

Opening our minds and hearts

RH morning 2016

Rabbi Nancy Rita Myers

A man visits a therapist because he has a fear of monsters living under his bed. He has been seeing this doctor for months. Every time he comes in, the doctor asks “Have you made any progress?” The man says, “No.” He then decides to go and see another doctor. Weeks pass. The man comes back to his original doctor who asks, “Have you made any progress?” The man replies with a grin, “Yes, I am feeling all better now.” “What happened?” asks the doctor. With a shrug of his shoulders, the man responds, “I went to another doctor and he cured me in one session. I am no longer afraid of monsters under my bed.” The doctor asked, “What did he tell you?” The man said, “He just told me to cut the legs off of my bed.”¹

I’m sure many of us have memories of being scared as a child. I was so afraid of monsters that I decided my white blankee had magical properties. Just by clutching it, a force field shot out and shielded my body from the terrors of the night. When I traveled as a youngster, the top most cover became imbued with the same power. I slept peacefully knowing my magic protection was there. When I became a mother and my young children Gabriel and Shane were scared at night. I told them of the power of clutching a blanket. Shane once looked at me skeptically. “Look!” I proclaimed. “It clearly worked because here I am.”

As adults, we laugh over the anxiety we had as children. However, even though we are no longer worried about demons or monsters lurking under our bed, we have a great many other fears. There have been concerns raised about terrorists, Muslims, and immigrants. Are all these fears equal? Do you fear Islamic terrorists crossing our borders and committing mayhem? Is there reason to question the loyalty of Muslim Americans worshiping in their mosques? Should we be concerned about Mexican immigrants regardless of how long they have lived in America? Are you afraid? Some of these fears are legitimate, but others, I’d like to suggest, are as silly as the boogey man.

I believe that we do have real security concerns. ISIL, DAESH, or whatever you want to call them have led horrific terrorist attacks in France, Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Lebanon. They can recruit easily on the internet and inspire those who are vulnerable to messages of hatred and martyrdom. These are not phantom monsters under our bed. They are real threats and we are justifiably concerned.

There are many reasons to be fearful for our safety and the wellbeing of our family. But when, when does our fear become our enemy? When does our fear metastasize so that we shoot ourselves in the foot, overreact to threats, and saw the legs off our own beds?

My daughter Gabriel went to NYC to spend time with my younger brother Nathan. It was a great bonding trip between them. On August 15, Nathan dropped my daughter at JFK. Gabriel got on her plane and sat as it remained motionless on the tarmac for hours. An announcement was made that there was a security breach at the airport. Fortunately, my daughter didn't see or experience what was happening. Inside, feet away from her were hundreds of people stampeding toward the exits in panic. One woman claims she saw a gun. One thought he heard a gunshot. Men cowered under chairs and security teams stormed the terminal with raised guns.

Eye witness David Wallace Wells writes,

“Then the screaming began. I can't remember what happened first — the flashing light of a fire alarm, the yelled warnings of a bomb and a shooter, the people turning around in a mob panic. I thought I saw smoke. I know I saw bags dropped, people falling to the floor and others stomping past them, through them, on them. Everybody was screaming. ... There was not even time or space to process what was happening, really. People were shouting about terrorism right next to me, as they ran, but I wasn't thinking about a shooter; I was just thinking, *GO!*”²

Did any of you hear of this? I only know because it impacted my daughter. That night, the Olympics were on TV. Jamaican athlete Usain Bolt crossed the finished line heroically. Onlookers in the terminal erupted with cheers and loud applause. Someone thought it sounded like gun fire. Mayhem and chaos exploded at the airport. That night some people could've been stampeded to death, injured in their flight, or accidentally shot by well-meaning security.

As I was writing this sermon, a similar incident happened at LAX! On August 29, there was chaos and a stampede because someone once again mistakenly thought there was a shooting! An eye witness account states that “A girl of about 10 tripped and fell in the crowd, and adults swept along in the mob began to jump over her, sometimes kicking her in the back.”³ There were monsters at JFK and LAX those nights.

I want to talk about fear with you today. Because we are scared. We are scared of so many things but I want to tell you that while fear can be a helpful emotion, it can also be self-defeating, self-fulfilling, and create a worse situation. We have an excellent example out of the book of Exodus. We are told a new king rose up who did know of the good deeds of Joseph. He saw a different people living in the land of Goshen. Pharaoh spoke to his advisors and gave in to fear. He feared that these Israelites may join with the enemies of Egypt and rise up against him. These foreigners, he thought, were a threat to him. So Pharaoh made a decision to enslave them. He made our people slaves and when that wasn't enough to diminish us, he decreed to kill every baby boy. We all know the Passover story. But how many of us look at the moment of decision. The time when Pharaoh set things in motion. What would've happened if he allowed our people to live peacefully with opportunities to engage in the larger Egyptian society? What if he didn't make us into slaves? Yes, we might not be here but there may have been a pyramid dedicated to

the great leader Moses. Or perhaps another sphinx with Moses sprouting a long flowing beard carved out of stone. The reason I am sharing this Torah teaching with you is to show how easy it is to make enemies. How easy it is to portray someone as a threat even if they aren't.

We can easily make our fellow Americans our enemies. We can look suspiciously on every Muslim. Why don't they denounce every bombing undertaken by ISIL? Why don't Muslims call out against the terrorist attacks in Europe or even in San Bernadino? By not doing so, some say, they are demonstrating they are complicit in terror. Well, guess what? They do! They have! An article from the Independent news, points out that ISIS is responsible for more Muslim deaths than western victims. ISIS has killed more Muslims than anyone else, if you factor in the bombings in Iraq, Lebanon, and recently in Turkey. We don't often think of that. King Abdullah II of Jordan said that "Terrorism is the greatest threat to our region" and Muslims should battle against extremist groups.⁴ In the aftermath of the truck attack in Nice, France, Arab leaders and Muslim clerics spoke out against it. "Sunni Islams' leading centre of learning, al-Azhar, said, the "vile terrorist attack" contradicted Islam and called for "uniting efforts to defeat terrorism and rid the world of its evil."⁵

An article in US News and World report by Mary Kate Cary says, "You'd never know it from the media, but Muslim leaders have denounced terrorism committed in the name of Islam over and over again. Apparently covering terrorist attacks drives more ratings than reporting on press conferences afterwards." She then cites the launching of the Muslim Reform Movement in Dec 2015 that states unequivocally, "We reject interpretations of Islam that call for any violence, social injustice and politicized Islam."⁶

I know there is a fear of terrorists trying to come to the U.S. to wreak harm. This is why, it is argued, we shouldn't allow certain people from certain places into our country. I have a secret to tell you. We don't seem to have a shortage of homegrown terrorists here in the U.S. There are plenty of angry white men ready to take up arms. There are plenty of mentally unstable Americans ready to go out in a blaze of glory. Immigrants are not the enemy. Those trying to escape war, starvation, aren't any different than our grandparents, great grandparents, and great grandparents. We remember the quotas on Jews coming from Europe in the 1930's. How boat loads of Jews were denied refuge on our shores and sent back to certain death in the gas chambers. We know of what our ancestors went through to come to this country.

I know the argument is that we must screen them. We must be sure they pose no threat. Most of us though have no idea what it takes to legally immigrate to our country. I looked at the White House website and learned about the many different ways refugees are screened long before they even come to our shore. First of all, they are vetted through U.N. Refugee Agency

who assesses them, collects documents, performs iris scans, and interviews them. Only then do they go to the Resettlement Support Center that also collects their documents, creates a file, and checks their information against biographic security checks. Then they are screened by US agencies such as the National Counterterrorism Center/Intelligence Community, FBI, and Department of Homeland security. They look for indicators such as if the person is a security risk, has connections with ‘bad actors’, or any outstanding warrants/immigration or criminal violations. Then the Department of Homeland security conducts additional interviews, finger prints, and checks them from other data bases. Only then are medical evaluations, cultural orientation, and assignments made.⁷ This process can take eighteen to twenty four months. Sadly, long enough for terrible things to happen to hopeful applicants.⁸ I share this with you because most of us make a decision on the ‘idea’ of immigrants and the possibility of threat as opposed to an informed decision based on accurate risk assessment.

But this sermon isn’t about immigration or convincing you to open our borders. It is about the emotion of fear and how fear can destroy all that we value. Many times I hear the phrase, “Trust your gut.” “Trust your initial reaction.” Well, I would like to boldly suggest that sometimes we shouldn’t accept our initial emotional response. Our brains in moments of panic can take short cuts. We immediately make assumptions that are not necessarily true. This is the primitive part of our minds that can protect us from an attacking lion but doesn’t always serve us in the society we live in. We have the ability to reason, question, and explore. We must take an honest look at a strong emotional reaction and ask, “Is it really valid? What is the evidence for this?” I believe this is important.

We shouldn’t not allow ourselves to pre judge a person based on stereotypes or appearance. In Pirkei Avot, Chapters of our Fathers, Rabbi Yose said, “*Al tistakel bakankan, ela b’mah sheyesh bo*, Don’t look at the wine flask, but rather at what is in it. For there are new flasks filled with old wine, and there are old wine flasks that don’t have even new wine.”⁹ This saying before printing presses, in essence teaches, don’t judge a book by its cover. If we see a person wearing a head scarf, a person with dark skin, someone whose gender is uncertain, perhaps we should check our initial gut reaction. When we act solely on emotion without checking with facts, reason, or rationality, we can make wrong assumptions, grave errors, and cause harm. Fear doesn’t always serve our interests. Sometimes it can lead us astray like it did with Pharaoh, like it did at JFK and at LAX airports.

When we allow fear to rule us and determine our actions, we can easily undermine our values, our ideals, and the reason for living. We, as Jews, don’t value life at all costs. We can’t commit murder, for example. No, we are not to do anything and everything just to survive. There’s a

famous of story of Rabbi Akiva who lived under Roman tyranny. He continued to teach Torah even in the face of threats to his own life. Once a young man ran up to Rabbi Akiva and begged him not to teach Torah anymore. Akiva sat the man down and told him this. There was once a sly fox called Sheul who was quite hungry. Shuel roamed the forest and then came upon a stream. In the waters were many brightly colored fish. "Umm," Shuel licked his lips. Calling out to them, he said, "Oh fishes! You are in grave danger! There are fishermen down river with nets ready to catch you." The fishes began to swim in a panic. "Not to worry, fishes," Shuel said. "I can save you all. Come out, stay on my back and I'll take you to a stream without fishermen." One of the fishes called out, "You are indeed clever, Shuel, but foolish. The water is our life. If we leave, we will surely die. We will take our chances in the river." Akiva turned to his earnest student. "The Torah is our water, without it we will surely die, I will take my chances studying and teaching it." ¹⁰

During the HH, we speak of life and death and being inscribed in the book of Life. We all know that we will die someday. We hope it will be many years away but this is a certainty. What is not certain though is how we will live. Will we embrace the ideology of the founders of our country rooted in freedom, pursuit of happiness, and justice for all? Will we will live proudly embracing the democracy of our nation and living wholeheartedly as Jews? We must not allow fear to undermine our core values as Americans nor as Jews. We must refuse to take short cuts. We should not cut off the legs of our democracy nor curtail our Jewish values. Not in the name of security and certainly not in the name of fear.

We come from a long line of Jews going all the way back to Abraham and Sarah. Our heritage is what makes us who we are. We must use our God given abilities to think, reason, and react responsibility to the concerns that face us as we live true to ourselves. We must open our hearts and our minds to realistically assess the challenges facing us and our country and never forget why we are here, why we live, and what kind of legacy we want to leave behind. May we put the monsters of irrational fear back into the closet and sleep well blanketed by staying true to our ideals, knowing that we have made our country a better place for future generations.

Notes:

¹ https://www.reddit.com/r/Jokes/comments/48urza/the_monster_under_the_bed/

² http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2016/08/the-terrifying-jfk-airport-shooting-that-wasnt.html?mid=emailshare_di

³ LA times Aug, 30, 2016

⁴ Independent.co.uk/nev

⁵ middleeasteye.net/nev

⁶ usnews.com/news/the-report/articles/2015-12-18/yes-moderates-muslims

⁷ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/11/20/infographic-screening-process-refugee-entry-united-states>

⁸ (<http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/patrick-goodenough/under-new-us-syrian-refugee-surge-processing-time-reportedly-slashed>)

⁹ Pirkei Avot 4:20

¹⁰ Berachot 61 B