From Fear to Hope?

Rabbi Claudia Kreiman

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When I got up from my mother’s shiva, eighteen years ago, one of the first phone calls I received was from the head of the Hebrew School where I was working, teaching Bnei Mitzvah students. She said I didn’t need to go back to teach right away, that they could get a sub, for as long as I needed. I immediately responded that I would be there, teaching the 6th and 7th graders and helping them to get ready for their Bar and Bat Mitzvah. I have one memory from that first class: standing among middle school children and crying, while the students sat silently.

Being back at the Bet-El synagogue in Buenos Aires on that day in August 1994, was a meaningful and powerful experience. My mother had been a teacher there. She helped found the nursery school in that synagogue and she was a very active youth leader.

I still remember the feeling of deciding to teach immediately after getting up from shiva. I am not sure I could articulate at that time why it was so important to me, but in a Dvar Torah that I shared eight years later at a synagogue in NY, I said it this way:

“My question then and my question now was not and is not how did God allow this to happen, but how can we bring God to earth, so that this does not happen again. I knew and I know that Human beings were responsible for this atrocity and not God, and I know more and more that only we, Human Beings, can make a change so this, does not happen again. I could choose to escape from God, but I choose to look for God.
I choose to look for meaning in life, and I choose to transform pain and engage life. I choose to keep falling in love, to keep singing and dancing. I choose to commit to life and friendship, to commit to Judaism and Education” (Dvar Torah at B’ni Jeshurun, NYC, Shabbat Shuva 2002).

I have continued to reflect on why I chose to go teach those children that day. What I understand now is that this was an act of affirmation. Affirmation of my outlook on this world, of Judaism, of the strength of my family, and my relationship with God. I had to go. Otherwise, fear and hatred might have begun to define me. I needed hope to guide me. I needed to affirm the possibility that we can live in a better world.

During the High Holidays season, we are asked to consider who we are. We face our own mortality, and we are encouraged to look at our lives, the choices we make, the ways we respond to what life brings to us. We must acknowledge and encounter our own fears.

I have come to realize lately that I feel a deep sense of fear. I have been feeling really scared. This is not a fear for my or my family’s immediate safety. It is as if that choice I made to be guided by hope is being held down: I cannot always see the possibility of a better world. I read the news and what is going on in Israel and in the world, and I feel scared.

I have been particularly fearful when thinking about the world my daughter will inherit. I am not just afraid, but at times, angry:

The recent events caused by the anti-Islam video and the violence that it generated, including the death of ambassador Chris Stevens and many others.
The beating of a seventeen-year-old Arab by a group of Jewish teenagers in Zion Square in Jerusalem, which left him in critical condition.
The shooting at the movie theater in Aurora, Colorado that killed twelve people.
The continuous deadly violence in Syria.
The attacks on women’s rights in Israel by the ultra-Orthodox political bloc.
The persistence of hunger in developing countries despite the abundance of resources in other parts of the world.
The uncertain future of our warming planet, and the willful blindness of many of our political leaders to climate change.
And of course, unfortunately there is much more to add to this list. There is so much war, hatred, injustice, poverty, and human rights violations.

A friend of mine shared with me that when she is in the car with her children, she finds herself turning off the radio, as it is so hard to explain to young and not so young children, the nature of the world we live in.

I find myself trying to understand what has happened to us, to humanity? And I wonder how to continue to let hope guide me. How do I not let the fear I feel define me and determine the choices I make?

When I shared some of these fears at a Torah Study session recently, a member of our community told me that our parents worried about the world they were leaving to us and we are doing ok, so I should remember that our children will be ok, too.

Will they? Perhaps, if only we remember to teach them to have hope. That human kind is capable of moving forward to reconciliation, if we do not let fear guide the choices we make in our lives. We can drown in fear. Fear changes the arc of the narrative we tell.

What I want to share today is that fear does not have to define us. At this time of year we are asked to frame our stories through reflection and teshuvah. We choose how we frame the narrative of our lives. We can move from a narrative of fear to one of hope.
My life changed forever the day that my mother was killed in the bombing of the AMIA, the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires. My life could look very different now if I had chosen to enter a narrative of fear. If I would have let the fear, the anger, the sadness, I felt and I still feel sometimes, shape my beliefs, my choices and my actions. If I would have let hatred for those who hurt me, guide my life.

There is a story in the Tractate of Brachot in the Talmud about Beruria the wife of Rabbi Meir, that has inspired me all these years and that I would like to share with you.

There were thugs in the neighborhood of Rabbi Meir who caused him a great deal of trouble.

Rabbi Meir accordingly prayed that they should die.

His wife Beruria said to him:

How do you make out [that such a prayer should be permitted]?

She quoted a verse from Psalms (104:35), which says: *itamu batta’im min haaretz* - Let hatta’im (sins) cease from earth.

And she asked - Is it written *bot’im* (sinners)?

And she responded no- It is written *batta’im* (sins)! Let sins cease from earth.

(Let me clarify that the words *batta’im* (sins) and *bot’im* (sinners) are written in the same way in Hebrew)

*Beruria* continued and said, look at the end of the verse:

Let *batta’im* (sins) cease from earth and let the wicked be no more.

"himot hatseim min hameirim rosheim zev akum"

Since the sins will cease, there will be no more wicked men!

Rather pray for them that they should repent, said *Beruria* and there will be no more wicked.
He did pray for them, and they repented.

(Babylonian Talmud, Tractate of Brachot 10a)

_Beruria_ invites us to understand that the wrongdoing of people is a complicated thing to comprehend. The prayer she asks Rabbi Meir to say is about the possibility of change. _Beruria_ speaks of hope, of the possibility of human beings to change, to grow, to repent; _Beruria_ speaks to the possibility of redemption.

I would like to offer _Beruria’s_ teaching as a lens through which we look at the world. Instead of feeling despair, fear, or anger when we read the news and see the atrocities taking place around the world, may we hear _Beruria’s_ voice that says, let’s pray, for the possibility of change, let’s believe that the world can be a different place. Let’s not fall into despair. Let’s hope.

But of course, hope and prayer are not enough. Today, a day that we spend together as a community in prayer, we ought to ask, how prayer can change our lives? How can prayer inspire our actions? How can it help transform us, and help us transform the world?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel teaches us: “Prayer takes the mind out of the narrowness of self-interest, and enables us to see the world in the mirror of the holy (…) Prayer clarifies our hopes and intentions. It help us discover our true aspirations (…) It gives us the opportunity to be honest, to say what we believe, and to stand for what we say” (Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity, page 343).
Perhaps Heschel’s teaching can be read in light of the final line of the *Unetane Tokef* prayer that we are about to recite. "*tsuva*- repentance; *tfilah*- prayer and *tzedakah* - justice can avert the severity of the decree." This declaration contains within it the seeds of hope, the possibility that things might get better.

*Tefilah* and *Tesuva*, - prayer and our capacity to look inward are the tools that help us to look into our own selves and take our minds out of the narrowness of self-interest, moving us to a life of *tzedakah*.

*Tzedakah* - which comes from the root TZ D K, means justice, to be committed to creating a society in which people care for each other and take that responsibility seriously. To be committed to seeing the world in the mirror of the holy. To live with the hope that the world can be a better place and not fall into despair.

Heschel continues and says: “However, prayer is no panacea, no substitute for action. It is, rather, like a beam thrown from a flashlight before us into the darkness. It is in this light that we who grope, stumble, and climb discover where we stand, what surrounds us, and the course which we should choose”.

So, yes, the world is a scary place, and we grope and stumble. And yes, at moments we feel frightened and angry about the world that our children will inherit. But that TBZ member who told me that I should not worry much, that I should not be so scared, was probably right. We need to believe in hope. We need to make choices from a place of hope and faith in humanity rather than in fear and hatred. Our decision-making should follow the beam thrown from that flashlight, and we should continue praying, joyously in community, to find the place where we stand, to bolster our belief that human kind can do better, that we can do better.
American Buddhist teacher, Pema Chodron writes, “Our personal attempts to live humanly in this world are never wasted. Choosing to cultivate love rather than anger just might be what it takes to save the planet from extinction.” (The Places that Scare You, page 41).

This year, may we cultivate love rather than anger, may we choose a narrative of hope rather than fear, may we encourage each other to believe in the possibility of real change, so that we can embark on a course of action that will make a better world.