

Rosh Hashana Day 5772/2011

Do Not Fear

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Today on this Jewish New Year's Day, I'm thinking back to a secular New Year's Day when Jessica was nine and Gwen was five. We were flying back from visiting grandparents in Florida. Our plane had taken off in the rain. Suddenly it was like we were in a toy plane being tossed in every direction. I was sitting between the girls, trying to calm their fears. Then the plane really pitched and bounced and dropped. Everyone was screaming. The girls began to scream, "Dad Dad, we're going to die, we're going to die!" The adrenaline was rushing and my heart was pounding. I thought to myself, maybe we are about to die. So I thought it was a good time to pray. I prayed that the pilot and copilot would use their very best ability and experience. Then I prayed, "God give me the courage and strength to remain calm and enable me to comfort and strengthen my children in the face of this terror." God was with me in that way and I was able to calm them. As you no doubt guessed, we finally landed safely. God had been with me, in the face of my own terrifying fear, helping me to be a good father, to bring calm to my children at a terrifying time.

Today as we greet the New Year, we prayed the Unetana Tokef. It is a stark reminder of just about all that we fear. In the coming year who will live and who will die? Who shall get sick and who shall face financial hardship, who shall be divorced and who shall lose his or her job? By this time next year some here will receive a call that a family member has died, the biopsy was malignant, the stroke was severe. We pray this prayer so that we can acknowledge our fears and face them head on. We can try changing behaviors that may lessen the likelihood of our fears coming to be or lessen the impact if they do occur. Or if they are already occurring, we may find in our tradition spiritual ways to survive them.

We are living in especially fearful times; increasing rates of cancer, Alzheimer's disease, job lay-offs and stock market plunges eating away our retirement. We fear we will outlive our savings, linger in a nursing home, or be hurt by a natural disaster. Add in now there's the possibility of nuclear and biological terrorism. To take a break while I was writing this sermon I went to the movies and saw of all

things, Contagion. Maybe it was not such a good idea. When I came home I had to add the fear of a world-wide pandemic to the list of our fears.

However, the challenge of living with our fears is as old as the Bible, writes Rabbi Harold Kushner in his latest book, "Conquering Fear: Living Boldly in an Uncertain World." In his ninth book, the author of When Bad Things Happen to Good People reminds us that Adam's first words to God are, "I heard you walking in the garden and I was afraid." We must fear a lot because God says in the Bible more than 80 times, "Do not fear". The Bible's greatest dream is that "Every person shall sit under his vine or her fig tree and none shall make them afraid."

What are your fears? How do you cope with them? We often cope in very negative ways. When a friend or family member has cancer, we devise a way to blame them for their illness-they didn't eat right, they did take enough vitamins, to put psychological distance between them and possibility that we might get it. We notice we're not remembering things but we deny it to ourselves, our spouses and friends, terrified that it is the onset of Alzheimer's disease. We know that we're financially in trouble but we live just the same, petrified, that is immobilized by fear, rather than facing the necessary changes head on which might be asking for help with a business or help from family. Sometimes we turn to alcohol or turn fear into displaced anger, fighting with those closest to us.

Kushner says that God is our greatest help in facing and conquering our fears. Often the Psalms are the place we turn to face and conquer fear. At this season, Jews traditionally say the 27th Psalm every day. "God is my light and my strength whom shall I fear?" Oprah Winfrey tells the story of the terror she felt when she was sued by the Beef Industry for saying people should eat less beef as it can contribute to heart disease. She says that the only thing that enabled her to get through the long ordeal was turning to God and reciting the 27th Psalm every day.

The Psalm that we know best and recite most in the face of fear, suffering, loss and death, is the 23d Palm. It is however kind of like the Pledge of Allegiance. We learn it in elementary school by heart and we intone it at important occasions. Seldom do we think about it. When we do, we don't connect with its old fashioned images of God as Shepherd and anointing my head with oil. However,

Rabbi Kushner thinks that this Psalm is a spiritual gold mine in conquering our fears and living boldly today in an uncertain world.

It is hard to think of God as a good Shepherd when so many bad things happen in the world. Kushner answers that God can't protect everyone from misfortune; there are the laws of nature and human free will. However our bodies are fashioned so that most of the time they fight off disease and heal. And God's shepherding power does exist in the form of doctors and nurses, researchers, wise therapists, clergy, police officers, and caring teachers, parents and friends. The tragic stories grab our attention because they are more unusual and natural disasters and shark attacks are destructive but relatively rare. God uses our minds and inner conscience to guide and shepherd us to minimize the bad things in life and maximize the good.

Let's take the next verse: "Adonai Is My Shepherd, I shall not want." Is this true? Rabbi Kushner tells the story of a colleague who was praying the 23rd Psalm at the bedside of an ill congregant. He began, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." Suddenly the woman sat straight up and said, "But I do want. I want my health, I want to great wardrobe, I want my nice house." Kushner informs us that the word want, "Echasar" really means, lack. Of course we want or desire, many things. However, what the Palmist means is that with a sense of God as our source and partner, we do not lack for a sense of purpose in life. Nor do we lack a sense of worth just as we are, being made in the divine image. We might not get everything we desire. But we know we can turn to God to help us through any hardship and not be destroyed by it, because we never **lack a sense of purpose, worth, or strength.**

Benot Deshe- "In lush pastures I lie down. Near restful water God will guide me. God will restore my soul." Having fun is good. But we live in a culture obsessed with entertainment and consumerism; where we look to get a sense of contentment from owning material things. Kushner reminds us that when it comes to facing our fears or our suffering, it is the nurturing of the soul that helps us, not the things we own. God gives us the beauty of nature to restore us. We take a walk in the woods or by the ocean to give us calm. We lie down surrounded by beautiful music and we find our soul restored. I have often been in a hospital

room, where the music lovingly chosen by family members is playing. I've seen it bring a sense of calm and courage, a restoration of the soul, when everything seems to be fearful about the next treatment or operation. "God will lead me in the path of righteousness, for that is God's purpose." God leads us when we allow the still small voice inside to guide us when we are fearful about doing the right thing. It may be speaking up publicly about a problem. It may be we're fearful to quit a job where we are being asked to do something unethical. We may be fearful about standing up for ourselves when we're not being treated respectfully. God was manifest in the still small voice within the prophet Elijah when he was afraid to speak out against injustice. God is there for us as well guiding us to goodness and giving us strength to do the right thing when we listen to the still small voice within. For as the Prophet Micah said, "God's purpose for us is to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God."

"Yeah though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will fear no evil. For Thou art with me." When we are in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, it seems often like all is lost. Or as one person said to me, "I don't think I'll ever be happy again." God says to us, you will not be stuck in the valley of the shadow of death forever. You will walk through it and out the other side. As the Psalm promises, one day the mourner notices the sun shining, he or she makes a new life, sometimes finds a new mate or starts to make new friends.

"I will fear no evil. For Thou art with me." It was this Psalm and the 27th Psalm that sustained the famous Jewish Refusnik, Anatoly Sharansky for nine years in prisons of the Soviet Gulag. Reciting these Psalms every day, he survived even the infamous Moskow KGB prison. Because God was with him, he feared no evil. When he walked off the plane in Israel, a free man, he had his Book of Psalms in his hand.

"Your rod and staff they comfort me." These tools of a shepherd are to guide and rescue. God gives us other people to guide us, often when we are veering off a good path. Sometime the rod is our caring doctor who says, "You need to lose thirty pounds." Sometimes it's a helpful boss or a loyal customer who calls a problem to our attention in a supportive and respectful way. It is actually comforting to know there are those who care about us and want to guide us to

safety or a good path. The crook or staff of a shepherd is often used to pull the sheep out of a hole or down from a dangerous spot. So God sends us friends and loved ones and others, even your clergy, when we have fallen into a hole. I remember a member who years ago lost his job. He was very fearful about what he was going to do. We talked about what he was good at and what jobs could be a good match. He bravely started a new career and over the years has been very successful.

“Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” Often what we fear most is being humiliated or shamed. Frequently in life, at work or in a family there are those who attack us, ridicule us or belittle us. But we need not see ourselves as those who try to hurt us see us and want to make us feel. We are made in the Divine image and we can see ourselves as God sees us. We are entitled to a respected place at the table of life, and to enjoyment of it.

Victor Frankl, the great Psychiatrist and doctor of the soul, survived Auschwitz because God helped him to maintain a sense of presence at the table of life, despite the depravity of the situation and torment by his enemies. He refused to see himself as his tormentors saw him-as a weak victim. Instead he chose to find ways to help others every day to be God’s partner. Often times it is illnesses and medical treatments that feel like enemies, seeking to destroy us. Here too, God helps us to stay at the table of life. One thing we know from pain experiments is that people can withstand twice as much pain if there is someone else in the room that cares about them and holds their hand. When facing illness, though we fear being overcome by fatigue, pain and despair, God’s caring presence can be sought and felt, strengthening and sustaining us.

“You have anointed my head with oil.” This verse is often puzzling until we discover that at night a shepherd often washes and pours oils on their lambs’ wounds to help them heal. The noted healer, Dr. Naomi Remens writes in her book, My Grandfather’s Blessings, that she came from a very competitive and achievement oriented Jewish family. She often feared failure and that she would be nothing if she didn’t succeed in expected ways. Her grandfather, however, was a Rabbi and each Friday night he would come and bless her. He would tell her how wonderful she was. If she had made a mistake he would go on about how

much she learned from it. He poured the healing balm of unconditional love, as God's intervening Shepherd. She writes that blessing, that healing balm God sent through her Grandfather enabled her to face difficulties, fear of failures and illnesses throughout her life.

Anointing with oil was also the way Jews in the Bible commissioned a special task or mission. We often fear growing old in our youth obsessed culture. We fear being unimportant, shunted to the side. In older age we need not see ourselves without purpose. Increasingly, people are finding themselves anointed with a particular task. Look at our own elders for fine examples. Some are guides that help people enjoy the beauty of Anu Nuevo the Henry Cowell Redwood Forests. Others volunteer in schools to give kids who need special attention a better chance in life. Parents often fear purposelessness when their children grow up. Some in our congregation now volunteer in the religious school. At any age, God can anoint us with new missions as God's partners in making a better world.

"My cup is overflowing." A closer translation might be, "My cup is satisfaction." Sometimes strangely enough, we are afraid to be happy. Maybe we fear we'll be vulnerable and as sometime in the past, our happiness will be taken away. God whispers, "I want you should be happy." God helps us to realize our deepest satisfactions are in our relationships, in our character, and in our enjoying life's everyday simple blessings like sight, taste and smell, a hug or kiss, reading or listening to music, or a nice meal. Enjoying these on a regular basis our cup of satisfaction overflows.

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of Adonai forever." Here I think of the story of Dr. Gisella Perl. As a young physician she became one of five doctors in Auschwitz. The only medicine she had was usually holding the hand of the suffering. After she was liberated she traveled to France where she tried to kill herself. She was rescued by nuns from a French convent. When she recovered she came to the New York, where she met Eleanor Roosevelt. Roosevelt heard her story and said, "Why don't you practice medicine again and help people?" She did. Then when she retired, she moved to Israel where she volunteered in the delivery ward of Shaare Tzeddek Hospital in Jerusalem. There she delivered more than a thousand babies. At times God was

working through her, shepherding the dying in Auschwitz through their fear, with goodness and mercy, following in the wake of her life. At other times, goodness and mercy were (pursuing) following after, her by the most unexpected means, nuns from a French convent and the wife of the President of the United States. When we fear we are alone, there is always mercy and goodness around us, pursuing us if we are open to God's messengers.

And I shall dwell in the House of the Lord forever." A rescue worker in New Orleans came upon a boy sitting on the porch of his house that was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. She said to him, "I guess you don't have a home anymore." He replied, "Oh yes, I still have a home. I just don't have a house to put it in." The Rabbi's say the righteous are not in heaven, heaven is in the righteous. God can't take away death. But God can take away the fear of death. When we fear death, we can know our soul is always in God's house, whether it be in God's earthly house or God's eternal home, our souls suffused forever with the goodness we accomplish on earth. Knowing we are always with the God of the 23rd Psalm, we can Live Courageously in a Fearful World.

Between now and Yom Kippur it is customary to spend some time each day, focusing on the spiritual aspects of our lives. Go to the Temple website and print out this sermon and a copy of the 23rd Psalm. Read it and think about it. Put a copy of the 23rd Psalm on your refrigerator or bed stand. Think about what you fear and meditate upon the 23rd Psalm for a little while each day. I think it may speak to you, help you find courage to face your fears, and give you strength to cope with whatever difficulties you may be facing in the New Year. May the deep modern meaning of this beloved ancient Psalm enter your hearts and minds this High Holiday seasons, and help you to live more courageously in a fearful world. Amen.

See Psalm 23 on the next page:

See also Rabbi Harold Kushner's eighth book, [The Lord Is My Shepherd: The Healing Wisdom of the Twenty-third Psalm.](#)

Psalm 23

A Song of David. *Adonai*, You are my shepherd, I shall not want. You make me lie down in green pastures, You lead me beside still waters. You restore my soul. You lead me in the right paths for the sake of Your name. Even when I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for You are with me; with rod and staff You comfort me. You have set a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of *Adonai* for ever.