

You've Got to Get Up Every Morning

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In his 2013 memoir, “The Seven Good Years,” Israeli Author, Etgar Keret, shared a story about living with fear. A friend showed up on his doorstep early one morning. He had heard from someone high up in the Israeli Defense Force that it was only a matter of months before Iran developed nuclear capabilities. Ahmadinejad, then the president of Iran, was just crazy enough to use the nukes and Tel Aviv was undoubtedly the first target.

The next morning, Etgar Keret’s wife noticed a water spot on their ceiling. She asked her husband to call the plumber. Instead, Etgar Keret told his wife about what he had learned regarding Iran’s nuclear capabilities and suggested that they wait a few months. He explained, “It would be a waste of our time and money. Why fix anything if the whole city is going to be wiped out in two months?” Keret’s wife agreed and this principle was soon applied to tending the garden and any non-urgent dish washing. They called it the “If I’m going up in flames anyway, then I won’t go as a sucker” philosophy. It extended to floor mopping and garbage removal. They took out a loan and bought an enormous new TV, figuring they would never have to pay back the bank.

Months later, Keret had a dream. Ahmadinejad approached him in the street. Ahmadinejad hugged him and kissed him on both cheeks, he said to Keret in fluent Yiddish, “My brother, I love you.” Keret woke up from his dream in a panic and he woke his wife.

“What’s wrong? Is it the Iranians?” she asked.

Keret nodded.

“That they annihilated us? I have one of those [dreams] every night,” she said.

“Even worse, I dreamed we were making peace with them.”

Keret’s wife worried aloud, “Maybe the Iranians won’t attack, And we’ll be stuck with this filthy, run-down apartment, and the debts...and those nudnik relatives of yours we promised to visit by Pesach because we were sure that by then...” she trailed off.

Keret reassured her, “Don’t worry, honey. We’re both survivors. We’ve already survived quite a bit together, illness, wars, terrorist attacks, and if peace is what fate has in store, we will survive it too.”¹

Etgar Keret’s tale describes one approach to living with fear. A kind of liberation that comes when you're certain that the worst is just around the corner. Eat dessert first, don't waste time mowing the lawn...because who knows what tomorrow will bring. It is hard to live with fear, with the nightmares about worst case scenarios that creep in when your defenses are down.

¹ *The Seven Good Years*, Etgar Keret

And after living with fear for months and months, for 18 months to be precise, well, there's something appealing about Etgar Keret's approach, to give up, to give in.

We have grown accustomed to fear. It's not just the pandemic. Haiti and New Orleans, a devastating UN Climate report...floods, and fires. Who by plague? Who by water? Who by fire? We have grown accustomed to a powerlessness borne of wild weather and evolving COVID variants.

And, in the past few years, we have confronted another kind of fear- a fear for our country. Fear of a detachment from truth and reality. Fear of the disinformation that has so poisoned people's minds that they reject a lifesaving vaccine. Fear of the so-called patriots who stormed the Capitol, proudly posting about their participation in a racist, antisemitic mob. Fear of a legal system that compensates people for reporting on their neighbor for making a deeply personal decision about their body and their life. Fear that perhaps we have grown too complacent, satisfied with a system that serves us while others suffer. Fear about the very identity of our country.

Who are we? Who are we becoming? What world will our children inherit? There is anger, there is sadness...but if I'm being honest...it's fear...it's always fear that keeps me up at night.

Asking who we are is what we are meant to do on Yom Kippur. Peering into uncertainty, recognizing our own powerlessness. On Yom Kippur, we visit this frightening place. We confront our vulnerability and all of the risks associated with living. This is the designated place for fear on the Jewish calendar. And then, for the most part, we try and push those thoughts aside, it's just one day. But we have been living a year of Yom Kippur. When our powerlessness and our fear are an inescapable part of daily living.

Judaism has a strange relationship with fear. Jews are known as an anxious people. We come by it naturally, throughout our history we've had good reason to fear. And while generations ago, Jewish parents legitimately feared for their children's fate during antisemitic pogroms, something has seeped into our DNA. My parents still ask me to text them once I've arrived at my destination and if I'm being honest, I've started doing the same to them.

But in spite of our tendency toward fear, we are told, over and over again in our texts, very explicitly- not to be afraid. More than 80 times in the Bible, God tells people not to be afraid. God says it to the patriarchs, God says it to Moses and to Joshua. God says it to the prophets. *Al tirah...*Do not be afraid.

But what do we do with that divine commandment? How can we truly be commanded not to fear. Fear is an emotional, natural response to danger. Fear is important, sometimes fear can keep you safe.

As I shared earlier in the service, our Torah reading for Yom Kippur includes a simple and searing message on a day that is filled with *yirah*, with fear. "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day; I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life so you and your offspring should live." "*u'vacharta bachayim*"² Choose life. In the face of fear,

² Deuteronomy 30:19

we are commanded to choose life. And choosing life, every day, is the example set by those who have struggled through some of life's great challenges.

I was telling a good friend about the theme of this sermon a few weeks ago. She had been diagnosed with breast cancer in January 2020. She endured surgery, chemo and radiation- largely alone in a New York City apartment. I was explaining it to her- struggling with the task of trying to breathe meaning into these challenging times. I stopped. "How did you do it?" I asked. "I kept going," she said. These are the words that echo from people who have survived, I keep stumbling about it...in an article about the manager of the rooftop restaurant in the World Trade Center, Windows on the World, when his baby brother died, the first great trauma in his life. "Keep going."³ In an interview with a pair of Holocaust survivors, confronting the losses and isolation of COVID. "Keep going"⁴ It's that old expression, "if you're going through hell, keep going."

Its those simple and profound opening words from Carole King- "You've got to get up every morning."⁵

There is a Talmudic story: Rabbi Akiva is traveling on a boat. While he was traveling, he saw another boat sinking into the sea. He was grief stricken, knowing that the scholar Rabbi Meir was onboard. Surveying the damage, Rabbi Akiva was certain that Rabbi Meir had died. But, not long after Rabbi Akiva had disembarked, he ran into Rabbi Meir. Rabbi Akiva asked him, "Who took you out of the water?" and Rabbi Meir responded, "One wave carried me to another, and that other wave to another, until I reached the shore, and a wave cast me up onto dry land." One wave, to another, and another to the next. One wave at a time carrying him toward his destination...just keep going.⁶

To keep going is not to deny the fear, it's not to deny the roaring waters around the boat sinking into the sea, but to allow the waves to carry you. To choose life in spite of the fear. To love, knowing that loving makes us vulnerable to loss, to build knowing that what we construct can be destroyed. To weed the garden, to call the plumber, to do the dishes...because even though tomorrow is not guaranteed, you can choose to keep living...for now.⁷

The fear, the big and overwhelming fear that has haunted us for 18 months...it has always been there. Not just during a pandemic, but when you bring a fragile baby home from the hospital, or when you go to the doctor seeking the diagnosis of an unexplained ailment, or when

³ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/09/glenn-vogt-september-11/620030/>

⁴

<https://www.winknews.com/2020/04/20/holocaust-survivors-in-swfl-share-messages-of-hope-during-pandemic/>

⁵ "Beautiful." Carole King

⁶ Yevamot 121a (I learned this story from a sermon by Rabbi Cassi Kail)

⁷ This didn't quite fit in the sermon, but I didn't want to totally cut it and may the memory of Michael K. Williams always be a blessing: There is a scene in the second season of the television show, *The Wire*, when Omar Little takes the stand. He is testifying as witness in a murder trial and he is asked what he does for a living. He explains that he robs drug dealers, that he's been doing it for 8 or 9 years. The prosecutor presses him, "How does a man rob drug dealers for 8 or 9 years and live to tell about it?" Omar responds, "Day at a time, I suppose."

you wait for news of a loved one who was near the scene of an accident. Who by plague? Who by water? Who by fire? Today is haunting because the pain is real, the suffering possible, sometimes the worst fears come true. And even then, when it seems impossible, we are instructed to choose life.

There was a beautiful and heart breaking article that appeared in the Atlantic this summer. A tribute to Bobby Mcilvaine, a young man who was killed on 9/11. It followed the way that his death has impacted those who loved him and how they grieved their horrible loss. Near the conclusion of the article, his mother describes a moment that she experienced with her “limping group”-what she called her grief group- 6 women who had also lost children. Nearly 20 years after her son had died, looking at the faces of these women, a thought occurred to her: “I wondered, What if God said, ‘Okay, look, we gotta rewind here.’ Would we go through all of this again?”

“Would they be willing to relive their same lives, give birth to those same children, fall in love with them and then lose them a second time?” ‘And I know that every single one of them would have said, emphatically, yes.’⁸

That is what it means to live with fear. To imagine, in the face of the pain and heartbreak, saying yes. Yes to love. Yes to life. And, yes to the potential for loss.

Rabbi Ilana Zietman, a rabbi here in DC, recently taught a text that comes from the book of Ezra. It describes the return to Jerusalem in the 6th century BCE. The people are returning to the site of the Temple, once the center of Jewish life, that had been destroyed. They gather to lay the foundation for the new Temple, and it is a moment of profoundly mixed emotion, the joy of potential and the sorrow for what has been lost.

The text says:

Many of the priests and Levites and the chiefs of the clans, the old men who had seen the first temple, wept loudly at the sight of the [foundation of the new temple].

Many others shouted joyously at the top of their voices. The people could not distinguish the shouts of joy from the people’s weeping, for the people raised a great teruah, the sound of which could be heard from afar.⁹

They raised a great teruah...a word familiar to us from the shofar service. The teruah, the broken blast of the shofar. It is the sound of joy and sorrow mixed. That is the sound of the season, that is the call meant to awaken us, to implore us to choose life. To choose life when you cry for all that has been destroyed, and to choose life with the joyous shouts of a new beginning. To choose life for all that it is, in spite of all there is to fear. To choose life knowing that truly living means that we’ve got a lot to lose. But to choose life is to ride the waves, from one to the next, to take out the trash, to do the dishes, to mow the lawn, and to love. In spite of the fear, to choose life is to love.

⁸ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/09/twenty-years-gone-911-bobby-mcilvaine/619490/>

⁹ Ezra 3:12-13