

From Anxiety to Agitation
Yom Kippur 5771 – Rabbi Toba Spitzer

While many of you know me as someone who practices mindfulness meditation and goes every year on week-long silent retreats, I will admit that this was not always the case. Back when I was in my 20s and early 30s, including while I was at rabbinical school, I couldn't have imagined sitting quietly for a week. In fact, I couldn't sit still very well at all. One day I was discussing this with a therapist whom I was seeing. I told her that I couldn't sit still for too long, because when I sat still I got anxious. She smiled and gently pointed out that perhaps what was actually happening was that I was anxious all the time, but when I sat still, I noticed it.

Wow. It seems sort of obvious now, but at the time it was a revelation. I knew immediately that she was right. On some level anxiety was my constant companion. Not an overwhelming one, but it was there.

I want to talk with you today about anxiety, because I know for many of us it's a frequent, if not constant, companion. There are certainly many things in our lives, in the world around us, to get anxious about. Every few days it seems there's something distressing shouting at us from the headlines – mosquitoes spreading disease, terror alerts, impending natural disasters, violent crime. On a personal level, there are so many reasons for us to be worried and afraid. Whether it's losing a job, going through a divorce, dealing with serious illness, stressing about our children, struggling with infertility, feeling like we'll never be able to afford to retire—all of these and many other problems challenge us.

Anxiety is a not uncommon, and a not unreasonable, response to the surprises and challenges life hands us. So what can, or should, we do about it?

I'd like to explore what I would call the spiritual ramifications of anxiety. Is anxiety a good thing, a bad thing, a neutral thing? And why do so many of us seem to be afflicted with some level of anxiety even when, truth be told, our lives aren't really that bad, when, compared to most of the people in the rest of the world, we are incredibly blessed? Like me, back in rabbinical school. I was pretty much fine. So what was I so anxious about?

After some extremely brief and superficial research on this topic, I think I can say that some amount of anxiety is either necessary or at least unavoidable – and may even have helped us evolve as human beings. It's adaptive to be able to imagine and plan for potentially negative events. We should feel uneasy when things aren't going well, and know when to protect ourselves when something dangerous is looming.

In our spiritual lives, our anxiety can be a signpost that some kind of change is needed, either within us, or in our external circumstances. Rabbi Alan Lew, z"l, writes that "Intensive afflictive states—anger, boredom, fear, guilt, impatience, grief, disappointment, dejection, anxiety, despair – are the great markers of our Teshuvah." When we are able to become aware of these feelings, and not deny them, they can help goad us into making needed changes in our lives. We may not like them, but they do serve a purpose.

Of course, I'm not speaking here of profound, immobilizing anxiety, the sort that causes real disability. But for all that anxiety has become a popular clinical diagnosis and a target for pharmaceutical intervention, the reality is that it's a common aversive state that at some time or other we all experience. So assuming that it is somewhat fundamental to the human condition, where does it come from? What is at the root of our anxiety?

Here are a few ways that I've been thinking about it:

One type of anxiety is essentially fear. Not the fear of an immediate threat right in front of us, but our fear of something that hasn't happened yet, something that we believe is coming and that we won't be able to cope with or make right. This fear may be based on past experience and thus have some grounding in reality, or it may entirely be a figment of our imagination, but either way, it's an emotional reaction to an imagined future. This kind of anxiety can easily get out of hand, as it's by nature a product not of our present reality, but of our thoughts. And as anyone who's spent any time with his or her own thoughts knows, they can be highly... creative, not to mention persistent.

Another sort of anxiety comes as a reaction to a difficult or annoying situation. When something unpleasant arises in our lives, we want it to go away. We want things to be different than they are, and we get anxious at our inability to make the difficult circumstance disappear. Sometimes this kind of anxiety is a signal that something needs to change, either inside ourselves or in our situation; it calls us to action. Sometimes it merely reflects the difficulty of sitting with the inevitable unpleasantness that arises in every life.

Finally, I came across a wonderful definition of anxiety by Dr. Moshe Meir. Meir describes anxiety as being "born of the comparison of the real with the ideal." After reading this, I was struck by how I, and I assume others, are busy making this comparison between the real and the ideal all the time. While it's not entirely conscious, I think we all assume that we should be living an ideal life—that we and our loved ones should always be healthy, that our relationships and our work lives should be pleasant and fulfilling, that all of our family members should be perfect. We look around and find the healthiest people, the seemingly best relationships, the most fulfilling jobs, the coolest parents and the picture-perfect children—all of whom are, of course, residing in other people's lives—and we take this as proof that something really is fundamentally wrong with our own existence. When our reality in any of these realms doesn't quite measure up to our perceived ideal, we suffer. In our inability to achieve this ideal, we get anxious.

So where does the problem lie – with our inability to accept what is real, or with our insistence on an ideal?

On the one hand, I am quite sure that we will never achieve any peace in our lives if we are forever in contention with the inevitable imperfections that life holds in store for us. We, and the people we love, will get sick. We will lose our job, or struggle with unfulfilling work, or have to deal with a difficult boss or unpleasant co-workers. Our children, our parents, our siblings, we ourselves are not perfect, and never will be. Things will happen in our lives that we never could

have imagined, and sometimes we will disappoint ourselves and others, despite our best efforts. This is just the reality of life on this planet.

On the other hand, it would be horribly passive and problematic to just accept all the pain and suffering in the world and reject the possibility of the ideal. We need to be able to imagine that things can indeed be better, both for ourselves and others. The call to justice in this morning's haftarah portion, the selection from the prophet Isaiah, assumes that we, as individuals and as a society, can do better—that we can feed the hungry, house the homeless, clothe the naked. We need to be able to dream for ourselves; we can and should want to achieve a greater level of happiness and contentment in our lives.

In the world of community organizing, people talk a lot about the world as it is, versus the world as it should be. The comparison, the perceived gap between the real and the ideal, is in this context not a source of anxiety, but a source of agitation. And agitation, in community organizing lingo, is not a bad thing at all. Agitation motivates us to make change, to get angry about injustice and do something about it. According to one community organizing manual, “Agitation is the art of challenging a person to be true to their self and to act on their self-interest.” In this scenario, we become agitated when we feel deeply the gap between the real and the ideal, and decide to do something about it.

In terms of what afflicts us, and our society today, I would suggest that we suffer from too much anxiety, and not enough agitation.

At the risk of oversimplifying, I think that many of us tend towards two extremes. On the one hand, we often feel fairly powerless when it comes to making an impact on the world around us. We perceive extreme limits on our ability to make real change. In the late 1980s, Rabbi Michael Lerner published a study of this phenomenon, which he termed “surplus powerlessness.” What he found among Americans in many walks of life was that we tend to overstate our own inability to make a difference in our communities and our society. In my perception, we often cede our potential power in the public realm to others – to our elected representatives, to organizations that advocate on our behalf. We donate money and time to support them, we might even take periodic action like sending an email or making a phone call, but by and large we don't think of ourselves as the change-makers. We delegate others to do that work for us, and then we get frustrated when they don't get the results we had hoped for. But underlying our frustration with others is the powerlessness that we assume for ourselves.

With a surplus of powerlessness comes a deficit of agitation. With the exception of a very few of us, most of us have not been pushed to take serious action on the issues that most concern us, action that would entail real, serious change in our own lives, in our communities and in the broader society. We have not been agitated, we have not been lovingly and firmly pushed to see where we are frustrated, where we can take action, and where the sources of our real power lie. As a result of not having been agitated, we in turn don't agitate. And without agitation, the world simply will not change. To take just one example: many people here worked hard to elect President Obama. Yet those of us who supported him have done exceedingly little to hold him accountable. He does what he is pushed to do, and the truth is that we, collectively, haven't really pushed.

Having ceded most of our power in the public realm, we turn to our private world and reach for an opposite extreme of control. We so desperately want everything to be okay in the arena in which we imagine ourselves able to exert some kind of power. And in contemporary America, being “okay” requires an enormous amount of private resources, because our public resources are so thin. So we kill ourselves working to make salaries that, for many of us in this room, put us in the top one to five percent of humanity in terms of income, and yet never seems enough to meet all the potential catastrophes that await us. We push our kids to achieve because we are terrified that they won’t be able to support themselves in the same way. We do all that we can to ward off illness, economic instability, emotional vulnerability. No wonder we’re so anxious.

The challenge we face is how to shift the balance. How might we diminish the anxiety, and ratchet up the agitation, in our lives?

Much of what we do and say during the High Holydays can help us in this task. Yom Kippur in particular is intended to jolt us, to wake us up out our spiritual lethargy. We traditionally wear white on Yom Kippur—a kittel, like the one that I am wearing—as a symbol of the shroud that we will be buried in. We remove ourselves as much as we can from our physical lives—from eating, bathing, physical pleasure—to remind ourselves how fragile we really are. We chant the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, which reminds us of the basic fact of human existence—that our lives are ephemeral; that we don’t know what awaits us this year, or whether in fact this year might be our last. We chant *adam yesodo k’afar*, that all of humanity comes from dust, and to dust we will return.

We do this not to be morbid, not to be sad, but to wake up. None of us really knows how long we’ll be here, and so we need to stop putting off the things that we need to attend to. Yom Kippur comes to remind us that we are mortal, and that we can be reborn—that tomorrow our life begins anew.

This is terrifying, but it is also invigorating. The intention is not to reduce us to trembling blobs of worry, wondering whether we get the “sword” or the “fire” this year. It’s to help us clarify our priorities, to remember who we truly are, to get us moving in the direction that we need to move.

I am grateful to my friend Nommi Nadich, Director of Social Justice Programs at the Jewish Community Relations Council, for her insight into one of the central prayers of these High Holydays that deals directly with these themes.

This prayer, the “U’v’chen” begins, interestingly enough, by asking God to cause us to fear:

Let Your *pachad* be upon all that you have made, and Your fear (*aimatcha*) upon all that You have created, and all the beings will have awe/fear (*yirucha*) and will bow down before you...

There are three different words for fear, here – *pachad*, *aimah*, and *yirah*. Different words, but all seem to point to the same experience—a sense of utter vulnerability in the face of the

enormity of the cosmos, the sheer wonder and power of the universe in the face of which we, and all created beings, are powerless indeed. Yet, according to the author of this prayer, this awareness is not supposed to paralyze us. Quite the opposite. According to what we read here, the effect of this acknowledgment of a vast, awe-inspiring Power that works in and around us, is this:

and they shall all be made into one unity (*agudah achat*) in order to do your will with a full heart...

In the vision of this prayer, awe or fear of God is intended to lead to a collective, wholehearted doing of God's will, which I understand to mean that all of humanity will embrace the Godly tasks of building a world of *tzedek* and *hesed*, love and justice. What begins in "fear" leads not to an anxious act of submission, but to a wholehearted commitment to our human task.

I'd like to quote for you from a d'var Torah that Nommi gave on this topic last year, as she captures so well the deeper meaning here:

Throughout the year, we wrestle with fears that threaten to stop us dead in our tracks – and perhaps even, to derail us from living lives of meaning and purpose. Our fears aren't only about the possibility of real tragedy and disaster, or the prospect of being abandoned as we age and falter... We obsess about the smaller things – about advancing in our jobs, about our children excelling in school and their careers, about our families exuding the aura of success, about being – or at least, appearing to be – invincible. Ultimately, it is other people we fear – how they might judge us if we make the wrong impression, if we don't measure up, and how we will be diminished in value as a result. On the Yamim Nora'im, - the Days of Awe – we are meant to turn our attention to the fear not of each other, but of God.

Nommi continues:

As modern people, what would it mean for us to live in fear of God? Would we be compelled to act with the knowledge that we are created in God's image – to act graciously and compassionately to others? To clothe the naked and feed the hungry? To pursue peace and justice? To protect the earth, guided by our understanding that we are God's partners in creation? Would we honor our parents and raise our children in a way that commands their respect? Or use our talents more fully, taking on the challenges and risks that enable us to reach our full potential? And perhaps most important, would we live each day with the very real fear of squandering our brief time on earth and not fulfilling the promise inherent in being created in God's image?

The U'v'chen prayer continues very much in the manner that Nommi suggests. The second paragraph expresses a yearning for a sense of God's presence, for hope, for the ability to "open our mouths" and say what needs to be said, leading ultimately to a call for *simcha* and *sasson*, gladness and joy. The prayer climaxes in the third paragraph with a vision of a world in which the righteous can truly celebrate, a world in which Godly love and justice overwhelm the rule of oppression.

To return to the language of community organizing: perhaps the High Holydays liturgy is trying to agitate us. It begins by unsettling us, shaking up our sense of complacency, making us realize our own vulnerability and the many ways in which the world is broken. Then it holds out for us a vision of the world as it might be, as it should be, as it can be, if only we have the faith, courage and strength to make it so. As Nommi writes, “Fearing God [means] reaching out, beyond the cocoons of our families and communities, and building deep bonds across humanity, to build a world that embodies God’s will.”

We are living in a time that unfortunately encourages us to do just the opposite. Instead of being called to have awe for the Power of Liberation that empowers us to act with love and justice, we are bombarded with messages that instill in us a fear of the Other. Our fear of terrorism has turned into a general anxiety and fear of all Muslims. Our economic troubles and anxieties have led to a misguided, punitive fear of immigrants, and a deep mistrust of government.

Those of us who refuse to tolerate the scapegoating of Muslims or of immigrants are not free of these underlying fears, and we often find our own targets for our anxiety, fellow citizens who, while they may appear misinformed or even hateful to us, are not really the cause of our problems. Those causes are far greater than any Tea Party rally or political figure or talk show host. They involve massive corporate interests, and deep-seated problems with our political and economic systems. They implicate all of us as consumers of a huge percentage of the world’s resources, far out of proportion to our numbers.

The challenge, then, of moving from anxiety to agitation, is this. On a personal level, we need to foster an ability to be as fully present as possible with those life experiences that are as inevitable as they are unpleasant—to sit with them, not deny them, and at the same time to not let them rule our lives. After I had my insight about my own anxiety, so many years ago, I tried just sitting quietly, to see what would happen. And sure enough, anxiety arose, and hung around, and I just sat with it. And after awhile it went away. I learned from this, and from years of practice since, that it is quite possible to cultivate calm, to cultivate wisdom, to allow anxiety to arise and to watch it pass.

And when something truly frightening arises in our lives, the challenge is to stay in the present moment, to deal with what faces us today, and to keep our minds from straying too far into the future. When the mind jumps forward, fears multiply, so we gently need to come back to now, to what is.

Another antidote to our fears is to learn to appreciate our blessings and expand our sense of gratitude. The Jewish practice of blessing—saying blessings upon awakening, when we go to the bathroom, when we eat, saying blessings throughout the day—this is a very specific practice to expand our sense of joy and gratitude. We can learn to see our problems in a larger context, and so feel less overwhelmed. We can practice not sweating the small stuff, because there is so much small stuff. We can learn to ask for help, so that we don’t feel so alone. All of these things will lessen our anxiety.

But we also need to deepen our ability to discern when a problem that seems personal is in fact a symptom of a much larger social issue. Worrying that we cannot afford to adequately care for ourselves or our parents as we age is a private anxiety—but the fact there is a dearth of acceptable, publically funded options for elder care—that should agitate us. The dilemma of parents needing to return to work before their infants are ready, or before they are ready, because child care is unavailable and unaffordable, is a private anxiety—but the fact that the United States is the only advanced nation that does not mandate paid parental leave or adequately subsidize child care is a social issue—that should agitate us. Struggling to afford to feed ourselves and our children safe, healthy food is a private anxiety—but the power of agribusiness and the failure of governmental agencies to adequately regulate those businesses is a social issue—that should agitate us.

Once we have come to a deeper understanding of the roots of our problems, then we can embrace the “*yirat Adonai*,” the Godly fear, so eloquently described by my friend Nommi. That is, the awareness of our own inherent Godliness, our own power and potential as human beings. And with that awareness comes an understanding of the inherent Godliness of others, and of our human responsibility as caretakers of this planet, a Creation that was not ours, but which we are charged to care for.

And once we recognize the deeper issues, and embrace our own capacity to make change, then we need to act—wisely, creatively, powerfully. To quote again from Dr. Moshe Meir, who wrote this in tribute to Rav Yehudah Amital, z”l, the founder of the first Israeli religious peace organization:

“[Rav Amital] was not moved by anxiety over the gap from the ideal, but rather by the **joy of creatively moving towards the unknown.**”

Part of agitation is not knowing what exactly is going to happen next. To move towards the unknown means to embrace the reality that we don’t know what the future will look like, but that we have faith that it can be better than what is. To move towards the unknown means admitting that we don’t know what we will look like, when we start to act in new ways.

This summer, I had the privilege of joining with eight women from the Hyatt 100, the group of housekeepers who were fired one year ago by the three local Hyatt hotels, in an act of civil disobedience. The most powerful part of the experience was getting to spend time with these beautiful, powerful, very funny women. The morning after the arrest, I was speaking with one of the union organizers involved in the campaign to support these women as they attempt to reclaim their jobs. He told me that the evening before, as we sat in front of the downtown Hyatt waiting to be arrested for trespassing, he asked one of the women, “Could you have imagined, a year ago, that you would have done all the things that you’ve done this year?”

Before their firing, these women were hotel housekeepers, about as low on the social class ladder as you can be in this country. They are primarily people of color, and many are not native English speakers, and so were further marginalized. Yet since their firing, as a result of their refusal to just sit back and accept the terrible injustice that has been done to them, these women have become leaders. They have flown all over the country, speaking to other hotel workers,

telling their story as a warning of what can happen when a corporation feels no constraints on its behavior. They have marched in front of the hotels that they once worked inside of, demanding justice. They have gotten arrested for the first time in their lives.

These women are, for me, models of successful agitation. They are not consumed with anger, they are not hateful. But they know that what happened to them was not a cause for private anxiety, but for public outrage. They are determined. They are loud when they need to be. And they have been transformed by becoming agitated, by joining together and taking action.

To move from anxiety to agitation, we need to do things that move us out of our habitual ways of thinking and doing. We need to take risks, to push ourselves in new ways. We may need to experience some significant inconvenience, because transformation is not always comfortable. We will need to have a deeper sense of faith in ourselves, and to work to come into relationship with others who can take action with us—because none of the problems that we’re facing can be solved by one person, or one congregation.

And, if we’re to believe our prayerbook, it will be worth it:

And therefore, let the just behold your peace, let them rejoice
Let all who follow in your path sing out with joy,
Let all who love you dance in celebration,
And may your power overwhelm all treachery,
So that it vanishes wholly from the earth like smoke.
Then shall the power of injustice pass away!

And in the words of my colleague, Rabbi Jeremy Schwartz:

May we find the courage to speak truth to earthly power. And in struggling against
oppressive power, may we find contentment and joy.

Amen, amen, amen.