sarah becomes worried. Sarah sees Ishmael, the son of Hagar- the maidservant, the woman that she earlier gave as a surrogate to her husband so that he could bring a child into the world, “laughing” and playing with Itzchak. The rabbis give different interpretations of what they were actually doing, ranging from sexual improprieties to idol worship. But whatever it was, something about Ishmael's action evokes Sarah's sharp reaction.

Sarah's immediate response is to ask Avraham to drive out Hagar and her son: “*Garesh et ha-Ama hazot v'et b'na*” (Genesis 21:10). Sarah becomes

overprotective of her son Itzchak. Perhaps she is afraid of sharing him, sharing his love, sharing Avraham's love. She feels threatened and jealous; maybe this is a result of how hard it was for her to conceive this child.

Sarah *Imeinu*, our great matriarch, is not depicted here in the best light! A few chapters earlier we are given a very different perspective on who she can be. There we are told how Avraham and Sarah open their home to the stranger, to the guests, running quickly to feed them and wash their feet (Genesis 18:6).

The *Midrash* teaches that the doors of Sarah's tent "were open wide" - a metaphor for her warm hospitality; moreover says the *Midrash*, "a blessing was bestowed upon her dough". Sarah's dough, the product of her hands spread blessings throughout the world. In Sarah's tent, adds the *Midrash*, "a lamp burned from the eve of one Shabbat to the eve of the following Shabbat", a symbol perhaps, of a home that radiated light, not only on Shabbat, but all week long (Genesis Rabbah 60:16).

How does such a generous and openhearted woman end up sending a woman and her child to die in the wilderness? This troubles me as I try to understand the relationship between Hagar and Sarah. Sarah's treatment of Hagar is shocking. These two women have known each other for many years. They were part of the same household. Ishmael is Sarah's stepson, her husband's son, Itzchak's half brother. Even at age fifteen, the age assigned him in the *Midrash*, he is still a young person.

Cathy Shad, a Jewish educator from congregation Netivot Shalom in California writes: "Only a very deep, all consuming fear could have driven

Sarah, famed for hospitality, to abandon two members of her own household....It feels to me” she adds “that Sarah’s fear literally got the best of her, that it was so all encompassing that she lost her ability to feel pious, loyal, or hospitable” (Dvar Torah Rosh Hashanah 5766).

Fear paralyzes. Fear is one of those feelings that we can all relate to on some level, and when we feel it, deeply in our bones, we know it is hard to think straight. We can become slaves to our own fear, and without realizing it, fear may become the only thing that guides us.

As the story is told in the Torah, Sarah’s reaction comes immediately after Itzchak’s weaning party. Perhaps for Sarah this party had more challenging elements than purely festive ones. Perhaps as she weans her son, she realizes that Itzchak is slowly becoming a person in his own right and that she will no longer be able to protect him from everything or guide him through all the challenges of life.

Scholar Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, *zichrona librachá*, understands and reads this story in dialogue with the wider lens of the Torah’s narrative of Jewish peoplehood. Hagar, she reminds us, is a slave from Egypt, oppressed by her master. Hagar calls out to God, who answers her and promises her a future as a great nation. If the story sounds familiar, it is because it is also our own. Dr. Frymer-Kensky says that this “is not a story of the conflict between ‘us’ and ‘other,’ but between ‘us’ and ‘another us’.” Hagar is a precursor to Israel, she is the redeemed slave, she is ‘us.’ Yet, Sarah is also ‘us’- the mother of Israel. Ironically, Sarah’s particular fear of losing herself arises as she faces another

woman who shares so much of her own story. Sarah is triggered by Hagar and cruelty replaces kindness.

Fear can lead people to live very solitary lives, like the couple Pema Chodron tells us about. People can feel that they are not allowed to speak to strangers in the street or open the door to those they don't know. We are taught to be careful, because we don't know what danger we might encounter in the streets, and because the unknown itself is dangerous. This leads to being disconnected from each other and living in superficial relationships. We let ourselves be open only to those who look like us, speak like us, and believe in what we believe.

We create our own fears; we make our selves afraid by creating barriers. In the era of Facebook and text message our lives are happening in texts and wall posts, which can facilitate withdrawal from real interaction and relationships. How many of our children actually live in a neighborhood like the one they sing about in Sesame Street full of “people that you meet each day”? How many of us have a real relationship with the people who live two houses or apartments down the way?

Many of you are familiar with the song: “*Kol Haolam Kulo gesher tzar meod, ve haikar lo lefached klal*” – which means “The world is a very narrow bridge and it is essential not to fear at all”. This song comes from a teaching of the 19th century Hassidic Master Rabbi Nahchman from Breslav, which is slightly altered in the lyrics. In the original teaching the words are “*Ve hayikar lo lehitpached klal*” - in the *hitapel*/reflective form -- meaning “The world is a very narrow bridge but the most important thing is not to **make yourself afraid**”.

This is true in a large scale. We see this in the lack of civility in the political discourse. We see it in the ways that, minorities are treated in many places. It is true that some of our fears are connected to real dangers. The question is what happens when fear is what guides our lives paralyzing us and creating barriers and walls that separate us from each another. As Rabbi Sharon Brous from congregation IKAR in Los Angeles put it: “Fear can be useful. But fear also tends to confuse our moral landscape. It jumbles our instinctive ability to reason through complex situations and determine what is really the right outcome” (Dvar Torah Rosh Hashanah 5771).

On September 12, our friend and TBZ member, Rabbi Or Rose, published, A Statement of Religious Commitment following the 10th Anniversary of 9/11, titled a Perfect Union. Many religious leaders have signed the statement and it calls on us to think about the role of religion in creating a just and compassionate world post 9/11.

To quote a few paragraphs: “As representatives of America's diverse religious traditions, we are committed to working together to achieve the enduring vision of a more perfect union. To fulfill this dream, we must invest in relationships with people who are different than we are, humbly sharing our wisdom and personal stories, listening to the insights and questions of others, offering respectful critique when necessary. We do not seek uniformity, but dignity for all people...In this spirit, we also recommit ourselves to work together across religious and secular lines to address other issues of injustice in our country and throughout the world. While we hold different religious

beliefs, we share in the conviction that we must all participate actively in caring for the needy and mending the wounds of our shared planet”.

Sarah’s fear did not allow her to see Hagar and Ishmael. They became the other. They became the enemy, those who we fear from. She banished them from her reality and send them to the wilderness.

In the wilderness, Hagar herself encounters fear. She worries for her life and her son’s life and she cannot see beyond her fear. But God calls to her- “*Al Tir’ee*”- Do not fear! Rabbi Brous imagines the angel saying: “I can’t promise you that everything will be ok. But I can tell you that you will not be able to save yourself or your son if you live with a blinding fear that prevents you from seeing redemption when it sits squarely in front of you.” This is when Hagar is able to see the spring of water that was hidden in the desert, overcoming the fear in a way that Sarah could not.

Each week we conclude Shabbat with the *Havdalab* service. The opening words of *Havdalab* are: “*Hine El Yeshuati evtach ve lo efchad*” – “Behold, God is my salvation; I trust and do not fear”. As we enter each week we know there will be scary things and that there is real danger, so we are reminded to be open, to trust and not to be afraid. May we enter this New Year “*evtach ve lo efchad*”. May we be open to hear the voice of the Divine, the voice within ourselves that says “*Al Tira*” – “*Al Tir’ee*” do not be afraid.