

And Jacob Sat Down: Reflections on Fear

If there's one word that seems to have captured our attention since September 11th, it's the word "terror." It's a dramatic word, fitting for dramatic events, for events that only a year ago would have been unimaginable. On a less dramatic level are the fears we encounter as we go about our lives, fears of pain and loss that each of us have encountered at some point in our journey.

Because the truth is that this life is an unsteady and volatile business. Our desire is for security and predictability, but reality does not always abide by our desires. Pain or joy may be waiting right around the corner -- and for all that we try to keep our lives to some well-ordered plan, there's so much that remains beyond our control. A job is lost, loved ones fall ill, an unforeseen opportunity arises, we find our lives moving in directions we never expected—whether for good or for bad, the reality of this life is change and flow.

And although the pleasant surprise is just as likely as the unforeseen evil, it's the lurking expectation of harm that seems to grab our attention. To make matters worse, an incessant media barrage encourages us to remain in a state of near panic. The same images play, over and over, and new fears are incorporated into our daily log of worries—how do I keep my children safe, my home secure, my health intact? What should I worry about this week—West Nile virus, dangerous strangers, the amorphous threat of terrorism?

Uncertainty and change, pain and loss are inevitable—but we do have choices in how we respond, in how we move through this life. What do we do with terror? How do we respond to our fears? This is the challenge that this anniversary of September 11th presents to us.

This morning's Torah reading contains some interesting teachings about fear. After the miraculous birth of Isaac comes a much more harrowing story—the story of Hagar and Ishmael, cast into the wilderness by Abraham and Sarah. Hagar is with her only child in the desert, and their meager supply of water runs out. Realizing that her son may be dying, Hagar places him under a bush, sits a distance away, and says aloud -- "I will not look upon the death of the child." She then raises her voice and weeps—in distress, in agony, perhaps in protest to the God who had promised her a long line of descendants. It is at this moment of despair that Hagar hears the voice of a Godly messenger.

In contrast to Hagar's anguish, the heavenly voice is gentle, almost nonchalant—in Hebrew, he says, "*malach, Hagar?*" This could be translated most literally as "what's with you, Hagar?" The divine

messenger seems to be implying that Hagar is premature in her distress. He goes on to tell her not to be afraid—a lovely play on words, for the words for “sight” and for “fear” are very similar in Hebrew. When the angel says “do not be afraid,” “*al-tiri*,” he is both evoking and

negating Hagar’s statement, “*al-ereh*,” I will not see.” The suggestion here is that Hagar’s eyes have been closed with fear. When she is able to open them again, she sees a well of water—a well which does not just miraculously appear, but which has been there all along, unseen, waiting to be found.

There is a lot we can learn about fear by studying Hagar’s actions. It seems strange, even cruel that Hagar would abandon her child precisely at the moment when she feels he is in grave danger. What is this about? Perhaps the Torah is pointing us towards an important insight: it is difficult to remain in the presence of our own fear. Our instinctive response to fear is to push it away, to move ourselves away—just as Hagar sits a bow-shot from her son.

But it is not enough that Hagar sits at a distance; she closes her eyes. This self-imposed blindness ultimately makes the problem worse. In her fear, Hagar fails to see the water that is vital to her and to the one she loves. This, then, is another basic component of fear: it can cause us to stop seeing. Sometimes, like Hagar, we will miss things right in front of us. Fear can cloud our minds, can keep us from accurately perceiving a situation or from choosing a wise course of action.

Fear creates its own reality to which we respond, regardless of the truth of the moment. My own experience of this is related to my fear of heights. I can become acutely afraid if I’m on any kind of exposed ledge, on something high up where I can see straight down. Whether or not there’s any actual danger of falling is irrelevant to how I feel. Whether I’m on a bridge or a balcony or a tall ladder—regardless of how safe I may or may not be, the fear produces its own physical reactions—trembling in my legs, a clenching in my chest, a feeling as if I’m not in control of my own body. This is often the way it is with fear. The fear itself takes on a tangible quality, to the extent of taking us over.

A true story: this past year, somewhere in Europe, a driver of a new BMW drove his car into a river (luckily, no one was hurt). The man was driving along and enjoying a special feature of his new car, a Global Positioning System map that told exactly where to turn, how to go. He was a careful driver and was following the GPS map in his car quite closely—so closely, in fact, that he ignored everything passing by his window—bells flashing, horns honking, people waving and yelling. The driver ignored everything around him and proceeded to drive straight into the river. Later it was discovered that the computer map had mistaken a ferry for a bridge.

This is us, when we’re driven by fear—all the flashings and signs of reality can do little to correct our course. Our GPS gets locked in and it’s hard to unlock it. This is not to say that there aren’t truly dangerous moments and experiences. My point is that our level of fear may or may not correspond to the

actuality of the threat. We may experience paralyzing fear in a moment when there is no imminent danger, and then find our minds relatively clear and calm in the face of a real peril. And even in the face of real danger, our fear may keep us from reacting in ways that will keep us from harm.

So. Fear is here, it's natural, and it can be problematic as well. So what do we do? To respond to fear in wiser ways, we need to know how it works. I have learned that, more often than not, fear is not about what is happening in this moment—it's about what we think is going to happen next. In this moment, I am here, and I deal with what life asks of me. But when I look to the future—to the next minute, the next hour, the next week or year—that's when fear shows up. And so this, too, is a kind of un-seeing—when we are lost in the future, in the anticipation of harm or loss, or when we are thrown back into the past, recounting some pain we've already experienced and are fearful of experiencing again. In either case, our fear makes us blind to the reality of the present moment.

I learned something important about this aspect of fear from my friend and colleague, Rabbi Shefa Gold, during a trip to her home in New Mexico a few summers ago. I was hiking with Shefa and some other friends, and at one point we had to cross a stream on a narrow bridge that had no sides. I was only able to make it across by holding on to the person in front of me, my heart in my throat the entire way across. Later, Shefa told me that she had also used to suffer from this kind of fear, and had cured herself of it by walking out onto ledges and keeping all of her awareness in her step in that moment, not thinking about the next step. I tried it, walking slowly and mindfully out on a plank of wood over the stream—and it worked. As long as my attention was focused on the present moment—right here, in this step, where I was fine—I had no fear; but the instant I began to anticipate the next step, I could feel my heart seize. (I wish I could say I've conquered this fear—I haven't. But at least now I know that it's possible to learn how.)

I've also learned that fear is tricky; it can disguise itself as something else. Fear can easily be cloaked in anger, often a righteous anger. In our instinctual reaction to push away that which makes us afraid, we get angry, we lash out, we become harsh and judgmental. Fear sometimes masquerades as cynicism and sarcasm, which are other good techniques for keeping things far away. But underneath it all is fear—our fear of being hurt, of being proved wrong, of losing something or someone important. At its most extreme, fear leads to hatred. And the sad truth is that it's often easier to justify our anger and our hate than to admit our fear.

God called to Hagar, “do not be afraid,” and perhaps this is a call that we can heed as well. Most religious traditions teach that it is possible to move entirely beyond fear. That may be too ambitious a goal, at least for this talk! We will leave fearlessness to the spiritual experts. But I don't believe that it's beyond any of us to learn to respond more wisely to fear, to lessen its impact on our lives, and perhaps to lessen its negative effects in the world around us.

There is a *midrash*, a rabbinic story, about Jacob when he sees his brother Esau after a 20 year separation. In the Torah story, Jacob is afraid as he approaches his brother, because the last time he saw him Esau wanted to kill him. When the rabbis read the story, they noted that, after Jacob's reunion with his brother, there is a listing of all of the tribes that descended from Esau, and then the Torah goes on to say that Jacob "settled" or "sat down"/"vayeshv Ya'akov." The *midrash* takes this to mean that Jacob literally settled down among Esau and his tribe:

"R. Hunia said: Jacob's decision to dwell in a land near Esau's may be understood by the parable of a man who, while on a journey, saw a pack of dogs and was seized with fear of them. What did he do? He sat down among them. So also, when our father Jacob saw Esau and his chiefs, he too, though afraid of them, settled down among them." (Gen. R. 84:5)

I love this *midrash*, because it seems so counter-intuitive. Our natural instinct is to run from that which makes us afraid; but here Jacob does the opposite. He just sits down. I read this *midrash* not as an instruction for how to react in a threatening situation, but rather as a metaphor for how to respond to our fear. When we feel fear arising, the goal is not to push it away, not to run away on a mental level. We're invited to sit amongst our fears, and in that sitting, to realize that our fears do not have to control us.

Jacob's action in the *midrash* mirrors Hagar's moment of transformation. After hearing the angel's instructions, Hagar turns back towards that which caused her fear, and takes her son Ishmael by the hand. For both Hagar and Jacob, the wise course is to stay in the present moment—just like my practice on the bridge, going one step at a time. What does it mean that God opened Hagar's eyes? Perhaps that she gained an awareness of being open to the present moment, to seeing the reality before her without jumping into the expectation of devastating loss.

This kind of seeing, of "sitting with" fear, takes practice. It's not complicated, but neither is it easy. The first step is to notice the feeling of fear as it arises, to name it, and at the same time not to attach to it or get caught up in it. It really helps just to articulate the words, "This feels like fear," and to not deny the feelings or push them away. To notice does not mean analyzing the fear or getting caught up in a story, but just to acknowledge what is happening. Doing this allows me to see the fear for what it is, and in that moment of seeing, to make some space between it and me. The Vietnamese Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Han, likens this to sitting on the bank of a river. When we experience fear or anger, we can imagine ourselves sitting on the banks, watching the river of particular emotion flow by, aware of what's happening but not getting caught up in the current.

There is in addition another kind of awareness, also experienced by Hagar, which can be a resource for us in moments of fear. Hagar sits away from her son, her eyes closed to that which she cannot bear to see, but she has not totally closed herself off to her connection with God. In her moment of fear, Hagar hears a voice; she becomes aware of God's presence. In Jewish tradition, one name for this kind of

awareness is “*yirat Adonai*,” literally, “fear” of God.

At its most basic level, *yirat Adonai* describes a fear of punishment for transgressing the word of God. That is a limited notion of *yirah*, and doesn't fit too well with my understanding of how Godliness operates. But the word “*yirah*” can also be translated as “awe.” A higher or deeper understanding of *yirat Adonai* is as an attitude of amazement, an awareness of the absolute awesomeness of the Power that shaped the cosmos and that infuses all aspects of Creation.

This type of *yirat Adonai* evokes a sense of humility on our part, a realization of our own relative insignificance in the greater scheme of things. The reality is that we are small and temporary beings. Over the course of the High Holydays, *Yamim Noraim*, days of awe, we confront our own mortality, we are asked to embrace that fact that this natural flow of life and death is part of what it means to be human. The gift in this realization is that if we have the ability or the inclination to see beyond the boundary of this “I,” of our limited sense of a self, we can experience a sense of connection to something beyond ourselves, a Power of which we are each a part and through which we are connected to all other living beings. At once humbling and empowering, *yirat Adonai* allows us to find our place in a complicated Universe.

How can an attitude of *yirah* help us deal with our more worldly fears? When we are able to come to the understanding that our individual existence is woven into a greater whole, we do not need to cling so fiercely to the particulars of our lives or to fear the disruptions that inevitably occur. We spend so much time and energy imagining that we're in control and worrying about losing that control, that it can actually be liberating to realize that we'll gain a greater sense of calm and of security if we can just let go. Fear is greatly diminished if we can allow ourselves to believe that there is something Else, something to which we are connected but which is not us, which supports us, guides us, which takes us wherever it is that we're going in our time on this planet. Call it God, call it Reality, call it simply Life—the less we fight against it, the more we open to it, the happier and the less fearful we will be.

This awareness, *yirah*, brings its own kind of *re'iyah*, seeing, a seeing that has nothing to do with our eyes. I recently discovered a real-world example of this in the writings of a remarkable man, Jacques Lusseyran, a Frenchman who became totally blind at the age of 8. When he was 15 he founded his own resistance group in Nazi-occupied France, and he survived 18 months in the Buchenwald concentration camp. Lusseyran recounts the world that opened to him when he became blind. He writes:

“I had completely lost the sight of my eyes; I could not see the light of the world any more. Yet the light was there... True I could not see the light outside myself any more, the light that illuminates objects, is associated with them, and plays on them. All the world around me was convinced that I had lost it forever. But I found it again in another place. I found it *in myself* and what a miracle!—it was intact.... The light was there. Its source was not obliterated. I felt it gushing forth every moment and

brimming over; I felt how it wanted to spread out over the world. I had only to receive it.” (*Against the Pollution of the I*, p. 29)

Lusseyran writes of his ability to “see” not just light, but trees and household objects and people—in a way that is utterly different than physical eyesight. He goes on to say:

“And so all is light in this blindness; and what is more, this manifest luminosity contains a magnificent lesson. Since my childhood I have been impressed with a phenomenon of surprising clarity: The light I saw changed with my inner condition...When I was sad, when I was afraid, all shades became dark and all form indistinct. When I was joyous and attentive, all pictures became light. Anger, remorse, plunged everything into darkness. A magnanimous resolution, a courageous decision, radiated a beam of light. By and by I learned to understand that love meant seeing and that hate was night.” (ibid., p. 61)

This inner light sustained Lusseyran in occupied Paris, and in the darkness of Buchenwald; it allowed him to overcome his fear. In classical Jewish language we might say, in the words of the *Adon Olam* prayer: *Adonai li v'lo irah*: Adonai is mine, is here for me; I will not fear. There is a Godly power right here, accessible to me, a source of calm and clarity and joy. This is the light that shone inwardly for Hagar, the light that allowed her to open her eyes and drink from the life-giving waters of the well.

We need to learn to access this light for ourselves, but not just for ourselves. I want to close by speaking a bit about the challenge of fear, of terror, for us not only as individuals, but also as Jews and as Americans.

The Jewish people have a particular relationship to fear, based on our experience of discrimination, exile, and oppression over the past two thousand years. In more recent history, the experience of the Holocaust has left traces of a profound terror that still affects us as a community in many ways. As Jews, we can't escape some portion of the fear that is our legacy as a people.

This fact presents us with a particular challenge. We can't erase our experience, and we need to acknowledge the fears we carry. Yet at the same time we need to understand the ways in which these fears can cause distortions in how we perceive and act in the world. Over the past year we've had to contend with the constant news of violence in Israel, as well as news about anti-Semitic incidents and rhetoric here in America, in Europe and in much of the Arab world. And it's natural to feel fear in reaction to all of this. Given the reality of violence against Jews, the reality of anti-Semitic propaganda and acts, how do we respond, as individuals, as a community?

The same question can be asked of us as Americans, in the face of events this past year that were truly

terrifying. How should we respond? What is the right measure of caution, versus the unnecessary measure of panic? How do we ensure that our actions as a nation are guided by a true desire to lessen the potential for future violence, rather than by the anger and fear that followed on the heels of that initial terror?

My concern is that there seems to be a tendency among those who have the power to affect public opinion—both in the Jewish community and in American society—to fan our fears rather than to respond wisely to that which makes us afraid. Too often the recognition of the very real pain and loss that we in the Jewish community have experienced balloons into an amorphous, unfounded fear that we, as a people, are in some kind of mortal danger. And as Americans, as citizens of the most powerful country in the world, we have an enormous responsibility to see to it that our fears do lead us to use our power in distorted ways, to ensure that a tragedy that affected thousands of people does not become the impetus for further tragedy around the world..

In a recent article in the *New Republic*, Leon Wieseltier, a Jewish writer, offers a thoughtful critique of the near-panic that has taken hold within much of the American Jewish community in reaction to Palestinian attacks on Israel and the upsurge of anti-Semitism. Wieseltier warns against the tendency to see every negative event through the lens of the past. He warns especially about casting every Jewish experience of violence or abuse in the frame of the Holocaust, to see Hitler lurking behind any pain we suffer. He cautions us against “typological thinking,” in which every perceived enemy of the Jews is the successor to Amalek, the Biblical enemy of Israel, who became known as the ancestor of Haman, and then of the Romans, the Crusaders, the of Hitler and now of Arafat.

Such “typological thinking” is problematic, Wieseltier says, because it erases the important distinctions between different historical situations and replaces reasoned response to the facts with hysteria. According to the Bible, there is only one response to Amalek: to wipe him out. And while this may have power on the level of myth, in the world of realpolitik it is dangerous and misguided. And we Jews are not alone in this kind of “typological thinking.” It can also be found in the halls of power in Washington, where simplistic notions of “axes of evil” justify equally simplistic—and most likely ineffective--solutions to problems that are anything but simple.

When our response to the world comes from a place of fear, we are in effect serving fear, making it our ruler. And when we serve fear—whether our own personal fear, or communal or national fear—we are unable to be of service to those ideals which we call Godly. *Yirat Adonai* calls for not only a recognition of a Power greater than ourselves, but also for certain mandates of justice and compassion that flow from that Power. Our tradition challenges us not to be overcome by the fears of the world but to strive to cultivate the *yirah* that inspires us to make the world a better—and ultimately safer—place. To rid the world of anti-Semitism, of terrorism, of all distortions in human thinking which give rise to hatred and violence, we need clarity and wisdom, the ability to understand what makes these distortions arise. With this understanding, we can begin to address in a serious way the roots of conflict that affect us as Jews, as Americans, as human beings.

A final word on fear, from our liturgy. During the Amidah, the standing prayer, we recite this phrase on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur:

U'v'chen ten pach'decha Adonai al kol ma'asecha, v'aymatcha al kol-mah-sh'barata... And therefore, Adonai, may a Godly fear infuse the whole of your Creation, and may the awesome knowledge of your presence dwell in all your creatures. Let all created beings revere you and humble themselves before you. Let them all become as one society, to do that which is Godly with *levav shalem*, with a whole and peaceful heart..."

My hope is that we learn to heed the words of this prayer, to be united in awe of that which connects us, rather than divided by the fears that diminish us. The well that Hagar discovered is here for each of us—the well of awareness, of inner light and strength. May each of us be open to the Presence of something Godly that sustains us in moments that threaten our sense of stability. May the blessing of a *lev shalem*, a whole and peaceful heart, be ours in the year to come.

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Rosh Hashanah 5763