

Rosh Hashanah I - Living in Fear

It's not hard to cause fear...

At the core of my being, I believe that every person here has Torah to share. Every single one of us was created in the image of God. Every one of us has a spark of divinity. I have such faith in each and every one of you, that I'm going to come down from the bimah now and choose someone at random to share a bit of Torah that is on your mind. You all have the words already within you, I'm just going to hand the microphone and get out of the way...

<<Walk down and around the room some, musing out loud who it might be, someone in the front of the room... someone in the back... etc.>>

I'd like to reflect on what's likely happening with some of you right now. Some of you might have slightly elevated heart rates. Some of you may be sweating a bit. Some of you might have been imagining what you would do if you were asked. Would you try to speak or would you decline? Would you flee the Sanctuary or stay no matter who was speaking? And some of you just might be thinking that this is the craziest thing I have done, which is saying something.

The human fear mechanism is a powerful driver of our behavior. When confronted with a potential threat, our brain releases a cocktail of hormones that heighten our senses, give us more strength, energy and endurance. The human fear reflex allowed us to see danger coming, prepare for it, and respond appropriately.

Most of the time, our fear reflex is triggered with false positives. The creaking of the house at night, or the screech of an animal in the yard presents no real threat. The stranger who approaches to help, not harm. The pain that sends us for a medical test which results in everything looking normal. Our fear reflex is hyperactive to be sure that we are ready the one time we need to be.

Fear has been prevalent before...

Some of you might remember another age, before I was born, when you were afraid of imminent nuclear war. There were drills in public schools where you hid under your desk in case of a nuclear attack. I imagine that your ears were well tuned to the sound of the air raid siren that never came.

Today's children and their parents fear mass school shootings. More and more of my B'nai Mitzvah students talk to me about how they push furniture against their doors, turn off the lights and hide in closets. Some of them have done this not only to practice, but because someone called in a threat. Their fears are growing, together with every parent that sends their children to the sacred learning spaces that are also targets.

I didn't grow up at the time of the threat of nuclear war. There weren't regular mass shootings when I was a child. I felt fear so infrequently, that perhaps I'm less accustomed to the feeling, and also more aware of the emotion when I feel it.

I remember a time I was afraid when I was 10 years old, just a little older than my eldest daughters are now. I was in the middle of reading *Night* by Elie Wiesel, which maybe was a poor choice for a 10 year old to grab from his parent's shelf. There was a rustling outside my bedroom window, and even though I was a "big kid" reading "grownup books," I was legitimately terrified that Nazis were right outside my window trying to get me. The "fight or flight" instinct kicked in, and I ran full tilt to my parents in tears.

I didn't experience much anti-Semitism growing up. An occasional comment here and there. "Don't Jew me down." Some kid trying to get under my skin, knowing my love and commitment to Judaism and trying to use it against me. A swastika some punk thought would be cool to spray paint on a playground. My rational mind dismissed these moments as happening in isolation, on the edges of society.

I saw within our Jewish community an overdeveloped fear response. Any whiff of anti-Semitism from any sector was met with a massive mobilization of our community. The communal and collective trauma of our history; the destruction of the Temple, the exile to foreign lands, the government sanctioned expulsions, the soft discrimination keeping us out of professions, the violence to our vulnerable communities, and the largest genocide in human history. We've had ample reason to be aware, to be afraid, and to activate the "Fight" reflex of "fight or flight." But to be honest, I thought we were too afraid.

This is arguably one of the best times in the entirety of Jewish history. We are a successful and accepted part of American society. The State of Israel nourishes a strong economy and contributes well beyond its size to the progress of the world. Anti-Semitism is condemned even by politicians who utter anti-Semitic statements.

...and it's prevalent again

And yet, just less than one year ago, White Supremacy erupted into the violence of a mass shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. Seven lives were taken from our brothers and sisters. Eleven more were injured. Shortly before the attack, the shooter posted on a social media site. "'HIAS likes to bring invaders in that kill our people. I can't sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I'm going in.'" Right here in this sanctuary, less than a month before the shooting, Shearith Israel was proud to welcome the CEO of HIAS Mark Hetfield to share words of Torah with us. We are proud to support the work of "Welcoming the stranger" We remember what it was like to be the stranger, and we take seriously the commandment in the Torah. *V'ahavatem et ha-ger.*

It wasn't too long ago that I thought our fear reflex was overdeveloped, that our responses to anti-Semitism were too strong, not proportional to the threat. I don't think that anymore.

We are sitting in a sanctuary just like Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. We are in a sacred space like the Chabad in Poway California. We are in a space dedicated to holiness like the Mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand that killed 51. We are sitting in a place dedicated to God, just like the 9 murdered at the Emanuel African Methodist Church in Charleston, South Carolina. This is a place of sacred learning, like every school that was thrown into chaos and fear with the threat of another mass shooting.

There are so many holy places that have been profaned by hate and gun violence. We are sitting in a holy place, praying that it never be profaned.

I wish there were not anti-Semites who believe that we are a threat to their way of life, but there are. I wish we didn't have to spend thousands and thousands of dollars every year on armed guards and security systems to minimize the potential threat, but we do. I wish that our fears weren't justified, but they are.

It shouldn't have to be an act of courage to come to Rosh Hashanah services and gather as Jews to pray and celebrate our new year, but it is. 5779 was a year that demonstrated that the threat is real, hate is rising, and we have reason to be afraid.

Our tradition offers wisdom in times of fear

We are not strangers to living in fear. We have experienced much worse times than today. We have a wealth of tools and traditions to guide us through moments of fear, to harness it for our benefit and the benefit of our world.

Over the course of these Holy days, we'll be exploring these different strategies, and how we as a community can activate our potential to add meaning, purpose and value to our lives, our families, our schools and our sacred places. We can learn from our tradition how to bring a small measure of healing to our world.

If there was ever a Rabbi who had reason to be afraid, it was Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto, also known as the Piaseczner Rebbe. A short time before the War broke out, his beloved Rebbetzin lost her life. The Piaseczner Rebbe consoled himself with his only son, Rabbi Elimelekh Shapira. But the Monday following Yom Kippur 1939, almost exactly 80 years ago, the Germans carried out a particularly brutal bombing campaign against Warsaw. Ultimately, in the course of a few days while he was still mourning his beloved wife, he lost his only son, his mother, his daughter-in-law and his sister-in-law. He was saying Kaddish for five of his closest relatives.

Despite the oppression of the Warsaw Ghetto, he shared Torah with his Chasidim on most Shabbatot and Yom Tovim. The Piaseczner Rebbe has an authority to talk about fear in a way that I pray to God, none of us ever gain. He saw a lot of ugliness in humanity during his life. Today, we see that ugliness rising again, the Rebbe's wisdom strikes me as eternally true and relevant.

Fear of the Other is lesser than Fear of Heaven

In one of his Divrei Torah on the creation of the world, the anniversary we are celebrating today, The Rebbe discussed the characteristic of fear. He said that when humans were created, the quality of fear was buried inside all of us, along with all the other qualities. But when a person is about to commit a wrong, and says to himself, "I hope nobody sees me, he is covering the divine spark within himself in the clothing of fear of other human beings. This kind of fear is the fear of embarrassment, and not a holy quality of fear. But if a person understands that God is actually looking at him all the time, then a different quality of fear seizes him. This quality of fear is that we will fail to reveal God's holiness in the world, that we won't walk the straight and right path for ourselves that God hopes for us. This quality of fear is called "fear of heaven."

A famous midrash shares that anyone who has Torah, but lacks the fear of Heaven is like a person with the keys to the inner chamber, but lacks the keys to the outer chamber. In this view, fear of heaven is the prerequisite to all the knowledge of our deep moral tradition. But what does it mean to have “fear of heaven?” How do we transform our fear of humans to a fear of heaven?

“Fear of Heaven” means fearing not living up to God’s expectations, our highest values

In the Talmud, we are taught, “Hakol b’yidei Shamayim Chutz Mi-yirat Shamayim.” Everything is in the hands of heaven, except for the fear of heaven.” Rabbi Shalom Hartman, zichrono livracha, a modern scholar and theologian, interpreted Maimonides understanding of this phrase as meaning that everything is in the hands of heaven, except for the entirety of human action. God does not have control over how we act, but if we cultivate fear of heaven, then we will be acting with a moral compass.

If we cultivate a fear of heaven, then we are continually receiving the wisdom of guidance to correct behavior. If our actions are driven by fear of the other, by fear of violence, by fear of change, then our choices may be misguided. But if our actions are driven by a fear of not acting according to our highest values, then we will find the strength to do what is right in the most challenging situations we face.

Our world feels like it is fracturing. But we are the ones who say *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad!* We brought the idea of a God who looks at the entire world and hopes for all of humanity. To have fear of heaven means to have a sense of what is right for all of God’s creation.

Over the course of these holidays, I intend to share how we respond to forces of evil that wish for us to retreat into fearing them, instead of fearing heaven. When white supremacists commit acts of violence against us, or against anyone not like them, we must resist fearing their smallness and

instead fear heaven. When any politician, no matter how high an office they hold, speaks words that try and convince us to hate and fear the “other,” we must resist them and fear heaven. When the problems of our world seem so great that we fear there is nothing we can do, we must resist despair and instead fear heaven. Fearing heaven means recognizing that when we join our hands together for the universal good, there is nothing too great for us to accomplish.

While my deepest prayer is for peace, There will be more hate inspired violence in the coming year. There will be politicians that try and convince us to hate the other. There will be problems that seem too great to solve. Hate may be rising, violence may be rising, but we need not fear hate and fear violence. Hate and violence are intended to distract us from fear of heaven, and we must resist that urge. Fearing heaven means that we are guided by our highest values, the mitzvot that God gave us with love. If you want to know how to combat the forces of hate and despair, then keep coming back to Shearith Israel over the course of these High Holidays and all year long with an open heart and a willingness to strive toward our best selves in building the world that we are all dreaming of.