

CBE
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HIGH HOLY DAYS

Yom Kippur 5784

Rabbi Stephanie Kolin, “Fear and the Year Ahead (With a Little Help from Moses and our Vagus Nerve)”
Congregation Beth Elohim

It happened one night last year at bedtime. We were up to the “teeth-brushing” part of our nightly ritual with our then five year old, which generally is an excellent time for stalling, dancing, beginning new art projects, or asking questions about God and spotted lantern flies. But not on this night. On this night, toothbrush in hand, she finally let out a whole list of things she had been afraid of over the past several months. It started when her school did a lockdown drill and she and her kindergarten friends had to hide in her classroom. “It’s a terrible hiding spot,” she told me through tears, “anyone could find us there.” And my heart broke that she has to think about any of this. And then came pouring out all that she’d been holding in: her fears about bad guys and guns, some more *magical* thinking that maybe we, her parents, are vampires, (we are not), and onward through fears of hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods. It was a difficult start to the night, to be sure, though I was very proud of her for telling us. But what hit me was that she didn’t say she wanted bigger locks on the doors or to stay home. Instead, she said: “I wish I wasn’t so afraid.” I wish I wasn’t so afraid. I get that.

The things themselves are fear-inducing, sure, but it’s what those fears do to us that was the burden that she yearned to lay down. How it made her *feel* to be afraid. That’s not just a kid thing. That’s a human thing.

That gut-sick feeling we get when we receive an ominous diagnosis, or we’re worrying about our kid’s safety away at college, or reading about threats on synagogues during the High Holy Days, or about this hottest summer on record. It’s weighty, it’s present, this ambient, or sometimes acute, detraction from how we’d otherwise like to move through the world.

Now, we don’t *stay* in a kid-relationship with fear. Part of what it is to grow up is to learn how to manage our fear. For some of us, it can burgeon and show up as anxiety throughout our life, which can be a very heavy burden to carry. And for some of us, to manage our fear is to just push through it. To say: “of course there are dangerous things. I live in NYC, what else is new?” Or “of course unbreathable orange skies worry me, but I’ve got things to do,” and so we put our heads down and press on and go to work and go to school. And that’s an incredibly useful coping mechanism - pushing through like that. But it also comes with costs and is a different kind of burden to carry.

Fear, when not felt, lodges in our bodies - in our shoulders, our jaws, our hips. It gets trapped in our arteries and can irritate our stomach linings, or wake us up at 3 in the morning, so we’re alert, but we’re not sure why. And fear permitted to overwhelm us can do the same.

In recent years, we've all had to figure out how to confront both the daily and defining threats of this moment in history, and we've each found our ways. But, and I wish this wasn't true, the year ahead is going to test us. As a historic election approaches, we will likely see an increase in violent rhetoric and acts of hate. There will continue to be climate upheaval. There will be, God forbid, more gun violence. There will surely continue to be just the regular scary parts of life that come with being mortal and knowing that the people we love are also mortal. And this year, we already know, fear will be intentionally used as a tool to control and manipulate. There will be politicians that want us afraid to get our vote, social media that want us afraid to get our clicks, and corporations that want us afraid to get our dollars.

And so: This next year is going to be about navigating our fear well. About planting our feet and finding a middle ground between letting it overwhelm us and pushing it away; some place where we can feel it, acknowledge it, and work through it. So it does not get stuck in our bodies, or prevent us from living our lives, or steal from us our joy.

Why does this matter? Because we all deserve to live without fear's controlling grip. And because all the things we need to do to mitigate the most fearful things require collective action. And if fear gets to take the wheel, we will find ourselves unable to effectively confront the threats before us, and we want very much to be effective.

Now pause. If you are feeling anxious right now, your stomach is churning, or you feel a tightening in your chest, or you wish I was talking about literally anything else, let's notice that. And I want to just invite you to put your hand on your stomach or chest or wherever you feel it, and take a slow breath in. And out. I want to talk about fear, but I don't want to generate more of it! That's the thing, though . . . our minds and our bodies are so completely connected that even when we just talk about fear, we get a masterclass on why we might wish we had less of it. It feels bad!

But fear is not a strange or extraordinary human experience. In fact, fear is among the very first biblical emotions articulated. Adam and Eve have eaten from the tree of knowledge of good and bad and await God's reaction. When God calls out to them, how does Adam respond? *Et kolcha shamati bagan*, I heard your voice in the garden, God, *va'ira*, and I was afraid and so I hid.

The burden of his fear, so heavy, that he tried to physically hide from an All Knowing Being, which is kind of absurd, and kind of understandable. Fear and our reactions to it are part of our story from the very beginning - spiritually and scientifically.

At its core, fear is a necessary evolutionary instinct. Faced with a saber-tooth tiger, for example, a person's reasonable fear would trigger a very welcome fight or flight response. Throughout history, fear, uncomfortable as it may be, has kept us alive. Fear is not an enemy or a shameful thing . . . but it is a tricky thing.

There's an idea that psychologists have been talking about in recent years called The Polyvagal Theory, formulated by Dr. Stephen Porges, that explains how we are always, subconsciously, scanning our environment for danger or safety. That's called neuroception. Good new word. And

when we neurocept danger, our vagus nerve gets all lit up. The vagus nerve, they propose, is connected to a huge portion of our body including our brain, our hearts, our lungs, our muscles, and our guts. So, when we perceive danger, our thinking, heart rate, breathing, and moving are all affected.

We get ready to either fight or flee, or the third F, freeze, where we dissociate from the trigger, and we become numb or totally exhausted. And even if we are not in *imminent* danger, our body's reactions can be the same as if we were facing down that tiger.

So whether we are someone who allows our fear to rise to the surface or not, we might experience physical aching in our bodies, foggy thinking, anxiety in our chest or gut, or just total exhaustion. And we might call *that*. 2016 through 2023. Just constant alert.

So what do we do? Because we don't have to live like that, and we don't have to live wishing we were less afraid. And there are ways, Polyvagal theorists say, to teach ourselves to "neurocept" greater safety and so be less afraid.

Our tradition has something to offer.

The phrase that is most frequently spoken in the TaNaKH, the Hebrew Bible, is "*Al tira*." Do not be afraid. It's said more than any other phrase.

Rabbi Yael Splansky, teaches: "When Avram sets out on a journey away from home because God tells him *lech lecha*, go forth, God says: *al tira*. Don't be afraid. When Hagar was about to give in to her despair as her child was dying, God reassured her: *al tir'i*, don't be afraid. In every generation, from Ruth to King David to Daniel," when we cross the sea or go to war, God tells them "*al tira*" - don't be afraid."

To utter these words so often, God must have felt in the hearts of our ancestors - our greatest, bravest leaders - trepidation as they faced their own threats, personal and communal.

Now, it's interesting because being told "don't be afraid" when you're afraid often doesn't work. It can make us feel silly or judged. But in these instances, somehow these words become a balm for the people receiving them. So let's take a closer look at one example.

After being enslaved in Mitzrayim for hundreds of years, we've run away from Pharaoh's army, arriving at the Sea of Reeds, and the story goes:

God said to Moses: Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp before the city, Pi-hachiot, between Migdol and the sea . . . you shall encamp facing it, by the sea.

So we're on our way, but Moses is instructed now to take us back a little bit and camp at this place called Pi-hachiot, facing the thing that is standing between us and our freedom.

Pharaoh's army gives chase and the text says:

וַיִּרְאוּ מֵאֹד

The people were very frightened . . .

And they demand of Moses: “Was it for lack of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness?” You can feel the terror in their voices.

But Moses says to the people, and here's our phrase, in the plural: *al tira'u* - don't be afraid. Then he says: *hityatzvu* - stand up and witness the salvation which God will work for you today, for the Egyptians that you see today, you will never see again.

And God adds: דַּבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּסְעוּ:
Tell the people to go forward.

The people are terrified, though many commentators note that they were so much bigger than Pharaoh's army that had they fought back, they easily could have overcome them, but *their* years of trauma leave them stuck and they can't see that - (which is not an insignificant lesson for us, too). So Moses and God team up to help them deal with their fear with three different offerings.

First, Moses has them camp facing the sea, facing the thing that is both what they are afraid of, because it has blocked their escape, but also the thing that could be their way out.

Ya know, for the past year, I've been part of a clergy cohort with the Institute for Jewish Spirituality - something that Rabbi Timoner and Cantor Breitzer have both done and encouraged. We've been learning mindfulness practices, including meditation. And one of the practices I was taught by Rabbi Dorothy Richman is to notice what we are feeling and invite it in without judgment.

To say, for example, “oh hello fear. I see you there. What have you come to teach me?” And to be with that fear and not run from it or try to push it away, but to include it, to remind myself that *it* is not *me*, and *it* is just passing through. To thank fear for trying to protect me, but also to remind fear that there are no tigers here and I do not need a fear reaction in my body right now.

Moses has the people look at their fear, engage with it as the threat that it might be, but not turn their back on it, let it overcome them, or to let it get bigger than it actually is in that moment.

What might it be like this year to look at our fear head on, acknowledge it with compassion, even gratitude, allow it to move through us, and then determine the best way to act next?

Second, Moses tells them to look at this Yeshuat-Adonai, this glimpse of salvation. He tells them a story that ends better than they think it will. He gives them an imagination of a future where they have won their freedom and do not tremble, but are safe and full of joy. “You will never see this army again,” he tells them.

We are most often flooded with dystopic images of our future, in both fiction and non-fiction. Images of the worst possible outcomes and truly terrifying projections of what might happen - if the waters rise, if Trump becomes president again, if Russia turns to nuclear war. These projected narratives impact us so much that we regularly come to imagine ourselves and our loved ones in terrifying situations, which only amplifies our fear.

In an article by Kendra Pierre-Louis, called "Wakanda has no Suburbs," she writes "The stories that we tell about ourselves and our place in the world are the raw materials from which we build our existence." When what we consume most - in movies, books, art, or the press - are images of future destruction, our subconscious accepts that as the most likely outcome, and we neurocept danger everywhere we look. Pierre-Louis suggests however, that when we create and consume different imaginations of the future - ones that project a time when we do feel safe and in concert with our planet and others, it changes our brain chemistry and disrupts our fear. The example of a hopeful vision that she holds up is that of Wakanda, the nation of the Marvel Superhero, Black Panther. "The skyscrapers", she writes, . . . "are high, organic structures that rise out of surrounding forests so lush they have likely never been chopped down." In short - Wakanda takes our current dismal projections of our planetary future and says: "or it could go like this."

Speaking to a people so afraid they would rather return to eternal captivity than press on, Moses proposes a different ending, where their captors fall and they live in a world free from tyranny. He's speaking directly to their vagus nerve when he tells them "picture it instead like this."

What if this year ahead, we are vigilant about the ways negative images impact us and instead we dream up new and better, and equally possible(!) outcomes for a different future? And soak in that for awhile, and so play with our brain chemistries a little bit.

And finally, the third way the people are guided toward moving through their fear - they are told: *v'yisa'u*. Travel together: as a collective, as a community, move forward together.

Teachers of polyvagal theory agree with Moses that an effective way to move through fear is to connect with other people in meaningful ways. This one is a gimme. Take a look around us. Really, do it. None of us is "the only one." If paralyzing fear isolates, and it does, then community is its antidote.

In fact, another way scientists (and cantors) suggest we get unstuck from fear is by singing together. Like what we do here. And like what our people did when they belted out *Mi Chamocha* while walking across the seafloor between two towering walls of water full of fish and God knows what else. They sang together and so broke fear's hold of them.

What if this year ahead, we determine to go it together - climate, bad health news, worries about our kids, political upheaval, violence, all of it. And disrupt the narrative that stoic independence is required to be courageous. It is not.

And so Moses, with a little help from God, found a way to disrupt fear's power over us - something our people needed in order to get to freedom. And I think so do we.

There's nothing wrong with being afraid and I want to urge each of us to be compassionate with ourselves when we are. There are things we are facing today that are worthy of our trepidation, no? *Al tira* doesn't mean buck up or man up or suck it up. It just means that at times when we wish we were less afraid, Jewish tradition hopes we triumph and so buoys us with tools for the road.

There's a story told by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel of a small town where a certain man was down on his luck. His friends suggested he take the job as the cantor for Yom Kippur services that year and he agreed. But midweek, he came to his rabbi, trembling. And he told him he was too scared to do it. With all of the people's souls in his hands, what if he messed up, what if he forgot how, what if he failed? And the rabbi looked at him and put his hand on his shoulder and said to him: "be afraid and pray."

The opposite of fear is not fearlessness, for while that would be nice, it's not real. I think that the opposite of fear is being fully alive. To be afraid and pray anyway. To be afraid and lead. To be afraid and face down our tigers. To be afraid and join with others to stop climate change or protect our democracy. Even if we are afraid of looking foolish while we try to figure out how. To be afraid and love someone fully even knowing that it makes us vulnerable. To be afraid and *live*.

Moses placed our people at the city called Pi-Hachiroth, facing the sea. Until this moment in Torah, this same city was called Pitom, the silenced mouth. Pi Ha-chirot, however, means "The Mouth of Freedom." There is a difference between being afraid and letting our fears dominate us, exhaust us, make us ache, or make us numb. A child's simple nighttime wish to be less afraid is all of our wish to be free. And we deserve to be free. And the world needs us to be free. Our children's children's children need us to be free.

We've got a year ahead of us. There will be hard parts. There will be great and unbounded joyful parts, too, parts that uplift us and heal us and surprise us. But there will also be hard parts populated by people who think they benefit from us being afraid. And there will be fear. Your child might confess it. Or your heart might utter it quietly or with a tiger's ferocity. Or your body might fight against it hard. And it will be ours to stand face to face with it and breathe, and sing, and strategize, and look in each other's eyes, and allow it passage through us but not lodging within us.

And so I pray: *Al tira'u*. May we face our fear like our people faced the sea, with compassion and honesty, in community, and with great imagination for the horizons ahead. May our fears not exhaust our brains, conquer our hearts, or tense our bodies, but let us find ourselves free and traveling forward together. Amen.