

RH2 – October 1, 2019 – Temple B'nai Brith

Answer us, Fear of Isaac

עננו אלוקי אברהם, עננו פחד יצחק...

Respond to us, God of Abraham,

Respond to us, Fear of Isaac...

penitential poem from the slichot service.

כל העולם כולו גשר צר מאוד והעיקר לא לפחד כלל

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov: the whole world is a very narrow bridge and the main thing is not to experience fear at all.¹

FDR: "the only thing we need to fear is fear itself."²

Fear is a basic human emotion. It is a human emotion the rabbis really don't like talking about. Let me elaborate. Our tradition is uncomfortable with fear and with most fear related feelings – worry, anxiety, despair, etc. The traditional worldview in Judaism is that everything that happens happens because God willed it and in accordance with a divine plan. Those who trust in God have nothing to fear because they know God will protect them, and those who experience fear anyway, just need to work harder on avoiding these feelings by working on their trust issues with God.

We can see this ideology in the psalm for the days of awe:

God is my light and my help, whom shall I fear?

God is the strength of my life: whom shall I dread?

Should evil come near me to devour my flesh, my enemies and haters would stumble and fall. should an army be gathered against me, I would not fear. Because I trust [God].³

Our torah reading today, the *akeida*, the binding of Isaac, marks one of few *midrashic* treatments of the topic of fear, and even here much is just implied. The *midrash* (the storied commentary) comes to fill gaps in the text of the torah, which means, that when the rabbis read the story of the binding they all noticed a) that fear is central to the story, and b) that fear was not mentioned in the story.

There is only one kind of fear that the rabbis think of as “good fear”. It is called *yir’ah* – the fear of God. It is represented in our story by Abraham, who shows how God fearing he is by accepting the call to sacrifice/slaughter his own child.

But there are other kinds of fear in this story. The *midrash* tells us that upon hearing what Abraham planned to do to her child, Sarah literally dropped dead⁴. It was not the loss of her son that killed her. After all, Isaac does not die, but rather the terrible fear when she realized a catastrophe of such magnitude was upon her just a moment ago.

And then there is Isaac, gradually understanding through the circuitous conversation with his father the depth of perversion that is about to take place. And bound to the alter, looking up towards heaven sees the impossible combination - the beloved arm of his father, who gave him life, holding a knife aimed at his chest, to extinguish his life. The *midrash rabba* says Isaac was blinded because of what happened on the alter. The burning tears of the angels, they say, fell into his staring open eyes and blinded him⁵. And so while Isaac did not die on the alter, he was changed forever by that experience. He remained silent and passive through the rest of his life, through the process of his father finding him a wife, through the birth of his sons. He seemed to be blinded in more than one way to everything that was happening in his own home. His evolution as a person, and as a literary character was stunted.

Which begs the question of what was it that happened to him on the alter. At least in reading the story as the commentators did, Isaac was a willing sacrifice. He allowed his father to bind him and helped him sharpen the knife. They do not view the fear of Isaac as fear of dying. So what kind of fear was it? It seems to me that it was a greater and more generalized sense of dread that came from knowing that the world is unsafe, that the most unspeakable things, still happen, whether we speak of them or remain silent. I think Isaac saw on the alter how tiny and insignificant his pain and fear are relative to the sheer greatness of the world, a Creator who would turn against their creation, a father who would turn against his own child. I believe he also understood that there was no going back to a time when it was possible to believe in a benevolent God and trust in the care parents owe their young children. Isaac’s world was shaken so deeply by his awareness of what was about to happen that he was thrown off the original course of his life. He became so overwhelmed that he grew numb and possibly remained this way for the rest of his life.

Rebbe Simcha Bunim of pshischa Said: *“On Rosh Hashanah the world begins anew. But before it begins a new it ends. Just as before death all the forces in the body strain to keep the life force in, similarly every person must use all their strength to hold together the life of the world.”*⁶

There are few things scarier than the thought of the world ending and this year many of us had to look this fear in the eye.

The climate crisis is not exactly the end of the world. The world will go on. But it proposes an end to the world as we know it. The extinction of vast number of animal species. Climate related illness and deaths. Geographic changes as the result of melting ice caps. And more.

Did you know that there actually is a term, *solastalgia*⁷ – which means the mental distress that is produced by environmental change on those directly affected by it? Despair around the climate is becoming so widespread and severe that the American psychological association published a 69 pages long climate change guide this year.⁸

In one of the books I read this summer 94 years old psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton compares the psychic numbing he sees in patients around the climate crisis to what he saw among survivors of the Hiroshima bomb. Of the research he writes: “The frequency of environmental and climate anxieties took us by surprise. So did the close interweaving of climate anxieties with nuclear anxieties.” He continues to explain that: “psychic numbing is a human equivalent to the way animals freeze (sometimes called playing dead) when threatened and lacking a path of either resistance or escape. The widespread numbing created by nuclear and climate imagery of extinction can be understood as playing dead on the part of the majority of people on earth.”⁹

I’m not assuming to know how many of you experience fear due to the climate crisis. But I assume that you are though worried and fearful about something – be it the rise in antisemitism or the incremental but steady loss of human rights or the worldwide shift towards totalitarianism and nationalism as if we learned nothing from the last world war.

Winston Churchill said “take the most gallant sailor, the most intrepid airman, or the most audacious soldier, put them at a table together—and what do you get? The sum of all of their fears.”¹⁰

I think it is also true with us today. When we look around us, when we sit together with friends, we find the sum of all of our fears. Lately it has become a pretty high sum. What all these fears have in common is: (a) Their magnitude. (b) That they all might feel outside the sphere of our power to change. (c) That we nonetheless need to speak up about them. And (d) That living with them for a time lead to habituation and numbing that keeps us from doing just that.

So how do we live with these long term fears? How do we not burn out? What can we do with the sense of despair? I've been struggling with these questions this year. I looked to traditional Jewish sources, to books and to friends and colleagues, both rabbis and therapists for answers.

It became clear very early on that I am not alone in thinking about this. It also became clear soon enough that nobody has clear solutions for how to heal ourselves from this psychic fatigue and numbing. It is a bit like being trapped in the Hassidic tale about the person lost in the forest who runs into another, and gladly asks "how do I get out of this forest?" only to find out that the other is also lost. In the story they wonder the forest together looking for the way out. I, too, am still wondering the forest.

I wish I had good answers to give you but all I can offer is the 5 things that have been helpful to me so far - gleaned wisdom from our tradition that I find applicable to our current predicament.

1. Keep it small. There is a concept in Judaism named ¹¹ האדם עולם קטן - The human is a tiny universe, a microcosm, and the universe is like a large human being – a macrocosm. The Hassidim take this to mean that the two are connected. That not only does everything that can be found on a universal scale can also be found within the human, but that what happens on the macro level effect the micro level and vice versa. What do I do with this? One of the panic inducing elements of my fears is the sheer magnitude of the issues. I go to a place in my mind where I feel the task is too great. That my impact is to insignificant that I don't even know where to start. It is helpful in those times to focus on the micro level. My own life. What change can I make here today. I try to keep it simple and small and hoping that what I do in my little world, my life, will have some effect on the world outside. (That's number one: Our commitment to *tikkun* is a commitment not to mending the whole world, but to strive to mend and better ourselves. אדם עולם קטן.

2. Trust–ביטחון, Trust in God or more specifically trust in God’s other creations. I tell myself that if I am doing something small it is possible that you are doing something small too. And because there are many of us, it is possible that though what I do is but a drop in a bucket, together we might actually have an impact when we each work small scale on our own stuff. (That’s number two. Remembering that we are part of one bigger whole. We are not the only ones working to fix things).
3. Return to the body - שוב לאחד¹² – ואם רץ לברך, שוב לאחד¹² – if your heart is racing (running from you), return to the One. It is not a secret that I live with chronic PTSD. One of the tools they provide us for dealing with anxiety or panic attacks are grounding exercises. These are simple exercises because clearly one needs to do them at a time of panic. And as the name indicates they are meant to center and ground us. Try this with me if you like. Sit with both hands holding your seat. Quietly say four things you see. Quietly name three things you hear. Quietly name two things you smell. Quietly name one thing you are touching.
This should have had a calming effect on you. And it resembles and complements the practice of Jewish meditation. (That’s number three – if you feel overwhelmed try to ground yourself. Don’t just leave yourself feeling this way).
4. Humans – אל תפרוש מן הציבור¹³ – אל תפרוש מן הציבור¹³. Do not separate yourself from the crowd. The science shows that being among other people reduces fear and fear caused fatigue. It doesn’t have to be a big group of people or even people you know.
The rabbis see the word ציבור – crowd, as an acronym צדיקים בינונים ורשעים – good people, so so people, and bad people.¹⁴ They say that to fulfill “not separating yourself” you shouldn’t be selective. Just go among people. Any people. (That’s number four - Don’t stay home alone. Even if you hate people).
5. Keep at it - אין אתה רשאי להבטל ממנה – We are not permitted to give up. If this sounds familiar it is because it is the second half of the Mishna – “It is not upon you to complete the work but neither are you allowed to cease from it.”¹⁵ Scientists found that our brains actually are incapable of experiencing fear as acutely when we are engaged in action¹⁶. So if we keep doing what we are doing we will feel better and be able to do more. It’s a fact! (that’s number 5).

I opened with a famous Rebbe Nachman quote that the whole world is a narrow bridge. This is what narrowness and constraint feels like. It's not great. And its also not possible to not be at all afraid.

But the good news is that Rebbe Nachman never actually said this. It is a wild wild paraphrasing of his quote. What he actually said was:

“You should know that in one’s life, a person needs to cross a very narrow bridge.”¹⁷

What rabbi Nachman actually said was that we all have to go through places of narrowness and difficulty in our lives. But he did not say the whole world is this narrowness and difficulty. It is true. We are crossing a bridge right now. It is hard. It is a long bridge. We might not see the other side but it is there.

But it is also true that we are together on the bridge. You are not alone in your fear and worry. I am not saying that we will see in our lifetime an improvement in the state of the climate crisis. I do hope we will see an improvement in some of the other areas that worry and scare us. But regardless of the outcome I hope we can find ways to overcome the fatigue and numbness. To regain our equilibrium. To sustain our inner selves, our *neshama* (our souls) – To support and strengthen each other.

To successfully hold the world’s life force with all our strength and see it reborn into a new year and a new chance at life.

Shanah tovah

¹ Rabbi Baruch Chait adaptation of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov.

² Franklin D. Roosevelt, First presidential inauguration speech, March 4, 933.

³ Psalm 27:1-2.

⁴ Midrash tanchuma vayera 22; Vayikra rabba 20:2.

⁵ Bereshit Rabb 65:10.

⁶ Attributed to Reb Simcha Bunem of Pschischa.

אמר רבי בונם:

בראש השנה מתחיל העולם מחדש, וקודם שהוא מתחיל מחדש מגיע הוא לסופו.

כשם שלפני הפטירה מתאמצים כל כוחות הגוף להחזיק את החיות, כך חייב האדם להחזיק את חיי העולם בכל כוחותיו.

⁷ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/18027145>

⁸ <https://www.apa.org/science/about/publications/climate-change-booklet.pdf>

⁹ Robert Jay Lifton, *The Climate Swerve: Reflections on Mind, Hope, and Survival*. The New Press. 2017. p.17, 21.

¹⁰ Winston Churchill. Speech Nov. 16, 1943.

¹¹ Avot d'Rabbi Natan 31:

האדם הוא עולם קטן, העולם הוא אדם גדול, ומה שיש בזה יש בזה

¹² Sefer Yetzira chapter 1, Mishna 4:8.

¹³ Mishna Avot, 2:4.

¹⁴ Rabbi Shlomo Aviner is bringing it from the Arizal, but I couldn't find a source.

¹⁵ Mishna Avot, 2:16.

¹⁶ <https://www.inc.com/mareo-mccracken/this-neuroscience-trick-will-help-you-overcome-any-fear.html>

¹⁷ Likutei Moharan II, 48.

ודע, שהאדם צריך לעבור על גשר צר מאד מאד, והכלל והעיקר שלא יתפחד כלל.