

Asking for Fear

Last year, I cut out of the paper a graphic op-ed called "100 Years of Fears," by Phillip Niemeyer. In it, he puts a little graphic and a heading for the major cultural fear of each year. Here are a few of what he includes:

1915 - U-Boats
1921 - Reds
1924 - Immigrants
1934 - Hunger
1943 - Evil Germans
1952 - Polio
1957 - Pelvises (Elvis)
1962 - Missiles from Cuba
1967 - Hippies
1972 - The Inner City
1976 - Red dye #2
1982 - Tylenol
1986 - Killer bees
1991 - Serial killers
1999 - the year 2000
2001 - Flying
2002 - Everything
2003 - WMDs
and 2014 - ISIS & Ebola - fear itself

It's really a wonderful list, spanning the truly dangerous to the ridiculous. Mostly, it's a brilliant reminder that there is always something to be fearful of, and our culture does a good job of hyping whatever the fear of the day might be.

When I think about obstacles to spiritual growth, obstacles to happiness, fear is usually at the top of the list. In today's Torah portion, we read about Hagar's fear after she is driven out of her home with Abraham and Sarah. Abraham rises early in the morning, gives Hagar and their son Ishmael a small amount of food and water, and sends them into the *midbar*, the wilderness. Soon the water runs out, and Hagar places her son under a bush, and then sits a ways away from him. She says, "Let me not see the child's death," then lifts up her voice and weeps. Hagar then hears the voice of a Godly messenger that says to her, *Mah lach, Hagar?* Literally, "What's with you, Hagar?" "*Al tiri*" it says - "Do not be afraid." The messenger instructs her to take the boy's hand, and then her eyes are opened - she now sees a well of water, and is able to revive Ishmael.

In this short and powerful story, we are shown the debilitating effects of fear. Presumably, this well of water was there all along, but Hagar's fear kept her from seeing it. The message she needs to hear, to be able to sustain her son and ensure her own legacy, is: *Al tiri*, do not fear.

No one likes to fear, and yet - as this graphic shows - it's always with us. We fear and we seek relief from fear. Psalm 27, which traditionally is recited every day during the month of Elul, the four weeks leading up to Rosh Hashanah, begins with this verse:

Adonai, my light and my liberation, whom shall I fear?
Adonai, stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?

The Psalmist goes on to talk about the feeling of being assaulted by "enemies and adversaries"--perhaps external forces, perhaps internal demons--and feeling supported in the face of these challenges. In the psalm, a sense of God's presence is an antidote to fear. It suggests a spiritual practice to overcome fear, finding a sense of refuge within our own hearts, finding sanctuary by "sitting in God's house," seeking a sense of *noam Adonai*, Godly peacefulness.

So: fear is not good, it is an obstacle in our path, and we need to find ways to overcome it.

And yet - we spend much of these High Holydays actively cultivating a sense of fear - in Hebrew, *yirah*. These are called, after all, the *Yamim Noraim* - Days of *Yirah*, which can be translated as "Awe," but also as "Fear." *Yamim Noraim* - Fearful Days. We recite the Unetaneh Tokef, with its terrifying list of possible fates that await us in the new year. It reminds us that we are like grass that withers, like flowers that fade, our lives as insubstantial as a passing cloud. On Yom Kippur we wear white, a symbol of our burial shroud, bringing home to us the frightening reality of our own mortality.

And throughout both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, during every Amidah, we recite a prayer called "U'v'chen":

U'v'chen ten pachdecha YHVH Eloheynu al kol ma'asecha, v'aimatcha al kol mah sh'barata, v'yirucha kol ha-ma'asim, v'yishtachavu lifanecha kol ha-b'ruim.....

There are three terms here for "fear": *pachad*, *aima*, and *yirah*. Here is a literal translation of the Hebrew that I just read:

And therefore, Adonai, bring fear (*pachad*) of You upon all that You've made, and terror/fear (*ayma*) of You on your creations, and all created beings will fear You (*yira'ucha*) and prostrate themselves before You.

Hmmm. This sounds fairly terrible. Why in the world would we be praying for an all-encompassing fear to descend on us, on all created beings?

I'd like to take a step back, and talk with you about this word, *yirah*, and its place in Jewish thought. It's a word, a concept, that Jewish commentators have been wrestling with for the past two thousand years, and I'd like to invite us here into that wrestle today, at the beginning of these *Yamim Noraim*, these Days of *Yirah*.

The phrase *yirat Elohim* or *yirat Adonai* - "fear of God"—is quite old, and goes back to Biblical texts. At the very beginning of the book of Exodus, two midwives, Shifra and Puah, are ordered by Pharaoh to kill every Israelite boy at the time of birth. We are told that the midwives "feared God" and refused to carry out the king's orders. To "fear God" in the Bible means to be a moral person, to be someone who - like the midwives - understands that there is a higher law, beyond the whims of earthly authority.

In multiple places throughout the Torah, the Israelites are told not just to love God, but also to fear God. In Deuteronomy chapter 10, which we read just a few Shabbats ago, it says: "And now, Israel, what does Adonai your God ask of you? Only this, to fear - *l'yirah* - Adonai your God, to walk in God's ways, to love and serve God. (Deut 10:12). In this text, *yirah*, fear, is an integral part of coming into relationship with the Divine and following the instructions set out in the Torah.

Later commentators look at this verse and try to understand what "fearing God" means in practice. On the simplest level, it is a fear of punishment. Keep these commandments, follow these laws, or else. This is called, in rabbinic tradition, *yirat cheyt*, "fear of sin," or *yirat onesh*, "fear of punishment." In general the rabbis did not consider this a particularly high spiritual level, although potentially a necessary one. While we might not like to admit it, there is some amount of this kind of fear that we rely on to organize our world. On a more earthly level, I know it's not a good idea to disobey traffic laws. I obey them partly out of fear of getting into an accident, and partly out of fear of getting caught and getting a ticket. Projecting this attitude onto God would be an understanding that somewhere down the line there may be some karmic come-uppance for any wrongdoing I might engage in today. And so, just in case, I should refrain.

But this does not seem to be the kind of fear that our prayer here, the *U'v'chen*, is talking about, and is not a particularly useful fear for those of us - I'm assuming the majority of us - who don't really believe in a God that punishes, a God that controls the universe like some traffic cop in the sky. It's either unbelievable or unpalatable to imagine that our entire religion is founded on the idea that there is some ultimate Being just waiting to cosmically rap us on the knuckles - or worse - if we misbehave.

And most of both rabbinic tradition and later medieval Jewish philosophers would agree with us. They didn't believe that their spiritual lives, their ritual and ethical decisions, should be guided by a fear of heavenly punishment. In many texts, we are told that the highest religious motivation is *ahavah*, love, not fear. Going back to that verse in Deuteronomy - what does God ask of us? To fear, and to love - perhaps in that order. A little fear, to make sure we curb our baser impulses, but ultimately we walk a Godly path out of love, not fear.

But then we come back to this prayer, that says, Give us fear! Envelope your creations in fear! What kind of fear is this - and what is its relation to love, to compassion, which we also pray for during these holydays?

As I mentioned earlier, the word "*yirah*" can be translated as "fear," but it also means "awe." Bachya Ibn Pakuda, a Spanish Jewish philosopher of the 11th century, wrote the first Jewish book of *mussar*, of ethics, called "Duties of the Heart." Each section of the book speaks of a *sha'ar*, a "gate," into the spiritual and moral life. Interestingly, it is in the final section, the "Gate of Love of Adonai," that he discusses *yirah*. Here, he distinguishes between two types. The first is what I mentioned earlier, fear of God's punishment. Bachya argues that this is not a good motivation for serving God, for an ethical and spiritually uplifted life. Rather, we should be seeking what he calls *yirat romemut*, awe of God's glory and exaltedness. This is the path to loving God, he says.

Later Hasidic teachers take up this theme, and write about a kind of awe of the Divine that entails an erasing of a sense of self. This is the "fear," this is the trembling - to be standing before Something so awesome, so grand, so beyond ourselves, that we lose any sense of ourselves. Yet it is not a fear that makes us turn and hide, but an awe that envelopes with a powerful experience of love - a shattering-of-self kind of love, something overwhelming and total. Of this experience, Rabbi Aaron of Karlin II, a Hasidic teacher, wrote: "*Yirah* without love is not whole; love without *yirah* is nothing." (*Itturei Torah*, Ekev)

If the first type of *yirah* - fear of Godly punishment - might strikes most of us as both unbelievable and unpalatable, then this mystical *yirah* - this awe of God's exaltedness - might be either entirely outside our belief system, or something far beyond any experience most of us have had. Is there another way to understand *yirah*, something that we might want to-- and be able to--cultivate during these *Yamim Noraim*?

To help me understand the deeper meaning of *yirah*, I turned to Abraham Joshua Heschel, and his master work, *God in Search of Man*. I'd like to share with you a bit of what he writes there about *yirah*.

Heschel contrasts "fear" with "awe" - he writes:

Fear is the anticipation and expectation of evil or pain... Awe, on the other hand, is the sense of wonder and humility inspired by the sublime or felt in the presence of mystery...Awe is the acquisition of insights which the world holds in store for us. Awe, unlike fear, does not make us shrink from the awe-inspiring object, but, on the contrary, draws us near to it. This is why awe is compatible with both love and joy. In a sense, awe is the antithesis of fear.

He goes on to say:

There is thus only one way to wisdom: awe. Forfeit your sense of awe, let your conceit diminish your ability to revere, and the universe becomes a market place for you...A return to reverence is the first prerequisite for a revival of wisdom...Wisdom comes from awe rather than from shrewdness. It is evoked not in moments of calculation but in moments of being in rapport with the mystery of reality. The greatest insights happen to us in moments of awe.

Elsewhere in the book, Heschel speaks of a sense of wonder, which is related to this experience of awe, a way of perceiving the world in which we live. He writes:

As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. [Humanity] will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder...The greatest hindrance to such awareness is our adjustment to conventional notions, to mental clichés. Wonder or radical amazement...is therefore a prerequisite for an authentic awareness of that which is.

Here, I think, is the core of *yirah*: not an emotion, not a mystical experience per se, but a stance, an orientation to the world. Heschel asks us to inhabit our lives with a perpetual sense of wonder - at the very fact of being alive, at the fact of just being here to be able to sense anything at all. He teaches that this is the point of Jewish practice - of saying blessings when we eat, when we wake up, when we do pretty much everything. It's to remind us of the wondrousness that lies behind each aspect of our existence, from the sun rising in the morning to the dinner we eat at night. We practice in order to cultivate the "radical amazement" which is the "prerequisite for an authentic awareness of that which is."

Both for Heschel and for many of the other Jewish thinkers who write about *yirah* as "awe," there is always a sense of humility involved. To really grasp the wonder of this universe, to grasp that even with all of our knowledge, there is so much beyond us, to really get how tiny a part of the cosmos we are - we can only be humble in the face of that reality. As we steadily tear apart this beautiful world, as our technology and our hubris and our greed threaten the very foundations of life, we can only stand in awe of the processes that brought it all to be, the incredible complexity of the web of life that sustains us and every creature on this planet.

Heschel goes on to talk about the responsibility that flows from this orientation to Reality:

[W]onder is not a state of esthetic enjoyment. Endless wonder is... the state of being asked the ultimate question. The soul is endowed with a sense of indebtedness, and wonder, awe, and fear unlock that sense of indebtedness. Wonder is the state of our being asked. In spite of our pride, in spite of our acquisitiveness, we are driven by an awareness that something is asked of us; that we are asked to wonder, to revere, to think and to live in a way that is compatible with the grandeur and mystery of living. (p. 112)

This idea that something is being asked of us--this is what is at the heart of these holidays, and this brings us back to the *U'v'chen* prayer we were exploring earlier.

I would now suggest we translate the first paragraph in this way:

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 have awe of this Reality and humble themselves before It. Let them all become as one society, to do that which is Godly with *levav shalem*, with a whole and peaceful heart...

This first part of the prayer is calling us to radical amazement, to an awareness of the vastness of the Reality of which we are a part. As Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg comments in the *machzor*: "The first *Uvchen*...calls us to acknowledge ourselves as created beings living in a world where we are not completely in charge. It is terrifying, and we acknowledge our fear at the absence of control in our lives." I read this part of the prayer as a cosmic slap upside the head, bringing us into a more expanded awareness. Wake up! You are part of something so much greater than you can even imagine! You are not in charge! Stop trying to control everything, and just humble yourself before the Reality in front of you.

And what results from such an awareness? All of creation--all humanity and all of the earth's creatures--become *agudah achat*, one unit, one society, one collective whole. This is not a terrifying vision, but a beautifully powerful promise of interconnection. Once we can relinquish our petty fears, our overriding concern for the self, we are open to this kind of connection--to one another, and to all of Creation.

The prayer then moves from this awareness of being in the presence of Something much greater than ourselves, to voicing a hope for our relationship to that Power:

U'v'chen teyn kavod YHVH l'amekha tehillah lirey'echa v'tikvah l'dorshecha, u-fitchon peh lam'yachalim lach...

And therefore, Adonai, give honor to your people; and the ability to praise to those who have awe of you, and hope to those who seek you; and the capacity for speech to those who yearn for you.

Here we are asking for capacities to channel our wonder: a sense of worth or honor, *kavod*; an ability to adequately praise, *tehillah*; and perhaps most importantly, *tikvah*--hope. We ask for *pitchon peh*, for the ability to put into words the insight that we have gained. As Heschel noted, something is asked of us--and we ask here for the ability to fulfill that responsibility. May we honor ourselves as Godly creatures. May we have a capacity for gratitude and praise, to see with a sense of wonder. May we embody the hope and possibility of change, of a world redeemed.

And it is this vision of a world redeemed which concludes the prayer. The third and final *U'v'chen* envisions a world in which the righteous and the just will rejoice, all evil will be overcome, and the reign of injustice will disappear from the earth.

I recently read a beautiful definition of *yirah* in a [d'var Torah](#) by Shai Held. Rabbi Held asks, "If fear and awe are so different, why does the same Hebrew word [*yirah*] convey both?" He goes on to say: "My teacher Bernard Steinberg once offered a powerful answer: 'Awe is what happens to fear when it stops being about me.'" Awe is what happens to fear when it stops being about me.

Fear arises when I feel out of control, when things do not go the way I anticipated. When I am fearful, the word "I" is always at the center - I can't do this, I'm worried about that, I can't bear it, what will I do. But if I can simply stand in the presence of what Is; if I allow myself to be overtaken by the sense of wonder that Heschel describes--then fear becomes awe. My terror at losing something precious to me melts in the awareness of all that is beyond me, all that is greater than me, all of which I am a part. And in that moment, my heart opens--because it's not really about me at all, none of this. I am broken open, and can experience a profound sense of connection--an overwhelming compassion and love--which binds me to everything and everyone.

There is a famous Talmudic saying, in the name of Rabbi Hanina: *Hakol b'yedei shamayim hutz m'yirat shamayim*: Everything is in the hands of Heaven except for *yirah* of Heaven. (Brachot 33b).

I believe Rabbi Hanina was saying something like this: Everything is in the hands of a Reality that is beyond our control, except for our willingness to stand in awe of that Reality. That is left up to us. Here is the world; here are the facts of our existence. We are born, and we are going to die. There is pain and suffering as well as beauty and pleasure. We don't really have much if any control over what happens to us. Life is uncertain, and our attempts to achieve certainty yield little but frustration and suffering. BUT - we do have a choice about how we approach all of this. Our attitude can make the world a very small, constricted place, or a place of wonder. We can choose cynicism and doubt--and make everything very small indeed. We can imagine ourselves powerful and in control, which will only last as long as we have good fortune, and will crumble at the first sign of distress.

Everything is in the hands of heaven--we come into this world and go out of this world without being consulted. But our sense of "awe" is in our hands. We can understand our place in the greater scheme of things, and be constantly appreciative that we are here at all. We can allow ourselves to relinquish the fantasy of control, and instead ask ourselves--what is demanded of me in this moment? We can embrace all that we not know, all that we cannot know, and relax into the truth of not knowing. We can walk away from the hubris of trying to conquer the world, and instead explore what it might mean to become *agudah achat*, a unified whole, with all of Creation.

As we enter the new year, may we each find a measure of *yirah*, of holy fear, that banishes all of our earthly fear, that opens up for us new pathways of love and connection. *L'shanah tovah!*

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