

Facing Fear

Elul 2009/5769

Rabbi Debra J. Robbins

When I was assigned my topic for this series, “Facing Fear” I was not happy.
How come I didn’t get the uplifting theme of “Finding Hope”?
Why couldn’t I write on the inspirational topic of “Embracing Prayer”??
I tried to ignore it and all I could do was think about it.
In the ultimate act of avoidance I sorted a pile of papers on my desk.
I uncovered a note to myself, written two summers ago, which said,
“Fear” *Life of Pi* page 162.
Hmmm, I thought to myself, fear—what a coincidence.
I found the book on the shelf and opened to the noted page.

The novel is a universal story about one man’s fear of fear,
about the human fear of loneliness,
about our fear of failing to live a meaningful life.
Life of Pi is a metaphor for us at this time of year.
We are the man on the lifeboat, with enemies and obstacles all around.
We are afraid and need to overcome that fear,
we need to remember we are never alone and choose to live.
Listen to Yann Martell’s words,

“The matter is difficult to put into words. For fear, real fear, such as shakes you to your foundation, such as you feel when you are brought face to face with your mortal end, nestles in your memory like a gangrene; it seeks to rot everything, even the words with which to speak of it. So you must fight hard to express it. **You must fight hard to shine the light of words upon it.** Because if you don’t if your fear becomes a wordless darkness that you avoid, perhaps even manage to forget, you open yourself to further attacks for fear because you never truly fought the opponent who defeated you.”¹

When I read this passage I wasn’t afraid of the sermon anymore.
I remembered that we Jews are called People of the Book for a reason.
We use words all the time in our fight for inspiration, hope and courage.
“You must fight hard to shine the light of words upon fear.”
It suddenly seemed so obvious.
The light of words would help me face the fear of this sermon.
The light of words could help all of us face our fears at this sacred time of year.

I felt a little bit braver.
I was capable pursuing words to shine on the fear.
But my confidence was short lived.
I hit a snag defining the Hebrew word for fear.
In Hebrew, the word *yirah* means both fear and awe.
In English we use a euphemism.

We call these most sacred days of the year the High Holy Days. In Hebrew they are called *Yamim Noraim*, Days of Awe, Days of Fear. Oye. I panicked. Which emotion—which *yirah* was I supposed to face? Thank goodness more words helped to shine the light. Alan Morinis, who helped us prepare for these days of *yirah* last year, explains it this way.

“Merged within the word *yirah* are two human experiences that are linked in Hebrew but separated in English. One is fear. The other is awe. Experience shows us that these can be two distinct inner qualities—you can be terrified of the bear and in awe of the sunset. But experience also justifies linking them together. Imagine standing right at the lip of the Grand Canyon, looking down into the vast and rainbow colored cavern. Fear and awe merge into one exuberant inner experience... [as our tradition teaches] the fear of [God] has two aspects: the fear of tribulations and Divine retribution, and the awe of God’s glory, majesty and awesome power...”²

This season of Elul, and our experiences of the High Holy Days—the prayers and the music, the sermons and the machzor, the words sung aloud and spoken silently, are all meant to help us face fear and experience awe. These days of Elul are our opportunity fight to shine the light of words on our fears, to move out the shadow into a life of awe. Words help us face the fear that comes over us, in wave after wave, as we make our way through Elul, into Rosh Hashanah and finally Yom Kippur. Words shine light during these sacred days, to give us courage and hope when we need it most, reminding us we are not alone and we can choose life.

The rabbi’s of our tradition anticipated people like us. Men and women who are afraid not just of writing a sermon, but of making changes to be better people than we were the year before. They understood that words could shine light on these dark scary moments and give us confidence to face the many fears of our physical and spiritual lives. Psalm 27, read daily during Elul, was chosen for exactly this task. We began our service tonight singing *Achat Shaalti*, verse 4 of this psalm. From the opening verse it shines the light on our fears.

The psalm begins,
“If Adonai is my light and my help, whom need I fear?
If Adonai is my life’s stronghold, of whom shall I be frightened?”³

The psalmist, like us, fears a lot of enemies—real and imagined, human and emotional, intellectual and spiritual opponents. The psalmist spends time in places that shine with God’s presence. The poet reminds us God’s light can be found in nature, among the broken and needy of the world, in the synagogue, and especially in the presence of words of Torah. In these places God’s light shines and dispels the darkness, allowing us to move beyond our fear, to face our enemies, the broken relationships, the unfulfilled dreams, the dark shattered spirit that surrounds us.

Psalm 27 ends with the ultimate note of encouragement. As Robert Alter points out in his commentary, While it is hard to know if the words were spoken by the poet to an audience, or to himself, it is clear that they provide “hopeful confidence... against the terrors of being overwhelmed by implacable enemies.”⁴ They are words that we can carry with us like a candle or a flashlight to shine on our enemies, our fears, in the days and weeks to come. “Hope in Adonai, let your heart be firm and bold, and hope in Adonai.”⁵ It is normal to feel afraid but if we stand in the light, if we move out of the shadow we can have firm hearts and be bold, we can feel brave and maybe even a bit of awe.

The idea of turning from darkness toward the light is familiar to us. Rabbi Larry Hoffman tells a story about a minister friend of his who gave a sermon about Psalm 23’s well know promise, “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for Thou art with me.” The minister asks, Why does the psalm emphasize “the valley of the **shadow** of death” and not just “the valley of death”? The answer, he concludes, is that “shadows are often more frightening than the real thing; and because where there is shadow, there is also light. Turn toward the light and the shadow vanishes. Our greatest fears dissipate with the coming of day.”⁶

“Turn toward the light and the shadow vanishes.” These words of Psalm 23 have a special spot in our High Holy Day liturgy. They are strategically placed to help us turn from the darkest shadow to the light, from our deepest fears to our hopes. When we have prayed and fasted all day on Yom Kippur, at the end of our Yizkor prayers,

when there is little time left to shine the light of words on our fears,
we read Psalm 23.

Its enduring image stays with us, reminding us,
whenever we find ourselves back in the shadows, afraid of the dark,
all we need to do is shine the light of words,
words that come from God and words that are gifts from people,
words that speak to our hearts and minds and offer us strength,
hope and courage.

There are many written words that speak to us during these sacred scary days.
And there are also words that are not written that help us face fear.
The blast of the shofar each Shabbat of Elul shines light on our fears.
It transports us to Mt. Sinai when the ancient Israelites first heard the sound They trembled
when they felt God's presence on the mountain.
They wanted to run from the awesome blessing
of living a life of values and ethics centered around mitzvot—holy actions.
The book of Exodus records that the people responded to the blast of the shofar with fear—
they were afraid but they were not paralyzed.
God's light of Torah and mitzvot kept shining on their fear,
making them braver and braver,
the more they understood the power of the words.
They came to use that same sound,
with its echoes and memories of fear, to express their awe.
The shofar came to be the sound of celebration and rejoicing,
a sound of thanks and praise on Rosh Hashanah.
In the morning, when light streams in the windows, we listen to the shofar.
Mindful of the warning given by the prophet Amos,
“When the shofar is sounded in the city, shall the people not tremble?”⁷
We stand and we listen to what Professor Saul Lieberman calls,
“a prayer without words.”

The sounds induce in us a range of emotions that surge in the heart, of thoughts that race
through the minds. We think of the situation of humanity, of each person's works and ways,
thoughts and schemes... We are awakened by the awesome *tekiah* sound to the multiple
dangers that threaten human life and make it so precarious. The weird, plaintive *shevarim-
teruah* notes which follow serve to remind us that fears that we fear often come upon us, that
human life is frequently the bearer of tragedy and frustration. But not for long are we
allowed to wallow in despondency. We are lifted to the heights of a bright hope as we hear
the *tekiah gedolah*, the prolonged concluding blast. This hope is one of redemption—the
redemption of humanity from the inner and outer drives that threaten to efface the divine
image in which we are made, the redemption of Israel from the yoke of exile and the
liberation of all people from exploitation and tyranny.⁸

Its ancient primal sound is a prayer without words.
We who felt afraid in the dark, feel courage and hope in the light.
We feel strong and inspired to overcome our fears to make our lives matter,

to embrace the freedom of our lives and bring it to others.
And then with a single shofar call at the close of Yom Kippur,
echoing in our ears as darkness descends,
we are finally ready to enter the year.
The wordless prayer of the shofar lights the darkness of our sacred journey
helping us to face our fears and turn them into awe during this sacred season.

One last word about the power of words to shine light on our fears.
In *The Book of Words* Rabbi Larry Kushner defines thirty Hebrew words.
In addition to a well known translation he suggests a synonym.
Bracha is Blessing and Awakening.
Lashon Hara is Gossip and Garbage.
Tefilah is Prayer and Script.
The most provocative reflection is on *Hayim*, translated as Life and Terror.
This caught my attention as I was working on facing my fear:
fear of the sermon at hand,
fear of the sacred work of repair waiting for attention,
fear of the dark distance in relationships with people and with God,
maybe even fear of failing to embrace all the blessings of life.

Rabbi Kushner teaches,
Only once you're really scared you're going to die does life take on real meaning... We
treasure life most when we keep the certainty and imminent possibility of our death before
us. Not only will we die, but we could die at any moment... This is one of the reasons we
have the Day of Atonement. On this day, we are commanded not to eat or drink. We cannot
have sex. We don't wear perfume, anoint or deodorize ourselves. We wear white. And by
the end of the day, looking around the crowded prayer hall, we realize what has been
happening. We appear more like corpses than living men and women. This day has been a
rehearsal for our on death.⁹

A rehearsal for a death, we hope and pray, will not arrive for a long time.
Just enough of a real experience to put a little fear in us,
enough awe-filled fear to motivate scare us, to motivate us,
to challenge us to live our lives most fully—
each and every moment of each and every day.
I'm still not happy about my sermon topic but I'm not afraid anymore.
We are supposed to feel fear at this time of year.
We are supposed to be scared, not scared to death, but scared to back to life.
The words are there.
Now we have to work hard to shine their light.
It is time to us to live fully and richly, responsibly and mindfully,
in relationships with others and with God,
shining light on our fears, filling these scary sacred days with awe.

Ken Yehi Ratzon. So May it Be God's Will. Amen.

-
- ¹ Yann Martell, *Life of Pi* p.162.
- ² Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness* pp.232-233.
- ³ Psalm 27:1 translation adapted from Martin Samuel Cohen in *Our Haven and Our Strength*.
- ⁴ Robert Alter on Psalm 27:14
- ⁵ Psalm 27:14 translation adapted from Robert Alter *The Book of Psalms*.
- ⁶ Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, *The Journey Home* p.160.
- ⁷ Amos 3:6
- ⁸ Adapted from Max Arzt, *Justice and Mercy*, pp.153-155.
- ⁹ Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, *The Book of Words*, pp.111-112.