

Rosh Hashanah Morning: Conquering Fear

“*Al tira*,” do not be afraid, is the most repeated phrase in the bible appearing close to eighty times. God tells Abraham not to be afraid when he is setting out on his great trek into the unknown. Isaac receives a similar reassurance when he leaves home. When Jacob embarks on his journey to reunite with his son. As our people stand at the shore of the sea with Pharaoh’s armies bearing down upon them. In Deuteronomy as the Israelites prepare for battle. In Joshua and Isaiah Psalms and Lamentations and Proverbs and Jeremiah and Daniel and Ezekiel we hear the command, *Al tira*, do not be afraid.

Why is this command repeated more than any other one? Because as human beings, fear is in our nature. Author and Rabbi Milton Steinberg wrote, “To live and to be afraid are the same thing. Every living creature from the humblest insect to man knows the meaning of fear. For among all the ingredients compounded in the creation of life, fear is one of the most important... We fear for our children just because we know into what strange paths they may wander. We are timorous about our health because we can picture ourselves in the grasp of strange, malignant diseases. We fret about the security of our position because we know how slight an error may ruin our standing with others. And we dread for our wealth because we can visualize ourselves in the hard lot of privation and poverty, because we can imagine ourselves stripped of the hard-earned things which we now possess.”ⁱ Rabbi Steinberg’s characterization of fear is that it is part of so much of the human experience. And we understand that some degree of fear is necessary and important. We should teach our children to fear what can be dangerous- the deep end of a swimming pool, too much exposure to the sun, busy roads and intersections. But more often than not, fear holds us back. Fear can overwhelm us and cause us to make poor decisions, shirk from responsibility, and miss out on life.

The stories we read on Rosh Hashanah are filled with fear. In the akeda that you just heard, fear is clearly present in Isaac but likely in Abraham too. And the other reading for Rosh Hashanah, the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael from Abraham and Sarah’s home is one that depicts three types of fear; fear of the other, fear of change, and fear of death. Each of these fears play a part in the story as well as our own lives. By learning from the challenges and mistakes of our biblical ancestors, we may be able to choose differently than they did when confronted with the same fears. As we enter into the new year, let us examine fear, what we may learn from it, and how we may conquer it.

Fear of the other. I believe this to be the most common of fears, one that peppers our daily lives. We are taught to fear when we are small children. I have seen the development of fear of the other first hand with my daughter Eliza. When she was a baby, Eliza loved to be held, by anyone, at anytime. The only times she would fuss when was she was hungry, tired, or wanted to be held. Anybody could pick up Eliza, hold her in their arms, and she would quickly stop crying and calm down. Around 10 months of age, that changed, and Eliza developed what we called “stranger danger.” All of a sudden, only daddy or abba could pick her up. If we tried to give her to a friend, or a relative, even her grandparents, she would tantrum. Eliza was demonstrating a developmentally appropriate fear of the other.

Fear of the other becomes glaringly present in Sarah's relationship to her mistress, Hagar. In our Torah, Hagar is quite literally the other. The name Hagar means stranger. Some scholars believe Hagar is derived from the Arabic word "hajara," meaning "emigrate," "separate," or "flee."ⁱⁱ When we first meet her, we are given her full title, *shifcha mitzrit u'shmah Hagar*.ⁱⁱⁱ The Egyptian slave woman named Hagar. Her otherness is highlighted in three ways. First by her socioeconomic or class status as *shifcha*, slave. Second by her country of origin, *mitzrit*, Egyptian. And finally, by her very name, *Hagar*, Stranger. So Sarah has three reasons to fear.

Sarah's fear of Hagar develops quickly, as Hagar becomes pregnant immediately after Sarah has given her to Abraham to become his wife and produce an heir for him, something Sarah has thus far been unable to do. The text teaches us that Hagar become an object of scorn for Sarah. However, in the very next verse, Sarah goes to her husband and reverses the language, telling Abraham that it is *she* who has become an object of scorn for Hagar. Abraham tells Sarah to do what she wants with Hagar, and so Sarah taunts and bullies Hagar until Hagar flees.

A few chapters later in the text, Sarah becomes pregnant and gives birth to Isaac. After Isaac has been weaned, Sarah sees him and Ishmael playing together. The Hebrew for playing that is used here is the word "*mitzacheik*," which is related to Isaac's name Yitzhak, commonly translated as laughter. This upsets Sarah and again, her fear of the other skyrockets. Many commentators defend Sarah, claiming *mitzacheik* was not innocent child's play but rather was Ishmael attempting to shoot arrows at his brother. One commentator even interprets *mitzacheik* to mean Ishmael was molesting Isaac. Sarah again goes to Abraham and asks him to throw out Hagar and Ishmael. After receiving God's reassurance that Hagar and Ishmael will be taken care of, Abraham casts them out into the harsh and unforgiving wilderness.

Fear of the other makes us act irrationally. It blinds us to what is really going on. A degree of fear of the other can be healthy. We were amused when Eliza would only go to us. However, in the Torah we see that Sarah is harboring some pretty strong feelings of fear about people she has known for a long time, people who are like family to her. In the first instance, Hagar was simply following Sarah's instructions to produce a child for her husband. And in the second, it is likely that the plain meaning of the text was the truth, that the boys were just playing together. But both of these events act as triggers, causing Sarah's fears of the other to flood out and cloud her judgment.

This fear of the other pervades our society. We judge and fear people based on their skin color, their nationality, how they dress, who they love. We fear those who have different opinions than we do about politics, who practice a different religion, who have different habits and hobbies. We often act like Eliza, throwing a tantrum and letting fear overwhelm us rather than taking a step back to examine our fears. Our fear of the other keeps us apart from the other and can compel us to act with vitriol or even violence toward the stranger

The second type of fear that holds us back is fear of change. We are living in a society that is rapidly different from the one in which our parents and grandparents grew up. The past century has seen unbelievable advances in science, technology, and medicine that in many ways

has improved our lives. We can facetime our friends and family across the world, take pills that prevent and cure what used to be fatal diseases, and we have access to all the information we want at the touch of our fingertips. We have seen advancements in civil rights for African Americans, women, and the LGBTQ community. And with all this change comes fear. We fear that our children are no longer sufficiently sheltered. We fear that new discoveries will uproot our old routines and ways of looking at the world. We fear that we cannot keep up with the breathtaking pace that change continues to occur in our world.

In our Torah, it is not just fear of the other but also a fear of change that motivates Sarah to cast out Hagar and Ishmael. The story begins with the birth of her own biological son, a miracle for Sarah who was 99 years old when she became a mother. To some degree, Sarah had been used to the way things were functioning. Remember that it was she who came up with the plan to give Hagar to Abraham as a wife to produce an heir. And Ishmael's name, meaning God has heard me, is a reference to Sarah's plea that God remember and take care of her family.

But then, three men visit Abraham and inform him that Sarah would soon become pregnant. Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent and how did she react? She laughed. Her reaction was one of incredulity, but it was also a product of her fear. How was her aged body to handle the complications and stresses of pregnancy? What would this new child mean for the order that she had created in her household? How would this rapid change affect her family? Sarah's fear of change is palpable in her laughter.

A few chapters later, it is this fear of change which prompts her harsh reaction towards Hagar and Ishmael. When she sees the two boys playing together, Sarah understands the extent of the changes that once made her laugh. How will the two boys share their inheritance? How can Sarah deal with being a mother and a step-mother at the same time? Will her children love and care for one another, or will they become enemies and destroy the other? Rather than struggling with or embracing the change, Sarah lets fear guide her request to ask Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael.

Fear of change can cause us to give up, to abdicate responsibility, to become stubborn and to refuse to learn new ideas and new skills. It can make us act curmudgeonly, denying us the opportunity to open up and try new things. We see this most when dealing with tradition. A tradition implies that something has always been done a certain way and we cannot possibly make any changes, additions, or alterations to it. But the old adage holds true, the only thing constant is change. And we can do our best to welcome and embrace that change, or we can act as Sarah and try our best to drive the changes away. Rabbi Roos has a poster in his office that I find myself often admiring. It is a picture of the running of the bulls in Pamplona, a tradition that dates back to at least the 15th century. In the past century, at least 15 people have died during the run and an additional 50-100 are injured each time the race is run. The caption on Rabbi Roos' poster reads "Tradition: Just because it's always been done that way doesn't mean it's not incredibly stupid." Fear of change prevents us from ending or amending traditions that are stupid, outdated, or dangerous. Fear of change stifles the naturally occurring process of growth and change.

The third kind of fear that appears in the story of Hagar affects each of us throughout our lives is the fear of death. As Woody Allen said, “It’s not that I am afraid of death, I just don’t want to be there when it happens.” Death is unpleasant, death is permanent, death is sad. We don’t know what waits for us when we die, only that it will happen to everyone we love, and to each of us.

After Hagar and Ishmael are cast out of Abraham’s house, they wander aimlessly in the wilderness of Beersheva.^{iv} When Hagar runs out of water, she takes Ishmael, places him under a bush, and walks away. I cannot fault Hagar for doing this. There can be absolutely nothing worse in the world than experiencing the suffering, and death of your child. Yet Hagar’s actions seem to demonstrate an abandonment and a sort of callousness toward her son. Hagar’s fear of death causes her to give up any sort of helping role in taking care of her child even if that means comforting him while he dies.

In his book, *Being Mortal*, Dr. Atul Gawande explores why we are so afraid of death that we are unable to face it. He discusses how modern medicine has brought incredible advances in length and quality of life, but at the same time, it has made our experience of death distant and surprising. Dr. Gawande shares the statistic that as recently as 1945, most deaths occurred at home. By the 1980’s, only 17% did. This number has been on a steady decrease since then. Dr. Gawande writes, “The waning days of our lives are given over to treatments that addle our brains and sap our bodies for a sliver’s chance of benefit. They are spent in institutions—nursing homes and intensive care units—where regimented, anonymous routines cut us off from all the things that matter to us in life. Our reluctance to honestly examine the experience of aging and dying has increased the harm we inflict on people and denied them the basic comforts they most need. Lacking a coherent view of how people might live successfully all the way to their very end, we have allowed our fates to be controlled by the imperative of medicine, technology, and strangers.”^v

Fear of death is related to fear of the other and fear of change. Because we are so removed from it in our daily lives, death has become the other. And when death comes to someone we love, we are often also faced with enormous changes that can be discomfoting and scary. So, our inclination as human beings is to go from treatment to treatment hoping for anything that will add days to our lives irrespective of what those days will look like. Modern medicine has enabled us to choose quantity over quality and while there are benefits to living longer, it means that sometimes these days are filled with denial, worry, and anxiety. Our fear of death often holds us back from facing our mortality and giving us the space to help make sure that our fleeting days are filled with meaning and comfort.

Al tira, fear not. Two words, and yet, they are among the hardest to heed. How do we take this teaching to heart? Earlier, I quoted Rabbi Milton Steinberg from his essay called “The fear of life.” He recounts the fears that follow us throughout our lives and prevent us from living up to our highest and most scared potential. But then he introduces a three step journey for overcoming our fears.

The first step is what Rabbi Steinberg calls travelling the road of disillusionment. We often hear being disillusioned as a negative, but Rabbi Steinberg calls us to take the word literally, as in the opposite of illusion. An illusion is something false that we make up. An illusion may fool, entice, or comfort us, but an illusion, by definition, is fake. Living with disillusionment means that we see things how they are with no pretense or embellishments. It means discovering the truth of a situation. In our biblical story, Hagar becomes disillusioned when, on the verge of death, God hears Ishmael's cries and sends an angel to comfort mother and child. After God tells Hagar to fear not, God opens Hagar's eyes and she sees a well of water. Water does not magically appear in the desert. The well had been there the whole time, but Hagar's fears blinded her from seeing it. With a little heavenly encouragement, Hagar becomes disillusioned and in doing so, is able to quench her son's thirst and save him and herself from death. With disillusionment, Hagar is able to conquer her fears and not only survive, but thrive.

Rabbi Steinberg's second step is what he calls treading the road of duty. He reminds us that each of us has tasks in life, professionally, personally, and communally. We all have a part to play and reminding ourselves of our duty can be a vehicle for moving through our fears. Last year, on the day before thanksgiving, Shalom, Eliza, my father and I were in a bad car accident on the way to visit my grandmother who was in the hospital. Thank God we were all fine, but we did not make it to see grandma. The next morning, the question arose of whether we should try again to visit grandma, knowing this would be our last opportunity to see her for some time. I was scared of getting into the car and driving the same roads which had proven terrifying only the previous day. But I knew I had a duty as Eliza's father and as a grandson to visit my grandmother and so we piled into a different car, drove past the interchange and saw the black skid marks on the pavement where the accident had occurred, and we made it to my grandma's. We had a lovely visit and my grandmother lit up when she saw her great-granddaughter. It turned out to be the second to last time I would see my grandma before she died this summer. I'm grateful my sense of duty motivated me to move past my fear and spend one more precious visit with Grandma Shirley.

The third step prescribed by Rabbi Steinberg is what he calls the road of faith and hope. He writes, "The road of faith which teaches that God has so ordered the world that from the good deeds fulfilled courageously in the hour of sorrow there will come at the end of days a new mankind which will have less cause than we to be afraid of life because the world will be kinder and better than it is now."¹ I think what Rabbi Steinberg means is that we strive to conquer fear not just for ourselves but for our children and the generations to come. Faith and hope can instill in us courage that our lives are meaningful and that what we do matters. If we think that humanity is good, then we are more likely to face our fear of the other and to build relationships with those who are different than ourselves. If we believe and hope that change can cause the moral ark of the universe to bend toward justice, then we will not allow our fears born out of temporary setbacks to paralyze us or cause us to give up. If we hope that future generations will remember us when we are gone, then we are more likely to live boldly with fearlessness and determination.

¹ Steinberg, p. 299

Al tira, fear not, is the most repeated phrase in the bible. And fear is likely the most repeated feeling of being human. We understand and acknowledge that the sacred task of facing and conquering fear will continue to challenge us as we journey through life. As we begin this new year, let us recommit ourselves to the sacred task of growing through our fears and working to not be ruled by them. May we heed and be reassured by God's command, and may we conquer our fears so that we may live fearless lives of purpose, courage, and hope.

ⁱ Steinberg, "A Believing Jew." pp. 291-292

ⁱⁱ Plaut Torah Commentary p. 99 footnote on 16:1

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 16:1

^{iv} Genesis 21:14

^v Being Mortal, p. 9