

# The Whole World is a Narrow Bridge

**Sermon by Rabbi George Gittleman**  
**Rosh Hashanah 5770**

Kol ha'olam kulo gesher tsar m'od v'haikar lo l'fached klal: The whole world is a narrow bridge, but the essence, (really... the crux of the matter), is not to be afraid

(Rabbi Chaim Nachim of Breslav)

These days, this saying is best known as a Jewish camp song, but it is actually a very serious and deep teaching. Kol ha'olam kulo gesher tsar m'od v'haikar lo l'fached klal: The whole world is a narrow bridge, and the essence is not to be afraid. Fear. Rabbi Nachman teaches that the essential thing in life is not to be afraid. The focus of my thoughts this evening is fear because we are plagued by fear. In Hebrew the Holy Days are called the yamim noraim, which is often translated as the “Days of Awe.” But it turns out that in Hebrew the word for “awe” and the word for “fear” are the same. Traditionally the Holy Days were in fact a fearful time for our ancestors, and maybe it is so for some of us as well.

So think of the imagery for a moment. The book of life, we are told, is open and God is up on God's throne, up there somewhere. And God decides who gets written in the book of life, and who gets written in the book of death. Who shall live and who shall die. That's pretty fearful. God as king and judge, sitting in (it is a he in this case) his heavenly court, passing judgment on our lives in the year ahead. In truth I think it's hard for us to relate to this aspect of our tradition because the myths are dead for us. When I say “myth” I don't mean it in a pejorative or negative way. I simply mean “King” as majestic and all powerful doesn't really work for us anymore; the kings that we know today are pretty impotent: right? So the idea of God as King is a “dead myth” for us, But not for our ancestors. In fact our Eastern European ancestors had a much more active religious imagination. And this kind of religious based fear was real to them. It was real to them in a way that we can't really grasp. They trembled before their God. And these, the Holy Days, were a fearful time, this was a scary time, it was also a hopeful time; there is a disconnect between us and our tradition, from our past and today. Nevertheless, if we let go of the fact that the myths are dead, they are still meaningful. It is still awesome, for example, to recognize that some of us will not be here next year. Some of us in this room will not be here next year. And our fate, our destiny, our lives are in so many ways out of our control. The truth is we have not a clue what will happen to us, our loved ones, or our community. And when we bump up and face that fact, it can be scary. And then those myths come alive again for us as well.

Our European forefathers and foremothers had a lot to be afraid of in a concrete physical way. Poverty, disease, political instability, pogroms. Thankfully, we don't have the same kind of raw existential threats crouching at our door as they did. Now our fear is more amorphous, like a bad storm or bad weather that's in the distance. You can see the cumulous clouds, you can maybe see the flashes of lightning and maybe with a great delay hear the roll of thunder, but it hasn't arrived to our door just yet.

We are living in a fearful time, globally. I am not going to list them all... Do I need to? Okay... beg me for mercy... Nationally, it is frightening. Locally, there is plenty to be afraid of right here in Sonoma County. And then of course it is an election year, and that is scary in itself. Both sides play on our fears. I think one side more than the other, but I will leave that for you to figure out for yourselves.

Kol ha'olam kulo gesher tsar m'od v'haikar lo l'fached klal: the whole world is a narrow bridge, and the essence is not to be afraid. Fear. Let's start with the anatomy of fear: what happens to us physically when we are afraid. Imagine for a moment... I would ask you to close your eyes, but I don't think we have our defibrillator working yet. Imagine for a moment that you are walking along a wooden path. You come around a corner, and there coiled up against a rock in the path is a huge rattle snake. It's rattles a buzz, it hisses, and then it lunges out at you. It actually happened to Laura and me. It didn't strike us, it barely missed us, but it ruined our trip to Yosemite.

This is what happens physically: various parts of the brain signal the nervous system and the organs to prepare to take action. The pupils of the eyes dilate. The bronchia in the lungs dilate to admit more oxygen, hairs stand on end, heart rate and blood pressure rise to supply the body and the brain with fuel, the liver begins to break down sugars for quick energy, blood vessels in the skin contract causing chills and sweating, the spleen pumps out white blood cells in case there is an injury, stomach and intestine enzyme secretions and muscle activity needed for digestions stop, and blood vessels in the stomach and intestines contract to divert blood to the muscles. The bladder and the colon prepare to empty. The central portion of the adrenal medulla floods the bloodstream with adrenaline. Breathing quickens, the entire body is in a state of high alert. Whew! This is what every rabbi goes through during the Holy Days, and it is called "fight or flight" in layman's terms. The anatomy of fear validates what we feel: "freaked out", overwhelmed frightened to death, scared ....!

Okay, but is it helpful, this "flight or fight" response? To really understand what this means to us, it helps to think in terms of metaphor. And the metaphor that I like to use is; a deer in the headlights. Now, picture a deer in the headlights: it is hunkered down a bit, eyes wide open, a car is coming, and it is thinking to itself that is a foreign looking, large object is coming toward it that doesn't look safe! "I think it is coming after me!..., it is going to kill me! I know I should move, but I am a deer trapped in the headlights, and it's going to run me over!" And then, guess what happens...splat!

When we are frightened we have trouble thinking and acting consciously. We lose our minds in large part due to the huge physiological reaction that fear causes – our bodies and our minds are flooded and overwhelmed physically: Kol ha'olam kulo gesher tsar m'od v'haikar lo l'fached klal: The whole world is a narrow bridge, but the essence is not to be afraid.

That's a little bit about the physiology of fear. Now I want to move to how does Judaism help us with fear? And I want to offer a few spiritual responses. What I am about to share I learned from Rabbi Avi Weiss, who is a renowned Orthodox rabbi and teacher from the East Coast; he gave a seminar for the Northern California Board of Rabbis which I attended a while back. His first teaching about fear was from the famous medieval rabbi named Isaac Abravanel. Rabbi

Abravanel was born in 1437 and lived through the Spanish inquisition. He knew a thing or two about fear.

His teaching about fear comes from his commentary to the book of Genesis, specifically from the story of Jacob and Esau. We don't have time for the whole story, but just remember that Jacob stole Esau's birthright, he went away for a long time and he came back with his wives and kids and everything else. Word came to him that his brother was waiting for him with 400 men. He was afraid! His fear seems obvious to us but Jewish Tradition, which tends to glorify the Patriarchs wonders why a great man like Jacob, who we're named after (he was later re-named "Israel"), would be afraid? That is the issue that Abravanel is dealing with. And what he does is he makes a distinction between feeling afraid, acting out of fear, and acting in spite of one's fear. Abravanel teaches that it is human to be afraid and to act out of fear. To run, to hide, to fight, that's human. By the way, I have learned over time that if I act out against someone and please forgive me (and I am serious), if I did that in the past year to you. That if I do that, it is usually because I am afraid. I am afraid of failure, of judgment, of being alone, of death. Usually that is where that kind of behavior comes from. And I have also learned that if someone acts out against me, at me, they are usually acting from a place of fear. We become psychologically like a cornered animal reacting from a primitive place of self protection. It is not very pretty and it is not very helpful. And as we enter into the New Year, it is helpful to reflect on how we might have acted out in fear, and hurt someone or ourselves. Take a moment, just take a moment. Did you let someone have it because you were afraid in some way? Next time you let someone have it, when you go over it in your mind, ask yourself, "Was I afraid?"

Abravanel says this is human behavior, acting out in fear. However there is a higher ground we humans can attain, and that is when we act in spite of fear. The hero is not fearless; another word for the fearless is the foolish! The hero is not fearless. The fearless person in a real, dangerous situation is a fool. The hero is the person who acts in spite of her or his fear.

A few examples... One of my heroes, actually heroines, is Lillian Judd. I don't know if she made it here this evening, but Lillian Judd is an amazing woman. She is an Auschwitz survivor, and she is one of my heroes. And she has many stories of how she acted in spite of her fear. I was having breakfast with her not too long ago. For the last decade I have had the privilege of breakfast at her house about once a quarter. She makes me mushroom omelets and so much other food that I don't eat for the rest of the day! She cooks, I eat and she tells me stories. This is the story she told me when I asked her, "Tell me Lillian a story of acting in spite of fear."

She said, "Well, I was in Auschwitz, and I was working in a little factory. And we were forced to cut curtains lengthways into pieces. And we had a quota that we had to make every day. And I struggled to make my quota every day. And if you did not make your quota you were either killed or beaten senseless. Some of the ladies knew how to sew, but I had not a clue how to do any of it, but I was holding my own. Someone told us that Yom Kippur was coming. And we decided as a group, me and the other girls that were there [they were 17 and 18 years old] that we were not going to work on Yom Kippur." "Well Lillian," I said, "How were you going to do that?" "We decided that we would make our quota and extra every day and we would hide the extra under our quota, so that when the day of Yom Kippur came, we would make like we were working all day, but we actually would not be cutting any fabric." That is acting in spite of fear.

It was not a happy story. They got caught. And she barely survived. But that is not the point, and that was not her point. She was illustrating for me, and all of us, how an everyday person can act in spite of their fear, in the most difficult situations.

Here is another example from one of the greatest teacher/Jewish thinkers I know, Moshe Habertal, who lives in Israel. He is a philosopher, a very gentle man. But he grew up in Israel, he served in the Israeli army. He was a tank commander. He tells a story of being ordered to take a village in the West Bank. He was told to go in his tank to the top of a hill overlooking a valley. “Just get your tank to the top of that hill.” He is driving his tank. There is a problem: there is a car in the way. “Look...you know a Styrofoam cup?” He asks. “Well that is what a car is like to a tank if you drive into it. It will just smush it like it is Styrofoam! So I have to ask myself, shall I just smush this Palestinian man’s car, and realize that for him that could have been twenty years of work to own that car, that car could have been his livelihood, and meant maybe everything to that family. Or do I stop my tank, get out of my tank, and go door to door finding out who’s the car it is and ask them to move it?” Obviously if he does that he is going to put himself in danger. So this is what he does: he gets out of his tank, he goes down to a couple of doors. They are not answering, no one is getting out. But finally someone does. He says “It is my car, thank you very much.” And he moves it, and Moshe moves his tank into position. That’s acting in spite of fear.

So those are kind of heroic situations, but these are not heroes. And what I want to say to you is that it can be true for us as well. Just by continuing to hope, to dream, to love and to live toward our highest aspirations, we can act in spite of our fears. It’s when we give up that we act in fear. So that’s one religious response taught by Rabbi Isaac Abravanel who lived through the Spanish inquisition and fled to Lisbon in the 15th century.

Another response to fear I want to teach you is from Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik, one of the greatest Orthodox thinkers of the 20th century. He relates a story about a psychiatrist in his community who is ready to become ba’al t’shuvah that means born again religious. But there is one concept that is keeping him from making this transition and that is: yirat Hashem/ Fear of God. Yirat Hashem is a basic theological concept in traditional Judaism. He says, “You know Rabbi, I am really engaged now religiously. I see a lot of value in Judaism. But I am a psychiatrist, and I know that fear is a bad thing. And this is my stumbling block. If you can help me over this stumbling block I am ready to commit to a more Jewish life.” And this is what the great Rav said: “I am not a psychiatrist, but I know one thing; fear is a part of being human. Everyone has fear. Fear of failure, fear of loss of money, of aging, of sickness. There is however one great fear that pushes away all the other smaller fears. What is that fear? It is fear of the Holy One, Blessed be He.” I could leave you here, but you must be asking yourself what I asked myself. And that is, “What does this mean to us?” What does it mean?

Well let me tell you first what I don’t think it means. I don’t think he is saying, “just have faith.” And I will tell you why. This guy lived through the Shoah, the Holocaust. Not him personally, but he saw most of his community completely obliterated by the Nazis. He knows better than to say that if you have faith, things are going to be okay. I don’t believe that is what he meant to say. This is what I think he is teaching: one way to handle our fears is to place them in a bigger context. And this is hard, but actually it is not all about us. Even if it all goes wrong for us, there

is a bigger picture that we are a part of, a higher order that we are connected to that exists and has meaning and purpose beyond what does, or does not happen to us.

It reminds me of a song by Leonard Cohen. I am not sure Rabbi Soloveitchik would appreciate me comparing the two. Sylvia Borstein, who many of you know, and who is a great teacher, mentor and friend to me has this inscribed inside her siddur, her prayer book. It goes like this: “And even when it all goes wrong I will stand before the Lord of Song with nothing on my tongue but halleluyah.”

In this way the higher fear *yirat Hashamyim*, can remove our lower fears, whether they are grounded in reality or not. There is a leap of faith required. But not that everything will be okay, or that God will take care of us. I wish it was that simple. The leap of faith is that there is meaning in our lives, doing the right thing matters, being kind is important, generosity is essential regardless of whatever else happens to us along the way.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt at his first inaugural address said, “There is only one thing to fear, and that is fear itself.” It was the height of the Depression, and at a low point for our country. Thankfully our financial woes are not as severe, at least not yet, as theirs were. *Kein Ahora*. Nevertheless, his words are instructive in two ways. First they acknowledge how debilitating fear is, something we have already spoken about this evening. In fact often the fear is worse than what is actually happening to us! Second, his words intimate a kind of confidence, faith really, in our country and that in the end our country will be okay. I will confess it is hard to have faith in our political leadership. I regularly have to take deep breaths when I read the morning news. You know we get the paper, we don’t get TV, I read the paper and I always see what is happening in the political campaign and depending on who is leading in the poles, I have a little minor panic attack. But, as challenging as it is for me to have faith in our political leadership, it is easy for me to believe in you. I have the greatest respect and admiration for the leadership of this community. I wish they were running the White House. I also believe in the spirit of America. The Jewish community has prospered here in America like at no other time in our history. America is a great, if troubled, country for us and so many other people.

We have reason to fear, but we have reason to hope as well. You know for the past 2000 years or so, Jews have been saying the *Sh'ma*: “Hear oh Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is One.” We have been saying that prayer through thick and thin, in prosperity and in utter poverty, in security and at the edge of the knife of genocide. Wherever we have been, and whatever our lot has been, we have said, (singing) *Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad*. At times it seemed like a shout into the void. But saying the *Sh'ma* is our way of saying that we will not give up, we will not give in to fear. If God is One, then our world can be One. We can put an end to war, poverty, sickness and disease. We can stop the poisoning of our planet, reverse the effects of global warming. We can, in the biblical idiom, “feed the hungry”, “clothe the naked”. If God is One, then we can all be One and together heal ourselves and our world.

So here we are. The New Year is upon us. We have not a clue what will be. Who will win the election? What will happen overseas? Who shall live and who shall die. We know there will be challenges; and we can imagine many frightful outcomes. But we also know that fear is the enemy, and coping with our fear is essential for a New Year of blessings for our selves, for our

families, for our community, for our country. Kol ha'olam kulo gesher tsar m'od v'haikar lo l'fached klal: The whole world is a narrow bridge, but the essence, is not to be afraid.

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