

"Don't let the Fear keep you from the Joy"
 Erev Rosh Hashana 5778
 Rabbi Rachel L. Joseph
 Congregation Beth Israel, Portland, Oregon

SING: *Kol haOlam kulo gesher tzar me'od*

This has been a scary year. As I stood on the bimah at this time last year and looked out at all of you, I imagined the endless possibilities that lie ahead for 5777. This is the year our country will come together and do right by its name; this is the year I will turn forty and everything will make sense in my life; this is the year of hope as I stand here and deliver a sermon about the most powerful Jewish imperative. This year is going to be amazing. Yet, from the fallout of the long-awaited presidential election to several terrorist attacks, from North Korea's nuclear threat, to our state engulfed in flames -- our beloved Columbia River Gorge on fire -- this year was rocked by seismic events both natural and human-made, some truly terrifying events. Time and time again, confronted with the reality of a broken world, I became paralyzed with fear. The proverbial rug pulled out from underneath my feet. Have you felt that, too?

Fear is real. It can be paralyzing. It can keep us from our goals. It can keep us from the people who care about us the most. It can even change who we are. Before I go any deeper, I want to mention that severe anxiety is more than fear. That people who suffer with severe anxiety suffer a real and debilitating medical condition. And for those who are listening to this sermon today who struggle with severe anxiety, I want you to know I am here for you; our community is here for you. None of us choose fear. But for most of us we can begin to control how we react to the fear.

I've had that experience. Perhaps you have, too. When I was a teenager, I came out as a lesbian to my family. The fear leading up to that moment was terrifying, despite the fact that I had progressive parents who were supportive of the LGBTQ community. It's different when it's your child, your family. I worried about their reaction: would they still love me, would they be disappointed in me, how would my life change? I let the fear paralyze me for too long until the day I chose joy, the moment when I decided that joy is bigger than fear. It has to be. Once I found the courage to tell them, their reaction was one of love and acceptance. The thing I had been so scared to do for years was over and it went better than I could have hoped for. I didn't let the fear keep me from the joy.

Traditionally, the *Yamim ha'Noraim* are presented to us as a fearful thing, as an awesome thing. We call these holidays "The Days of Awe" and they are meant to feel awesome. That visceral reaction to something that causes us to question our own false sense of security.

There are two words for fear or awe in Hebrew. The first is *Yirah*. It is that moment of awareness that evokes a kind of spiritual vertigo, a realization that terra firma maybe isn't as firm as we think. *Yirah* is more than the autonomic fear that all animals experience when facing

an immediate threat. *Yirah* is what Heschel called "Radical Amazement." It is what we come here to discover on these *Yamim Noraim*: these Days of Awe. Indeed, perhaps more than discovering *yirah* here, it occurs to me that we should be bringing *Yirah*, awe, with us as we enter the sanctuary in order to renew our relationship with ourselves, with our *neshamah*, our soul, and thereby reacquaint ourselves with God. Thus we make these holy days High.

Alas it is less awe that we carry with us as we enter Rosh Hashana this year. In its place we bear simple fear. Not *yirah* but the second word for fear in Hebrew: *pachad*. We may often render the two words alike, we may often translate them into English with the same meaning, but the two are very different. *Yirah* is the beginning of all goodness. It is the root of awareness that we are smaller than we think, that the Universe is an inexhaustible source of wonder, that the other, even my enemy, is – like me – created in the image of God. *Yirah* is hope. *Pachad*, by contrast, is the mother of all evil. It is uncomplicated animalistic fear. It causes us to fight back. To close ourselves off. To objectify the other. It is the root of hatred. And we all saw it in full bloom this year when neo-Nazis and white supremacists marched through the streets of Charlottesville. When they marched through the streets of Portland and Vancouver. When a man spewing hate speech stabbed two people to death on the Max train. Make no mistake about it: These acts of evil, pure and unmitigated acts of evil, were driven by fear.

And that, of course, is precisely what those who perpetrate such evil seek. They seek to destroy our awe, our wonder, our hope for finding sacred commonality by overwhelming us with fear at its primal worst, they want to cause fear because they feel fear.

Every generation has its fear and today, more than at any time since September 11, 2001, we sense fear around us.

We fear for Israel—because of the threats it faces from without and because of the deep ruptures that tear at it from within.

We fear for our planet—because of floods and fires, earthquakes and hurricanes, climate change and disease.

We fear for our nation— because of a political culture more toxic than ever.

We fear for our city and state--because it's changing so rapidly and we wonder if it will remain livable.

And all these fears cause us to fear for ourselves. Will we find a job? Will we keep our job? Will we be able to go to the hospital and pay for medicine? Will we be able to afford the mortgage?

We live in fearful times. And I'll be honest, I think of many of you when I'm on the bimah and the losses we have all shared with each other. When I look around this space at our beautiful, sacred community, I see the faces of so many who have experienced loss and

heartbreak. In our community this year we lost loved ones: a parent, sibling, spouse, relative, friend, and God help us, even children. We lost jobs, unsure of what comes next, how to pay the bills and feed our families. We lost homes to fire, water, the bank. We lost health, physical as well as emotional. We lost faith in God, perhaps unclear on why we are even here this evening/today. We lost faith in humanity. We lost our marriages. We lost the potential for new life through miscarriage. We lost ourselves, unclear of our purpose and priorities. Most likely, 5777 brought the experience of loss to all of our lives in one way or another. And among the host of emotions that accompany loss, like disbelief, shock, anger, apathy, and regret, fear is the emotion society encourages us to push aside, fight through, and let go.

Yes, we have much to fear. We have good reasons to fear. It is totally appropriate for us to tremble and wail and moan.

But then what?

That, my friends, is the question: What then? What comes after the fear? What comes after the trembling? What comes after the wailing and the moaning and the crying?

The answer is right before us. The answer is the heart of today. The answer is in a text from our tradition from Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav.

[SING SECOND TIME]

Kol haOlam kulo gesher tzar me'od

(Our whole entire world is a narrow bridge)

V'ha'ikar, v'ha'ikar, lo l'fached klal

(And the whole point, and the whole point, is to not make yourself afraid)

I want to reflect with you on this song, and on the challenge of fear.

Kol haOlam kulo gesher tzar me'od: All the world is but a very narrow bridge...
 ...v'ha'ikar lo l'fached klal: and the key is to fear nothing. It is, to be sure, a powerful sentiment. To live without fear. The problem is, that's not what Rabbi Nachman said. As Rabbi Stephen Arnold has pointed out, "Who in their right mind would teach 'don't be afraid at all' in a world which is very scary? To teach 'don't be afraid at all' to [someone] who is already scared, is like teaching "You mustn't cry" to [someone] who's in great pain." In fact, Gesher Tzar Me'od, "the narrow bridge" we've been singing for years is close to Nachman's teaching, but the original text is subtly and ultimately, I think, profoundly different.

Here is the original (Likutei Moharan II: 48): A person must pass over a very, very narrow bridge. And the fundamental principal... Is to not make oneself afraid at all (lo **yitpacheid** klal). On the surface, it doesn't sound all that different. The sentiment to the casual listener certainly appears to be the same. Life is a balancing act. Don't let fear overwhelm you. But Hebraically there is a substantial difference between saying **l'fached** and **yitpacheid**. They are both rooted from the same letters. Fear. The difference, however, is that the first means to be afraid. But

the second – which is what Nachman actually taught – is the “reflexive” state of the verb. It is an action that one does to oneself. In other words: Self-inflicted. Meaning: don't freak yourself out. And for me, that makes all the difference in the world. Of course we cannot avoid fear. We need fear. It keeps us from harm. It is a survival instinct. A gift from God. Nevertheless, when crossing that bridge, when navigating Mitzrayim, the narrow straits that invariably cross our paths, the last thing we want to do is be the "source" of our own fear. Don't freak yourself out.

And if this is true externally, for the things that threaten our world, how much the more so for the microcosms of our individual lives? Is there any one of us who does not bear some measure of pain or fear as we enter the New Year? Be it our health or our relationships, our – what so often seems to be – elusive search for contentment and meaning in our personal and professional lives, our concern for the state of our world and the real threat of anti-Semitism -- do we not each *schlepp*, large or small, suitcases of *tzuris* as just a part of the normal course of living? We don't need CNN or the New York Times or even social media to bring fear into our lives. It is par for the course of living. Yet can we distinguish the *pachad* that genuinely threatens from without from that which we manufacture all by ourselves? With all the darkness that seems to overwhelm us, to give in to fear is certainly an act of surrender. But to make ourselves afraid is simply self-destructive. **In other words, the great lesson of all Jewish spiritual exercise is that we have the power.** We are not weak. We are not helpless. We are not alone. We don't need to turn to God for help. Rather we simply need to draw close to God. And that process of drawing close to God, or maybe even better of drawing out the holy within us, is what nurtures our ability to rise above ourselves, to realize our humanity, and to embrace our potential as sacred beings. **To come back to joy.**

[ENCOURAGE EVERYONE TO JOIN THIRD TIME]

Kol haOlam kulo gesher tzar me'od

(Our whole entire world is a narrow bridge)

V'ha'ikar, v'ha'ikar, lo l'fached klal

(And the whole point, and the whole point, is to not make yourself afraid)

Even when our world seems narrow and constricting – even then, aiming for joy isn't optional. Joy isn't an extra or a detour on the spiritual path: as Rabbi Nachman put it, joy is “the whole point.” But the joy he taught isn't a naïve glee, or mere fun, or escape from daily life: the joy is freedom, feeling the fullness of reality, even the stress and strain of daily life. It's being aware of these things and letting them propel you across the bridge towards joy. Joy can be a homing beacon that issues from our bleak and broken places.

But while seeking this kind of joy can be a challenge anytime, during these Days of Awe, it can seem totally far-fetched. After all, Rosh Hashanah enhances our sense that life is fragile, that what's most real may not be what we tend to see and seek most of the year. This time of year asks us to see habits and fears that distance us from our loved ones, from our highest selves, and even from God – then cross the bridge toward changing them. This crossing isn't always easy, and let's face it: we tend not to associate joy with things that are hard.

Rosh Hashanah asks us to *see* so that we can *seek*, to turn so we can grow, all so we can find joy. The chance of *teshuvah*, turning toward one another and our highest selves, invites deep joy – and our community, this “Home under the Dome,” aspires to be an especially joyful place. Too many Jews, however, have known Rosh Hashanah as such a serious time – long services, foreboding talk of sin and judgment, endless sermons (oops) – that for some, the joy has gone out of it.

So let’s be real about joy. And being real about joy means also being real about the opposite of joy, what keeps us from joy. In Rosh Hashanah’s call to *teshuvah* – coming back to ourselves – the opposite of joy isn’t sadness: it’s fear. We know this from experience. Joy opens us and brims with possibility. Joy uplifts and expands us. Joy feels like there’s nothing we can’t do, no hurdle or habit we can’t overcome. Fear is the opposite: fear propels us out of joyful moments. Fear makes us say: “oh yes, this is good now but wait till later...” Fear makes us believe that joy can’t possibly last. So because the opposite of joy is fear, Rabbi Nachman comes to teach us, “Our whole entire world is a narrow bridge, and the whole point is to not make yourself afraid.” **The whole point is to learn how to cross the bridge of life with joy.**

Even though our bridge may seem narrow, the point of our journey, the point of Nachman’s song, the point of Rosh Hashanah itself – is to cross the bridge anyway to not make yourself afraid.

Of course, learning this lesson isn’t a one-time thing. We need to re-learn it, year after year. Because fear, inertia and feeling like a stranger in our own skin can creep up on us every year. We make promises that we don’t keep. We forget what we remembered this time last year. And we have good reason: life is busy, sometimes life is hard, truth and change can be scary, and we can lose our joy.

When I came out to my parents, they helped me turn my fear into joy. But life gets complicated. I met my former partner of 18 years while we were in college. We were two women who fell in love and began crossing that narrow bridge of life. The bridge is long and there are starts and stops along the way. When my partner discovered their true self and transitioned from female to male while I was in rabbinical school, it was a time of fear for me, but I wasn’t paralyzed. I felt it, acknowledged it, and we moved forward. A few years later, after moving to Portland, we realized we were walking on two separate bridges and to live our best lives -- to move towards joy -- we had to cross separately. Now, at 40, I stand here confidently, living the life I could only have imagined before. I have a new found freedom, a newfound fearlessness and a new found hope and joy in the world and in people. It’s not my natural place, but this Rosh Hashana I am not letting the fear keep me from the joy.

Yes, this has been a scary year and on this Rosh Hashanah, may each of us hear the call to cross our bridge from fear to joy. May we have the vision to see that what we distance ourselves from might be our innermost self. May we come to know that we are heard and loved exactly where we are. And may the *pachad* that accompanies us into this time be transcended by the *yirah* of these Days of Awe. As Rabbi Nachman warned, the only thing

blocking the way to your heart is the *pachad*, the fear you bring upon yourself. So may love open us to a joy that can make our *teshuvah* – our return – good and sweet, truly worthy of a *shana tovah u'mitukah*. May this year be good and sweet for us and all we love. And may we turn our fear to joy.

Shana Tovah!

[SING TOGETHER WITH CANTOR]

Kol haOlam kulo gesher tzar me'od

(Our whole entire world is a narrow bridge)

*V'ha'ikar, v'ha'ikar, lo **yitpachaid** klal*

(And the whole point, and the whole point, is to not make yourself afraid)