

Did you hear about the case brought against an older Jewish man who was in a truck accident and sued for damages, but who the insurance company countersued for making a fraudulent claim?

The prosecutor began by asking the man, "Didn't you say, at the scene of the accident, 'I'm fine'?"

"Well, let me tell you," the man said, "I just put my dog Moishele, into the car ..."

"I didn't ask for any details", the lawyer interrupted. "Just answer the question. Did you not say, at the scene of the accident, 'I'm fine'?"

The man continued, "Well, I just got Moishele into the car and I was driving down the road ..."

The lawyer interrupted again and said, "Judge, I am trying to establish the fact that, at the scene of the accident, this man told the officer on the scene that he was just fine. Now several weeks after the accident he is trying to sue my client. I believe he is a fraud. Please tell him just to answer the question."

By this time, the Judge, puzzled by the man's insistence said to the lawyer, "I'd like to hear what he has to say about his dog Moishele."

The man thanked the Judge and proceeded. "Like I was saying, I just loaded my dog Moishele into the car and was driving him down the highway when this huge semi-truck ran the stop sign and smacked my car. Moishele was thrown into one ditch and me into another. I was hurting, real bad, and didn't want to move. I also heard Moishele moaning and groaning, and knew he was in terrible shape. Then, the officer comes along. He also heard Moishele in pain. So, he goes over to him. After he looks at him, and sees what a terrible condition Moishele is in, he takes out his gun and shoots him."

"Then, the officer came across the road, gun still in hand, looks at me and says, 'How you feeling?'"

"Nu, Judge - so what would you say?"

I have to tell you, I feel like a bit like the old Jewish man in the joke this year. It's hard not to feel a bit battered and bruised. We live in a time when it's easy to be frightened. The violence perpetrated by radical jihadists seems

to strike ever closer to home. It isn't just guns we have to worry about. It's just some fanatic with a kitchen knife or a truck or a pressure cooker. And with our gaze turned to those things, in the background a shrewd and dangerous dictator raises the specter of nuclear Armageddon. In our schools and workplaces we no longer have only fire drills, but teach our children how to hide in closets behind barred doors. We are nervous that – for the first time in many generations – those who come after us will have less than we do. There are more people on the move in the world that at any time since the end of the Second World War – over 40 million (half of whom are children. Half!).<sup>1</sup> And I am emotionally torn. I am anxious about being overwhelmed by the sheer number of refugees – and fear that a few among them may seek to take advantage of the situation to cause mayhem. Yet how can my compassion not respond to the image of a dead refugee child on a beach? How can I harden my heart, as did Pharaoh and those who turned their backs on Jews, when we were refugee? I am pained by the violence I see directed against police in this country, the growing number of murders in our cities and our national inability to confront the fears of African-Americans (particularly Black men) have that they are pre-judged just because of the color of their skin? And need I say anything about this *meshuganer* election? No matter who wins, given the crassness of the campaigning, it feels like we all have already lost. Is it any wonder, then, that I (like many of you) have a gnawing feeling of disquiet and uncertainty? What is happening to our country? How can we control the growing sense that the world is growing less stable?

At a time when everyone is so emotionally charged I feel a bit like I'm staring down the barrel of the gun, afraid to say anything lest I make things worse. So ... I stand before you like that old Jewish guy before the judge. In this time of pain and anger, of deep divisiveness, what would you say?

Some caution that it is best to not say anything about what is going in the world. I certainly understand the desire to just act like everything is "fine".

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/briefingpapers/refugees/>

Many times in recent months I've kept my mouth closed and my opinions to myself when I've heard what people say or write me because I value the relationship I have more than the need to offer my opinion. There certainly is some Jewish justification in choosing peace over truth.

The Talmudic sages realized that the desire to be "right", to assert one's own understanding of truth, does not come without a cost. They taught that the destruction of the Temple and loss of Jewish sovereignty was not the result of the power of our enemies, but due to two internal problems that weakened the Jewish community. One was *sinat hinam* שניאת חנם, a "full blown hatred" of the citizenry towards one another.<sup>2</sup> A second was that the people followed the law. So, nu, what's wrong with following the law? It is that people were so focused only on their sense of "justice" that they forgot how the law must be leavened with compromise and mercy.<sup>3</sup> In this the rabbis were teaching that when people in a group or nation no longer care about one another, when they are so entrenched in their own views that they hate those with a different point-of-view, when they insist on the justness of their views without trying to be compassionate towards others, the seeds of societal destruction are sown.

The Israeli poet, Yehudah Amichai, wrote a poem that captures the essence of what those rabbis were teaching. It's called *ha'makom bo anu tzodkim* המקום בו אנו צודקים - "From the place Where We are Right":

From the place where we are right  
Flowers will never grow  
In the spring.  
The place where we are right  
Is hard and trampled  
Like a yard.

Amichai picks up a thread from our tradition that understands that an implacable and immovable insistence on only our own point of view inhibits anything creative or innovative. To insist, "I am right and you are wrong" hardens the heart and dims the hope of creating a civil society.

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<sup>2</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 9b

<sup>3</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 30b

Maybe you don't struggle listening to others, but I suspect many of us find it hard to take seriously the views of those with whom we deeply disagree. And so, in our families and in the nation, we retreat to our political and ideological corners. And I fear that in so doing we are losing our way – confusing our opponents with our enemies. No wonder the Presidential campaign is so vituperous and toxic. It isn't just those running for office. It's us. It isn't the candidates who are tearing us apart. We're doing it to ourselves.

I hope you understand, then, that if I tell you "I'm fine" it's because I'm not sure I want to tell you how I really feel. But allow me to let you in on a little secret that a congregant I'm fond of taught me about what "fine – F, I, N, E" – really means. FINE stands for being frustrated, insecure, neurotic and exasperated. So, as we look forward to this new Jewish year, in case you're asking ... "I'm fine!"

Can we find in Jewish traditions, however, a way to move forward – even if not in agreement about how to do so – at least agreeing what we ought *not* do? I think so. And the answer comes from the rather strange choice for a Torah reading our traditions suggest for Rosh Hashanah. On this day traditionally known as "The Day of the World's Birth", the natural Torah reading would seem to be the story of Creation. Instead, we read the עקידה *Akeidah*, the Binding of Isaac.

Many who read this tale conclude that this is a pious story about faith in God. The truth, I suggest, is the very opposite. I think it is a narrative of tremendous failure, and the source of the tragedy is the assumption that the primary way to motivate human beings is through fear.

In the עקידה *Akeidah* two words appear multiple times in various forms – ראה *ro'eh* (meaning "sight" or "vision") and ירא *yirah* ("fear" or "awe"). Abraham lifts his eyes as he walks towards the mountain and "sees" (ירא *va'yar*) the place from afar. When Isaac asks, "Where is the lamb for an offering?" he is told יראה *Elohim yireh lo* "God will show (or 'make seen') the lamb." At the critical moment when he is about to slaughter Isaac the angel calls him a

ירא אלהים *Yireih Elohim* “God-fearer.” Finally, after offering the ram in place of his son Abraham calls this place יהוה ירה *Adonai Yireh*. Though this is often translated as “the mount where God appears”, it is deeply intertwined with being the place where Isaac endures a primal, elemental and life-threatening terror inspired by what Abraham assumes God wants.

In this story, then, fear and vision are locked in a powerful dance. But which moves Abraham more? Is he a “visionary of God” (רואה השם *roeh Hashem*) or is he motivated primarily by fear of the Divine (יראת השם *Yirat Hashem*)?

The modern Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, argues that the crucial moment in this story is not when Abraham accedes to God's demand that he offer his son. Rather it was “Abraham's ear for hearing the voice that brought him back to the ethical order, in *forbidding* him to perform a human sacrifice, [that] was the highest moment in the drama.”<sup>4</sup>

I disagree, for Abraham never wavers. Throughout this story he acts out of a single-minded submission to God's will. “Take your son, your only son, whom you love ... and offer him up.” And he does it! He is, in fact, so hell-bent on slitting his son's throat that only the extraordinary intervention of the angel calling out to him twice (“Avraham, Avraham”) stops him.

The prophet Isaiah says that we Jews are the “descendants of Abraham who loved [God].”<sup>5</sup> In this story, however, this “lover of God” is given a new appellation – ירא אלהים *Yireih Elohim* ... Abraham, the one who “fears.” And what does this fear do to Isaac? It drives him away, for never again in Torah do we hear of Abraham and Isaac together. After this, Isaac is seen only with his half-brother Ishmael (himself abandoned by Abraham) and the woman he loves he brings into his mother Sarah's tent. Yes, Abraham loved God, but his fear of God led him to shunt aside one son, ignore his wife and terrorize his

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<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names*, p. 77

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 41:8

other son. No wonder the name Jacob (Isaac's son) uses for God of his father is פחד יצחק *Pachad Yitzhak* ("the Fear – or better – Terror of Isaac")!<sup>6</sup>

The story we read today, then, is the tragic turning point of Abraham's failure. God asks for something cruel and unjust, violent and destructive ... and Abraham accepts that immorality as the price faithful obedience demands. Why is it that at this critical moment it is only the angel who speaks, when earlier God speaks to Abraham directly? And why is the blessing he receives here no different than what he was offered earlier in the Torah? It is because he has lost his way. His fear trumps his vision – and because of this the next generation is debilitated and terrorized.

The *עקידה* *Akeidah* is, therefore, our great Jewish tragedy and cautionary tale. It reminds us that the noblest of human virtues and hopes, even faith itself, can be corrupted.

What allows Abraham – indeed, any of us – to suspend all we know to be moral and right? It's a critical question, for if an individual can set aside all he or she knows is just and compassionate, so too can a nation lose its moral bearings. After the Holocaust we know, as Rabbi Donniel Hartman teaches, "the most advanced of societies can be the most morally corrupt. No one is immune."<sup>7</sup> We certainly are living in a time when liberal democracies are confronted with great challenges. The institutions of a free press, independent judiciary and the rule of law are being questioned. Faced with the dual threats of radical Islam and totalitarianism, many in the West wonder if the constraints of the law and ethics are justified. As I said earlier, it certainly is understandable that we are more anxious.

But there is a dangerous side affect of fear, for is there any great virtue that cannot be twisted by it? Religion and faith become instruments of holy war when its adherents are convinced that the unbeliever or heretic is suspect. The demagogue, who claims to represent the "will of the people", turns against "outsiders" as the source of national weakness – justifying the

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<sup>6</sup> Used by Jacob as the name of God for his father in Genesis 31:42.

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vpu\\_uvtpYk&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vpu_uvtpYk&feature=youtu.be)

suspension of legal protections. Tyrants pervert the need for security into oppressive restrictions on political expression. Fear is a principal instrument of the bully, silencing voices of conscience with the claim that those who speak of equity, justice and compassion are naïve or weak. Fear allows the mob to cloak itself in “democracy”, allowing the majority to trample the liberties of the minority. On the Left fear leads BDS not only to critique Israeli policy, but to question Israel's very right to exist. And on the Right, white supremacists, and those on the alt-right intimidate and threaten Jewish politicians, journalists and thinkers. Fear allows the pretense of calling a lie the truth. Fear sacrifices liberty for power. Fear – real or imagined – is the barrier between us as human beings. It is the root cause that leads us to attack and denigrate those who are not like us – and so is the source of anti-Semitism and racism, ethnic cleansing and genocide.

Of course, sometimes fear is justified. There is evil in the world and people who seek our harm. More than this, there are times when fear is necessary and good. Fear of punishment, knowing that there are consequences for doing something hurtful or harmful, can be good. And a healthy respect for the government, our sages taught, prevents society from sliding into anarchy and mob rule. Fear is the sense of realism that Jew-hatred has taught us, that when someone says they want to harm or destroy you, they mean it. And so when Iran or Hamas say they seek Israel's annihilation, we best take them seriously. A healthy fear keeps us vigilant, but also humble – for in a world of competing claims and powers, we must never grow smug thinking we, or our candidate or political party or our country or our faith, have all the answers. As much as a healthy fear makes us wary of the over-reach of others, it should make us wary of pomposity in ourselves or the people or groups we support.

In Hebrew the term ירא *yirah* is both “fear” and “awe”. As we say in English, something can be *awesome* or *awful*. Abraham heard both voices – that of an awesome Power in the universe that gives life and brings death. Yet at the top of the mountain it was the voice of a God who expects compassion

and righteousness who keeps him from crossing the thin line that separates civilization from barbarism.

What, then, keeps a healthy fear from becoming dangerous? The answer is balancing fear (ירא *yirah*) with ירה *yireh* (vision). Only when fear is bound to the ethical boundaries that leads to what the prophet says is the goal – that is, to “do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God” - is it healthy.<sup>8</sup> That is the great message of the עקידה *Akeidah*. If you want to be part of the covenant of Israel it is not enough merely to believe in God. It is to bring godliness into the world. Our goal is not monotheism. It is *ethical* monotheism.

About 400 years ago the custom developed to say the words of Psalm 27 the whole month before Rosh Hashanah and throughout the Days of Awe. The central theme of this Psalm is fear – and finding ways to overcome it. And what is the way to do that? “Teach me Your way [God], lead me on a straight (or honest) path ...” with the hope to “believe in seeing good.”<sup>9</sup>

During these Days of Awe the choice is placed before us. Will we be paralyzed by the world’s terror and immobilized by our fears? Will we circle the wagons and protect all we have; afraid others might steal it from us? Or will we courageously face our fears and not lose our humanity, our decency and our character along the way? Can we affirm a vision for ourselves, for the Jewish people, for America and our world that does not sacrifice the moral underpinnings of what it is we are fighting for? Can we truly be fine – armed with fortitude, integrity, nobility and ethics?

We live in a time of fear and trembling, and there are things to worry about. But we Jews have always found a way to define ourselves not by our anxieties, but our capacity to envision a better, more decent world. We are not just those who fear God, but are the “descendants of Abraham who loved God.” The voice we hear is not just the word of God from on High, but God who is in the plea of those -

... like Hannah, who are broken and anguished,

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<sup>8</sup> Micah 6:8

<sup>9</sup> Psalm 27:11, 13



... like Ishmael, who are abandoned,  
... like Sarah, who are shunted aside,  
... like Isaac, who are degraded by those who claim to follow a higher  
ideal, but whose principles are twisted by fear into malice and hate.

Nahman of Bratslav (the Bratslaver Rebbe) taught that we all walk a fine line between normalcy and horror: כל העולם כולו גשר צר מאד *ko ha'olam kulo, gesher tzar m'od* "All the world's a bridge," he said, "a very narrow bridge." והעקר לא לפחד כלל *v'ha'ikkar lo l'fcheid k'lal* "The main thing is not to be afraid."

The world *is* a narrow bridge. But the main thing is *not* to be afraid.