

Being Afraid vs. Acting Afraid

Rosh Hashanah, Day 1

Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom

At the end of May, I was standing in a hot, crowded jet way at BWI, waiting to board a flight to Dallas. My beloved father-in-law had just passed away, and our family was en route to the funeral. As we stood there crammed into that long metal tube, masked but certainly not socially distant, my daughter Nessa gave me the once over, leaned in and asked in a whisper, “Abba, did you bring a hat?” Did I bring a hat? Why? To a funeral? There’s no rain in the forecast...what do you mean? Then she glanced up at my head, my kippah specifically and said, “You know the world is a dangerous place with all the antisemitism going on right now, maybe you should have worn a hat over your kippah.” My response was visceral, instinctive, and without hesitation...I said “I am not going to hide who I am because there are some crazy people in the world who hate Jews! Plus, we’re in Baltimore, where there are tons of Jewish people and we’re going to Texas where they love the Jewish people!” It’s hard to read someone’s facial expression when most of it is covered by a mask. But I could tell just by looking into her eyes that she was neither satisfied nor amused. And at that moment I began to imagine what this world must look like through the eyes of my children: A global health crisis that has impacted almost every aspect of their existence; a society divided and roiled by one upheaval after another; mortal violence in places they are supposed to feel comfortable, like schools and shopping centers; extreme climate and weather, with increasingly dire warnings for the planet; crises facing Israel and the Jewish people; the death of their beloved, larger than life Zayde. I think Jake Tapper said it best when he said, “it’s a hot mess inside a dumpster fire inside a train wreck.” Most of the world right now is a downright scary place. And not just for kids. Is there any one of us here today who has not been terrified by any of those phenomena I just mentioned? Some people, many people were afraid to walk into this building, into this room today! And I can’t blame them. I’m certainly grateful that you are watching from a place you feel safe.

This past year has gotten me thinking a lot about fear...You know the Bible says over 80 times that we must not be afraid. Twenty times in the Torah, thirteen times in the Book of Psalms, twenty six times just in the Books of Isaiah and Jeremiah, another thirty or so times sprinkled across the rest of the Hebrew Bible. More than 80 times! Do not be afraid, do not fear. Tell me, what kind of chutzpah is that?! What is the Bible trying to teach me by telling me over and over not to fear? Is there is never a legitimate occasion in this *meshugganeh* world to fear? And to complicate matters more, we say in the Amidah on Rosh Hashanah, *u’vchein tein pach’decha*, we literally ask God to make us afraid, to give us fear. Check it out for yourself on page 87 in the mahzor! So which is it, should I be afraid or should I not be afraid? Should I desire fear, actually pray for fear, or reject it?

The two most courageous people in the entire Torah, in my opinion, show up at the beginning of the Book of Exodus. Their names were Shifra and Puah, and they were two midwives, who were instructed to carry out Pharaoh’s diabolical, murderous policy. Whenever a Hebrew woman delivers a baby, if it is a girl, let her live. But if it’s a boy, you are to kill him on the spot. What were they supposed to do? Pharaoh himself was demanding this terrible deed of them, expecting them to murder every male child. Listen to what the Torah says:

Va’tireina ha’meyaldot et ha’Elohim, ve’lo asu ka’asher dibeir aleihem melech Mitzrayim

Because the midwives **feared** God, they refused to do what the King of Egypt commanded them to do.¹

And the Torah goes on to say that they concocted some story about how Jewish women just pop out babies without requiring any assistance and by the time arrive for the delivery, the babies are already born. Very clever. When the Torah says they feared God, it doesn't mean that they were trembling before God in terror. It meant that they were afraid of violating a divinely inspired moral absolute. It is more fundamentally terrifying to murder innocent children than to face the wrath of Pharaoh. That kind of fear is good fear, that kind of fear is HOLY fear. That's the kind of fear that allows us to take remarkable personal risks and go to extraordinary lengths to pursue justice and to take a stand for what is right, like these courageous women, Shifra and Puah. That's the kind of fear we ask for, pray for: U'vchein tein pachdecha...Give me the fear, the awe of You God that I would be terrified not to take a risk for righteousness, terrified not to take a stand for justice!

But the Bible also tells us about unhealthy fear. Self-defeating fear. Paralyzing fear. When Moses sent 12 spies into the Promised Land to do some reconnaissance, and bring back detailed reports to the nation, 10 of them came back and sowed massive despair among the Jewish people. They told them the land was impenetrable; the cities were fortified by towering walls. The people looked like giants, and that they themselves were like grasshoppers. Entering the land would be a bloodbath. But two of those spies, Joshua and Caleb, tried to convince the people otherwise. Come on, they said, you don't know your own strength. This land has been promised to us for generations and now the time has come for us to claim it. But the people were persuaded by fear. The voices that said, you can't, you're not strong enough, you're not capable, you don't have what it takes. And do you know what our tradition calls that whole episode? *Cheit ha'meraglim*, the Sin [capital S] of the Spies. A monumental sin that resulted in that whole generation not being able to enter the land. Forty more years before any Jew would cross into Eretz Yisrael, because they succumbed to their fears and listened to words of defeat and dismay. That's the kind of fear that our Torah tells us to reject.

How many people do we know who have given up on their dreams because they are too afraid to pursue them? They convince themselves that it's too late, it's too risky, there's not enough time. People who stay in dead-end jobs instead of doing what they know would really give them happiness and fulfillment; people who stay in abusive, unhealthy relationships because they have been convinced by the fear that no one else would love them, no one else would treat them any better, no one else would think they are attractive or worthy of affection. How many people have chosen to not to be too obvious about their Jewish identity or their support for Israel, out of an unhealthy fear of backlash or repercussions?

I believe that what our tradition teaches us is that fear should never get the last word. Look, it makes sense to be afraid of some things. You should fear this virus, you should fear those who wish to hurt us, to persecute us, to kill us. And you should take all the necessary precautions, and yes the vaccines too! There's a great story that one of my heroes, Rabbi Avi Weiss tells about when he invited the great Israeli General Ariel Sharon to speak in his synagogue in Riverdale. Sharon of course would go on to become Israel's 11th prime minister, but long before that he was a revered military leader. Rabbi Weiss introduced him to the congregation as "the Fearless

¹ Exodus 1:17

General.” And when Sharon came up to the podium the first thing he said was, ‘*K’vod ha’Rav*, with all due respect, do you think that when I was on the front in Six Day War, the Yom Kippur War, the Suez Canal that I wasn’t afraid? Only a fool wouldn’t be afraid!” The great Bible commentator Yitzhak Abarbanel who was born in Lisbon in 1437 said “One who enters battle thinking he or she is not going to die is not an exalted hero. However, he said, *gibor...hu she’poel neged rigshotav...* real greatness, real heroism emerges when one acts contrary to their feelings,” when one is able to acknowledge fear and still do what is necessary, what is right, what is just.

In many of the places where the Bible tells us not to be afraid, those words are directly followed by the phrase “and do not be discouraged.” Doesn’t that sound redundant? Don’t be afraid and don’t be discouraged, *Lo tira ve’lo teichat*. What’s the difference? Fear is a natural, instinctive response to danger. It’s an evolutionary advantage...It tells us to run away from predators; to get out of harm’s way. Fear is reflexive; but being discouraged is a choice. Fear is instinctive; but being discouraged is an attitude. The early 18th century Hassidic master Rabbi Mordecai of Lechovitz once said: “It is only permitted to worry about one thing: We are only allowed to worry about always being worried!” Ah, if only my grandmother of blessed memory knew that! She worried all the time! The only thing you’re allowed to worry about is worrying too much! About being too discouraged. About succumbing too much to our fears. That, and only that, you are permitted to worry about.

I read a wonderful little book this year by Elie Wiesel, definitely not one of his more famous works. It’s called “The Jews of Silence,” and it is essentially a memoir of visits he made to the Soviet Union in the 1960’s as a reporter for the Israeli newspaper Ha’aretz. The mission was to write about the situation of roughly 3 million Jews trapped inside the Soviet Union. Practically every Jew in the Soviet Union was afraid of just about everything, and just about everyone. No one knew who was a spy, who was informing on who, if you said something to someone, even innocently you could wind up in Siberia, in the Gulag, or worse...But the Soviets allowed the Jews to gather together publicly on just one night of the entire year, right outside the main synagogue in Moscow, where they could keep a close eye on them. And that night was Simchat Torah. Every year Jews came out of the woodwork, by the tens of thousands. They were not religious, nobody knew what it meant to be religious. They never read or studied the Torah, but they knew in their kishkes that Torah was something that bound them together. Simchat Torah at the Great Synagogue in Moscow was the one night to celebrate being Jewish, whatever that may have meant. Wiesel described the unbridled dancing and singing and celebrating at the Great Synagogue, young people and old people; people who knew a little about being Jewish and many more who really didn’t have the first clue what it meant beyond being stamped on their identity papers. Just after midnight, at the Simchat Torah celebration in 1966, the floodlights outside the synagogue on Arkhipova street were suddenly shut off. The throngs of people stood pressed against each other in confused silence. It was pitch black. They knew it wasn’t an electrical malfunction. It was the KGB telling them, enough. The party’s over. Time to disperse. Go back into hiding until next year. But something extraordinary happened. Someone took a newspaper out of his pocket and lit it on fire, lighting up the darkness. Then someone else did the same thing. Before long thousands of newspapers were lit at once, flaming torches were everywhere. Nobody said a word, the only sound was the crackle of burning paper. And then, about a hundred students climbed onto the roof of a nearby building, and holding their torches high began to chant in Hebrew and Russian: Am Yisrael Chai! The People of Israel lives! Am

Yisrael Chai! The people of Israel lives! Soon the entire crowd, thousands upon thousands of people roared those same words over and over! A university student turned to an astonished Weisel and said, “Anyone who wants to defame us can go ahead and do so. That’s their business. We simply don’t answer. We refuse to argue with them. Our answer lies in the fact that we continue to survive-and that we wish to go on surviving.” That, my friends, is our Jewish DNA. From Shifra and Puah, to the Soviet Union, to this very day. We may be afraid, but we must not be discouraged. We may be surrounded by darkness, but we also possess the match and the newspaper to dispel it!

This is a scary world, my friends, and there are frightening forces and frightening people all around us. But are we going to retreat into the darkness, succumb to our fears, remove our kipot, tuck in our Star of David necklaces, remove our mezzuzot...or courageously light up our newspapers and illuminate that darkness? Will fear keep us from doing acts of loving kindness, from expressing compassion for our neighbors, doing justice for the stranger, the orphan and the widow, the refugee, the immigrant? Will we be too terrified to speak out for Israel or to call out anti-Semitism, not wanting to draw too much attention to ourselves...or will we stand up proudly and fearlessly for who we are, and declare Am Yisrael Chai, the people of Israel live! No matter what anyone says, the People of Israel live!

No sermon on fear would be complete without a reference to Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, the great Hasidic master who was born in Ukraine in 1772. Rebbe Nachman is the source of that great Jewish camp song *Kol Ha'olam kulo gesher tzar me'od, ve'ha-ikar lo lefached klal*...the whole world is like a very narrow bridge...but the main thing is not to be afraid. I learned recently that these words are actually not Rebbe Nachman’s original words. He didn’t say, *ve'haikar lo lefached klal*, the main thing is not to be afraid. What he actually said is slightly different, but the difference is hugely important. Rebbe Nachman said *ve'haikar lo lehitpached klal*...the main thing is not to act afraid. We can be justified in having plenty of fears...the world is full of them. But what Rebbe Nachman taught is not to live afraid, not to live discouraged, not to be convinced that we are powerless to make change in our lives and our world. *Kol ha'olam kulo gesher tzar me'od*, this world is indeed like a very narrow bridge—it’s so easy to fall off, so easy to slip into oblivion. *Ve'haikar*, but the most important thing to remember is *lo lehitpached klal*, to not let fear get the best of us; not to let fear control us. Not to fear hold us back from pursuing justice, doing right in the world, or from being proud of who we are. In the words of Psalm 27, which we recite at this season: *chazak ve'ametz libecha ve'kaveh el Adonai*...Be strong, take courage and trust in God. That, more than anything, is what this moment in time demands.