

Yom Kippur Sermon – 5767 - “Fear”

There’s a Hasidic story where a holy rebbe went on a journey and failed to lock the door of his house. While he was away, a crowd of demons entered and took over his dwelling. When the rebbe returned and opened his door, the demons rushed at him, ready to devour him. The rebbe slammed the door shut and prayed. Then he took a deep breath and opened the door again. At once, the demons pounced but as they reached for the man, he bowed low and acknowledged their presence. An amazing thing happened. Half the demons disappeared but the biggest and strongest were left, and they leapt at the rebbe. He reached out to them and offered them hospitality. Could he give them drink? Cook them a meal? At this, the rest of the demons disappeared – all but one who was the chief. This demon was huge and very fierce. It was not going to be deterred. It opened its jaws, showing the sharpest of teeth, and as it came close, the rebbe put his head right inside the demon’s mouth. At this point, the chief demon also disappeared and the rebbe had his house back.

Listening to NPR the other morning, I heard Arianna Huffington talking about her latest book, which is about fearlessness and how we can all achieve a state of living without fear. I thought of how in so much self-help terminology, fear is talked about as an emotion to overcome, something that keeps us from realizing our true potential. Judaism is counter-cultural in this respect. *Yirat HaShem*, translated as ‘fear’ or ‘awe’ of God, is a traditional Jewish value, understood as a necessary ingredient in one’s spiritual life, particularly at this time of year. So I wanted to look more closely at *Yirat HaShem*, what exactly is holy fear? Put differently, what is the role of fear in our lives? Is there such a thing as good fear and bad fear?

At first, fear is a gift given to us. We need it for survival. As Joy Cowley writes, “fear might be an uncomfortable emotion but it is the gift connected to our survival...As new infants we blink at strong light, flinch at loud noise, cry when we experience hunger and discomfort. In early childhood it is our fear that helps keep us safe.” And yet children have an instinctive sense as well for when to confront their fears, when a particular fear is perhaps no longer useful. Cowley is a Catholic thinker who also writes children’s books, one of which is about a farmer who discovers a giant weta in his bed (I don’t know what a weta is either). A mother wrote to Cowley, complaining that her four-year old insisted that his six-year old brother read him the story each night before bed, but then would later wake up screaming that there was a giant weta in his bed. Cowley points out that even though it was terrifying, the four-year old was insisting upon hearing it every night, and was somehow actively dealing with his fear.

Fear is obviously a reality for adults, too, it’s one of our core human experiences. So the question for most of us is not whether or not fear is a good or a bad thing, but rather, *how* to be in relationship to fear. Arguably, much of our lives and our decisions are affected by our relationship to fear. And it was the same for our biblical ancestors. God tells Abraham, *Al tira, Avram*. Don’t be afraid. Which, as Torah scholar Aviva Zornberg points out, is a clue that fear was present, that is signifying that Abraham was afraid. It’s like Bob Dylan singing, “Don’t think twice it’s alright.” There it is – you’ve

just thought twice. You don't tell someone to not be afraid unless they are feeling afraid. Moses, Rachel and Sarah – all ancestors living with fear. One of God's names is *Pachad Yitzhak*, the fear of Isaac. In our sacred stories, fear is one of the ways that we come to know God. In fact, along with love, fear is probably one of two chief paths we have to God.

In our own family narratives, we can probably name the fears that were lifelong companions for our parents and grandparents, our siblings. Entire generations share certain fears. For the one that grew up during the Great Depression, for instance, it is the fear of not having enough. Some of our family's fears we'll never know because of how closely many of us guard our fears. And we guard for good reason: in our society, fear is likely to be viewed as a weakness, not to be aired in public. Some fears are related to the stories of our lives. My father lost his father at an early age, and because of this experience, he would probably say that the fear of abandonment has been a companion for him ever since.

When I was little, like almost every child, I was terrified of the dark. There was a crack on the ceiling above my bed that haunted me. Wanting to help, my mother put a band-aid over it, and I subsequently became afraid of the band-aid. My persistent dream was of a man coming down the chimney with a sack to put me in and take me away (maybe this dark and thinly veiled Santa Claus imagery accounts for why I chose Judaism as my path and not Christianity). But as I got older, my fear of the night stayed with me, unabated, and when I was eleven, my parents found a psychologist to whom I could talk to about my fears. In an effort to make me comfortable, he spoke about movies and such, but he kept going on until I was aware that the hour was almost up, and so I worked up my courage and blurted out, "I came here because I was afraid of the dark!" In some ways, even today this fear is just as strong, though it has transformed. I have made some amount of peace with the actual nighttime, but the fear of the dark grows with me and finds new things to attach onto. Fear of the night is fear of what we can't see. I think in my braver moments, personally and professionally, I am able to step forward towards the fear, and blurt out, "I came here because I'm afraid of the dark!"

In many ways, we are a society driven by fear. At the Interfaith Council meeting last week, one of the ministers who has been in town for years bemoaned the fact that we haven't been able to get the Bennington Banner to cover events like the interfaith prayer service, or volunteer projects where teens help the elderly. Instead, what sells papers are the grizzly car accidents, the abductions, and the untimely deaths. This was one of the central messages in Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 911* – how our media routinely keeps us terrified. So each day on the news we read of violence, loss, destruction, and tragedy. How are we supposed to process those stories? Vanessa and I were talking about this over breakfast at the Blue Benn, and she said that a natural reaction to what we read every day in the newspapers would be *grief* – but how can we feel that much grief? So instead we respond with fear, with slowly building up a wall of fear to distance ourselves from those terrible events. We practice a fear that leads to distance, rather than a compassion that leads to closeness.

On a hike a few years ago, I asked my Father – who is making a lot of appearances over this Yom Kippur - if he considered fear to be a useful emotion. He said he thought it was, because in his thinking, fear is relational – it is something real that invites us into relationship with whatever or whoever it is that we’re afraid of. And where there is the potential for relationship, there is the potential for real work and transformation. Anxiety on the other hand, he said, was less useful – because with anxiety, there is no relationship. In anxiety, one is just spinning round in one’s own head.

I want to turn to the notion of what our tradition might mean when it speaks of *yirat hashem* / fear of God. For those of us who do not find resonance with the idea of a rewarding and punishing deity, we probably relate less to *yirat hashem* as fear of getting smitten from above by a well-placed thunderbolt. But let’s take that anthropomorphic image away and see where we’re left. What is the role of fear in our spiritual lives? And when I say spiritual lives, I’m talking about our daily lives, because the daily regular stuff that life is made of is where Judaism has always said spirituality plays itself out.

Art Green has said that we don’t know what *yirat hashem* could be: it’s usually death or suffering that we fear – and that’s not the same as fear of God. But what if fear of God could be understood as fear of change? If change is the only constant in our universe, what if God could be defined as change? I think of one of Yehuda Amichai’s – whose *yahrzeit* was last week - final poems called “Jewish travel: change is God and death is his prophet.” I think of the fall: driving on Kellystand Road a few days ago - blue sky, wind and sun, leaves falling, the mountain positively on fire with color – thinking there is absolutely nothing here I can hold onto. This fall, this season we’re in right now, is about nothing if not change. I don’t even know what to say I love because it’s changing so fast. I felt love and fear. Was this a moment of *yirat hashem*?

If we’re conscious about it, perhaps the fear of change doesn’t go away, but we learn to see it as a companion, or as a houseguest. Sometimes we slam the door on it and pray, sometimes we bow to it and fix it dinner, sometimes we even stick our head in its jaws. If we’re conscious of our fear, perhaps we don’t act out in unhealthy ways when we feel afraid. Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron talks about the trop in the movie, “Beautiful Mind” – where the mentally ill protagonist’s voices are embodied and each is a figure in his life. When he is sick, he thinks they are real – and it brings him great suffering. As he gets well, he knows they are not real, but they are still there, hanging out with him, almost like old friends or old companions. He sees them, but does not react to them unconsciously. By the end of “Beautiful Mind,” the protagonist still sees his collection of characters, but he has befriended them. He has brought them into the light where he can see them better. Which is one thing we can do when we are afraid of the dark.

How do we know when we’re in healthy relationship to fear? Cowley says that simple awareness is usually enough. We can ask, “What is it within us that feels tight and restrictive? What thoughts harden our lovely soft hearts? What ideas do we hold in a tight fist? What takes us forward on our sacred journey and what holds us back? Where is the clutter in our lives and how do we name it? How do we fill that inner emptiness that was created for God?”

The commandment to love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, and your might comes after the sentence, “What does the Lord your God want of you except that you fear the Lord your God, and walk in his ways.” (Deut. 10:12) Green says that “Judaism has always insisted on the proper balance of love and fear as ideal for maintaining the religious life.” There is a kabbalistic kavannah, or intention, that someone praying begins his prayers with: *L’shem yichud kudsha brich hu, uschinte bidchilu ur’chimu l’yached shem yud hey b’vav-hei b’yichuda shelim b’shem kol Israel.* For the sake of the unification of the Blessed Holy One’s name, in love and fear, in the name of all who wrestle with God. In love *and* fear. God’s name is shorthand for how God is manifest in the world. It is our task to make sure that God’s name is unified on this earth, meaning that God’s presence is real to us. And we experience God in moments of love and moments of fear.

The Australian cartoonist, poet and mystic Michael Leunig writes: *There are only two feelings. Love and fear. There are only two languages. Love and fear. There are only two activities. Love and fear. There are only two motives, two procedures, two frameworks, two results. Love and fear. Love and fear.*

There is a famous rabbinic saying, *reshit chochma yirat hashem*: the beginning of wisdom is the fear of God. This has always been difficult for me to understand: I couldn’t relate to fear of God as a phrase or emotion. I tried translating fear as ‘awe’ for a while – but that didn’t feel quite right either. Norman Fischer, one of my meditation teachers, has helped me understand this: The ancient rabbis *wanted* us to be afraid, he says. We spend most of our lives resisting fear – that what we call fear is not actually the *direct experience* of fear, but the feeling of *resisting* fear, of trying to keep it at arm’s length. He says the goal is to let ourselves be afraid when we feel afraid, to actually experience the fear. To say, fear is happening – and to not fight it off.

My Dad and I have had a chavruta around fear for years. And after sending him a draft of this he wrote back with these thoughts: “So yes, perhaps there is such a thing as good fear and bad fear. Good fear is fear expressed, unleashed, felt, embraced, shared, drawn into relationship, in the light. Bad fear is fear resisted, contained, held at bay, or tightly inside, rejected, in the dark.”

On Yom Kippur, we come forward and put our heads into the jaws of our fears. We acknowledge our habitual avoidance of that which makes us afraid – and we see the connection between the avoidance of fear and hurting other people and ourselves. On Yom Kippur, fear is infused into the liturgy, we call God by the name of fear, we feel our fragility and the change swirling around us. May we be willing. May there be mercy.