

In 1964 there was a campaign ad on TV featuring an adorable 4 year old girl standing in a meadow with chirping birds, counting as she plucks the petals of a daisy. When she reaches "9", an ominous-sounding male voice is heard counting down a missile launch, and as the girl's eyes turn toward something she sees in the sky, the camera zooms in until her pupil fills the screen, blacking it out. When the countdown reaches zero, the blackness is replaced by the flash and mushroom cloud of a nuclear explosion.

As the firestorm rages, a voice-over from President Lyndon Johnson states, "These are the stakes! To make a world in which all of God's children can live, or to go into the dark. We must either love each other, or we must die." Another voice-over then says, "Vote for President Johnson on November 3. The stakes are too high for you to stay home."

The ad was highly controversial and was pulled after one airing. But it certainly wasn't the end of fear-mongering. Everybody's doing it or being accused of doing it...From Bush to Obama, from Bachman to Dr. Oz, folks capitalize on our fears to achieve their goals. We live in a culture of fear.

26 year old British pop star Lily Allen wrote recently:

*I don't know what's right and what's real anymore
I don't know how I'm meant to feel anymore
When do you think it will all become clear?
'Cause I'm being taken over by the fear.*

Fear is a natural part of life. We fear spiders, heights, flying, terrorism, disease, dying. We fear isolation, we fear conflict, we fear love, and we fear the end of love. We fear loneliness; and being lost in the crowd. We fear change and we fear that things will never change. We fear the unknown; we fear falsehood; we fear the truth. We fear failure and we fear success. We fear loss – of our loved ones, our wealth, our free time, our job, our status, our perspective, our youth, our innocence, our ability to cope. We fear - fear itself.

As Dave Barry describes it: *"All of us are born with a set of instinctive fears—of falling, of the dark, of lobsters, of falling on lobsters in the dark, of speaking before a Rotary Club, and of the words "Some Assembly Required."*

Not all fears are the same. Some of our fears are innate, others are learned. Some fears are warranted, others irrational. Some fears are temporary, others persist. Some grow into full blown phobias. And our responses to fear are just as varied, ranging from fight to flight, from protective to paralyzing, from life-saving to murderous.

Our Torah reflects how fundamental fear has always been to the human condition. After Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit they tried to hide from God, like naughty children crouching behind the sofa. But of course God found them, and when asked why they were hiding, Adam responded: "Because I was afraid."

“Because I was afraid.”

How poignant – the very first recorded words that human beings speak to God are, “I was afraid.” Our forebears understood that to be human is to experience fear. In a sense, the entire story of the Torah – from Adam and Eve in the garden, to Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah, From Jacob wrestling with his fear on the banks of the Jabbok, to the Israelites trembling at the foot of Mount Sinai - our people’s sacred narrative is the story of transforming fear into faith time and time again.

While fear is apparently a God-given part of being human, I don’t believe that God intended it to rule us. If we allow ourselves to be enslaved by fear, then God liberated us from Egypt in vain.

In the Torah, the phrase Chazak Va’Ematz –Be strong and have courage – is repeated 27 times. In each instance, fear threatens to prevent good or righteous behavior. We need courage because God needs us. We are God’s partners in Tikkun Olam – the ongoing betterment of the world. But we can’t do our job paralyzed by fear.

Many well known people, from Mark Twain to Nelson Mandela to Psychedelic Rocker Ambrose Redmoon have expressed the idea that courage is not the absence of fear, but the knowledge that something more important needs be done. Conquering fear is one of the greatest spiritual challenges of living. And when we succeed, the experience is transcendent.

How then do we do it? How do we transform fear to transcendence? The first step is finding a way to articulate our fears. When we name things, they become known, and the known is always more comfortable than the unknown.

In the award-winning novel *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel, Pi, reflecting on his 227 days in a lifeboat with a Bengal Tiger says: *“The matter is difficult to put into words. For fear, real fear, such as shakes you to your foundation, such as you feel when you are brought face to face with your mortal end, nestles in your memory like a gangrene; it seeks to rot everything, even the words with which to speak of it. So you must fight hard to express it. You must fight hard to shine the light of words upon it.”*

We Jews have never lacked for words to express ourselves. We call these days the Yamim Nora'im –Days of Awe, but the implication is something deeper, and perhaps darker. Rabbi Milton Steinberg explains: *“As we sit in the synagogue at the end of one year and the beginning of another, contemplating the past and facing the future, what strange and awful terrors beset us. From day to day we have been content to live on, unquestioning and unreflecting; but on this day of all days, deep in our hearts lies a haunting challenge. Who knows what the year to come will bring? Who knows what sorrow may befall us in the twelve months which lie ahead? Over us on this day hangs a dark... fear. For the future behind its inscrutable veil holds many things... We are all of us afraid, today.”*

The prayer on these Yamim Noraim that best expresses this fear is called Unataneh Tokef. We know it well.

Un'tanneh Tokef Kedushat ha yom Ki hu nora va'ayom:

Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day:

It is awesome and full of dread...

The great shofar is sounded,
the still, small voice in heard;

The angels,
gripped by fear and trembling,
declare in awe:

This is the Day of Judgment...

On Rosh Hashana it is written

On Yom Kippur it is sealed:

Who shall live and who shall die...

We are, all of us, afraid today. Rabbi Keith Stern writes of when he was a camp counselor deep in Texas Hill Country: *"It was orientation week. The camp director welcomed the new staff, and, along with the usual pep talk, he told us that if a snake should take up residence in the bunk, all we had to do was grab a broom and shoo the critter out the door. A fellow counselor, Hannah Cohen, turned white. She raised her hand and said "I am scared of snakes, I mean, really terrified. I'll be hanging from the rafters if I even think I see a snake let alone try and shoo it out the door. You have got to be kidding me." Then the Head Counselor got up. "Hannah," she said, eying her clip board, "You're the senior counselor in Bunk 5, right? Well, honey, you may want to scream and shriek and hide, but if there's a snake on that floor, 12 ten-year-old girls will be looking at you, not at the snake. So if you see a snake, you take a deep breath and say, 'Today's my day to be brave.' Then you go get the broom." Hannah never did see a snake that summer. But she did repeat the words, "Today's my day to brave" more than once. We all did. "*

Today is OUR day to be brave. On this day of judgment, this day of awe and dread, where shall we find courage? The very same source which frightened us, the Unataneh Tokef ends with a message of tremendous hope. After recounting all the strange and awful terrors, the prayer says: *Uteshuva, utefilah, utzedakkah ma'avirin et ro'a hagezera.* Teshuva, Tefilah, and Tzedakkah – which I'll translate in a moment –transform the harshness of the decree. Teshuva, Tefilah, and Tzedakkah can lead us to the courage we need to face our God and our deeds on this day of judgment, and to meet with grace whatever the future holds. They can transform our fear into transcendence.

Teshuva, Tefilah, and Tzedakkah are usually translated as Repentance, Prayer, and Charity. This morning I am going to interpret them a bit more broadly. Teshuva, I will translate as "turning." Next, Tefilah: I think, at least for Jews, the purpose of prayer is three-fold: to reach upward to God, inward to our own souls, and outward to community. Finally, Tzedakka I understand as "Righteous action."

First, Teshuva: turning. Ordinarily, we run away from what we fear. Sometimes we run with our legs, more often, with our heads. We withdraw to safer, more secure places. We crawl into the TV, rent a movie, read a novel - anything that takes us away from what we fear in the real world. We numb ourselves with food or alcohol. Or we busy ourselves with the little details of life so we haven't the time to confront our bigger fears. I'll tell you - this past week I washed every dish, swept up all the dust bunnies, and answered every last email to avoid facing my blank computer screen.

This running away can enable us to go on living in spite of our fears but it is not courage. As Mark Twain said, "denial ain't just a river in Egypt." Teshuva teaches us to turn toward our fears instead of away; to face them honestly and openly. We must accept life for all it truly is. Disease, suffering, hunger, longing, loneliness, violence - these are all a part of life, and they are all scary. Ignoring them will not make them go away. When we turn to face them - *panim el panim* - we lessen their power over us. Eleanor Roosevelt said: "*We gain strength, and courage, and confidence by each experience in which we really stop to look fear in the face... we must do that which we think we cannot.*"

The more traditional understanding of Teshuva - Repentance, is another way to address fear. If we correct our past mistakes, take care of unfinished business, apologize and forgive, then we'll have no need to hide behind the proverbial sofa.

Second is Tefilah. Above all, prayer reminds us of God's presence. King David, in Psalm 23, says to God, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, *lo Ira Ra Ki atah imadi* - I will fear no evil, for You are with me." And he asserts again in Psalm 27: "Adonai is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?"

Milton Steinberg calls prayer the "road of faith and hope," and that road, twisty as it may be, leads to courage. By faith I don't mean the facile belief that we can just sit passively and wait for God to take care of things. My ultra-orthodox cousin once visited from Jerusalem. She had 8 children, and very little money, yet she didn't worry because her mantra was "God will provide." Well, the second part of "God will provide" was "Uncle Jerry, can you buy the kids some Nikes?"

I'm reminded of the man who toppled over the edge of a cliff. As he fell toward his certain death, the man reached out and grabbed a branch protruding from the cliff side. Hanging on for dear life, he yelled, "Help! Help! Is there anyone out there? Can someone save me?" Suddenly a voice boomed out from above, "This is the Lord. Let go of the branch and I'll catch you." There was a long pause and then the man feebly said, "Is there anyone else out there?"

Having faith doesn't mean letting go of our hold on reality. Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: Prayer invites God's presence to suffuse our spirits, God's will to prevail in our lives. Prayer may not bring water to parched fields, nor mend a broken bridge, nor rebuild a ruined city. But prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart, rebuild a weakened will.

Prayer is not only God-talk, it is also self-talk. In Hebrew, to pray, *L'hitpalel*, is a reflexive verb, that is to say the subject and object of the verb are one and the same. A young father was pushing a stroller through a crowded shopping mall, and the baby was howling at the top of its little lungs. "Easy now, Jacob," the father said quietly. "Please keep calm. Don't worry Jacob, this won't last forever. Everything is going to be OK." A grandmotherly woman who was watching came up to the father and said, "Young man I'm impressed. You really know just how to speak to babies – calmly and gently. So the little one's name is Jacob?" "No, ma'am," the father corrected her. "He's Michael. I'm Jacob."

Hope is the feeling we have that the feeling we have is not permanent.

The third aspect of prayer which helps allay fear is that for Jews, prayer takes place within the context of community. I hope everyone here has experienced the strength, comfort and joy that is to be found in a community coming together to pray. In communal prayer we reinforce each other's beliefs and values. We strengthen each other's hope. *Tefilah* reminds us that in the quest for hope we are never alone.

On Erev Rosh Hashana I shared a reflection by Julie Neraas: With hope, so much is possible. Without it, so little is. Hope is a powerful conduit between our individual, local lives, and the Great Mystery infusing and upholding us At its core, hope is the sense of a way forward, of possibility, [even in the face of fear.] Hope sends a farmer into the fields, a student to school, an addict to AA. Hope is an energy that chooses life [over fear].

However...or in technical Talmudic parlance "On the other hand..." In the world of business and politics, the watchword is "Hope is not a plan." According to the Talmud, a father is obligated to teach his child three things: Torah, a trade, and how to swim. The reasons for first two are obvious. But why swimming? the sages ask. "Because his life may depend on it!" Think about swimming for a moment. Once we leave the womb, water is definitely NOT our natural element. Our instinctive response when we first hit the water is fear, and it is this response which most often leads to drowning. Learning to swim is, in essence, learning to overcome fear.

Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav taught, "throughout our whole lifetime, we must travel over a very narrow bridge, and the fundamental and essential rule is that we must not paralyze ourselves with fear." If we know how to swim, the narrow bridge of life is less frightening to cross.

But I digress. This is not a public service announcement for your local swim school. It is a reminder that *Teshuva* and *Tefilah* – facing our fears with faith, hope and courage – are not quite enough. There is yet the last element which has the power to transform the decree of our future: *Tzedakkah*.

As an antidote to fear *Tzedakkah* is a call to action. W. Clement Stone, a brilliant man

who began his life in abject poverty and died at the age of 100 a multi-millionaire, philanthropist, and inspirational speaker said, *“Thinking will not overcome fear, but action will.”* Although many others have expressed the same sentiment, I rather like the way John Wayne put it: *“Courage is being scared to death... and saddling up anyway.”*

Courage is doing that which is necessary even when you don't want to, even when you are afraid, even when you might fail. New York poet laureate Audre Lorde said *“When I dare to be powerful – to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.”*

Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben proposes that to beat fear we meld turning and action: *“We need to get out of our own skins, out of our own heads, out of our own anxieties, out of our own self-absorption and turn our gaze to those whose fears we can do something about. To the hungry, we can bring food. To the naked, we can bring clothes. To the homeless, we can provide shelter. To the lost we can be their compass. It isn't so much what we do, but that we do that matters.”*

It isn't so much what we do, but that we do that matters. At least for starters. We sing Mi Kamocha at every service to remind us of the joy we felt after crossing the Red Sea. But if we remember back a little further to when we stood terrified before a deep and unyielding sea, the picture looks a bit different. The midrash tells us that the sea would not part until one brave soul was willing to step forward and get his toes wet.

Rabbi Tarfon taught *“Lo aleicha ham'lacha ligmor...”* You don't have to complete the task, neither are you free to avoid it. Courage is taking that first small step – picking up the receiver to make that difficult phone call – typing that first word onto the blank page – Filling out your name on the job application – that will bolster your courage to take the next step and the next, until finally you are dancing on the opposite shore.

Last night, at the very beginning of our Yom Kippur worship, your clergy stood before the open ark and said *“Hineini he'ani mi'ma'as nir'ash v'nifchad, Hineini - Here I am, trembling and afraid as I stand before You to plead for your people, O gracious God.”* Hineini. Here I am. It is a most fitting response to Hazak V'ematz – Be strong and have courage. Hineini. Here I am.

Our Biblical forefathers were afraid, yet each of them, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses was able, ultimately, to say, *“Hineini.”* Here I am, fully present, ready for the task at hand.

We stand at the threshold of a new year. The world is a scary place, it is true. Yet we do not here stand alone. We stand together, with one another, with God, with the resources of Teshuva, Tefilah and Tzedakkah to fortify us. May God grant us the courage to say *“Hineini.”* Here I am. This is my year to be brave.

Ken Y'hi Ratzon.