

Rabbi Joel Mosbacher  
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“Fear Itself”

(With appreciation to Rabbis Michael Marmor, Josh Caruso, Sharon Brous, Matthew Gewirtz, and Adam Baldachin for inspiration for this sermon.)

Here we gather in our numbers, on these days of awe. How are you feeling? Are you feeling awe, or are you feeling awe? Are you feeling the awe that makes you grateful to be alive, inspired, moved by the service, warmed by the strength of this community, prayerful and hopeful with the possibilities a new year brings? I hope so. I certainly am. Are you feeling the awe that God is judging our actions and determining our fate? Are you feeling another kind of awe-- fear-- unsettled by the rise of anti-Semitism, the spread of terrorism and the ever-intensifying threats to the State of Israel? Or is it, perhaps, all of the above?

As I prepared for these high holidays, a part of me just wanted to bring you comfort on this day of days. I just wanted to talk to you about goodness and light, about promise and possibility. I wanted to tell you not to worry, that everything will be fine, we should just keep doing exactly what we're doing, pay no attention to that man behind the curtain.

But if I did, I thought, I wouldn't be a rabbi—I'd be a false prophet.

And then, I thought about Rebbe Nachman. You may not know much about Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav, the late 18th to early 19th century Hasidic master and religious thinker. But even if you don't know much about him, you may well know some of his words.

Kol haolam kulo gesher tsar m'od.... V'haikar lo l'fached klal.

Rebbe Nachman offers us an important teaching on fear.... The whole world is a very narrow bridge, he says, and the most important thing is lo lefached klal—don't be afraid at all. I love this song—I have been singing it since I was about 10 years old at camp, and it's one of the first songs I learned how to play on guitar. And despite the fact that my kids think I'm old, I'm glad that Rebbe Nachman's words are still sung rousingly every Friday night at Shabbat song session at Eisner and Crane Lake camps, and often here too at our First Friday Shabbat dinners.

In the midst of the war in Israel and Gaza this summer, with my 16 year old son off gallivanting around Israel with 40 of his closest camp friends, I got to wonder, though, about the Rebbe's wisdom. “The important thing is,” he said, “don't be afraid at all.” At first, I thought of the verse

in Proverbs (12:25) that says “D’agah velev ish yashchena; v’ davar tov yesamchena. If there is anxiety in someone’s heart, let him or her banish it and turn it in to joy with a good word.”

Then I thought—what kind of sermon is that, at a time like this? What kind of rabbi would teach “don’t be afraid at all” in a world which is very scary, bridge or no bridge. There wasn’t a moment this summer that I stopped being afraid for Israel. Praying, grieving, hoping, doubting, feeling frustrated, I was filled with fear. Thinking about my family in Israel, my friends, teachers; imagining the fear in people of all ages, running to bomb shelters, hoping to find safety.

In a world that seems in a surge of racism and xenophobia, in a world of ISIS and Iran, in a world of Boko Haram and Ebola, of Russian aggression and Hamas—how could that be the theme I share with you today-- “Don’t be afraid at all?” What was Rebbe Nachman thinking!

I went back to look at his original words. In a text called Likutei Tinyana, he writes:

Envision a tightrope walker, balance pole in his hands, crossing 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, Rebbe Nachman teaches, the bottom line: V’haikar shelo yitpached klal.

Wait, I thought—v’haikar shelo yitpached klal—that must be a typo. I thought it was v’haikar lo l’fached klal.

When Rabbi Baruch Chait made Rebbe Nachman’s words popular with the melody we know-- a melody he composed, ironically, while performing for Israeli soldiers 41 years ago during the Yom Kippur war, he actually meaningfully distorted Nachman’s words.

No, with all due respect, Rabbi Chait; Nachman didn’t say “the most important part is not to be afraid at all.”

Take a look, friends, at the original text. Nachman said, shelo yitpached klal—literally—he shouldn’t enfeeble himself; he shouldn’t paralyze himself with fear or, colloquially, the most important thing is: he shouldn’t freak himself out.

To say “don’t be afraid at all” to someone who is already scared is somewhat like saying “don’t cry at all” to someone who is in great pain, and so I won’t do that today.

It’s been a scary summer. As I’ve asked you in recent weeks how your summer was, many of

you gave some wonderful answers—the beach, a trip, a staycation, camp. But I’ve sensed that, for most if not all of us, it’s been a summer of concern, perhaps even a bit of fear of the real perils of our world, of the tragedy and despair that has faced the Jewish people.

I admit that I am seduced by the idea of living without fear.

It’s why, when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt gave his State of the Union speech in 1941, later named the Four Freedoms speech, Freedom from Fear was among them. How ironic that this sentiment was delivered in a world that did not yet know the horrors of Hiroshima or Nagasaki, Auschwitz or Treblinka.

But, in fact, to live with fear is to be human. I bet we each have had an experience of fear we could name. Fear is a healthy response to dangerous situations. Dr. Robert Leahy, in an article in *Psychology Today*, makes the argument that “fear is adaptive because it protects us. Let us imagine,” he writes, “that you are the evolutionary designer of a human being. Now, you are going to design a human who can survive in a primitive environment where there are tigers, lions, wolves, poisonous snakes and bugs. It is an environment where starvation is the general rule. What will you build into the software in the primitive brain? You will build in FEAR.”

Fear makes us cautious and careful and prepared. We look both ways before we cross the street so we’re not run down by some crazy motorist. We teach our children to be careful around the stove, or around the Shabbat candles, or when using knives, because we’re fearful of what might happen to them. We put money away for retirement or for our kids’ college funds, because we’re fearful we will not have enough when the time comes.

Fear can be a good thing.

I want to tell you this morning that there’s nothing to be afraid of, but that’s naïve. There are real things to be concerned about in the world—like the pachad—the fear-- that millions of Israelis felt this summer as Hamas sent thousands of rockets aimed not at Israel’s military bases, but explicitly at its civilian populations. The real question is not “should we be afraid or not afraid?” The real question is: “What do you do when you feel afraid?” Today, I want to make a case for why we must, in fact, not hide from the fear we feel—why we must actually master that fear and transform it into righteous action.

I was reminded of a teaching I learned from Rabbi Michael Marmur. This particular text appears in the Babylonian Talmud.

The subject occupying the sages in this teaching is fear, and most particularly, the fear that an apparently weaker party can command over an ostensibly stronger one.

The rabbis taught that a lion can be terrorized by a beast which can do it no harm, perhaps by a gnat issuing a smell or a sound which convinces the lion it ought to be afraid.

A mosquito can drive an elephant crazy - we know what it's like when one keeps buzzing in our ears, just imagine what it must feel like to have one up your trunk! They went on to describe the powerful scorpion that fears a spider.

Their study in animal psychiatry continues as they suggest that a humble swallow may strike fear in the heart of a mighty eagle. And lastly, they describe the alarm felt by a whale at the thought that a small fish might block its blowhole.

Let's think about the allegories each of these animals represents. Think about the lion- the king of the beasts. Whom does the lion fear? A tiny gnat—Rashi says it's a small animal with a big voice. And when the lion hears the voice but cannot see it, his imagination does him in. For the Talmudic Sages, this gnat represents a certain fear that leads the lion to think that he can't be courageous. The lion feels the fear of fear itself. He can't get beyond the fear of being terribly afraid all the time.

Consider the elephant—the largest land animal on earth today. Of whom is he afraid? The mosquito—one of the smallest creatures. It can't kill the elephant, but it can drive him crazy. The sound of the mosquito terrifies him. It renders the elephant immobile.

The gnat and the mosquito are of no real threat to the lion or the elephant, but they have the capacity to scare them into paralysis. Though they have no real power, they can keep truly powerful animals from being themselves.

When it comes to the fear an eagle might experience. If a smaller bird gets under its wings, the eagle might fail to achieve the height it seeks.

The scorpion can usually be expected to defeat the spider with a powerful sting. Sometimes it fails to do so, and the spider finds a chink in the scorpion's armor into which it plants its poison. This is not just the psychological fear the lion or the elephant feels. The spider can actually kill the scorpion. The scorpion fears that he might not be able to defend himself. His fear stems from his vulnerability.

And, according to the midrash, the whale is afraid of a 6 inch long fish called a stickleback. Why would such a huge animal be afraid of such a tiny creature? Well, have you ever known someone who had the experience of eating fish for dinner and, all of a sudden, the bone they didn't know was there got stuck in their throat?

The whale, as we'll see this afternoon in the story of Jonah, plays a role in Jewish tradition as a symbol of the messianic future—in the rabbinic mind, it's an animal that could feed the entire world.

In this sense we are always hoping for a glimpse of the whale, an intimation of redemption, a hoped-for age of peace for all humankind as envisioned by our prophets. The whale's fear is the fear of losing hope for a better future.

Rabbi Marmur's teaching led me back to the fear we might feel for the threats Israel faces. It made me consider the possibility that some of those fears are real and well-founded, whereas others are nothing but fear itself that has the power to freak us out beyond all proportion, and forget who we are, and who we want Israel to be.

The fear a scorpion feels is one of Israel's real fears— a small number of terrorists who can strike real fear into the mighty State of Israel.

I personally have not felt this much existential fear for Israel and the Jewish people in my 16 plus years as a rabbi. We fret about this fear, and we fret for good reason. Israel is fighting for her life. Our breath was taken away this summer at Hamas's pathology of terror tunnels and human shields.

And so I stand here today on Yom Kippur to say to you with all urgency that it is our absolute obligation to stand with Israel. We are proud Americans, Jews who proudly choose America as our homeland. We live in the greatest country in the world.

But friends, Israel is also our home. It is our source. It is our inspiration. It is our safety net. Israel reminds us that, even when we have fears, we Jews are not powerless. I'm here to tell you today that without a thriving Israel, our very survival will be at stake.

Israel is, to our great pride, a regional superpower with a great deal of strength. But it resides in a dangerous and volatile neighborhood, and we fear that one day it may fall prey to one or more of its adversaries.

That pachad, that fear, was powerful and motivating. It inspired the Israeli ingenuity that created the Iron Dome system—funded by the United States. Thank God, and thank the Yiddeshe cup, and thank the President and Congress for that. Too many Israelis died this summer, and we mourn for them, full stop. And, many more would have died or been injured had legitimate pachad not motivated Israelis to develop incredible defenses.

There are, unfortunately, threats to Jews and the State of Israel in many places in this world. We must continue to stand for a secure and strong Israel, supported by its greatest friend in the world, the United States of America.

When I think of the deceiving ability of the gnat and the mosquito to strike fear in much more powerful creatures, I think of the Boycott, Divest, and Sanction movement against Israel endorsed by, among others, the Presbyterian Church USA this summer. The goal of this movement is to attempt to delegitimize Israel by divesting in companies that do business with the Jewish state.

The BDS movement, as it's called, cannot truly injure Israel monetarily- the Presbyterians have a small number of actual dollars invested in Israel. But this fear is real insofar as it paralyzes relationships—relationships between the State of Israel and potential supporters, and relationships between the PCUSA and the American Jewish community.

We must work with Israel to combat this fear. We can and must do this by challenging our neighbors to think seriously about how they relate to Israel. In that spirit, I have asked Reverend Steve Huston of the First Presbyterian Church in Ramsey to enter into a dialogue with me here at the synagogue on November 6 in the evening. We will discuss what brings us joy and what brings us pain, and I urge you to be here to join that dialogue.

At the same time, the allegory of the eagle's fear is a fear sensed by all of us who love Israel. We want Israel to be a noble project—to advance the self-determination and self-expression of the Jewish people. The eagle's fear represents moral fear. It is the fear that we may have to pay a moral price in defending ourselves. Israel could be brought low by this type of fear, as Rabbi Marmur teaches, by its failure to soar above the moral standards of our real enemies.

We Jews acted out of this type of fear when we gathered in the streets of Jerusalem to scream "Death to Arabs," and then said it was "just graffiti."

I say "we" because, as you know, on Yom Kippur, we own collective responsibility for our sins.

We watched silently as Jews uprooted Palestinian olive trees earlier this summer, but we refused to acknowledge that those acts uproot the essence of who we are supposed to be.

We cannot be silent as Jews first burn mosques, as we did this summer, and then we burned a child alive. Yes, we. We must be better, and not just better than our enemies.

Being better than Hamas is not good enough. "Not being revolting" is not a standard that will

inspire our kids to believe that Israel should be more important to them than Iceland or Italy any other country that starts with “I.” Israel must continue to build something that reflects the very best of what Jewish tradition has stood for.

For Israel, and for the Jewish people, it is not enough for Israel to win the war, whatever that means. When Israel’s walls are breached, it cannot allow its heart to be breached. It must prevail, AND it must be better.

As we seek to understand all these kinds of fears, we too must act. And so today I invite you to join me in serious learning about Israel. Beginning Sunday October 12 at 7:00 p.m., I will be teaching a 9 session series about Israel in which we will address questions such as:

What are the benefits of Jewish sovereignty? How should a Jewish state exercise military power ethically? How do we create and maintain a Jewish democracy? Why should American Jews care about Israel? What values should a Jewish state embody? And what can Israel offer the world?

Sign up at the synagogue office—join us even if you can’t make every session. Let’s engage in deep conversation about what it means for Israel to soar.

The allegory of the whale reminds me that Israel’s national anthem is called Hatikvah—the hope. We must seek out stories that remind us of hope even in the midst of despair. There were stories that didn’t make the headlines this summer—like the one I heard from Rabbi Gordon Tucker. He spoke to a Jewish man in Ashkelon whose house was significantly damaged by a direct rocket hit from Gaza.

The man told Rabbi Tucker that he had called up his friends—men who had helped him build the house—Palestinian men from Gaza, as it turns out. He wanted to make sure that they were coping as well, and to let them know that he would be rebuilding the house they had constructed, and was looking forward to the day when they could get back together again.

Ali Abu Awwad, a Palestinian leader in the non-violent movement for peace, chose hope over fear after his beloved brother was killed by Israeli soldiers. Ali realized the futility of revenge—he realized that no amount of spilled Jewish blood would ease the pain that shattered his family and his heart. Now, he travels around the world with bereaved Israelis who have also lost loved ones, crying sacred tears and building paths to peace and reconciliation.

These are remarkable stories, and yet, by no means the only instances of people traumatized whose hearts nevertheless did not become closed off to the suffering of others.

My fear is that one of the victims in this cycle of violence is the hope of both peoples for a better

future. If the whale sinks, our hopes sink with it.

This situation is ultimately scary because it is so incredibly complicated. I submit to you that anyone who claims to be able to explain it all in one sentence or less is simply ignoring the complexities inherent in the conflicts of the Middle East.

Much has been written about the trend among American Jews – especially young ones - to detach from Israel, a detachment I heard over coffee this summer with more than a few 20 somethings who grew up in this congregation. Many feel that they are forced to choose –it's either the narrative of Israel, right or wrong, or the accusation that questioning Israeli policies equates to hating Israel altogether.

But this, of course, is a false set of choices.

Can we worry for friends and family serving in Gaza, grieve for fallen soldiers, detest Hamas and still weep for the deaths of innocent Palestinians? Of course we can – are we not human?

Can we worry for Israel in a tumultuous time and in a dangerous neighborhood, and still believe that a diplomatic resolution to the conflict with the Palestinians must be a top priority? Indeed we can.

Can we hold - in this holy space on this holy day - complexities and contradictions that stretch the heart, that make us uncomfortable, that make life complicated? We must figure out how to.

Naturally, we want simple answers. We want purely good guys and purely bad guys. Accepting the subtleties of an argument and counter-argument does not mean creating an equivalency – moral or empirical. But it does mean that it is a critical task of a critical thinker to attune the heart to such complexities. If we are to find hope for the future, we need to be open to seeing the problems Israel faces from 360 degrees.

This year, in 5775, let us look to many sources to understand Israel instead of just one. If you want to find hope for and commitment to the State of Israel, I encourage you to read the *Jerusalem Post* on line, yes. And, read *Ha'aretz*, too. Join me in reading the *Wall Street Journal's* coverage of Israel, and *The New York Times*, too.

This year, I will attend the AIPAC policy conference for the first time in March. Join me there. And, this time, for the first time, I will attend the J-Street policy conference. Join me there, too. Let us see Zionism in its fullness. Let us learn from every lover of Israel.

Hear me correctly, my friends. There are palpable dangers that confront Israel from near and far,

and the Jewish people in places around the world.

But the real dangers we face as a people are only compounded when we begin to act out of fear, when we justify any and all action because of fear, when we let our fear blind us to our religious obligation to see the other as created, like us, in the image of God. When we allow our fears to rule us, I believe that rational fear begins to turn to self-imposed panic that breeds self-fulfilling prophecies.

Or, if we master it, fear can help us shed light in the darkest places; it can inspire us to reach higher, to seek life in the face death.

On these Yamim Noraim, these days of awe and trembling, may we live up to the potential embodied by our hopes, not choke on the restrictions forced on us by our fears. May all who love Israel both defend her vociferously and support her in living up to the ideals of her Declaration of Independence. May Jews who disagree passionately with each other be able to both talk and listen openly and honestly with each other without demonizing the other, calling the other anti-Zionist or pro-apartheid.

In order for our fears to be burnt off by the warming sun of truth, they must be acknowledged and confronted.

This is a time for reflection and self-examination. It is a time to reaffirm our faith in our ability to grow as human beings and as a people. It is a time for speaking up for our principles, pushing across that narrow bridge despite our fears, deepening our understanding about and advocacy for what we care most about. Let us, like the tightrope walker, move forward and back, balance pole in hand. It's okay to be afraid. In acknowledging that, though, let's not freak ourselves out. We'll keep moving together on this bridge, facing our fear, striving for our highest ideals, praying and learning and working for a world filled with more hope than fear.

Kol Haolam kulo gesher tsar m'od...

V'haikar lo l'hitpached klal.