Feeling Safe in an Unsafe World

Rabbi Gregory S. Marx

Kol Nidre/October 2014

Leonard Cohen sings a song inspired by Untetaneh Tokeff

And who by fire, who by water, Who in the sunshine, who in the night
time, Who by high ordeal, who by common trial, Who in your merry merry
month of may, Who by very slow decay, And who shall I say is calling?

Why would our Rabbis and then Leonard Cohen write such a dark themed
prayer and song? What are we trying to say about ourselves and our emotions? To
me, it is clear….The central theme is fear and the anxiety of life. Fear is a part of the
human experience. To take the liturgy apart…..

Mi vamayim - Who by water: victims of hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, of the
tsunamis of Thailand and Japan

Mi va'ra'av - Who by hunger: more than a billion people go to sleep hungry every
night
Mi va'skila - Who by stoning - the thousands killed on 9/11 as the stones of the Twin Towers came down

Mi va'cherev u'mi va'chaya - Who by sword and who by beast: Americans James Foley and Steve Sotloff, beheaded by humans who acted like beasts.

The common denominator of Jews over the summer is not faith. It is not repentance. It is not love and atonement. It is fear. A rabbi in North Miami Beach was shot on his way home from shul. Yesterfay, a Rabbi has his home and car firebombed in Atlantic City. The cantor of our sister congregation in Manayunk, Mishkan Shalom was brutally stabbed to death in his home two days ago. Jews are barricaded in synagogues all across France and have to be rescued by the police.

Even my daughter, the undefeatable Zionist expressed concern that a Palestinian is in one of her college classes and has already started to express her contempt for Jews and the Israeli oppression. While my daughter is not afraid, as that is not her makeup, I have to say, that as a parent and as a Jew…I am afraid.

Israels know about fear. With the discovery of hundreds of Gaza tunnels, Israelis have fears that Palestinian terrorists will tunnel into their rural communities, kidnap their children out of nurseries and hold them for ransom.

European Jews know about fear. They have seen and we have heard about hundreds of violent protests against Israelis and Jews. And while they say, they are not anti-
Semitic, only anti-Israel, we know that this is not about politics and freedom but about Jew hatred and driving a wedge between the Jews of Israel and the Diaspora. Just three weeks ago, Steven Sotloff was beheaded in Iraq by ISIS. Sotloff grew up in my hometown synagogue in Miami and was a cousin of two members of this shul. And here in the US, a man from Kentucky is running for the US Senate on the campaign slogan, “With Jews we lose.” This is a first in my lifetime.

As one Israeli put it, looking back over the summer, “Hope has lost and fear has won.”

Fear is woven into the fabric of our society as well. According to the American Kennel Club more people are turning away from poodles and bichon Friezes and turning toward Dobermans and Rottweilers. People want dogs that can protect them from predators. More and more people are buying home alarms systems. Gun sales are soaring. 40% of all homes in America have at least one firearm. We arm ourselves not as sportsmen but because we are afraid. And more often than not, we tragically turn those weapons on ourselves, our families or the police, as is the case in the Poconos.

Fear stalks our cities, our skies, our homes, and our lives.

We all know fear. In my times with you, my counseling conversations either directly or indirectly end up talking about our fears. We live in a world where we afraid of cancer that can ravage the body. One hundred years ago, we didn’t know
how to predict cancer. It just came and within a few months we were gone. Now we can see the tumor when it is microscopic and we fight with all the medical technology available and its good, but the down side is that it makes us afraid. We are afraid of failing health and ending up in nursing homes. We are afraid of death and of losing a loved one. We are afraid of global warming and losing our jobs and going bankrupt. We are afraid of growing older, of disappointing our parents, our children, our spouses, and our lovers, afraid over a troubled marriage or of our children losing themselves. We are afraid of what people think of us, or that they don’t think of us at all. We are afraid of appearing foolish, afraid of failure or perhaps of success. Some are afraid to fly. Others are afraid of new experiences. And to make matters worse, now there is Ebola.

Fear haunts us and destroys our ability to enjoy life. It is without doubt the greatest irony of all; we are at the very same time the most secure and safe generation that has ever lived and perhaps the most fearful. We live behind locked doors, barricaded gates within fenced communities – and we still feel afraid.

Our fears are not always rational. If facts determined our fears, our biggest anxieties would probably be of Hamburgers and French fries. According to the National Center for Health Statistics the number one cause of death in America is heart disease. Someone dies of cardiovascular disease in America every 34 seconds – 697,000 a year. If facts determined our fears, our second biggest dread would be
tobacco leaves. The number two cause of death in America is cancer – 560,000 a year. And yet, more and more young people are lighting up all across American College campuses.

It reminds me of an American Lung Association ad I saw, in which a woman drives up her street alone at night, and parks in front of her house as a man stares at her while sitting in a car across the street. She gets out of the car and holds the key between her fingers as protection and quickly darts into her home, locks the door and breathes a sigh of relief. Then she sits down to relax, and lights up a cigarette. The voice over says merely, “It’s time to protect you, from yourself.”

We are like that famous shipwrecked sailor who when he was rescued after three years on a deserted island was tossed a bundle of newspapers by the rescuing Captain who said, “First please read through these and then let me know if you still wish to be rescued.” In truth we desperately want to be rescued – rescued from our worry, rescued from that ever-present underlying anxiety that robs us of our sleep and keeps us perpetually on edge as if waiting for the next shoe to drop or axe to fall or bomb to explode.

Did you know that the first interaction between God and humanity revolved around fear? When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, God comes looking for them and they attempt to hide. Like a scene from our own childhood when we had done something we were not supposed to do and we literally hide from our searching
parents behind a couch or in a closet. When God finds them, as of course God must, God asks them why they are hiding and Adam responds: “Because I was afraid.”

How poignant – the very first recorded words that human beings speak to God are, “I was afraid.” Our ancestors were wise enough to know that to be human is to experience fear. And in a sense the entire Torah – our people’s most sacred narrative is the story of transforming fear into faith, time and time again. And that’s why we are here, as well. Conquering fear is one of the greatest spiritual challenges of living.

It’s like the old saying. The optimist proclaims that we live in the best of all possible worlds, and the pessimist fears this is true.

I have my fears. I am fearful about the future of our country. I worry that our children will not do as well as we have done. I am fearful for the moral decay of our society. I see fewer values displayed in private and public life, and it makes me worry. I am fearful for Israel’s future. I must admit that there are times when I wonder if Israel can withstand all that hate and so many enemies at her gate. I worry about the future of the Jewish people. Both anti-Semitism and indifference threaten us. Too many seem to hate us, for no reason at all, and far too many Jews just don’t seem to care.
This sermon is delivered as much for me as it is delivered by me. It is said that a good sermon addresses the needs of the preacher as much as the needs of the congregation. So here goes.

First, as Jews, we need to quiet our minds and hearts. We need to remember who we are and where we have come from – that we Jews have been here for over 4,000 years in spite of all attempts at the contrary. For a hundred generations from Egyptians to Assyrians to Philistines to Babylonians to Romans, from the tortures of the Spanish Inquisition to the gas chambers of Auschwitz, from the burned synagogues of Paris, to the missile attacks on Sderot, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv– they have tried it all. But look around – here we are.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom wrote a few months ago immediately after a terror attack in London: ”Terror fails and will always fail, because it arouses in us a profound instinct for life…. Free societies are always stronger than their enemies take them to be. Enemies of the West mistake our openness for vulnerability, our tolerance for decadence, our respect for differences for a lack of moral conviction.”

The best response to terror is in the quiet strength to carry on with life. We can and must quiet our souls by giving to others, by practicing our faith and teaching it our children…..By loving and caring for each other and by living in the moment, one day at a time, one moment at a time, one breath at a time.
Thomas Carlyle in a beautiful and wise poem wrote: “When the oak is felled, the whole forest echoes with its fall, but a hundred acorns are sown in silence by an unnoticed breeze.” We need to have faith in the continuity of life, love and hope. While the media will naturally focus on the falling of the oak, we mustn’t forget about the quiet, publically ignored, planting of seeds that accompany it. You and I are the unnoticed breeze – and it is our quiet, ordinary, everyday acts of life and love that sow the seeds of that which truly matters in the world.

This brings me to my second point. And it’s critical of the organized Jewish community. **We mustn’t buy into the over dramatization of the crisis by Jewish organizations.** Many have professional fundraisers who know that crisis, pain, and terror and the reporting of it in fund raising letters and emails are the most effective ways to raise money. So many groups are dedicated to helping Jews in crisis and when Jews are in trouble, their fund raising communications won’t stop coming with banners like, “Israel under attack,” “Jews of Europe terrorized and fear for their lives.” Don’t get me wrong, I value these organizations, but they need to stop over dramatizing to raise funds, for it only serves to terrify and catastrophize. It’s good business to capitalize on the calamity, but it only deepens our sense of being under siege, which may or may not be true.
In the Biblical book of First Kings, we learn of the prophet, Elijah who was looking for God in the dramatic event. He looked for God in the natural disasters that were prone to occur in Israel.

The Bible says, “Behold a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke its mighty rocks in pieces, but God was not in the wind. And after the wind a terrifying earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a raging fire, but God was not in the fire. And after the fire, a still, small voice.” Truth is that still, small voice. It is not found in the whirlwind but in the quiet resolve to persevere, despite it all.

Third, the key to feeling safe is to come to terms with what we can change in life and then doing something about it. The best way to confront our fear is to fight it by doing something. Thinking will not overcome fear but action will. The path to feeling safe in an unsafe world is to get out of our own skins, out of our own heads, out of our own anxieties, out of our own self-absorption and turn our gaze to those whose fears we can do something about. To the hungry, we can bring food. To the naked, we can bring clothes. To the homeless, we can provide shelter. To the lost we can be their compass. It isn’t so much what we do, but that we do that matters.

I know there are times when we feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of the forces and powers that seem so far beyond your control. The enormity of the world’s
problems threatens to drown us by their sheer number, size and frequency. In truth, we can’t do everything for everyone everywhere, but we can do something for someone somewhere. And it is in the very act of doing itself that is our salvation.

Fourth and most important of all, we can and must hold on to our faith in God and in each other. Psalm 16:8, “Shviti Adonai LeNegdi Tamid - “I have set the Lord always before me; surely God is at my right hand and I shall not be moved. God will not abandon my soul … God will make known to me the path of life.” The Psalmist is saying that no matter what, we must not lose faith, hope, courage or life. Our greatest task is not to despair, not to lose hope, not to stop loving life and believing in God. The news can easily make us throw up our hands in despair and give up, yet we come here, because we don’t want to do that. We don’t want to capitulate and give up on all that is good. And more important, we don’t want our children to despair. In the darkest of times, Jews recited prayers, psalms and believed. We can do the same.

A young father is pushing a baby’s stroller through a crowded shopping mall and the infant is absolutely howling at the top of its little lungs. “Please, Jacob, control yourself,” the father said quietly. “Easy now, Jacob, please keep calm.” “Don’t worry Jacob, everything is going to be OK.”
A woman who was watching came up to the father and said, “My, you really know just how to speak to babies – calmly and gently. So the little one’s name is Jacob?” “No, ma’am,” the father corrected her. “He’s Michael. I’m Jacob.”

We are all Jacob, at one time or another. When the howling of the world echoes in our ears, take a deep, slow breath. We can quiet our souls and remember that we are like stained-glass windows. When the new Beth Or was built, we decided to internally illuminate our windows. In the old building, you may remember, the windows shone only when the sun was out. When the darkness set in, they lost their true beauty. No exterior light could make them sparkle. In our new home, we decided to put the lights within, because we wanted them to shine at all times, even in the darkest of moments or when the rain was falling. We are like those windows. It’s easy to sparkle and shine when the sun is out. When the darkness sets in, when there is reason to fear, it is in these hours, that our true beauty, our real courage, our faithful perseverance is manifest, but only if there is a light from within.

We all have a light from within. We need to do the things that can be done. One day at a time. We need to love the ones who are there to be loved. One day at a time. We need to believe in the eternality of our people and in the sheltering presence of God. We must never lose faith. And if we can do that, we will discover that our inner light can chase the darkest shadows away.