

Rabbi Daniel Berman
Temple Reyim
Rosh Hashanah
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“Yearning to Breathe: Staying Open-Hearted When Living with Fear”

L’shanah tovah.

It is, as always, sweet and uplifting to be here with you.

We’ve been together for over three years now. Three years getting to know each other, learning and praying, together at the most important moments in our lives.

We are doing our best to fulfill our community’s mission of a strong Jewish identity, traditional observance, spiritual openness, kindness and generosity. It is never perfect, but the qualities of compassion and forgiveness are alive and well in our community, and for that I am very grateful.

It has been a joyful, meaningful year for my wife Sarah, for our kids Elie and Mica, and for me. Thank you for your trust, your openness, your forgiveness, and your partnership.

The holiday of Rosh Hashanah is unique. Unlike other two-day holidays, our ancient rabbis call Rosh Hashanah a “yoma arichta” meaning one “extended day.” In observance of this tradition, I will be giving a two-part sermon this year.

I shared with you last year a bit about my preparation for our High Holy Days.

Throughout the year I keep a journal with notes, thoughts, and questions; reactions to events around the world, and reflections on our own lives.

In the early summer, I begin to review my journal.

I am searching for the themes and questions that feel the most immediately alive for us.

As I reviewed my notes, one theme consistently emerged, connecting some very honest conversations we have had as a community with a broader, national, even global dialogue that has challenged and pained us this year:

We live with so much fear.

Tomorrow I will speak about fear as a source of creativity, gratitude and most importantly, empathy. This however, is already a secondary matter.

Our starting point requires a more fundamental question: when feeling afraid, can we stay open-hearted?

Reflecting on this question these last few months, I went to my personal wellspring of inspiration and identity: the stories of those whose lives so immediately and intimately shaped my own.

My family, like most families, has a defining story.

The central event in the story goes back three generations to my grandparents - though I imagine that if you asked my grandmother, she would tell you she was bringing to life a family history that preceded her by generations as well.

My mother's parents each left their families in Poland before World War II to come to Palestine. My grandfather Yonah Meyer joined Kibbutz Ein Harod in the Jezreel Valley near Mount Gilboa, and my grandmother Esther settled in Haifa.

They came independently - and met at Bat Shlomo, a moshav on the southern slopes of Mt Carmel. They spent their lives together and raised their family in Palestine through the founding of the state of Israel and into the 1950's.

Much of their family was killed in Poland, and they each spent the rest of their lives trying to respond to this reality. Not just the loss, but the complete negation of the most basic human qualities: not just kindness, care, and compassion, but the recognition that the person before you is a living being with a neshama, a soul.

My grandfather, a tailor, was stoic and private; he held the losses close to his heart. My grandmother, on the other hand, was a nurse. You may not be surprised, therefore, that her hashkafa, her worldview, was one of unrelenting idealism, boundless courage, and gritty street smarts. Her mission wasn't very grandiose - it wasn't to restore kindness and compassion to the spiritual energy of the world after the Shoah, though in hindsight I think that's exactly what's she did. She just needed a way to endure and respond to loss, sadness and the inescapable fear of living.

Just after the War, over 250,000 Jewish refugees came across closed borders from inside Europe to the coast in an attempt to sail for Palestine. In most cases, the British detained the refugees in detention camps on the island of Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. For the following four years, Jewish survivors were slowly transported to Haifa. The last Jewish refugees were brought from Cyprus to Israel in the winter of 1949.

For my grandfather, the continuous immigration of survivors into Israel was both the greatest possible mitzvah and spiritual torture. The sight of refugees meant an unsparing confrontation with reminders of the decimation of his family, whom he left behind.

For my grandmother, this reality was an urgent call.

She first saw Pinchas, a fourteen year-old boy walking alone, aimlessly, in Haifa, smoking a cigarette. A child... alone... smoking. My grandmother, a nurse. This was her trifecta. I can only imagine the rush of compassion, worry and anger surging through my grandmother's bones.

She marched up to him.

“Ech korim lecha?” She asked him. “What's your name?”

“korim li Pinchas” My name is Pinchas.

“Mah atah oseh kahn?” my grandmother asked. “What are you doing here?”

“mi’ashen.” “I’m smoking.”

Zeh lo tov lecha” That’s not good for you.

“Mah zeh mishaneh? Ayn li af echad.” What’s the difference? I don’t have anyone.

“Achshav yesh lecha.” Now you do.

She brought him back to their apartment, where he lived for many years, together with my grandparents and their own children, my mother and her brother.

Pinchas was one of many. My grandmother made trips to orphanages in Israel and claimed children as her nieces and nephews and brought them home.

My mother told me she would come home from school not knowing who she’d be sharing her room with that week, month or year. When the world’s doors were closed, or at best cracked, the doors to their home were wide open.

Opening our doors is an ancient Jewish story.

One of the great stories in Torah begins with Abraham sitting by the entrance of his tent. The day grew hotter and hotter. Looking up, Abraham saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them. He bowed to the ground and urged them, “don’t go on past me. I am your servant. Let us bring a little water, you’ll bathe your feet and recline and rest under the shade of the tree. And we’ll bring you bread to nourish you.” Sarah, too, hears the guests, and immediately welcomes them and rushes to bake them bread and cakes to welcome them into their home.

Our ancient rabbinic tradition sees in the story the *midah*, the attribute, of *bachnasat orchim* - not just welcoming, but actively bringing guests into our homes. One collection of interpretive tales called

Avot De'Rebbe Natan expands upon this story of Abraham, imagining that when he met anyone who needed a place to stay, he brought them home. And to those who hadn't been blessed with wheat bread or meat or wine, Abraham specifically gave wheat bread, meat; and wine.

Rebbe Natan didn't stop there - he imagined that Abraham built spacious mansions along the highways, and stocked them with food and drink, so that whoever entered could eat and drink.

This is just one of rabbinic stories praising this attribute of willingness to opening our doors.

And yet, at the same time, there's also a powerful critique of Abraham and Sarah's seemingly unimpeachable idealism. Yes, Abraham invites these strangers into their home, and Sarah races to nourish them - but, as we read this morning, after miraculously giving birth to her son Isaac, Sarah also tells Abraham to cast out Abraham's first son Ishmael and Ishmael's mother, Hagar. Abraham agrees to do so.

How could this be? How could they welcome in complete strangers, while casting out family?

The answer begins with a story about pain and fear. While Sarah celebrated the miracle of giving birth, the painful longing and isolation that she experienced while barren did not suddenly disappear. It remained part of her life and it dictated her response to perceived threats to her son.

In telling Abraham to cast out Hagar and Ishmael, Sarah sought to protect her son Isaac, fearful that Hagar and Ishmael would be rivals, possibly even stand-ins, for this family that she finally, painstakingly, created. The pain that she carried, originating in an experience of "*chaser*", of lack, of negation of purpose, identity and being, caused her to vehemently protect her son, at the cost of casting others out.

The desire and need to protect against fear is instinctive, particularly when we perceive threats to those we love the most. These threats may be external and imposed upon us, or they may be internal - a personal struggle with feelings of fear and vulnerability. When we're afraid we often respond by closing our hearts. We take cover. Our posture changes. We pull in our energy and we put up boundaries. We isolate ourselves and distance others.

This is not a critique. This is how we endure.

My grandparents left Israel not that many years after the influx of refugees, in the early 1950s, seeking relief from the constant confrontation with a tortured past. They were protecting their own minds and hearts, and their own children, even as they had to let go of other children they had brought in to care for and love.

Openness has its limitations.

But what do we do if our fears become overpowering, shutting out our ability to live out the truths of our defining stories: open minds, open hearts, open homes?

One of the great blessings of my work is that I get to be with people during very important times in their lives.

I try to listen actively and ask questions.

There is often a moment, when I can ask: What are you afraid of?

Here's what I have learned:

Our fears are very personal and very deep.

We're afraid of:

losing people we love.

growing old.

losing our memories, or control of our bodies.

suffering.

failing.

we're afraid that we don't know very much - even in the fields that have named us experts. And that will be revealed to the world. We have this dream all the time, and we wake up anxious, the fear living, as it does, in the belly of the subconscious.

we're afraid of confrontation.

of asking forgiveness.

of feeling exposed, rather than empowered, by forgiving.

of dying, particularly unexpectedly, or tragically.

of leaving behind people who love us, and who will mourn this loss. What we wouldn't give to hold them and comfort their broken hearts.

Philip Niemeyer is an artist and filmmaker in Brooklyn. He designs graphics that tell a story about our world. He is known for his social and political commentary. Two years ago he published a graphic called "100 years of fear," naming and illustrating the main event each of the last 100 years that caused us to tremble in fear. There was a wide range of events: nuclear power, acts of terror, viruses, home foreclosures, racial violence, missing out, even clowns.

The point of the graphic is that every year, we find a new devastating fear. What we're afraid of changes, or deepens, or gets displaced, or projected upon a different event or perceived threat.

The graphic also makes clear: our fears are not only personal, they may also be cultural, communal, constructed, and contagious.

For precisely this reason - that we fear so much - our High Holy Days place fear at the heart of the Jewish worldview.

Starting with the name of the days itself, - Yamim Nora'im we call these holy days "Days of Fear."

Our central prayer is called *u'netanah tokef*. It begins with a terrifying image of a judgment day, when the angels tremble at God's judgment of all creation. The dramatic image is meant to raise our heart rates, as we are about to acknowledge our deepest fear: that as we look around the room, we don't know who will live and who will die, who will be healthy and who will suffer, who will be at peace and who will be afflicted. On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed.

This is what we're doing on these days. Confronting this terrifying reality.

But these holy days don't leave us there. As we confront fear, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur present us with a critical spiritual question:

When we're afraid, can we stay open-hearted?

This is a personal question.

When we're afraid to reach out to a parent, or a sibling or a child whom we know we hurt, or who hurt us, can we unlock the doors just enough to let them back in? Can we draw upon our compassion and generosity that dwells deeply within us to love and to forgive.

When we're not doing well, struggling physically or emotionally or both - times when we feel particularly protective, inclined to hide - we might find a way to let others in, to care for us as listening companions?

When we're afraid, can we stay open hearted?

This is a communal question as well.

At Reyim, we have an extraordinary commitment to the *mitzvah* of chesed, to loving kindness and care for one another. Can we respond to our fears by opening our doors even more widely, finding new ways to express our generosity and kindness to one another? We might invite each other - perhaps people we haven't had a chance to get to know - into our homes for comfort and friendship.

Even further - look at this amazing space we have. Can we reimagine and expand what it means to be a sanctuary? Our tradition instructs us not only to build sanctuaries as spaces for prayer and learnings, but also for freedom and protection.

This year, with guidance from leaders in our community who have brought new energy and life to our work of areyvut, social action, we are collaborating with local synagogues and churches to help support and settle refugees in this area. We don't need to build spacious mansions and stock them with food and water like Avraham. But there are so many people whom we might serve with our collective strength, resourcefulness and commitment to *mitzvah*. A space becomes a "makom kadosh" - sacred - when we are taking care of others.

When we're afraid, can we stay open-hearted?

This is an existential question, a philosophical question, a political and geo-political question, and a piercing human question, which has a grip on the throat of our country and dozens of nations in the world right now. Can we let others in, to be cared for, taught, settled, and nourished? How we answer may ultimately define us.

Door-opening, after all, might be an ancient Jewish story, but so is knocking on doors, terrified, in hope and prayer that we would be let in. As a Jewish community, we have depended greatly on the grace of those who opened their doors while living in fear.

While they ultimately arrived safely, not lost on my grandparents was the fact that it took many years to make their way here from Israel to the United States. With their children, they bribed and hid their way through Europe and Canada, navigating closed borders and severe immigration restrictions before arriving, ultimately, in Coolidge Corner, Brookline.

Once here, my grandmother discovered a new way to live with an open home. No longer surrounded by refugee children from the war, she instead picked on the elderly. She brought home residents from nearby nursing homes for Shabbat dinner. Anyone who looked like they could eat a little something quickly became a guest.

She also connected with a friend who had come to the U.S. before the start of World War I, together with 12 million immigrants who entered the Ellis Island gateway, including three million Eastern European Jews. There they were met by a poem, bronzed upon a pedestal, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

Two generations later, well settled in our homes and communities, this is still an urgent spiritual call: “Give us all those yearning to breathe free.”

May we live with open minds, open hearts and open homes. Even as we fear, may this year bring many full and lasting breaths.

L’shanah tovah.