

Coping with Fear

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In 1933, facing the growing menace posed by an increasingly bellicose and well-armed Third Reich, as well as the problems of a ravaged economy, and personal disillusionment and widespread depression, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt uttered the immortal words, "We have nothing to fear, but fear itself."

He wanted to reassure a jittery American nation and to restore calm to a tense public. His words, as well as his mere presence went a long way towards achieving his goal.

Winston Churchill played a similar role for his nation during World War II. What is it about a calming, confident presence that enables a leader to help people overcome their fears?

The commander of the American troops at the Battle of Bunker Hill told his men, "don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes." He too, was attempting to instill confidence in those who were in his charge as they faced a better-equipped enemy. That, or he didn't want to take too many chances because he was worried about the inaccuracy of the crude rifles in the hands of his soldiers.

Throughout history, individuals who have been thrust into leadership roles in particularly adverse times have risen to the occasion, or not. Although not actually involved in a war today, there is a high level of anxiety and fear in our society. And for good reason -- We are constantly being bombarded with so much to worry about.

Just last week, we boarded up windows, moved in lawn furniture, lined up at the grocery store to buy water, batteries, and supplies and bunkered down in anticipation of the onslaught of Hurricane Isabel. When it finally hit, the devastation was horrific, but we were almost relieved the damage wasn't worse than anticipated.

We have certainly had our share of storms to weather recently. A year ago at this time, our region was in the grips of an unknown sniper, who randomly preyed upon innocent victims. Our life styles were drastically altered and inconvenienced. Tourists cancelled visits, outdoor student athletic activities were scrapped, and many events were called, as much of our area was virtually shut down.

And of course, since 9-11, our world is so very different. We now know that there are people so indoctrinated with hatred that they will stop at nothing in their quest to destroy and take lives. We are less secure than previous generations, for the very foundation of our civilization is under attack as never before.

The still-unsolved anthrax attacks followed on the heels of 9-11, bringing further panic and anxiety to an already nervous public. Duct tape anyone?

We unquestionably live in a time very different than the one most of us grew up in. One of the most terrifying and unsettling aspects is the randomness of it all. When dealing with circumstances beyond our control, we feel vulnerable as we face the unknown, which makes it that much more difficult to cope with our fears.

No one ever knows when or where a terrorist will strike. Particularly alarming are the growing accessibility and array of tools of destruction at their disposal. It is difficult to set foot into any public gathering without wondering if anyone else, or if everyone else is thinking what you might be thinking at that moment -- what a great target this would be for someone seeking to wreak havoc and destruction.

David Ropeik, author of "RISK: A Practical Guide for Deciding What's Really Safe and What's Really Dangerous in the World Around You" cautioned last October, during the height of the sniper attacks in an article he wrote for the Washington Post entitled, "Be Afraid of Being Very Afraid" about the danger of over reacting to external factors. He advised, "Fear in and of itself is a risk...the stress of fear is dangerous...It is a complicated conflict between our natural, self-protective emotions on the one hand, and on the other, the risk that our fears might actually exacerbate the dangers we face."

More often than not the media does not help, as it whips us into a bigger frenzy and panic, disseminating information in a manner which does not merely inform, but more often than not contributes to even greater panic and alarm. Barry Glassner author of "The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things" says that the most widely held (and scariest) terrorist scenarios begin in the media.

About a year ½ ago, a friend was planning to travel to Israel. She called shortly before her scheduled departure, concerned by what she was hearing on the news, and so she turned to me asking what to do. My advice was simple. I told her, "Turn off the tv, and stop listening to the news." The individual took my recommendation, and upon her return later thanked me, and told me not only how happy she was to have gone, but how relieved she was to be liberated from listening to the round the clock news coverage. The saturation coverage in the media had almost immobilized her.

We have to be careful not to dwell on our situation and become so obsessed that we become almost paralyzed and afraid to act, go out, or leave our homes.

When pollsters take the pulse of the American public to see what concerns them the most, the results consistently reveal that the economy is the most important issue people worry about. These pollsters have obviously never interviewed members of our congregation. Yes, we worry about the economy and jobs as well, but I find that people are extremely concerned about issues of public safety and personal security, in a way that did not exist a few short years ago.

One senses a growing degree of uncertainty in our community. I don't want you to get the wrong impression, and think that I do polling to determine the content of my sermons, but I want to address this issue today because I feel it is on the minds of so many in our

community and because I share these concerns. I, too agonize over what the world of our grandchildren will be like.

Granted, there is an element of worry, which is part of being Jewish, but in this case our fears are not imagined. As someone once said, even people who are paranoid can have enemies and people who don't like them.

So on this Rosh Hashana, I would like to consider what guidance and direction our ancient tradition can offer to help us cope with our fears. Saying that we have nothing to fear but fear itself is easier said than done, and may not allay our anxieties. There is however, a great deal we can learn from the collective wisdom of our heritage and from the experiences of the generations who preceded us.

Even the most peripheral view of Jewish history reveals the extent to which Jews have been exposed throughout the millennia to terror beyond imagination. On Yom Kippur we read the martyrology, which tells the story of how the Romans tortured Jews, especially those who taught and sought to perpetuate Judaism. We recall the courage of Rabbi Akiba who defiantly resisted the Romans, and who uttered the shema with his last dying breath.

In the Middle Ages, Jews were accused of defaming the host, of poisoning wells, of being agents of the devil, of being the devil, of killing Christian children and using their blood to make matzah. Talmuds were censored and burned. Torah scrolls were desecrated. Synagogues were burned. Jews were tortured and killed. The Chelmenicki Riots in Poland in 1648 where the Cossacks unleashed the Polish peasantry resulted in the deaths of almost 100,000 Jews. With the emergence of nationalism in the 1800's, Jews were accused of being parasites and the source of all the evil in the world. The pogroms of the 19th century were so horrendous, that it led to millions of Jews leaving Eastern Europe to make their way to Palestine and the shores of this country.

But somehow, through it all, despite it all, Jews, Judaism and the Jewish people survived. Not only did we survive, we found the ability to be optimistic, to bring a message of hope to the world and to bring children into this world.

The immortal words Anne Frank wrote in her diary reflect the eternal optimism of the Jewish people. Taking refuge from German stormtroopers in an attic, hoping not to be discovered, she wrote,

“It's really a wonder I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever approaching thunder, which will destroy us too, I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again.”

Where does such faith come from? How can a young person who sees the world around her being destroyed find the inner resolve to have such faith? What is the source of such good will? How did they do it? How did our ancestors overcome their fears and find the resolve necessary to persevere?

We sometimes forget that we have a treasure, with powerful, eternal insights which gives ageless advice. That treasure is the Bible.

Right now we are a bit uneasy about the whole debate over the public display of the Ten Commandments in a state court. We are in a bit of a quandary. We know we should be kind of proud, and take some pride of authorship that it is so prominent and important – after all it does come from our Bible. But on the other hand, we have been raised to believe that the notion of the separation of church and state is our God. And while that doctrine has served us well, we always thought it mainly applied to not bringing Christian teachings into our lives. The Ten Commandments, well that's a different story. But I would contend the real truth of the matter is that the source of discomfort for so many Jews may be because we are uncertain how to respond when people take the Bible too seriously.

And that is a shame, because there is a lot of good stuff in it.

About to lead his people into the Promised Land, Joshua is told, “Do not be afraid. Hazak ve'amatz, be strong and resolute. Do not be terrified or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” These words are echoed in the 27th psalm, which is read every day at this time of year.

Each service in the month before the Yamim HaNoraim we proclaim the ancient words --

Adonai ori, v'yishi, memee ira?

The Lord is my light and my help, whom should I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life, whom should I dread?

When evildoers attack me, to slander and devour my flesh, when foes threaten, they shall stumble and fall.

Though wars threaten me, I remain steadfast in my faith. Should war beset me, still would I be confident.

It concludes:

Do not subject me to the will of my foes, for false witnesses and unjust accusers have appeared against me....

Kaveh el adonai, Look to the Lord.

Hazak ve'yaametz lebecha, Be strong and of good courage. Hope in the Lord!

It is no wonder that this particular psalm was inserted in the liturgy from the beginning of the month of Elul, through the fall holidays. Facing unimaginable fears, with enemies all

around, the writer realized that he could find comfort and refuge in steadfast faith in God. During the Yamim haNoraim, the Days of Awe, a time of Judgment, we are reminded that God is to be approached as a shelter from the storm.

A similar theme is expressed in the 23rd Psalm, in words familiar to many of us.

Adonai Roe, lo ehsar binot desheh yarbeetzaynee.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not lack. Yeah though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no harm, for You are with me. Your rod, and your staff, they comfort me.”

Ironically, this psalm is familiar because it is popular in Christian circles. Most do not realize that it is a powerful prayer which is traditionally said as part of one’s night time regimen as well as at a time of loss, because it states that one is not alone, when living in the presence of God.

One of my favorite prayers, the Hashkivenu prayer, is recited only in the evening service, at the time of day when people felt especially susceptible to their fears. It asks God to spread over us the shelter of His peace and draw us under the protecting, sheltering wings of the Shechina so that we will be “shielded from enemies, pestilence, starvation, sword and sorrow,” all very real threats.

These liturgical yearnings show that our sages saw themselves as part of something bigger than just themselves. They felt connected to each other and had a sense of community. They knew they were a part of an eternal people.

And they also lived their lives accompanied by a God they were in frequent contact with. God was no stranger to them, nor was it a mere ephemeral concept. They turned in prayer, not the way people in a desperate situation do, or on an as needed basis. Rather, it was a regular part of their daily life. It came naturally to them, and helped to prevent them from being overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness. As the Psalmist said in the 23rd Psalm, I am not alone, for the Lord is with me. It is why the 27th Psalm expresses the wish -- “One thing I ask of the Lord, to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord, to visit in His Temple.”

To our ancestors, God was a constant. God was accessible. And God was real.

They, like us, had fears. And so they prayed not so much to change the situation, or the reality that surrounded them, but as a means of coping with whatever they were confronting. They knew that they could align themselves with God and in so doing draw faith, encouragement, and the support necessary to deal with life’s vicissitudes.

There is much wisdom here for us on this Rosh Hashana.

What we learn from each of these passages is that our sages confronted fear with faith, faith in God. And that is something we need to be reminded of at this time of year.

Tomorrow we will read the powerful story of the Akedat Yitzhak, the binding of Isaac. Before being bound to the altar, as he is making the journey to the mountain with his father, he asks, *Hinei haesh v'haetzim, v'ayeh haseh l'olah?* Here are the firestone and wood, but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" His question lets us know that he knows what is really going on. His father, Abraham responds with the telling words, "*Elohim yireh lo haseh le'olah, beni*, God will provide the offering, my son." Abraham's response is the ultimate statement of faith.

Soren Kierkegaard in his seminal philosophical work, Fear and Trembling sees Abraham as the lonely man of faith. He writes, "Faith therefore is not an aesthetic emotion but something far higher, precisely because it has resignation as its presupposition; it is not an immediate instinct of the heart, but is the paradox of life and existence."

Isaac is bound to the altar, and is only spared at the last possible moment. One of the primary reasons we sound the shofar on Rosh Hashana is to remind us of Isaac's courage as well as of his faith. When we hear the shofar, the story of the binding of Isaac, or these psalms, we are being summoned, and should take the message to heart.

A few months ago I received an email which commented on how different life was just a generation ago. I have slightly modified it, and share it with you ---

"According to today's regulators and bureaucrats, those of us who were kids in the 40's, 50's, 60's, and even 70's probably should not have survived.

Our baby cribs were covered with bright colored lead-based paint. We had no childproof lids on medicine bottles, doors or cabinets, and when we rode our bikes, we had no helmets.

As children, we rode in cars with no air bags or seat belts. Riding in the back of a pickup truck on a warm day was always a special treat. (Not to mention the risks we took hitchhiking.)

We drank water from the garden hose, and would have thought it silly to buy water in a bottle from a grocery store. We shared one soft drink with four friends, all from the same bottle.

We ate cupcakes, bread and butter, and drank soda pop with sugar in it, but we were never overweight because we were always outside playing.

We would ride our go-carts down a hill, only to find out that it had no brakes, a problem we learned to solve after running into the bushes a few times.

We would leave home in the morning and play all day, as long as we were back when the street lights came on. No one was able to reach us all day – because we had no cell phones.

Instead of video games, computers, cable, or internet chat rooms, we had friends. We went outside and found them. We didn't have all kinds of after school activities or car pools. We rode bikes or walked to a friend's home. We played dodge ball, and sometimes, the ball really hurt.

We made up games with sticks and tennis balls, and although we were told it would happen, did not put out many eyes.

We fell out of trees, got cut and broke bones and teeth, but there were no lawsuits from these accidents.

Little League had tryouts and not everyone made the team. Those who didn't somehow learned to deal with disappointment.

Not all students were gifted, talented, underachievers, or distracted. Some just weren't as smart as others. Although they didn't do as well on tests as others, they learned to live with the consequences.

And somehow, this generation, which shouldn't have survived, learned how to deal with failure and success and has produced some of the best risk-takers and problem solvers and inventors, ever."

Yes, the world our children inhabit is very different from the one we knew. When we were children we did not awaken each day to a color code on our television screen indicating the level of the terrorist threat for that day. But many of us do have memories of drills in hallways, and of crouching on the floor next to our lockers, or under our desks, with our hands covering our heads in the event of a nuclear attack. Each generation must confront its terror and that which threatens its sense of security.

Rosh Hashana comes each year to remind us to turn and return to our tradition, to be reminded of its power and attraction, of how much it has to offer us, especially in times like these. Although the threats were different, our sages imparted to us the means to cope with that which threatens to overwhelm us. The holiday also reaffirms that human life is about much more than just security and personal safety, but about commitment and being a part of a system and a people who embraces life, and who are accompanied by God.

We all, each of us in our own way face unimaginable fears. What may appear to be a minor nuisance to one person, is real to another. The question is how to cope with these feelings. I am not suggesting that prayer will magically alter the outcome of events. Rather, I am suggesting this morning, that ongoing prayer, which engenders a relationship with God, accompanied by a turn and return to our sources is one response. It is not the only response, for the Talmud cautions us that a person should pray as if everything depends on God, but act as if everything depends on you. But it remains an important option which for too many of us is not a regular part of our lives.

As Rabbi Yosef Soloveitchik, “haRav”, writes in “Worship of the Heart”, “The basic function of prayer is not its practical consequences, but the metaphysical formation of a fellowship consisting of God and man.” He views it as part of an intimate dialogue with God, within the context of precedents in the Jewish tradition.

It is not so much that our faith can give us a protective shield, but rather that it can help us through difficult times.

Natan Sharansky’s autobiography, “Fear No Evil” takes its name from the 23rd psalm, because reading the book of psalms is what gave him the fortitude to withstand a Soviet regime intent on crushing his spirit and the movement he led. Imprisoned and placed in isolation for his leadership of the Soviet Jewry human rights movement, his book tells one of the most inspiring stories I have ever read of courage, defiance and determination. The major weapons the KGB employed against him and other prisoners were fear and isolation. He did not succumb to their tactics because he found comfort and the power to resist by his credence in Judaism. Despite unbelievable pressure and unimaginable tactics exerted on him to break his will, Sharansky writes how this faith is what allowed him to stay free, and view his oppressors as the ones who were not. In his prison cell, he would sing the words of Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav, *Kol Haolam kulo gesher tzar me’od*. The entire world is a narrow bridge. *V’haikar lo lfached klal*, and the important thing is not to be afraid at all.

May we strive to live our lives in accord with this teaching, and may it offer us confidence and security. May we face the future as well as our fears knowing that we are not alone. In the words of the psalmist, *Hazak ve’amatz*. Be strong and of good courage. Take courage in the Lord, *v’lo lefached*, let us not be afraid.

May God be with you in the coming year, and more importantly, may you strive in how you live your lives to be with God.

Amen.

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