

Fear and Love
Kol Nidre 5778
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I almost didn't become a rabbi.

It was the summer of 2001.

I was reading a book about people making massive career changes, not because I was thinking about making one, but because it was written by a former CEO of a company I had backed in business, and I wanted to see how she was spinning her "career change." In this book she talked about how people made radical career moves—business people becoming writers and artists and more—and how they took the first steps to doing so by meeting with people in those jobs to see what it was like. And then--okay I know this is going to sound really crazy--but it was as if God was speaking to me through the pages of the book.

You see one year before that, on the High Holidays I had gone to services and heard a new rabbi give a compelling sermon that brought me to tears. And there was a moment during that sermon that I thought to myself-wow what would it be like to be a rabbi? And of course I immediately squashed that thought, because...well... it was a crazy thought.

How could I become a rabbi? I had an MBA, which barely qualified me for anything rabbinic. I had spent 17 years building my career on Wall Street and I had finally landed exactly where I wanted to be: a co-founder in a small private equity firm raising a first-time fund.

How could I become a rabbi? I was married with two young children. I was living a totally 'secular' life—I didn't keep kosher, didn't keep Shabbat, didn't even regularly go to shul. I had never gone to day school or studied much about Judaism--in fact my then 7 year old knew more about Judaism than I did. And then there was the problem of Hebrew—I had learned to read it—poorly—as a kid in religious school but that was about all I knew.

Like I said, crazy, right?

But somehow reading that book, brought that High Holiday moment right back. And then the crazy voice wouldn't go away. So six months after reading that book, I mustered up the courage to make an appointment, and went to talk to that rabbi. And I still hadn't mentioned my crazy idea to another soul.

I had been working so hard to repress my crazy idea because deep down I was just too scared to even think about moving forward with it. I was afraid—make that *terrified*-- of the reaction of my family. I was afraid of walking away from a hard-fought career. I was afraid of looking ridiculous. I was **HUGELY** afraid of failure and public humiliation.

But I was also incredibly blessed in ways that my fear, initially, kept me from seeing. Because once I found the courage to actually talk about my dream out loud, I experienced the love of family, friends, and people I can now call colleagues, to support me through the long and hard path.

And I shudder to think how close I came to denying myself of my dream, because my fears almost held me back from saying or doing anything about them.

We often think of Yom Kippur as a day to articulate our heartfelt hopes for the coming year. But Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his book *Conquering Fear*, suggests that today is also a day to also acknowledge our deepest fears. Because one of the profound messages of Yom Kippur, a day that stands at the intersection of life and death, is that life is preciously short and that fear constricts our soul and limits us from fulfilling our potential as human beings. According to Rabbi Kushner, in addition to the Ten Commandments, God gave us an 'Eleventh Commandment'-the commandment not to be afraid, to keep us from missing out on life's many blessings.

One of the seminal stories of the Torah illustrates this point and teaches us that fear can rob us of our dreams. The story takes place about 2 years after the Israelites left Egypt, and were on the brink of entering the 'Promised Land.' Moses--doing what any good commander would do-- sends 12 scouts ahead to check out the land and report back. After 40 days, the men return from their mission and the rave about the Promised Land and what a great land it is—a land flowing with milk and honey. But then... 10 of the 12 scouts add that no matter how great that place may be, they are too afraid to try to conquer it. The inhabitants, they say, are as big as giants! And compared to the inhabitants, they feel like mere 'grasshoppers'.

Well you know how fear can be contagious? Turns out that the fear of those 10 scouts spread to the rest of the Israelite community. And so God got angry. And God said that a community ruled by fear is not one worthy of the Promised Land. And so God condemned that generation of Israelites—with the notable exception of the two scouts who came back unafraid-- to wander in the wilderness for another 38 years until every one of those fearful Israelites died off and a new generation could emerge.

I am not suggesting that fear is not real and not in fact a natural response that can be helpful in protecting us when we are in real danger. What I AM suggesting, however, is that we need to think seriously about all the ways that fear keeps us from actualizing our destiny.

When we are very young we dream big: we dream of becoming astronauts and princesses and President. And then as we get bigger, our dreams somehow get smaller. We say to ourselves, 'that's not realistic,' 'I can't do that,' 'that's crazy.' But what we are really saying is, 'I'm afraid of putting myself out there,' 'I'm afraid of not being good enough,' 'I'm afraid of what people will say,' 'I'm afraid of being alone,' 'I'm afraid of failure.'

So we 'play it safe,' and our lives become more and more conscribed. The older we grow, the more like grasshoppers we become.

Fear of change, fear of failure, fear of judgment, fear of rejection, fear of uncertainty...these can keep us locked in narrow places and in narrow lives. They can keep us trapped in jobs we do not like. They can confine us in relationships that don't allow us to grow. They can keep us from trying new experiences. They can keep us from pursuing our dreams.

And it's not just our personal fears that hold us back. Thousands of years later, we too, even here in America, are living in a world consumed by fear. It is the root cause of xenophobia. It drives much of the debate on immigration in the world today—if we open our borders will our lives and our jobs will be diminished? Will terrorism surge?

Of course there are events which are legitimately frightening, and we need to do what is prudent and safe for all. The problem is not the instinct of fear, it is what do with our fear. Because to objectify others, to rob them of their legitimacy and their humanity, and to cast fearful and stereotypical blame, diminishes us as human beings. Not only that, it can be very dangerous. As Justice Louis D. Brandeis once wrote: "Men feared witches and burnt women."

Last month, I had the privilege of joining 25 other North American Jewish leaders to spend 4 days in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem through an educational Jewish organization called Encounter. There we listened to the stories of Palestinians from Bethlehem, Hebron, Ramallah, East Jerusalem and a tiny village called Khalet Zakariya. The point of the trip was to see and hear from ordinary people--people who are not so very different than us--struggling to lead lives of dignity under very difficult circumstances. It was a hard, sad and disheartening trip, because I heard how a country I love dearly--Israel--lets fear become, to quote Antwan (one of the Palestinians we met) 'an obstacle to peace.'

There are many stories I can share with you at another time, but perhaps the person that had the most impact on me was a soft-spoken, secular, hijab-wearing woman named Lama—a mother of 5 who taught English at a Palestinian high school. Someone from our group asked her, if she had super powers and could change any one thing, what it is that would she change. Her answer: 'if I could change one thing, I would change hearts.'

What would it look like to respond to our fears by opening our hearts?

It would look like *One Love Manchester*, the benefit concert held on June 4 of this year organized by Ariana Grande in response to the bombing of her concert at Manchester Arena that killed 22 concert goers and injured more than 100 two weeks earlier. As Katy Perry said, when she addressed that crowd of 50,000 people, 'It's not easy to always choose love, is it?' 'Especially in moments like these. It can be the most difficult thing to do. 'But love conquers fear and love conquers hate, and this love you choose will give you strength and it's our greatest power.'

It would look like the three separate obligations we have in the Torah to love: the obligation to love our neighbor as ourself, *v'ahavta l're-echa kamocha*, the obligation to love Adonai our God *v'ahavta et Adonai elohecha* and perhaps the least known but arguably most important: *V'ahavtem et ha-ger*: the obligation for all of us to love the stranger. Yes, the Torah commands us to love those who can seem most different from us, those who can inspire the most fear.

It would look like what Rabbi Sharon Brous calls "Yom Kippur Love," a love that starts from a place of deep honesty and vulnerability. A love that says: I'm giving you access to my fears, my hopes, to me. I will let you see the best and also the worst of me. I will let you see my soul – and I want to see yours. Show me your scars – I promise not to run.

It would look like, in the words of Rabbi Harold Kushner, "confronting our fears with the knowledge that failure and rejection are not fatal, that the people who love me love me for who I am and for what I stand for at my best, not what I achieve."

There is a psalm we say every day from the month before Rosh Hashanah until 10 days after Yom Kippur as part of our High Holiday liturgy. The psalm ends with the same words uttered by Moses at the end of the Torah as he turns over the mantle of leadership to Joshua, and as the Israelites stand, once again, on the cusp of entering the Promised Land: *hazak ve'emetz*, be strong and of good courage Moses tells Joshua, knowing that's what it will take to go forward.

But our Psalmist adds another word as well—*libecha* in your heart. *hazak v'ya-a-metz libecha*, be strong and find courage in your heart, for courage is what will enable us to do the unimaginable, to change our lives, to change the world, to fulfill our dreams and to actualize our potential.

My wish for all of us all this year is that that we find the strength within our hearts to live fully and courageously in this precious life ours.

G'mar Hatimah Tovah