

Rosh Hashanah 5779/2018  
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*“Fear not, for I will be with you:”  
Fear, Hope, & Courage In Our Lives & Our World*

When all the world is a hopeless jumble  
And the raindrops tumble all around  
Heaven opens a magic lane  
When all the clouds darken up the skyway  
There’s a Rainbow Highway to be found  
Leading from your window pane  
To a place beyond the sun  
Just a step beyond the rain

Somewhere over the rainbow<sup>1</sup>

This past year, the world did feel like a hopeless jumble. I feel like the twister is getting faster and faster, and I don’t have anywhere to hide. Many of us fear the direction we seem to be headed.

I choose to believe that “Heaven opens a magic lane” leading to “a Rainbow Highway.” The alternative is too terrifying.

Life has its light, and its darkness, and that’s why we’re here tonight. None of us have to be here. We choose to be here because we choose to believe that there is light after the darkness. We choose to believe that we can be better, and our world can be better. We choose to believe that hope is not yet lost. We choose to believe that Heaven (whatever we understand that word to mean) will indeed lead us to a better place.

Heaven may be the force of nature or the achievements of humanity, the cause of the Big Bang or the Spirit of Love or a power greater than ourselves. Heaven may be imagined as *Avinu Malkeinu* or *Imeinu Shechinateinu*, as a Shepherd or a Friend or a Rainbow.

More than a century before Judy Garland, there was Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav who imagined the whole world as a very narrow bridge.

“In 1973, this teaching of Rebbe Nachman’s was broadcast as a song<sup>2</sup>... to... troops during the Yom Kippur war.”<sup>3</sup> The song became a hit and a “staple of Israeli culture.”<sup>4</sup> Grammy award-

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<sup>1</sup> The original first verse of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow”

winner Ofra Haza, known as the “Madonna of the East.”, even made a popular cover. In good Israeli fashion the song sings:

Kol HaOlam Kulo  
Gesher Tzar Me’od  
V’haikar Lo Lfached Klal

All the world is a very narrow bridge  
The most important thing is not to be afraid<sup>5</sup>

I recently read a book entitled *Conquering Fear*, by Rabbi Harold Kushner, the author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Rabbi Kushner points out that: “If it were...easy [to conquer our fear], God would not have needed to admonish so many generations not to be afraid.”<sup>6</sup> Over and over again, God reassuringly says, ‘Do not fear.’ - to Abraham<sup>7</sup>, to Hagar<sup>8</sup>, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to Moses and Joshua and Isaiah and Jeremiah. Throughout the Bible, God offers these words not to the timid and the fragile, but to women and men of great courage and achievement.

Just moments ago we read of our Divine encounter at Sinai – a Holy moment that makes us who we are. A Holy moment made possible by all the Holy moments that came before.

I want to take us back to the Burning Bush, to the sacred encounter when God first speaks to Moses. Moses asks God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh with that demand? Why should he listen to me?”<sup>9</sup> “God replies, Ehyeh imach, I will be with you.”<sup>10</sup> Next Moses asks God, “When I go to the Israelites with this message [that You will set them free], and they ask me ‘In whose name do you speak?’ what shall I say to them?”<sup>11</sup> And immediately following we find one of the most central verses in the entire Bible.<sup>12</sup> “God replies with a crucial answer that defies easy translation and has provoked volumes of commentary: ‘My name is Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh; tell them that Ehyeh sent you to them.’”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> written by Rabbi Baruch Chait

<sup>3</sup> <https://dailystoic.com/the-world-is-a-narrow-bridge/>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Likutey Moharan II, 48. Wikipedia page on Rebbe Nachman of Breslov.

<sup>6</sup> Kushner, Harold S, *Conquering Fear: Living Boldly in an Uncertain World*. New York: Anchor Books, 2009, p. 69.

<sup>7</sup> Parshat Lech L’cha.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 21:17, the occurrence of ‘fear not’ in this verse is different from the usual, though still conveys a similar idea.

<sup>9</sup> Exodus 3:11

<sup>10</sup> Exodus 3:12

<sup>11</sup> Exodus 3:13

<sup>12</sup> Kushner, Harold S, *Nine Essential Things I’ve Learned About Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 2015, p. 50-51.

<sup>13</sup> Kushner, *Nine Essential Things...*, p. 50-51.

Rashi offers us a helpful explanation that is true to my own experience. Rashi “seems to have been the first to note the connection between”<sup>14</sup> the two occurrences of Ehyeh only two verses apart in Exodus 3:12 and 3:14. God’s Shem, Rashi teaches, God’s essence, “God’s essential identity...is ‘the One who will be with you’ when you have to do something you’re afraid will be too hard for you.”<sup>15</sup>

“That insight, that God is to be found not in the crisis, but in our response to the crisis,”<sup>16</sup> is an essential part of Jewish tradition. Perhaps it is also a crucial part of LGBTQ culture. For in our response to the crisis, that is where “Heaven opens a magic lane.”

Ehyeh imach means, “I won’t do it for you, I won’t do it without you, but I won’t leave you to do it alone.” I will be with you, and I will give you strength and courage and hope to do what you could never have done for yourself.

My own life, and my professional experience, attest to the truth of Rashi’s teaching. But you don’t have to take my word for it. Rabbi Kushner lost a child to a rare disease, and he counseled congregants for over four decades. In his most recent book, he “testifies to the validity of Rashi’s interpretation and the truth of that promise” in his own life.<sup>17</sup>

I need a God who is with us in our fears and our struggles, giving us strength and courage we never knew possible.

I need a God who is with us in our grief and our emptiness, inspiring us with hope in what seems impossible.

I need a God who is with us in our anger and in our guilt, the ‘Forgiving-One’ who guides us to forgive ourselves, and encourages us to be forgiving of others, not for their sakes, but for ours, so that we might be set free from our past, to rejoice and to hope and to courageously seek a new way of living.

That is a God I can believe in!

That is the God of today’s Torah reading. God is with the Jewish people every step of the way - out of Egypt and across the sea, to the thunder and lightning of Sinai, wandering through the wilderness, and attacking an enemy of giants to conquer a new land – the ultimate examples of doing ‘something you’re afraid will be too hard for you.’

Notice that God does not free just one person and their family, as in Genesis. God frees an entire people, over a million strong.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Kushner, Nine Essential Things..., p. 52.

<sup>15</sup> Kushner, Nine Essential Things..., p. 52.

<sup>16</sup> Kushner, Nine Essential Things..., p. 50-51.

<sup>17</sup> Kushner, Nine Essential Things..., p. 55.

<sup>18</sup> According to Exodus 12:37–38, the Israelites numbered "about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children", plus many non-Israelites and livestock. Numbers 1:46 gives

Picture a million people trapped at the shore of the sea, Pharoah's Army drawing closer. Behind them is their fear of Pharoah and before them their fear of drowning. They want to believe that God will be with them, but they are too terrified to move.

There are many *midrashim* that explain just when God split the see. In one of my favorites, the credit goes not to Nachshon, but to a group of women.<sup>19</sup>

All the men are fighting, each one trying to make someone else go in first. As all the men were pushing each other, the women took hands, and together, they walked into the Sea. In that instant, the sea parted.

Every time the clouds darken the sky, "We say to ourselves, 'I'm not sure I can do this.' And Heaven whispers to us, 'Yes, you can, because you don't have to do it alone. I will be with you; other people will be with you to help you through.'"<sup>20</sup>

As it declares in our new siddur:

You make our lives difficult...  
But You do not abandon us  
You give us the courage to enter our struggles...<sup>21</sup>

Eleanor Roosevelt once said:

You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you look fear in the face [and] you are able to say to yourself, "I lived through this horror."... You must do the thing you think you cannot do.<sup>22</sup>

What is it that you most fear? Are you constantly anxious about what's happening at home or in our homeland? Are you fearful for your own safety as an immigrant, a person of color, or a member of the trans and gender-queer community? Perhaps you can't stop worrying about financial insecurity or your own immortality or being alone? Or are you terrified of facing something shameful you have done? Or unable to face what someone else has done to you?

We come together to ensure we never have to face our fears alone. We not only confess together and celebrate together, we share our anxieties with each other, and with God.

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a more precise total of 603,550 men aged 20 and up. (Wikipedia on The Exodus) Thus, including women and children, the Israelites must have totaled well over a million people.

<sup>19</sup> A Young Person's Guide to the Origins of Jewish Prayer published by Torah Aura. I have rewritten part of the original *midrash* to serve my purpose of preaching courage, as well as community.

<sup>20</sup> Kushner, Conquering Fear, p. 163.

<sup>21</sup> Jacobson, Burt. "The Promise of Redemption." Found in *Shavat Va-Yinafash Second Edition: Revised, Expanded and Renewed* on page 73.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Kushner, Conquering Fear, p. 170.

Who shall live and who shall die?  
Who shall find comfort and who shall despair?

Maya Angelou wrote, “Without courage, we cannot practice any other virtue with consistency.”

God’s essence is ‘the One who will be with you’ when you have to do something you’re afraid will be too hard.

Hope and courage are gifts from Heaven.

‘Heaven opens a magic lane.  
When all the clouds darken up the skyway  
There’s a Rainbow Highway to be found’<sup>23</sup>

Rainbows symbolize not only pride and diversity, but hope. As a congregation of LGBTQ people and allies, we know that hope made possible all the progress we have made, and imagines all the progress that we will achieve.

It’s been said that “Hope is like a bird that senses the dawn and carefully starts to sing while it is still dark.”

To lose hope is to sink into depression and despair.

With hope, we can find joy, even in the rain.

“When all the clouds darken up the skyway  
[Hope shows us the] Rainbow Highway to be found”<sup>24</sup>

And perhaps we will see a “Rainbow Wave.” That’s what NPR calls it. 430 LGBT candidates this year have run for office at every level of government,<sup>25</sup> and many of them, including bisexuals and trans-folk, have already won. Along with record numbers of LGBT people and records numbers of women, we’re seeing record numbers of Native Americans and African-Americans running for office.

Those who rise up against us use the politics of fear to silence us.  
They want us to despair so they can defeat us.  
They want us trapped in the pain of the past, and the fear of the future, so they can steal our present.

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<sup>23</sup> The original first verse of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow”

<sup>24</sup> The original first verse of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow”

<sup>25</sup> “Rise of LGBTQ Candidates Could Usher In A 'Rainbow Wave' In 2018,” National Public Radio online, 9/3/18.

“[I]n this moment, [in every moment], hope is the power that makes our lives possible.”<sup>26</sup>

You do not abandon us  
You give us the courage to enter our struggles...<sup>27</sup>  
And the hope to believe that a Rainbow Highway will be found.

“We sin against ourselves and against... [Heaven] if we let [the] fear rob us of our freedom to enjoy as much life as we are granted.”<sup>28</sup> We don’t know ‘Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die?... whose life extended and whose cut short?.’<sup>29</sup> We do know that each year, each moment is a blessing, that when we set aside our fear and our anger and our ego, we receive the abundance of blessing that was there all along.

I need a God who is with us in our fears and our struggles, giving us strength and courage we never knew possible.

‘Fear not, for I will be with you.’

*Ehyeh imach*: “I won’t do it for you, I won’t do it without you, but I won’t leave you to do it alone.” I will be with you, and your community will be with you, and I will give you strength and courage and hope to do what you could never have done yourself.

‘All the world’s a very narrow bridge  
and the most important thing is not to be afraid.’

But, that’s not really what Rebbe Nachman taught. I had the opportunity to study the original text, and a better translation would be ‘not to give in to our fears.’

Whether the bridge leads “to a better world or just... tomorrow’s problems and possibilities”<sup>30</sup> we will never know.

Yet we do know it is courage which allows us to hope, to imagine, to persevere. Without courage, there is no forgiveness, no repentance, no fresh start for the new year.

God’s essence is ‘the One who will be with you’ when you have to do something you’re afraid will be too hard.

As the Psalmist declares:

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<sup>26</sup> Kleinbaum, Sharon, email to Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, June 22, 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Jacobson, Burt. “The Promise of Redemption.” Found in *Shavat Va-Yinafash Second Edition: Revised, Expanded and Renewed* on page 73.

<sup>28</sup> Kushner, *Conquering Fear*, p. 157.

<sup>29</sup> U’ne-taneh Tokef

<sup>30</sup> Kushner, *Conquering Fear*, p. 159-160.

“I can see the good, the blessings, the ways of life.  
Cultivate hope in the Infinite Presence.  
Let your heart be strong and filled with courage.  
Cultivate hope.”<sup>31</sup>

In conclusion, I recall the words of William James:

“These then are my last words to you. Be not afraid of life. Believe that life is worth living and your belief will help create the fact.”

For,  
All the world is a very narrow bridge,  
and the most important thing  
is not to give in to our fears.

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<sup>31</sup> Final verses of Psalm 27.