

Sermon For Rosh HaShanah Morning
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Temple Beth El of Boca Raton
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Two weeks ago, I was spending a lot of time doing what I suspect we all were doing - carefully watching the storm track for Hurricane Irma. Every six hours, at 11 and 5, I would jump onto the internet to see where the latest computer models and storm track would put the infamous "cone". Irma was a Category Five monster aiming straight at Boca Raton.

I looked at pictures of the awful damage Irma had already wrought in the Caribbean, in St. Martin and Barbuda, where more than 90% of the structures were rendered uninhabitable. I heard friends and neighbors retelling stories of Hurricane Andrew, and I remember the awful destruction that storm brought to Homestead. And I got this feeling. It was a sinking feeling in my gut, my heart quickening and filling with butterflies. "What is this feeling?" I asked myself. Was it nervousness, anxiety ... and then I knew. It was fear.

I remember another time I had that same feeling. It was a number of years ago, and I had felt a lump in my leg - a soreness and bruise that wouldn't go away. I went to the doctor and he seemed concerned. "Let's get some pictures of this," he said. So we got an X-Ray, and he called me a couple of days later. "There's something there, but we don't know what it is. I want you to have an MRI." I felt that same chill wash over me - the butterflies rose up, and I could feel the color drain from my face. I had the scan and then as I waited three days for the results, I remember that same feeling of dread and fear. "What if this is something serious? What could it be? How will I handle this? What will it mean for my wife, my children, for you - my congregation?" I did my best to keep walking, going about my normal business even with my heart in my throat. And then the call. "Don't worry. It's nothing."

Fear is an unwelcome and painful companion on our journey of life. We naturally assume that life is supposed to be full and free, joyous and tranquil. And then something happens and all that we assumed would be is suddenly in thrown into jeopardy. We feel like we're in danger, unsafe, vulnerable ... afraid.

Fear is an immensely powerful force. It shapes us. It transforms us. Fear is a paradox. Fear destroys but it also saves. Fear paralyzes, but also catalyzes. Fear hardens but

also softens. Fear reminds us that we can die, but fear also reminds us that we can live.

At different points in our lives, we live with all kinds of fears. When we are little, we find ourselves afraid of a dog or the dark. In our adolescence we fear that we might not fit in, that we will never find our place, that we won't measure up to our parents' expectations or our own. As we grow into adulthood we fear that we will not find a career, that we will not find our soulmate. We fear that our businesses might fail, that our careers might not flourish, that we may lose or never find our economic security. We fear for our physical safety and our emotional equanimity. We fear for our children, and we fear for our parents, and we fear for ourselves - that happiness may erode, that health may fail, that we won't get to do everything we planned, that we may get hurt, or even die.

But beyond the natural fears that are a normal part of our life's journey, other fears seem to consume our society as well. These days we see a growing sense of fear of the Other - a xenophobic fear of foreigners, fear of people whose skin is a different color, fear of people whose sexuality is different from our own, fear of people whose religious beliefs we don't understand, and even now a fear of people whose politics may tack away from ours toward the Left or the Right.

Many of us carry the scars of when we were hurt, and the remembrance of those traumas inspires more lasting fears. An injury makes us afraid to venture out or walk or run. An abusive parent makes us afraid of conflict. An unfaithful partner makes us afraid to love.

Fear comes from feeling unsafe and vulnerable. We fear the fact that there are things we cannot control and that we do not understand. Ultimately, what we fear is the awesome fact and reality that we are human.

Rosh HaShanah is a celebration of life and our humanity, and in that celebration a painful reminder of what truly makes us human. To be human is to be mortal, fallible, limited and scared. This morning we declared, "ונתנה תקף קדושת היום - Let us proclaim the power of this day - a day whose holiness awakens deepest awe!" In this New Year some of us will live, and some of us will die. Some will see ripe age and some will not. Some of us will fall victim to the vicissitudes of living in a broken world. Some of us will be secure and some will be driven, some will be tranquil and some will be troubled. Some of us will be poor, and some will be rich. Some will be humbled and some exalted.

The High Holy Days are designed to make us embrace the fact of our mortality. These days remind us that our time here is limited, our days are numbered, that we are human. They are called the Yamim Nora'im - the days of Awe. But the root of the Hebrew word for Awe - נורא - is the same root as that for fear פחד. These Days of Awe are also Days of Fear.

There are different ways we can choose to live with fear. One response can be to give in to our fears, to allow them to dictate how we live. That response can make us feel safe, but it also can be crippling. A friend in our congregation told me she had always longed to visit Israel. "Come with us on our trip in June! Take your family - you'll meet fantastic people. I would love to share Israel with you." She shook her head with sadness. "I can't," she said. "I've always been afraid to fly. I would love to, but I simply can't do it." And so her fears will keep her from fulfilling one of her life's dreams.

Our fears can dictate how we live in the world. We feel afraid and vulnerable that people who are not like us might come to hurt us. So we build walls around our neighborhoods, and we build walls around our countries in an effort to make us feel more safe. We fear the effects of longevity and age, so we do everything we can to stay young - obsessively searching for the perfect diet, exercise regimen, and sometimes surgical remedies to ward off aging. We fear the unknown, and so we bury ourselves in echo chambers, right and left, that constantly reinforce what we already think and feel, never pushing us to look at things through a different lens or consider a different point of view.

Fear makes us feel insecure and weak, and that is why fear is often used as a weapon. In the course of a normal day, we walk down the street, go to a pizza restaurant, or join friends at a dance club or a concert, without a care or concern. But then a terrorist takes what should be secure and makes it dangerous, insinuating fear into the safety of our normal routine. What should be safe, suddenly isn't. When White Supremacists stand armed with assault rifles across the street from a synagogue in Charlottesville, VA, suddenly the fear they impose destroys the basic sanctity and peace of Shabbat.

Fear can take us to awful and ugly places, especially when it spawns cynicism, callousness, hardness and hatred. This is the lesson in the story of the Exodus.

Exodus begins with a Pharaoh who did not know Joseph, who did not understand this foreign people, the Israelites, living on his northern border. The Israelites were different. They came from a different land. They had different customs and ways

of life. They spoke a different language. And Pharaoh was afraid: "in the event of a war, they may join our enemies in fighting against us... (Exodus 1:10)". So Pharaoh sought to dominate them through ruthless oppression, enslavement, and hard labor. Pharaoh's fear drove him to become hard and cold and mean and cruel. His fear even leads him to commit genocide - ordering the Israelites to cast their infant sons into the Nile River. Pharaoh's evil lies in his insistence on pretending he is god and not a human being, and that is what dooms his nation, his people, and his family to destruction.

But fear need not be the force that destroys our societies from without and our souls from within. Fear can also inspire us to pursue paths that are constructive and healing and holy.

Fear of a Category Five hurricane can prompt us to pack up our cars and flee, to prepare our homes with proper materials and resources to keep ourselves safe, and to reach out to others who are vulnerable and in need. Fear of illness can drive us to get into the gym and get healthy. Fear can inspire the deepest courage and resilience. But more importantly, fear can remind us of what it really means to be a human being.

The journey of Abraham teaches us about our own journeys in life. In the Ten Trials Abraham is made to endure, his journey is one of constant encounters with fear. He is asked to leave all he knows and all that is familiar to journey to a land he has never seen for a future he could not possibly imagine. He is asked to confront hunger and famine, infertility and family drama, to see his loved-ones taken captive and fight to redeem them, - I mean could there be anything scarier than being asked at age 99 to perform your own circumcision?!

Yes. There is something even scarier than that. And that is to contemplate your own mortality, or God forbid, the loss of your own child. Abraham's last trial is one that asks him to confront the greatest imaginable fear.

Think of the fear Abraham carried as he walked those three days with his son toward Mount Moriah. Imagine how difficult it was to pretend everything was normal. How did he do that? How can we, like Abraham, learn to live day after day, year after year, in fear?

What Abraham discovered is what these Holy Days are meant for us to discover. We all live with fear. It is the inescapable essence of human experience. But what makes human life holy is how we choose to respond to fear, and tradition on these holy days teaches us that there are three holy answers to a life filled with fear: Teshuvah, Tefilah, and Tzedakah.

What is Teshuva? Teshuva is the process that reminds us what we're here for. Fear warps our ability to see, and takes us off the path we're meant to follow. God wants us to love, but fear hardens our hearts. God wants us to be just, but fear makes us selfish. God wants us to be understanding, but fear makes us ignorant. God wants us to achieve, but fear makes us paralyzed. So what is required is for us to transcend our fears so that we champion love and justice and understanding even though we're afraid.

In the Kabbalah, the Zohar teaches us that God wants us to transform our fear into reverence, into awe, to wonder, and to love¹. Teshuva is the process whereby we refocus our attention - turning from what we fear to what God wants. Teshuva asks us to recommit ourselves to live as God would want us to live - pursuing a life of meaning, purpose and holiness.

But how do we do that when we are so afraid? The answer is in the second holy response - Tefilah - meditation, petition and prayer. In her book *Hope Will Find You*, Rabbi Naomi Levy describes her arduous journey learning how to raise a daughter with a rare degenerative disease. When her daughter was very young, doctors offered her a terrible diagnosis, but said they would only know for sure if she had this dreaded condition when she was older. She writes how she spent years wallowing in fear, in anger, in sadness, losing her sense of self, her spirituality, her hope.

But then, she is reminded of a teaching from the great Hasidic sage Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, who himself knew something of fear, having lost four of his children in infancy and his wife at a young age to tuberculosis. It was one of his most famous teachings that captured Rabbi Levy in her moment of deepest fear: "כל העולם כולו גשר צר מאד. והאיקר לא לפחד כלל" - The whole world is like a very narrow bridge, but the most important part is not to be afraid."²

She learned that through prayer - through deliberately pushing away her fears and opening up her soul and her spirit she could harness her fears and walk that narrow bridge. In prayer she cultivated that sense of wonder and awe, of deep appreciation and gratitude for life's awesome and holy gifts, even if those gifts are fragile and fleeting.

"Our challenge as humans," she teaches, "is to recognize our frailty, to understand how brief our time here is. There is a rumbling beneath the surface of all things. We don't know

¹ Zohar I:11b-12a

² Likutei Moharan II:48

what today will bring, what any day will bring." Life can be difficult - it is fragile, it is tenuous and it is scary. But as Rabbi Levy says, "If all I've got is this brief tenuous existence, I'd better live it to its fullest... All I can do is strive to live passionately and fearlessly as long as I can."

And that's what leads us to Tzedakah - to act in the world with righteousness and goodness. The greatest way to live with fear is to live - to live with passion and compassion, to live with kindness and generosity, to laugh and to love, to pursue justice and peace. To keep walking, one step at a time, on that scary narrow bridge, confident that we are walking toward a holy place, toward a greater good, toward a better world.

No matter what is asked of him, no matter how frightened he is, Abraham keeps walking. He knows somehow, that with enough faith, with enough courage, he can triumph over even the most powerful fears. And that's why, when Abraham's trial is over, his son is safe, and he is finally relieved of his fear, he names that place Adonai Yireh - God will see, because it was in that place that Adonai Yeraeh - God is seen. But what's amazing is that those two words - Yireh and Yeraeh are spelled exactly the same as Yirah. That place of fear - Yirah - became a place of vision - Yireh. What did Abraham see in that place? Abraham saw that even though human life is fragile and finite and fraught with fear, it can be, with faith and fortitude, nonetheless holy and Divine.

In this New year 5778, let us embrace the fullness of our humanity. Let our fears give way to an overwhelming sense of awe and wonder for the gift of life, of love, and courage and of light. And may the sound of the shofar announce for us a New Year of vision, of understanding, of love and of peace.