

Embracing our Fears - Rosh Hashanah 5784

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I want to ask everyone, if they can, for just a moment, to think about one of your earliest memories, one that you will never forget. Conjure up an important memory, one that for you is a core memory in your life. Think of something that is ingrained within you. Don't worry, I'm not going to ask you to share your memory... But with your permission, I'll share mine with you.

This memory comes from when I was a little boy, and I think it's fair to say that it's probably my first ever memory - I'm not sure I can remember anything in my life before this. I was probably about 3 years old, sitting in my stroller, in our hallway, about to leave the house with my mother and brother. My father was staying behind to do some work in our attic. Our main hallway in my childhood home was right next to the living room. And I have a distinct, unforgettable memory of looking over to that quiet and peaceful room, quite innocently, and all of a sudden, hearing a huge crack and feeling a bit of a shake, and then seeing two legs pop out from the ceiling. A large hole had opened up, not large enough for a person to fall through, but just large enough for two legs

Those two legs belonged to my father. While he had been doing work in our attic, he discovered, unfortunately, that the floor was not as strong as he thought it was! Thank G-d, my father was fine and was uninjured, though the same could not be said for our ceiling.

There is some humor in this incident looking back on it. But I also remember, at the time, crying - as a little boy - and I remember my father's legs kicking back and forth, and I remember shouting. But most of all, I remember my fear. Fear is one of the most powerful emotions, forming some of our core memories. And while I'm sure this isn't the case for everyone here, I imagine that for at least some of you, the earliest memory you thought of just a moment ago had something to do with fear. Because we are hardwired to remember fear.

We are not only hardwired to remember it, but it's also inevitable that we are going to experience it. It's impossible to go through life without being scared of something. It's part of being human. We experience fear, and throughout our lives, we form powerful memories of the moments we've encountered our fears. But confronting these moments, in real time and in our memories, can be difficult. This is because - naturally - fear makes us uncomfortable and unhappy. As human as it is to experience fear, it is also human to avoid fear, to have a visceral reaction, to try and prevent ourselves from experiencing it whenever possible.

This is true in all aspects of life, and it's especially true when it comes to our Jewish lives. I cannot tell you the number of teachers and rabbis I have learned with over the years who have attempted in one way or another to frame Judaism in positive, warm, loving, non-fearful terms. This starts with something as simple as translating the word יראה (yirah) as "awe" instead of fear. This isn't an incorrect translation! But it's certainly an interpretation that can make all kinds of passages in our tradition seem much more attractive than they otherwise could be (or were intended to be). Or, as another example, the word חטא (chet) is sometimes translated as "missing the mark" (this is actually how missing a goal in soccer is described in modern Hebrew) instead of "sin." It's much less scary to think about how we have "missed the mark" in the previous year as opposed to a heavy, frightening word like "sin." I could go on and on with more such examples.

And I couldn't blame my teachers, or anyone who chooses to frame Judaism in this way. In fact, I do so myself! This approach builds up a Jewish life that is very appealing, attractive, and engaging. And I'm grateful for it, because quite honestly, I'm not sure I'd be here today if I grew up thinking that we should live our Jewish lives in fear. I think many of us would agree that instinctually, it's better to approach our lives trying to avoid the things that make us afraid.

But there's a challenge with this approach, one that I feel acutely today, particularly at this moment, as we are about to blow the shofar. Because as much as the shofar is consistent with living a Jewish life filled with joy - we are about to say הריעו לאלקים כף, הריעו תקעו כף, - "All of the nations should join hands, sound the shofar to hashem with a cry of joy" - the shofar is also all about fear. And, one could argue, fear is actually central to the shofar and to Rosh Hashanah in general.

What does the shofar have to do with fear? To answer this question, we need to better understand one of the core texts in which the shofar appears in the Torah, and that is the revelation at Har Sinai. This story is the first, and only one of two times in the whole Torah when the shofar appears, so it's safe to say that this episode is a prototype, of sorts, for understanding one of the main emotions that the shofar is meant to make us feel.

Some might imagine Har Sinai as peaceful and inviting, and in fact, on Shavuot many shuls decorate with flowers, because there is a midrash that explains that there were flowers all over Har Sinai. But if you read the pesukim (verses), which are a core part of the shofarot section of our Musaf service which we are about to recite, Har Sinai seems to be anything but sweet smelling flowers. To put it bluntly, Har Sinai is a terrifying experience! Take just one verse for example:

וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בִּהְיוֹת הַבֹּקֶר וַיְהִי קֶלֶת וּבְרָקִים וַעֲנָן כָּבֵד עַל־הָהָר וְקוֹל שֹׁפָר חָזָק מְאֹד וַיִּתְרַד כָּכֹל־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר בַּמַּחֲנֶה:

On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain and a very loud blast of the horn; and all the people who were in the camp trembled.

When we blow the shofar, it's hard not to be reconnected to that sense of fear, urgency, crisis, and chaos that Har Sinai must have inspired. In a way, we are reliving this experience today, trying to get ourselves to feel that very same fear that the Jewish people felt at Har Sinai. This trepidation that the Jewish people felt is one we are tapping into when we hear the shofar.

But one question remains - why would we want to make ourselves feel this way, today of all days? Why do we need to feel fear - if being afraid makes us so uncomfortable, and particularly on Rosh Hashanah - the New year, which we are so blessed to be able to celebrate together - why should we feel any fear? How could we simultaneously push fear out of our Jewish lives, but also invite it in, on one of the most important days of the year, no less?

One answer to this question relates to what I've already shared about remembering our fears. Looking at the Har Sinai story more closely, it seems that if it had been a pleasant, joyful experience, it would have been easier to forget. Because, just as with my memory of my father falling through our living room ceiling, Har Sinai is now hardwired into our psyche. And even more so, had Har Sinai been less dramatic, the experience might have been slowly forgotten throughout the generations. This was something important that we needed to remember for all time, so Hashem made it a dramatic and terrifying and unforgettable sound and light show. A beautiful comment by Rashi illustrates this idea - He says, *אָבֵל כָּאֵן הוֹלֵךְ וְחֹזֵק מְאֹד*. Usually, a shofar starts off strong and grows weaker. But this shofar at Har Sinai was miraculous - it grew louder as time went on. As much as the shofar grew louder in that moment, it continues to grow louder throughout the generations.

We have an opportunity, year after year, to reenact this moment, to make sure that the memory of our collective fear at Har Sinai is firmly embedded in our conscience, growing stronger each generation and not growing weaker.

And today, on Rosh Hashanah, it's not only about embracing our fear from Har Sinai, but also all of the other fears that we bring to this day and to this moment. Because today is not only a day about having a sweet new year. It is not even a "Happy New Year." It's a day for us to be introspective, a day for us to contemplate our lives, a day for us to reckon with who we are, and yes, a day to feel a bit of fear.

Today, we can lean into our fears, both personal and communal, and the shofar helps to remind us of this. When we hear the sound of the shofar, we can remember Har Sinai, the fear our ancestors felt, and the importance and gravity this inspired to preserve the Torah in each generation. And we can also remember our own fears, whatever they may be... Fears of losing someone, fears for the welfare of our family and our community, fears of failure, or fears of missed opportunities

Through encountering our fears we can realize how important something is to us. This is hard work - Because while it might be easy to think about the things we are afraid of, it is counterintuitive and against our instinct to push ourselves to feel them. But that's exactly what the shofar is asking us to do.

And when we feel these fears, we can remember that behind them can be many positive forces, reminding us of so many important things. If we are afraid of losing someone, it can remind us how much we care about them. If we are afraid of the welfare of our family and our community, it can remind us of the centrality of these things in our lives. If we are afraid of failure, it can remind us of our determination to succeed. If we are afraid of missed opportunities, it can remind us to be more mindful and intentional about how we use our time

There is a powerful Midrash that relates that at the time of the giving of the Torah, the Jewish people retreated 12 mil, approximately 7.5 miles, every time one of the ten commandments was uttered, out of fear for what they were hearing. But for each commandment that they heard, they found themselves back where they were before. How so? The Midrash says, *רדו וסייעו את אחיכם*, Hashem sent angels to bring us back to hear the next commandment. As if to say, Hashem was sending us support - in the form of these angels - who would help us lean into our fear. Because in that moment, the fear was there to help us - to realize the importance of the moment, and to remember it for generations to come.

I want to wish everyone a shana tova, a good year. A sweet new year. And while I won't wish everyone a fearful year, I want to bless us all that we can find moments, both now and in the future, to embrace our fears, learn from them, grow from them, remember them, and realize what they teach us.