

On Fear and Awe

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This past year I encountered a new feeling or emotional sensation. It occurred on several instances, but three moments stand out in particular. I experienced fear in a new way.

During the winter break I went skiing with several friends. Now some of you might know that as a teenager in Montreal I was quite an avid skier. If you were to ask my childhood friends to describe me as a skier many would hurry to tell you that I was “crazy,” while some would simply say that I was “fearless.”

I haven’t skied for years and I was very much looking forward to the thrill of hitting the slopes, of speedily making my way down a steep trail. But alas, just as soon as I got off the chairlift, just as soon as my eyes looked down the mountain, that feeling crept into my heart and mind. It was fear.

“I’m a husband, I’m a father, I’m a rabbi. I have responsibilities...” Reasonable thoughts followed by fiercely unreasonable fears, “What if I fall?” followed by “What if I get hurt?” followed by “What if I really get hurt?” leading to “And what if I die?”

Don’t get me wrong...I did ski that day, but I skied with...perspective.

A few months later, I had to book several flights, for a family visit, a conference, and a shul related simchah.

I love flying. I get to be anonymous for a few hours, with no phone calls, no text messages, or the constant disruptive flow of email communication. For some reason however, I delayed booking my flights.

My paternal grandfather is scared of flying. So is my uncle. But I never experienced that feeling before. It was quite strange...I kept thinking of my children and just couldn’t explain or justify to

myself how I could bring myself to willingly sit in an object that hangs between heaven and earth.

Joelle, our trusted shul administrator, and Frayda finally intervened and I did book those flights. I even flew without great trepidation and yet still, I did experience a few moments of irrational fear.

Late in the summer my fears were finally confirmed. While driving nearby our home I got into a minor accident and thank God...thank God nobody was hurt and no real damage was done.

As it turned out, the accident wasn't my fault either...but...but...but...for days afterwards I walked around with a deep sense of shame and guilt, and most of all...I moved about the world with a great sense of fear and trepidation. Every driver, every rider, and every Berkeley pedestrian seemed like a predator to me. I suddenly realized that in a sheer moment, through no fault of my own, my entire life could be altered and drastically changed.

Everything. Everything we hold onto could be taken away with the blink of an eye.

We all have fears. Irrational fears triggered by skiing or farfetched fears triggered by flying. We all also have some fears that have been realized or fulfilled. Fears triggered by an accident, or an illness, a feud in the family, or a failure at work.

In a recent article titled "What Fear Can Teach Us," Karen Thompson Walker, the author of "The Age of Miracles," describes fear in a profound way. She writes:

"[...] We might just as easily call [...] fears by a different name. What if instead of calling them fears, we called them stories? Because that's really what fear is, if you think about it. It's a kind of unintentional storytelling that we are all born knowing how to do. And fears and storytelling have the same components. They have the same architecture. Like all stories, fears have characters. In our fears, the characters are us. Fears also have plots. They have beginnings and middles and ends. You board the plane. The plane takes off. The engine fails. Our fears also tend to contain imagery that can be every bit as vivid as what you might find in the pages of a novel. [...] Fears also have suspense. [...] Just like all great stories, our fears focus our attention

on a question that is as important in life as it is in literature: What will happen next? In other words, our fears make us think about the future. And humans, by the way, are the only creatures capable of thinking about the future in this way, of projecting ourselves forward in time, and this mental time travel is just one more thing that fears have in common with storytelling.”

She then goes on and offers a critical insight:

“[...] If we think of our fears as more than just fears but as stories, we should think of ourselves as the authors of those stories. But just as importantly, we need to think of ourselves as the readers of our fears, and how we choose to read our fears can have a profound effect on our lives.”

Fears are stories we tell ourselves. Sometimes we do so unintentionally. Sometimes however we do so quite intentionally.

A review of any of the Amidah services recited over Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur quickly reveals that “fear” is very much a central component of the story we tell ourselves during this High Holiday season. In fact, “fear” is the first request we make of God in every one of those prayers. Immediately after the Kedusha, in the evening, in the morning, during Mussaf, as well as in the afternoon, we plead with God:

ובכן תן פחדך ה' א-להינו על כל מעשיך ואימתך על כל מה שבראת

“And so place the fear of You, Lord our God, over all that You have made, and the terror of You [God] over all You have created.”

In one of his High Holiday sermons, Rav Soloveitchik describes a conversation he once had with a psychiatrist about this very prayer. The Rav recalls:

“A very eminent psychiatrist once said to me: Had I the authority to do so, I would eliminate the prayer recited on the High Holy Day that begins with the words, “Cast Thy fear,” as fear is the major cause of the mental illnesses that beset mankind. In order to preserve one’s mental health one should be free of fears, and so there is certainly no reason why one should ever pray for fear.”

Rav Soloveitchik then goes on and offers his own insight about fear:

“Though I am not a psychiatrist, what he said helped me to understand the true nature of that prayer which was ordained by the Sages of Israel. And that is what I told that psychiatrist: Everyone seems to be beset with fears of all kinds. Some are afraid that they will not be able to succeed in their careers, others fear losing their wealth or status or that they will fail to attain sufficient prominence. Many people are afraid of sickness and bodily weakness. In generations past, fear of leprosy engulfed the world; today people live in fear of cancerous growth. Many people do not go to see a doctor even when they have pains lest he diagnose “the disease.” Man is plagued constantly by all sorts of lesser fears. I am not a psychiatrist, but I do know that one major source of fear can wipe out all of these lesser fears. What fear can overtake man, thereby uprooting all other fears, such as that of failure, of poverty, of old age, of rejection or of disease? Only the fear of the Lord! That is the reason behind the expression in the High Holy Day prayer, “Cast [Your] fear, O Lord our God, upon all [Your] handiwork and [Your] awe upon all that [You have] created.” We pray that this great fear will free us from those other ones which lurk everywhere, upsetting our lives. “ (Rav Soloveitchik, *On Repentance*, pp. 223-224)

In other words, according to Rav Soloveitchik, during the High Holidays we purposely tell a particular story about fear. In it, we intentionally focus our fear on God, simultaneously releasing ourselves of any other fear. Through our standing before God in this way, we become free from all debilitating fears and empowered to focus on ultimate concerns.

The Rav takes an additional, critical step.

To begin, Rav Soloveitchik points out that the famous medieval Jewish jurist and philosopher, R. Moses Maimonides, consistently uses three words to describe the days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Maimonides refers to them as days of *teshuvah* (repentance), *pachad* (fear) and *yira'ah* (awe). Rav Soloveitchik further notes that the prayer “*Ten Pachdecha*” which we just discussed also refers to both *pachad* (fear) and *yira'ah* (awe). Thus we say:

ובכן תן פחדך ה' א-להינו על כל מעשיך ואימתך על כל מה שבראת וייראוך כל המעשים

“And so place the fear (*pachdecha*) of You, Lord our God, over all that You have made, and the terror of You [God] over all You have created and all who were made will stand in awe (*ve'yir'oucha*) of You.” (וייראוך כל המעשים)

According to Rav Soloveitchik, in our tradition *pachad* (fear) and *yira'ah* (awe) mean two different things.

The Rav explains that, “*Pahad* [fear] overwhelms and paralyzes the individual, an experience described in the *U'netaneh Tokef* prayer: “And the great shofar will be sounded and a still, thin voice will be heard, and the angels shake, terror and trembling will seize them.”” (Rav Soloveitchik, *Before Hashem You Shall Be Purified*, p. 10) In other words, *pachad* (fear) is an overwhelming emotional state.

In contrast Rav Soloveitchik argues that *yira'ah* (awe) “suggests reverence and loyalty, as exemplified in the Biblical command, “Every man shall revere (*tira'u*) his mother and father” (Leviticus 19:3).” (Rav Soloveitchik, *Before Hashem You Shall Be Purified*, p. 13) In this sense *yira'ah* (awe) is not simply an emotion, but it is also a call for action. *Yira'ah* (awe) forms the basis for an intricate system of behaviors that guide and govern a person’s relationship to his or her parents, teachers, and even God.

Rav Soloveitchik explains that ideally during the High Holidays “[...] The emotion of *pahad* gives way to a new, more mature emotion: *yira'ah* or awe. [...] The arousal of *pahad* [fear] [...] is not meant to leave the Jew permanently paralyzed. This powerful and ultimately destructive emotion must be transformed into a mobilizing, constructive force [...].” (Rav Soloveitchik, *Before Hashem You Shall Be Purified*, p. 13)

In the article, "What Fear Can Teach Us" Karen Thompson Walker introduces a similar idea. She writes, “I read about a study recently of successful entrepreneurs, and the author found that these people shared a habit that he called “productive paranoia,” which meant that these people, instead of dismissing their fears, these people read them closely, they studied them, and then they translated that fear into preparation and action. So that way, if their worst fears came true, their businesses were ready.”

I believe that “productive paranoia” aptly captures the Rav’s explanation of the transition from *pachad* (fear) to *yir’ah* (awe). On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur our tradition challenges us to tell a story of fear, not for the sake of fear itself, but rather as a way to induce – in the words of Karen Thompson Walker – “preparation and action” or in the words of the Rav as a “mobilizing, constructive force.”

When you hear the *U’netaneh Tokef* prayer (“Who shall live and who shall die?”), what do you think about? Who do you think about?

What story of fear captivates our hearts? What story of fear paralyzes or directs our actions?

Some of us need to be released of our fears because many of our fears simply do not point towards ultimate concerns, towards all that is holy, sacred, and everlasting in life.

And yet, many of us must also learn to channel some of our fears – fears that do in fact point towards ultimate concerns – into “productive paranoia” and a “mobilizing constructive force.”

We are vulnerable and life is precious. There is so much to lose in the blink of an eye...and yet there is also so much yet to gain.

Think of one person who you’re scared of losing. One relationship you hold dear and near to your heart. How might you channel that fear and sense of vulnerability into positive, constructive actions on a regular basis?

Think of one aspect of our community that particularly resonates for you and that you fear might be lost to us. One aspect of CBI you hold dear and near to your heart. How might you channel this concern and sense of vulnerability into positive, constructive actions on a regular basis?

Think of one mitzvah, one sacred commandment, without which our relationship to our tradition and to God would be rendered null and void. One mitzvah you hold dear and near to your heart. How might you channel this concern into consistent commitment; this sense of alarm into constructive actions on a regular basis?

The Yizkor service which we are about to begin tells this story too. We are vulnerable and life is precious. There is so much to lose in the blink of an eye...and yet there is also so much yet to gain. Our fear of loss realized painfully through the passing of a loved one must also be channeled back into life, inspiring a sense of urgency, a deeper commitment to sacred care and ultimate actions.

The Talmud in *Berachot* 60a relates that Rabbi Ishmael ben Yossi was once in the market of Zion when he saw one of his students walking behind him. Rabbi Ishmael noticed that the student looked frightened. Rabbi Ishmael then said to his student, 'You must be a sinner, for it says in Isaiah, "*The sinners in Zion are afraid*" (Isaiah 33:14).' Without missing a beat, the student quickly harkened back, 'But is it not also written, "Fortunate is the person who is always afraid"?' (Proverbs 28:14) But Rabbi Ishmael rejected this proof-text, explaining instead, 'That verse refers to Torah study. Regarding Torah alone, it is proper to be vigilant and afraid lest we forget our learning.'

Friends, there are fears that make us into sinners and there are fears that bind us to Torah and to God. Fears that are in vain and fears that connect us to ultimate concerns – to all that is holy, sacred, and everlasting in life.

As we begin this New Year, may we have the wisdom to discern and tell the difference between one kind of fear and another kind of fear. Ultimately, may we have the capacity to transform our fears into awe; our alarmed concern into constructive actions, our sense of vulnerability into sacred transformative deeds.

ובכן תן פחדך ה' א-להינו על כל מעשיך ואימתך על כל מה שבראת וייראוך כל המעשים

And so please God – place the fear of You, Lord our God, over all that You have made, and the terror of You [God] over all You have created so that we may stand before You God with true and real awe.