

Rabbi Akiva teaches in Pirke Avot Avot (4.16) “This world is like an entrance hall before the world to come. Get ready in the entrance hall, so you can go into the great hall.”

ר' עקיבה או' העולם הזה דומה לפרוזדור לפני העולם הבא התקן עצמך לפרוזדור כדי שתיכנס ליתריקליון.

More well known is the Reb Nahman reworded and refocused version of this teaching, “The whole world is a very narrow bridge. The essential thing is not to be afraid at all.”

כל העולם כולו גשר צר מאוד. והעיקר לא לפחד כלל.

Who here has not felt fear? Fear of not being able to pay the bills, fear of losing one's job, fear of failure, fear of doing inadvertent harm, fear of being harmed, fear of saying the wrong thing, fear of falling, fear of getting sick, fear of dying. There are so many reasons that one might be afraid. The words “I will not fear” are found most often in Psalms, perhaps reflecting a Psalmist who writes about what he and others were really thinking and feeling inside. Looking through Biblical and Rabbinic aphorisms about fear, I was struck by how many of them have been set to music, such as Psalm 3:

“I have no fear of the myriad forces arrayed against me on every side.” (Psalms 3:7)

לא-אירא מרבבות עם אשר סביב שְׁתו עָלַי.

The concentration of “I will not be afraid, I will not be afraid, I will not be afraid,” in Psalms and the widespread use of these verses in popular songs suggests to me that the feeling of being afraid and the desire for something like a mantra to drive away the fear is a powerful motivation for the creation of prayer and song.

Apropos of this time of year, Psalm 27 opens, “Adonai is my light and my help; whom should I fear? Adonai is the stronghold of my life, whom should I dread?”

יהוה אורי וישעי ממי אירא יהוה מעוזי ממי אפחד.

The Psalmist poses the seemingly rhetorical questions, why should I be afraid, whom shall I dread? Yet, at this time of year our liturgy deliberately changes tone to emphasize the fear - God the king, the decider of who shall live and who shall die. It's almost as if we are supposed to be terrified on Yom Kippur, that the season and the holiday are supposed to frighten us into better behavior.

One one hand, we understand the holiday as a time of fear and awe, and on the other hand we have the Psalmist's advice not to be afraid, that fear is unnecessary. The focus on fear and awe may be an effective way to stress the importance of *Heshbon Hanefesh*, self-reckoning before the ultimate Judge, the Sovereign of Sovereigns, but living without the stress of fear is even more important to allow us to to live a healthy life.

The Psalmist's first suggestion is to trust in God - “My heart will have no fear, I trust [that God will give me what I ask].” If only we trust, we need not fear. God is the shining light that leads me through the deep darkness of the valley of the shadow of death. The author of the *unetaneh tokef* prayer, though has a different perspective. He writes, *u'malakhim yeihafeizun* -- “Angels will be alarmed, seized with fear and trembling.” Our liturgy asserts that even those of tremendous faith and piety, those who trust in God absolutely, even angels, are judged and are afraid.

Another reading of Psalm 27 suggests that the antidote to fear is love. The Psalmist desires closeness to God, to live out his life in God's Sanctuary, for God's Presence to comfort him and remain with him even as he loses his parents. It calls to mind a line from Song of Songs, a book read allegorically as the loving relationship between God and Israel. אֲנִי לְדֹדַי וְדֹדַי לִי, I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine (6:3). A well known midrash reads the first letters of each of the four words of this verse, *Aleph, Lammed, Vav, Lammed*, as Elul, the name of the month leading into Rosh Hashanah, and suggests that is a time to strengthen one's relationship with God, to bring a loving God closer to your heart. Psalm 27 thus suggests that a close, loving, relationship with God will shield us from falling into the trap of letting fear paralyze us.

A third way to banish fear might be found in the closing words of Psalm 27:

“Strengthen your heart and hope in Adonai.”

תְּזַק וַיֵּאמֶר לְבָבִי וַיְקַוֶּה אֶל־יְהוָה.

The antidote is not trust exactly, but hope - be strong and have hope that the fear itself will not destroy you, bringing to mind Roosevelt's first inaugural address, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Hope is living your life knowing that you can find the hidden reserves of strength to overcome the fear when you need to. Hope is the optimism that there is light on the other side of the darkness.

Let's break down fear into two categories. When we are talking about a kind of fear that motivates us to engage in self examination, we might accept the notion that this is a positive kind of fear. It is reasonable fear: Fear of consequences, fear of making avoidable mistakes, the fear that causes us to prepare well and take reasonable precautions like wearing bike helmets and seat belts.

This is also the kind of fear that I feel every time I stand before you. It is the fear of judgement. I stand before you as the object of your judgement. The words I share with you, not only today but every Shabbat and Yom Tov that I share Torah with you, are a little bit of myself. You do the same when you speak in front of a group, when you make a presentation. You have your own moment of fear, when you bare a bit of your soul before others and are subject to their judgement. This is healthy fear, the fear of the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur liturgy.

It is the other kind of fear that we want to avoid. This is the paralyzing kind of fear. It's what happens when we are so afraid that our minds and bodies seize up. We stop thinking and start reacting. Sometimes it's fight or flight, but sometimes the instinct to take either action fails us and we do neither. Or maybe we do decide to fight, but sometimes the source of the fear is unknown, and we find that the way we engage the fear and fight back may be futile. We may lash out with words against people who are trying to help, or dash off angry, poorly worded or wildly inappropriate emails.

When we act out of the kind of fear that narrows our ability to think, we typically will make very poor decisions. We make such decisions out of a poorly considered reflexive desire to escape from the painful emotional state of fear. A decision made in a state of fear will move us away from the source of anxiety, but might not move us in a helpful direction in order to avoid hitting the same pothole in the future.

This is the fear that the Psalmist was addressing with his prescription of trust, hope, and love. It is possible to talk oneself out of fear. Certain rituals present opportunities to calm fears. It is a

fact that shallow breathing heightens anxiety, stress, and fear. Deep breathing is calming. The *Nishmat Kol Hai*, the deep living breath of prayer as a deliberate, focused, act can calm the breath and make it possible to think past the fear and nurture trust in a higher power. Repetitive ritual, such as a regular Shabbat practice, can provide a comforting frameworks of stability and hope in a world that is shifting under our feet. Any action which takes us out of our own heads, such as serving others through acts of gemilut hasadim, loving kindness, can help chase away fear and anxiety.

I want Congregation Ahavas Israel to be a place where this can happen, where you can set aside your fears and be in a safe place of prayer, of regular community, and of service.

I know that some people are afraid when they walk into a synagogue because it may be an unfamiliar community, one which they participate in infrequently, or one whose rules are unfamiliar, and they feel out of place.

I know that some people are afraid because a synagogue community tries to create a family atmosphere, and not all families get along well. There may be people in the community that you have had difficult relationships with.

I am asking for your help in treating all people who come into our building with love. Smile and say hello, Good Yontif, Hag Sameah. Help make this building a place where people can set their fears aside and trust that they will be safe here. Help get the word out that as long as you show respect to others who have made Ahavas Israel a part of their spiritual search, that you too have a home here. We know the rules of Shabbat and Kashrut in our building can be sometimes confusing, but it is our goal to introduce you to a traditional Jewish spiritual path that sees Shabbat and Kashrut as core practices that support all of the other values that Judaism stands for.

I am asking you to do your part to make Congregation Ahavas Israel a place where kindness conquers fear. The benefit to you is obvious - As you put out the energy of kindness and love, you will receive, in greater measure, the energy of kindness and love in return. Let us protect the well-deserved reputation, that I hear again and again from visitors, that we are a welcoming place.

Let us walk together through the valley of deepest darkness, and together we will will replace fear with love, hope, and trust in one another!