

To those who are afraid..."
Kol Nidre

"To those who are afraid"

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I would like to address myself tonight to those who are afraid. Afraid of what you ask? I'm not sure it really matters. My comments will apply to a host of contemporary fears and they are aimed at helping you live in a frightening world - my goal tonight is to try and help you be less afraid.

This past summer we went on a wonderful Temple Beth Sholom trip to Israel. 23 of you went with us and by all accounts had a wonderful time. A fair number of you told me that you would have liked to join us - but that you were afraid, afraid to travel to a place you perceived as dangerous. I want to address myself to you tonight.

Some 12 of our teens participated in one or another summer trip to Israel this summer and they had the time of their life. Others of you shared with me that you had considered sending your children to Israel with USY or Camp Ramah - but in the end - you could not bring yourself to let them go - you were just too afraid, just too overwhelmed by your fears for their safety. I want to address myself to you tonight.

There are some of you who are afraid right here in New York. You tell me that you worry about the next terror attack right here in America. Some of you left town during the Republican Convention because you were afraid. Some of you don't like traveling on the subways or going to one or another of what you consider "high risk locations" around the city. I want to address my words to you tonight.

There are some of you here tonight who have confided to me different kinds of fears. You may be confronting a terrible disease - cancer, a heart problem and you are afraid.

Some of you have shared with me that you are afraid to make the change in your life that you are becoming convinced needs to be made. To escape an abusive spouse, an oppressive job, a relationship that has long outlived any value - you know you need to change, to move on - but you are afraid. I have prepared my remarks for you tonight.

A little girl was practicing her part in the school play - it was only one line but she was nervous and had never been in a play before - so she rehearsed it over and over: "It is I, be not afraid!" It is I be not afraid" And as the moment approached she paced back stage - going over her one line again and again: "It is I, be not afraid! It is I be not afraid." Finally her big moment arrived, she got her cue, stepped out onto the stage - and was overwhelmed by the lights, the size of the auditorium and all the people who had come to hear her say her part: She looked into the crowd and was stunned - she could barely compose herself - finally a small voice came forth to recite her well practiced line - "It's me - and I'm scared!"

I worry that this is the way too many of us feel - we prepare with a certain amount of bravado - but when the curtain goes up and we step into the spot light - we are afraid - too afraid to live the way we know we should be living.

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen in her wonderful book, *My Grandfather's Blessings* tells of an episode in her own life: "Many years ago," she writes, "I had an odd dream. It was only a single image, but I awoke deeply disturbed. I had no idea what the dream meant, but it felt like some sort of message to me. It aroused strong feelings of sadness and of being trapped. The image was very vivid. I saw a daffodil bulb planted in the earth. Lying on top of it was a large and very heavy rock. Because of this rock, the daffodil was unable to bloom. For several weeks," Dr. Remen goes on to write, "I could not get this simple, powerful dream out of my mind, and eventually I described it to a friend who had a deep interest in dreams and their meanings. "Perhaps there is a conversation going on between the rock and the daffodil," her friend said. "Why not listen in?" With surprise," writes Dr. Remen, "I realized that I knew this conversation well. The rock was saying: "It's a dangerous world. DON'T BLOOM! I will keep you safe."

At that point Dr. Remen began to laugh as she realized that the rock sounded just like her father. Her friend, the therapist then asked Dr. Remen if she could hear the other side of the conversation. What was the daffodil bulb saying to the rock? Naomi Remen smiled and then replied: "But I need to bloom, blooming is my whole purpose for being alive!"

Naomi Remen thought for awhile and then said, "You know it should feel good to have a heavy rock between you and danger, shouldn't it?" But, for some reason she felt very sad, and the matter was left unresolved.

Some years later, Dr. Remen was agonizing over a major career change. The stress of this decision became intense and she was reminded of her dream. Suddenly she said, she knew how the rock felt. The rock was afraid to let the bulb bloom. It knew the daffodil's value and was determined that it must not come to harm. If it bloomed and became visible it could be hurt. But for the first time she also understood that if it did not bloom, the daffodil might die.

“Survival for survival’s sake was a high priority in my family.” Concluded Dr. Remen, “My father, and indeed many other members of my family, had been made fearful of life by the Depression and the War. They had become experts at surviving through fear. Surviving for them was a question of tenacity, of putting safety above all other considerations. But survival could be achieved not only by avoiding life - but by embracing it. Survival through fear was a matter of hiding well; Survival through living, was a matter of passion and risk. Of finding something important and serving it. Of doing what was needed in order to live out loud. Is it possible to protect something so well that you stop the life in it? The reason the rock had given the bulb for not blooming was the very reason it was important to bloom. It is a dangerous world, a world of suffering, loneliness, and loss. Daffodils are needed.

Naomi Remen’s family is like many of our own. They had cultivated fear as a weapon to shield her from the world. But as she grew as an adult she came to learn that fear may provide the wrong kind of protection.

On Rosh Hashanah I referred to two kinds of wrist bands the yellow ones that all the kids are wearing that proclaim “Live Strong!” And the red strings that are becoming more and more popular - and even crossing over to contemporary pop culture as Madonna and others publically sport them. I like the yellow wrist bands - they proclaim a message of strength and confidence - but I am less enamored with the red strings. I did a little research and checked these strings out on the Kabbalah Web site which informed me that red string has been a form of protection for centuries. It goes on to inform us that these red strings, if placed and worn properly, can protect us from the power of the evil eye . We are surrounded by people and forces that wish us ill - the string forms a “protective shield” without which you are in danger of becoming a victim to these negative thoughts. Or so it goes on the Kabbalah web site.

Now, I want to make it clear once and for all that we Jews are not superstitious! (Poo Poo, keyn ahora). Truth be told, that more accurately captures the real Jewish stance on superstition. We are against it officially - but unofficially - why take chances - better to cover all your bases, no? For some it is the red string, others tie red ribbons on their babies crib, on their strollers and even place little pieces of red ribbon in their pockets or shoes. A friend spoke of a red ribbon she found in an old purse as she was cleaning out her closet - it had been placed there by her mother who had been dead for more than a dozen years. The most common response I get from people when I inquire about their red string - is a sheepish smile and a “well it couldn’t hurt - could it?” To which I usually smile and say - no, it couldn’t hurt.

Truth be told, these superstitions represent either a precaution or a world view. If they fall into the category of a precaution - "couldn't hurt" or "why take chances" - well I can live with that. But if it is your world view, your first line of defense, if you are investing too much energy in these strings as protection against a frightening world - then I need to speak to you tonight as well.

The question I place before all of us tonight - is what is your fundamental world view? Do you see the world as primarily a dangerous place? Are you a fragile flower in need of protection- or do you see life as an exciting opportunity for growth, one that needs to be embraced and explored? There is a great difference between defending life and befriending it. Defending life is often about holding on to whatever you have at all cost. Befriending life is about strengthening and supporting life's movement toward wholeness. Defending life requires strategies of defense of which red strings and not taking unnecessary trips to Israel are prime examples. Befriending life may require us to take risks, sometimes great risks, it requires us to let go over and over again, until we finally surrender to life's own dream of itself. What I am presenting for your consideration this evening is that it may ultimately be a wiser course to celebrate life more and defend it less.

One of my favorite stories from the Bible is the one of Jacob struggling with the angel. You remember it don't you. Jacob had done a terrible thing at home and was forced to flee. He left everything he knew, everything that was familiar to him behind and set out on a new and frightening journey alone. One night, many years later, on his way back home, he dreamed a dream as he slept alone by the river bank. He had been traveling, and when he had stopped to make his meal and settle down to sleep, the place had seemed safe enough. But it was not so. Jacob awakened to find himself gripped by muscular arms and pinned to the ground. It was so dark that he could not see his enemy, but he could feel his power. Gathering all his strength, he began to struggle to be free. Now Jacob was a very strong man, in the prime of his life, but even using all of his strength, he could not free himself, he could not overcome this enemy. They wrestled for a long time, a very long time - and as the night began to end, and the light of day began to shine, Jacob noticed with astonishment that he had been wrestling with an angel. Now angels, or at least this angel could not be caught in the daylight - so quickly the tables began to turn - the angel had to leave, had to get out of there, but Jacob grabbed on with all the strength he could muster and would not let him depart. "Let me go" the angel told Jacob, "the light has come.", but Jacob held him close. "I will not let you go until you bless me" declared Jacob. And so the angel was forced to give Jacob a blessing - but what a strange blessing it was: For as the angel acquiesced to Jacob's demand, he inquired of him, "What is your name..." "Jacob!" "No," said the angel, "your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Yisrael - for you have struggled with God and man and prevailed..." And Jacob was wounded in this encounter and left it limping, in fact he limped for the rest of his life.

Now my friends - this is no minor story - this is where we, the Jewish people, get our name - we are after all Yisrael . So what does this strange encounter mean to teach us about who we are; about who we are meant to be? It has always left me with many more questions than answers. How could Jacob confuse an angel as an enemy? How could a name change and a wound be a blessing?

It is indeed a puzzling story about the nature of blessings and the nature of enemies. How tempting it must have been for Jacob to have let the enemy go and just flee as soon as he had the chance - but he didn't . He kept on struggling. And from that struggle we are given our name.

What is clear to me, is that struggle is the very point of this story. To put the struggle behind you as quickly as possible and get on with your life - is so tempting. It might make life easier - but far less genuine.

Perhaps the wisdom of this story lies in engaging the life you have been given as fully and as courageously as possible and not letting go until you find the unknown blessing that is in everything.

During this summer, my wife, Edy emailed our close and dear friends Rabbi Neil & Alisa Kurshan sharing the good news of our daughter Dina's engagement. Rabbi Kurshan wrote back inquiring about the date for the wedding. When Edy responded, he wrote back, "Mazel-Tov, I have penciled it in." And in the characteristic email banter in which many of us sometimes engage, Edy wrote back, "Only pencil and not pen?" To which Rabbi Kurshan responded: "Between you and me it's in pen. But between me and God it is in pencil." Now although this exchange was light hearted, there was a serious point and a profound truth underlying Rabbi Kurshan's response. We can never be sure about life; we can never be certain about what lies ahead. "Im yirtze Hashem - God willing, the wedding will happen, but God does not issue promissory notes or guarantees.

I love that expression: Im yirtze Hashem - "God willing" - it is an entire theology lesson, an entire philosophy of life compacted into three Hebrew words - two in English. Im yirtze Hashem - "God willing" When someone says, we are planning a wedding, or a Bar Mitzvah this summer, or we are having a baby in a few months - the traditional Jew hastens to add: Im yirtze Hashem - "God willing" . Some people take this to an extreme. "We will be having dinner in a half hour." Im yirtze Hashem - "God willing" I mean after all, you never know, God might bring the world to an end between now and the time the chicken soup is put on the table. But, the wonderful thing about this expression is that it is never said with fear - it is just a simple, humble reminder to speaker and listener - of the nature of things and the way of the world.

Im yirtze Hashem - "God willing" - it reminds us that a Jewish view of life requires us to hold things loosely. The upcoming lunch appointment, the chicken soup, the Bar-Mitzvah

or the wedding - all are in God's hands. To be alive means to wait for the will of God to reveal itself. Our job is to struggle, like Jacob of old. Our job is to wrestle with God and with man. Our job is to engage life with all of our might - to bring to life a curiosity, a sense of adventure, a strength and yes, when needed a ferocity - but how things will turn out are ultimately not in our hands.

And our job is not to fear the unknown - but to face it with confidence and hope. For the traditional Jew: Im yirtze Hashem - "God willing" really says it all. In life one might not always get one's way, but never for a second do we doubt that there is a way to be gotten. At any given moment the will of God may be unknown, but the presence of God is certain and in fact it is the only certainly we really need to engage life, to believe in life and its possibilities. You are exactly where God wants you to be!

Every year, Debra, my secretary, brings me the new list of B'nai Mitzvah. We assign B'nai Mitzvah three years in advance!!! I always look at this list with mixed feelings - on one hand I see the progression of children into adulthood - it is a moment of optimism. But, I also find it a little depressing that somewhere - even if only on a sheet in the Beth Sholom office - it is geschriben - it is written where I will be on each respective Shabbat - THREE YEARS FROM NOW! And this year, I looked at that list, I smiled and thought to myself, Im yirtze Hashem . Oh, to those parents who have a date with me in the next three years - don't worry - between you and me it is in pen - but between me and God, it is written in pencil - I will be there, at your simcha -Im yirtze Hashem - "God willing".

To those of you who are afraid - the one's I want to speak to tonight - you are holding on to life too tightly. You are going to have to learn this most important secret of Jewish survival - the ability to hold life loosely. It is not an uncommon human response. We get scared and we grab on tighter. As roller coaster approaches the top of the hill - our fingers grasp the bar even tighter. You have heard me refer to us as being in a post 9-11 world. 9-11 gave us all quite a fright. Prior to 9-11 most of us here in America lived with the illusion that we, here, were safe and secure. But it was an illusion. Jacob lay down to sleep that night and he thought he was in a safe place as well - but it too was an illusion. He awoke to find himself in a struggle for his very life - and so have we. But the secret to Jacob's success came not in the holding tight - but in the letting go. The blessing came after he let the angel go. It is human nature to want to dwell in places where we have the illusion of control. After all - to be dependent or to be vulnerable - is, well, uncomfortable. But the only thing worse than being vulnerable - is to ignore our vulnerability. The person who navigates a narrow passage, or skirts a dangerous cliff is indeed in a precarious position - the only thing worse - is to pretend otherwise. Carelessness, and false confidence creates a far more dangerous reality.

Many people who seek my counsel do so at times when they are afraid. “Rabbi, I need your help - my husband is in the final stages of cancer and I do not know what to do, I am so afraid...” “Rabbi, my wife is leaving me and I don’t know what to do, I am afraid...” Rabbi, I have lost my job, my future for the first time is uncertain and I am afraid, I don’t know what to do.”

The first thing that makes these moments so frightening is the realization that a place you thought was safe, is no longer. Life had been so secure - and in one terrible moment a doctor’s diagnosis changes everything you had believed in, everything you had built your life on.

Your spouse was the one safe place in an otherwise uncertain universe. He or she was the one you could depend on - marriage was your refuge, and then in one terrible moment it is gone, the rug has been pulled out from under you and you are frightened and the world is a very different place than you thought it was.

And it is not surprising that the first reaction for so many - is to grab hold of what you thought was.

How does that saying go? “Denial is not just a river in Egypt.” When confronted with a terrible diagnosis - we seek a second opinion, and a third - a fourth if we think it might help. A spouse when informed that a partner has been unfaithful or is leaving will not untypically respond initially by promising to try harder, be better - “let’s give it one more chance, one more try - we can make this work - I know we can...” And when one loses their job - again - it is not uncommon to protest: “I’ll work harder, I’ll double my hours - you don’t have to pay me more - just give me another chance to prove that you are wrong about me.” Divorce is so messy - because a place of trust is turned into a place of battle. The one place you thought you were safe, safe enough to have revealed all your secrets, all your vulnerabilities - and now it all becomes ammunition for the fight - is it any wonder you feel so betrayed, so hurt, so afraid.

What all of these have in common - divorce, disease, job loss, rejection, even 9-11, is that they are all moments that reveal the vulnerability of life. We had thought things were one way - and we discover they are another - and we are afraid. Like Jacob of old, this person we thought was a friend has become an enemy, this job we had thought secure, this life we had thought dependable, this world we had thought safe - is not, and we do not know what to do, but we now know we are in the struggle of our life.

And no matter how much we try to hold on tighter - try to hold on to what was - salvation does not lie in that direction. And if you seek my counsel - I will not rush you - at first I will listen, I will embrace you and I will try and understand the pain of betrayal you must be feeling - but ultimately, inevitably when you are ready I will whisper in your ear the very same message that the angel whispered in to Jacob’s ear: “let go”, “let go”.

“Rabbi, I don’t know what to do, the cancer has gotten so bad that my husband refuses to fight anymore. He has lost his interest in watching TV, he barely wants to see anyone, he doesn’t even talk to me much anymore, what should I do?” “Let go - he is letting go and so must you, let go.”

There are moments when we must let go of our marriages, our jobs, our hopes our dreams, our lives. “V’hu tzolaya al ye’rayho And Jacob left the struggle limping...” My friends - there is no defense against life. No protection from it. Life is a struggle. And no one will emerge without their share of scars and wounds. But, it is only after Jacob begins to limp that he becomes Yisrael. It is the imperfect Jacob that is superior to the previously perfect one. It is the wounded Jacob who goes on to become Yisrael - and the father of all Jews since. It is at the very place of our vulnerability that we find our humanity. Ironically, God does not protect Jacob from the wound, God merely gives him the strength to transform the wound into a blessing.

As so my friends, the choice is yours. How will you respond to the vulnerability of life? Will you be afraid? Or will you be Yisrael - the one who struggles, who fights and who emerges wounded - bloodied but not defeated?

When I invite you to go on our next Israel trip - say I invited you to join us next August on our next wonderful TBS trip to Israel - how would you respond? When your child says that he or she wants to go to Israel. How will you respond? “But, rabbi, it is a dangerous world is it not?” As the saying goes: Kol Haolom kulo gesher tzar m’od - The whole world is a dangerous place - v’haikar lo l’faheyd klal - and the challenge is not to be afraid.

On this Yom Kippur day I stand before you to say that I do not have the power to change the world - I wish I did. But, we do have the power to change ourselves - we do have the power to determine how we will respond to this world in which we live.

Time and time again during these days we say the words, Zahreynu l’hayyim... Remember us for life, ‘O God.’ Thus translated it recognizes the fragility of life and is a prayer for God’s protection. But there is another way of translating these words - maybe even a better way of translating them. “Zahreynu l’hayyim: Remind us ‘O God to live.” Remind us to embrace life, to confront our pain and grief and to reach out to each other. Flowers gotta grow - that’s what flowers do - and so should you. “O’ Lord, Help us to open the hands we have clenched in fear, and to extend those hands in love to one another. To embrace life, to live life, l’hayyim!”