

Erev Rosh HaShanah, 5780

September 29, 2019

Don't Freak Yourself Out

Baruchim habaim l'Yomim Noraim, welcome, my friends to the sacred journey of the Days of Awe. I say this with full knowledge of the oxymoron in the greeting.

- Welcome to the deep dive into the heart of darkness of the soul.
- Welcome to that vulnerable space for searching the rough edges of our humanity.
- Welcome to the open book of the good, bad, exemplary and horrific deeds of our lives.

The Yomim Noraim – these awesome, fearful, liminal days draw us together in droves. The community girds us to face our foibles, the follies, feats and defeats. The liturgy and music move us to lift the sacred and discard the chaff of our days.

The Days of Awe remind us of the essential truth in the words attributed to 18th/C mystic Reb Nachman: “Kol haolam kulo gesher tzar meod, v'haikar lo l'fached klal. The whole world is but a narrow bridge and the key is not to be afraid.” We are on a journey down that narrow bridge of our days, walking side by side with a community helping us to make sense of it all. And the key is not to be afraid.

The last part of Reb Nachman's quote has always struck me as a beat off. Is the key really to suppress our fears, to bury them, and pretend they don't exist? Telling someone not to be afraid denies the veracity of their feelings, and can even exacerbate that fear. Conjure the image of a toddler birthday party featuring a clown? Inevitably one or two of the kids retreat mortified by the bright painted character in costume. No amount of assuring: “there's nothing to be afraid of,” or “don't worry it's just a costume,” assuages the fears of those terrified toddlers. We adults may find slightly more comfort than toddlers when assured that we need not worry; yet, there is no denying that allaying another's fears, requires more than a soothing: “There, There.”

Fear is not in and of itself evil. Fear can be helpful when it motivates us to take reasonable steps for our own safety. I often counsel Bnai Mitzvah students that the butterflies they feel in their stomach are really the energy of adrenalin instructing them

to be at the top of their game. I encourage them to harness that energy and concentrate on using it to read with more depth and to lead with more strength.

Fear definitely spurs me into action before the Holy Days. I have this recurring dream of “fear and trembling.” I am standing before you in my exercise clothes. I look out and realize that it must be Rosh HaShanah. On the lectern I have nothing: no order of the service, no list of the music, no markings in my prayer book, and horror of horrors (or maybe not for you) no sermon. Inevitably, that anxiety dream propels me to begin preparing in earnest for the Holy Days. Fear can lift us out of complacency and focus us on our tasks with a greater sense of urgency and responsibility.

As much as fear motivates, it also leaves us isolated, frozen, and stuck, in oft-distorted views of reality. We see the fallout of fear all around us. It stifles open communication, lest we offend someone with a different point of view. It annihilates trust pushing us to operate from a position of the worst possibilities of our brothers and sisters. It feeds deceit and obliterates integrity.

We live in the age where fear frames everything from the swings in the economy, to the election of world leaders, from the structure of our schools, to the entre into our houses of worship. Our fears dominate our surroundings in tangible ways. In times gone by the idea of a “big brother” watching our every move and listening to our every phone call was viewed as a perverse intrusion into our innate right to personal privacy. In this day and age, we assent to Alexa, and Siri, our smart phones, and watches tracking our location down to the seat we sit on in this sanctuary; and tracking our words to the call and response of our prayers. We relinquish our personal freedom in the name of protecting our families and fighting our fears.

Fears’ stronghold on our culture has escalated over the course of the last few decades. Consider simple childhood innocence for example. When I was in elementary school I was riding my bike to school with my best friend by the fourth grade. I crossed two major streets and pedaled on the side of another. By the time my son was in elementary school, the only way I would let him ride his bike to school was with me tailing behind him in the car. It didn’t help that on one of the earlier of those excursions it began to drizzle and when he hit the brakes he flipped over the top of his bicycle into

the middle of Lead Mine Road. Had I not been there to block other cars, I reasoned, that would have been the end of him. As I watch my grandchildren entering elementary school, I cannot imagine a day when I will feel it is safe for them to ride their bikes up and down Edwards Mill Road to school whether their parents are following them or not. Have drivers gotten that much worse over these years, or is it that my fears have morphed exponentially?

All the more so, fear dominates the decline of civility and trust in the public arena. The PNC Center recently joined all the other sports arenas in the area banning fans from bringing in any medium sized or larger purses or bags. Instead they only permit one clear plastic bag per person. Fear has decimated the political arena from Washington all the way to town councils. Some of you may remember the days when Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich led the impeachment of President Bill Clinton, and how Gingrich and Clinton then worked together to balance the federal budget with a surplus for the only time in decades before or after. Today, we cannot get legislators from opposing sides to let each other know when a committee meeting will take place, much less for them to work together to reach meaningful compromise. No one dares to risk the wrath of their political party if they were thought to be associating with someone of the opposite party.

We feed on a regular diet of fear. "Breaking News" used to refer to exceptional news stories, emergencies that needed special attention. Rarely more than once every few months would a breaking news story come out. Today "breaking news" has become a regular feature of every news hour. We live on high alert. Unchecked fear pits us against one another, sews mistrust, and falsely justifies dehumanizing the other. It decimates civil society and undermines free expression.

Judaism helps to de-escalate the spiraling trajectory of fear by breaking fear down into three distinct concepts. Reb Zalman Schacter-Shalomi explains:

"Pachad: Terror is real and imminent danger. Like Daniel Pearl must have felt in his last minutes of life." (Reb Zalman Schacter-Shalomi: What is Fear of G!d, YouTube). The times in which we face actual mortal fear *Pachad* are few and far between for most of us. *Pachad* is the word for fear referenced in that popular Hebrew song: "The whole

world is a narrow bridge and the key is not to be afraid.” In the course of a year we cross many narrow bridges, events that give us pause and cause us to proceed with caution. These events: an actual narrow bridge, an evaluation coming up at work, having a prayer to lead in front of a packed congregation, they give us a moment of fearful pause; but, they do not warrant the level of fear of *pachad* that underlies our culture today.

Colleague Rabbi Elizabeth Dunsker did some research into Reb Nachman's quote and found: “It turns out that this song the way we sing it is not (accurate to) the way Reb Nachman wrote it. He did not write, “lo l'fached klal” “don't be afraid at all” rather he wrote “lo yitpacheid klal” which to an ear not familiar to Hebrew might not sound so different, but it makes all the difference in the world. It turns fear from an active verb to a reflective one. It says, the world is a narrow bridge, but the main thing **is not to freak ourselves out**. ... It's not about having no fear, rather it is about operating within the fear without letting it stop us from moving forward. Commentary on this text says, “Envision a tightrope walker, balancing a pole in his hands, crossing between two buildings, with no net. He's scared; but he keeps on moving. Forward, then back, then forward again. Always in motion. If he were to freeze up with fear and stop moving, that's when he'd be most likely to fall. Hence the bottom line v'hikar she'lo yitpacheid klal, it's critically important that he not fill himself with fear.” (Rabbi Elizabeth Dunsker, quoting Likutei Tinyana 48, heard from Rabbi Stephen Arnold.).

Often we fall into the trap of absorbing the *pachad* of others. I know that I am not the only one guilty of freaking myself out. When my kids used to come to me a day or two before a project was due, that they had known about for a month, off I would run to Michaels for poster board, Styrofoam balls, plastic farm animals, and who knows what else. It took me too long to learn that we all would have been better off if I didn't absorb their fear and just let them face the consequences. My revised mantra is: “Your volcanic eruption is not my river of lava to deal with.”

When we fill ourselves with life-threatening fear in the face of every challenge, great or small, we never cross that narrow bridge. Instead we descend into a constant state of the second Hebrew concept for fear: *Aimah*. Reb Zalman explains *Aimah* as a

state of deep dark anxiety. While *Pachad* represents real and present danger, *Aimah* is that sense of foreboding that paralyzes us when we don't know where the danger might be lurking; but, nonetheless, we always feel it is upon us. (Reb Zalman Schacter-Shalomi: What is Fear of G!d, YouTube).

Aimah is the state of the world today. People feel an overarching anxiety that propels them to build hard shell cocoons to protect themselves from the constantly feared barrage of danger. Studies show: “that an estimated 68 million–plus Americans — more than 1 in 4 — have purchased survival gear on the back of recent political events or natural circumstances beyond our control” (<https://www.finder.com/doomsday-prepper-statistics>). That is not to say that 1 in 4 Americans have retreated to remote, barb wired shelters in the wilderness. Many however have put aside weeks' worth of supplies and developed detailed plans for quick escape if need arises. More still avoid crowds, buy fortified backpacks for their kids, or refuse to look into the eyes of a stranger. All an alarming indication of the level of *Aimah* – the fear of looming danger that has invaded the psyche of humanity.

The third type of fear is the fear that brings us together during the Days of Awe – *Yomim Noraim*. The root of *Noraim* is *Yirah* which also means fear. *Yirah* Reb Nachman teaches is related to: *Roeh to see; (in) Latin it is to SPECT, inspect.*” Reb Nachman explains: “I come into in a room and figure no one is there, then see somebody in the corner of the room. I have a startle reflex, suddenly I realize **I am being seen**. That is what we strive for in relationship with God. **I realize I am being seen and I behave altogether differently**. Rambam says when one wakes up in the morning... the way that one acts when no one is around is different than when one lives knowing that God is around. *Shiviti Adonai lenegdi tamid* – Place God before you always, (the verse written above the ark in many sanctuaries) creates a strong affective base by which to orient our lives.” (Reb Zalman Schacter-Shalomi: What is Fear of G!d, YouTube). The fear of God is balanced by a yearning to stand in that ineffable awe of God's presence. When one recognizes that there is something to yearn for that is beyond the self there is a sense of both fear that you will not measure up, and there is wonder at reaching for that possibility.

Fear as it is used in the Yomim Noraim beckons us to channel our fear to **inspect our days and respect the ineffable Creator** of our world. There is fear and foreboding in inspecting and owning up to our culpabilities before God. And there is awe in the vast blessings of our lives that we both give and receive. To live with this third type of fear is to envision God watching, or if we can't envision God watching that we know that our character is on the line in everything we do. Fear as awe brings our lives back to the center and core of what is sacred.

The antidote to the fear of *Aimah and Pachad is Yireh*. Grappling with *Aimah*, that foreboding sense of amorphous doom, leaves us paralyzed. **Inspecting** where we are, what our contribution is to the situation gives us perspective to redirect. It allows us to keep walking on that tight rope, and activates the power from within to effectuate change. It reestablishes self-control and direction so often ceded to the breaking news cycle, or the barrage of dooms-day messages screaming at us from every direction. To move from the fear of panic to the fear of awe, keep in mind that "I stand before God always." Take a moment in the face of panic and know that you are not alone, God's presence is in this room, perhaps somewhere watching in the corner, or perhaps sitting right next to you ready to walk with you through the challenge.

Even in the face of the *Pachad* -- mortal danger the *Yirah* of awe can serve us. Knowing that you live with integrity, reconciling your transgressions, doing what you can to live fully, brings a level of peace in the face of *Pachad*. Even the fear of mortal danger cannot tear down the awe of a life well lived.

These *Yomim Noraim* bring us together to realign our intentions and our actions. In so doing we restore our own sense of balance in this sacred world. As we open this season let us face our fears without freaking ourselves out. Restoring the integrity of our lives we inspect the fear of these days and transform it into a sense of awe for the gift of life.

AMEN