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You're Afraid? So Am I

L'shanah tovah.

A year ago, on the second morning of Rosh Hashanah, I began by saying that during these two days, we read the stories of a family: Abraham, Sarah and their son Isaac.

This was not true. At least not entirely.

We also read the story of Abraham's other family: Hagar and Ishmael.

Ishmael is Abraham's first son. Hagar is Sarah's servant and Ishmael's mother.

As we began the Torah reading yesterday morning, Sarah had already grown old, long past the time she could imagine giving birth. Yet her life was about to change.

After being unable to conceive all of her life, Sarah, at last, gives birth to a child, a son named Issac, Yitzchak.

Upon his birth, Sarah says: tzchok asah li Elohim.

God has brought me laughter.

God has brought me tzchok.

God has brought me Yitzchak.

In this name Yitzchak, which shares a root with the Hebrew word for laughter, we hear the sounds of unbridled joy.

Much of our tradition reads and interprets this story as a portrayal of miracles, of the possibility that God takes note of us, remembers our pain, and enables us to experience true joy at the most unexpected moments in our lives.

What's often excluded, however, from our interpretive tradition is the dramatic, life altering impact that the birth of Isaac had not only on Sarah and Avraham, but also on Hagar and Ishmael.

As Isaac grew older, Sarah witnessed Ishmael "mitzachek." This Hebrew root clearly means either laughing or playing. But the context in which the word appears ambiguous, for immediately after witnessing this act of "mitzachek," Sarah tell Abraham to cast out Hagar and Ishmael from their home.

What is it about Ishmael's act of "mitzachek" that so profoundly threatens Sarah? Ishmael is not simply laughing or playing. Through the act of mitzachek, he is taking on the identity - and the status - of her own son, Yitzchak. Ishmael is Yitzchak-ing.

Sarah moves quickly into a protective posture, demanding the removal of Hagar and Ishmael from their home. Abraham is distressed. It's his son, his first child, after all - but he listens to Sarah and consents.

He takes bread and water, places them over Hagar's shoulder, and sends them away.

Our story then radically shifts from Abraham and Sarah to Hagar and Ishmael.

Hagar and Ishmael wander in the wilderness until finishing the water Abraham gave them. Seeing the water was gone, Hagar takes Ishmael and leaves him under a bush, walks away and sits at a distance from him. She says, "*al ereb b'mot hayeled*," - "Let me not look on as this child dies." She then cries a terrifying, howling cry.

God calls to Hagar, "mah lach, Hagar?"

"What troubles you, Hagar?" Until now, Hagar had simply been called a "*shifchat*," a maid, or "*amah hazot*" - that slave woman. Now, amazingly, God calls her by her name. In doing so, God acknowledges her being and her trauma.

"Al tiri," God says. "Don't be afraid."

"Come, lift up your son and hold him by the hand and I will make a great nation of him."

The entire story turns on these three elements.

First, a caring inquiry into her personal emotional, spiritual life. “What troubles you, Hagar?”

Second, an acknowledging call, “al tiri.” In saying “don’t be afraid,” God is also saying, “I know you are.”

And third, an instruction to reconnect to her son. “Lift him up and hold him by the hand.” By touching her son, she reminds Ishmael, “I’m your mother,” and she reminds herself, “this is my son.”

At last, Hagar opens her eyes, sees a well of water, comes close to her son Ishmael, and gives it to him to drink.

Our rabbinic commentators are fascinated by this story. What happened exactly? Where did this well come from?

Did God create a well of water, where there was none?

Or if the well was there the whole time, why couldn’t Hagar see it?

The well was there, our rabbis suggest. But Hagar could not see it.

Until God called to her.

Until God called to her, Hagar was treated harshly, the term in Hebrew of her treatment the same as that describing the experience of the Israelites in Egypt. She was, ostracized, like her son, placed at a long distance.

Now she is validated, understood.

Her eyes are now open to the well, the sustaining source of life.

God’s call, al tiri, don’t be afraid, is not a mandate for Hagar to overcome her fears. She remains terrified throughout. What enables her to see the well is God’s recognition of her spiritual, emotional inner life. She regains her strength, empowered now not only to bring water to her son, but to become his mother again.

This is a critical Jewish insight. We often consider fear an obstacle that we must try to overcome and conquer. This is an almost punitive approach, as if by being afraid, we have done something inherently wrong, requiring correction.

But fear does not need to be an obstacle to spiritual growth, to personal development, or even to happiness. Judaism doesn't ask us to beat back or overcome our fears, but to notice them, care for them, ask about them, even draw upon them as sources for clarity, acceptance, spiritual courage, and empathy.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, known as Rav Kook, was the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi in Palestine, before the founding of the State of Israel, and one of this last century's greatest, most influential and most celebrated Jewish teachers, mystics, and Talmudic scholars.

In his book, The Moral Principles, he writes about the personal qualities that we must cultivate to lift us up towards a higher spiritual realm. He begins by echoing an ancient rabbinic teaching: fear is the most profound kind of wisdom. Even science, when it seeks truth in its basic positions, thrives on fear. Without fear, science just hovers over external layers of truth.

Fear strengthens us. Yes, when we first are afraid, we feel disoriented, as if we've lost our will or agency to act in the world. We might suffer physically or spiritually, unable to meet the challenges of our lives. But, Kook writes, the spirit of a courageous person, who recognizes in his inner being that fear is an essential part of the human experience, will not abandon his dream. Rather, he will refine it, purify it, raise it to the heights of knowledge...and pervade it with the sweetness of love, of open mind and broad heart...

Rabbi Abraham Elijah Kaplan (1890-1924) was an Orthodox Rabbi, poet, philosopher and Talmudic scholar in the early 20th century. He was living in Lithuania, and died very young, only 34 years old. In his youth, facing death, he tragically gained enormous wisdom on the experience of fear. He wrote an essay entitled "In the Footsteps of Fear."

Fear, he writes, is an opportunity to live courageously and positively. It "is to see things as they really are." He paints an image to help us understand. The image is a father carrying his beloved son

like a bear cub on his shoulders. He's afraid his son will fall, but he loves this experience of closeness. His son holds onto his father, and howls in delight. So the father begins dancing with his son, moving a little faster, swinging him around, heightening the risk of falling, but feeling now, as clearly as ever, how much he loves that child. How that love and intimacy is all he really wants in his very short life.

Our fears, he writes, help us see and feel what is truly important. We spend a lot of time moving from project to project. We're driven by achievement, which so often means suppressing - or at least compartmentalizing - our fears. We struggle to prioritize what we know to be most important to us: time with family and friends; spending time in nature; being imaginative.

But when we see clearly, things look and feel different. We immediately re-prioritize. Amazingly, fear can be a source for living with gratitude and humility.

There is actually scientific support for the idea. When we're afraid, the subconscious mind takes matters in hand by narrowing attention to things that are really important. Deep within the midbrain, a small, primitive structure sends out projections to the frontal cortex, releasing a potent neurotransmitter and hormone - the brain's version of adrenaline. The hormone causes the mind to be more focused and active when sharp attention is absolutely essential.

Our fears not only help us be discerning and clear; but also feel courageously, spiritually, uniquely alive.

Susan Kaplow is a psychotherapist, an immensely talented artist and writer based in New York City. She recently published a book called *Hard Blessings: Jewish Ways Through Illness*, which tells thirty different stories, including her own, each one a testimony on Jewish practice as a source of healing.

In her own story, the author writes about responding Jewishly to pervasive fear.

"When I was first diagnosed with cancer, she writes, "the only thing I felt was fear. Every night, I woke in terror at 2 a.m., shaking and drenched in sweat. During the day, panic attacks assailed me, compromising my work as a psychotherapist and making it impossible for me to take in the love and support that surrounded me. "I can't do this," I repeatedly told my partner, alluding to the

mastectomy and chemotherapy I was facing. “I’m going to run away to Paris where I won’t have cancer,” I declared on more than one occasion.

She then begins to share her story of endurance. Waking up panicked in the middle of the night, she rushed through her house searching for something - anything - to keep her mind focused. She went through book shelves and bureau drawers, and found nothing to help bring calm, until she found her tallit, neatly folded, alone on a shelf. She wrapped herself in it, and fell back asleep.

“The next morning,” she writes, “I awoke still wrapped in my tallit. As I stroked the wool and draped the fringes over my fingers, I had the strongest sense that God had sent me a hint, that there was more help available if I’d only seek it. Now facing the cancer treatments that terrified me, I created a ritual with my tallit.”

At sunrise, she would wrap herself in her tallit, and begin the morning prayers. When it came time to say the Sh’ma, she adapted the traditional practice of winding the fringes around her finger, adding an innovation to match her needs. She recited all of her fears, assigning each fear to a separate white fringe, which she then wound around her finger. She took the blue fringes and wrapped them around the white fringes. Feeling that God was holding her fears with her, she prayed the Sh’ma.

It’s a beautiful account - she didn’t try to overcome or fears, but rather open herself to them. She was terrified through months of surgery and chemotherapy that followed. But, acknowledging and caring for her fears, she discovered a ritual that grounded her, and helped her accept her life and be at rest. She saw now - with clarity - what she couldn’t see before: how blessed and grateful she was.

This is the work of these days of teshuvah. As you are here, in the Sanctuary these days, or with family and friends, ask each other this question: What are you afraid of? Many of us will answer, “to begin with, the question itself.” But we’re together in this. In our question to one another we also hear God’s compassionate inquiry, “mah lach,” what troubles you? and God’s comforting call, “al tiri.”

Rather than crying from a distance, despairing of conflict, we can use this time to approach those we have set apart from us, and begin a process of repair and healing. Our fears can become sources not

only for creativity and endurance, but also for spiritual courage and, most importantly, empathy.
You're afraid? So am I.

I mentioned yesterday our many fears:
losing people we love.
growing old.
losing our memories, or control of our bodies.
suffering.
failing.
incompetence
confrontation.
asking forgiveness.
forgiving.
dying
Leaving people we love
leaving behind people who love us.

You're afraid? So am I.

I'm afraid I won't be able to summon up enough courage to ask for forgiveness, relying instead of a fragile hope that time heals or helps us forget. I'm afraid I will never be the person, son, father, partner, rabbi that I imagined I'd be. I'm afraid I will be shattered by the loss of those I love.

So...Mah lach? What troubles you?

Wrap yourself in your tallit, take the fringes through your fingers, the white and the blue threads intertwined around your palm.

May we dwell together there, in imagination, in possibility, in strength, in empathy, in clarity.
L'shanah tovah.