

Fear and courage in a time of violence and terrorism

RH morning 2019
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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, "So 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

There are many things that people are afraid of that are really just monsters under the bed. We can have irrational fears of flying, heights, the dark, spiders, letting our children play outside, or obsessive concern with germs. There is no limit to the things we can be afraid of. And then there are real fears. These can encompass everything from our children, finances, medical challenges, and more. With such worries, we have to garner all the knowledge and insights possible, work hard, prepare, and do what we can for the best possible outcome.

And then there are fears that are legitimate but the fear itself paralyzes and obstructs us from living fully. After so many shootings in schools, churches, synagogues, festivals, governmental and newspaper offices, manufacturing plant, music bar, parking lots, and stores, we can legitimately feel afraid. As Bob Blum commented to me before services in August after the three mass shootings in Gilroy, CA, Dayton, OH, and El Paso, TX, "It can happen anywhere." Concerns about gun violence and mass shootings aren't monsters under the bed.

Last year, I spoke specifically about what I believe our nation must do to lessen gun violence and to save lives. I continue to have more thoughts on this and absolutely believe that dire action is needed especially at the Federal level of our government. However, this year, this morning, I would like to leave policy and politics aside and talk to you about us, our values, and ways of living even in a time of fear. Now, I could quote Roosevelt, "The only thing we need to fear is fear itself." That's not exactly true but I am concerned that our fear can be a greater threat to our way of life as Americans and as Jews.

Let's explore reactions on an individual level. In a state of anxiety of the next shooting, one may think twice about going to a large gathering, event, or even going to his college campus. A shopping trip may be indefinitely postponed. One may avoid social events and instead choose to remain within one's home isolated. In such a state, a person can be overcome by trepidation and will avoid taking risks that are necessary for growth and doing what he/she must in order to live

a full life. How terrible would it be for one not to go to school, work, concerts, movies, or festivals?

On a synagogue level, there can be a desire to wall ourselves off to all outsiders and run deficits out of fear for security. With such action, Jewish institutions run the risk of depleting funding for programming, worship and staff and subvert their mission to serve the people. And when we wall ourselves off from new comers, we shut ourselves off from future growth and vitality. And in a time of declining religious affiliation, we can inadvertently threaten the viability of our synagogue and Jewish community.

Now there are pragmatic things to be done that can enhance security and we are absolutely doing them and they will continue to be reevaluated. However, when fear is the driving force, rational ideas and solutions aren't enacted. Knee jerk reactions can lead to extreme actions that don't necessarily increase one's safety and can have the opposite effect of terrorizing ourselves. Fear, when unhinged, can be harmful for us on the individual and communal level.

Dr. Michelle Gelfand, distinguished professor of psychology at the University of Maryland and Emmy Denison, wrote an editorial in the LA times about fear. They assert that most people wildly overestimate threats such as shark attacks or plane crashes even in the face of statistical safety. People generally make decisions with cognitive biases, i.e., systematic errors in thinking. Examples of such errors include confirmation bias where one seeks out evidence that confirms one's beliefs and ignores information that challenges them. Another one is sunk-cost fallacy where one continues to do something even though its unproductive simply because one is invested in it. And lastly, the availability heuristic where one overestimates the probability of events based on how easily they come to mind. They caution that threats that are exaggerated or biased can still produce a strong psychological response.²

Even though these scholars connect threat to the kind of political leaders we choose they are easily applied to how we respond to the threat of mass shootings. Despite the uptick, despite the wide media coverage, it is very unlikely that we or our loved ones will be caught up in a shooting. And even if we understand cognitive bias, our fears can still get the better of us. And so, I would like to offer some perspective from history. We aren't the only generation of Jews or Americans to live under threat. Our ancestors in many ways, lived a much more precarious life, than we do today.

Jews living in Roman times, less than two thousand years ago, lived in fear of just being Jewish. Rome's desire to crack down on all resistance led them, in the second century of the Common Era, to prohibit Jews from studying Torah, raising Jewish children, or practicing their traditions. The traditional Musar service for Yom Kippur, now folded into our afternoon worship, describes the martylogy of our great rabbis such as Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel, Rabbi Hanina ben Hakinai, and Rabbi Akiva to name a few. In the middle ages, Rabbi Ammon of

Mayence faced a torturous death for not being willing to immediately denounce his Jewish heritage. This is the basis of our Untaneh Tokef prayer. When the black plague swept through Europe in the 14th century, Jews were scapegoated by the false claim that they poisoned the wells. During the Crusader period, when bands of rag tag soldiers filled with zeal for liberating the Promised Land, happened to pass through Jewish villages in the Rhine, well, that was a terrible time for our people. Jews faced the blood libel in Europe where a false rumour was spread that Jews use Christian baby blood for matza. Cossacks ransacked our towns at the beginning of the 20th century in Ukraine. And we all know about the Holocaust.

Our people not only faced hostile enemies but had to deal with crushing poverty. My great grandmother Rachel described life in Poland as miserable. She remembered going to bed hungry many nights. Her father struggled to make a living. Once her mother was able to cobble together a few coins and after sunset procured some old, stale bread. Rachel was shaken from her slumber to choke down some bread with hot water mixed with milk so she would have some sustenance in her. She would scour the nearby forest for berries and her memories of being hungry lingered even into older age living in America. My mother related that if she was ever given roses as a gift, she scoffed, “You can’t eat flowers.”

Even as I recount our hardships, I want you to know that our history isn’t just one of persecution. We have had some incredible high points. In the Golden Age of Spain, we sat side by side with Christian and Muslim scholars to decipher ancient Greek and Roman literature and philosophy. Maimonides, a great medieval sage, was exalted by the rulers and is still remembered in Cordoba, Spain. We were welcomed whole heartedly into Poland and Russia as early as the 13th century and given protections and rights. During the Renaissance in Italy, Jews lived fully as Italians with a taste for art and literature. Some Jews translated mystical works into Latin for their patrons and Italy became a center for Hebrew printing, composing music, and theater.³ Often in Europe because we were Jews, that is, we weren’t Christian or Muslim, we were more likely to be trusted and recognized as a source for building up provinces.

And by the way, we have it good right now living in the United States. We can go to any university we are qualified to get into, we can work any profession, and marry anyone we want. Our children mix easily with others regardless of their religious, ethnic, or racial backgrounds. We are freer than we have ever been. And in spite of our concerns of gun violence, we live with a lot of security and safety that our ancestors would’ve envied.

There is no doubt that even in good times, our ancestors had it much, much worse than we do today. And in spite of it all, they lived despite hunger or fears for their safety. Rachel describes the joy of the klezmer musicians coming to their town and dancing to joyful music. People still laughed, joked, danced, and did the best they could even in very precarious situations. They had a will to live even when afraid and under threat. Jews have adapted over the millennia to this.

How did our people deal with their fear? It's because we held on to our values. In the second century of the Common Era, Rabbi Akiva was secretly teaching students in a cave. A boy came running breathlessly to him and exclaimed, "Rabbi, you must stop! The Romans will kill you." Akiva shook his head and told the boy, "There once was a sly but hungry fox and he happened to arrive at a stream. Oh there were so many colorful fishes in the water. Licking his lips, he called out, "Oh fishies! Fishies, there is danger downstream. Fisherman are waiting with nets to catch you." The fishes begin to panic and swim in circles. The fox continues, "However, I can save you. Just jump on my back and I will take you to another stream close by." One of the fishes points his mouth out of the water and replies, "Oh you are clever, dear fox, but you will certainly eat us. The water is our life. We will remain here and take our chances with the fisherman.

Akiva turns to the boy, "The Torah is our water. It gives us life. I will take my chances with the Romans."

So what is our water? What gives us life? It is our values. Our Jewish values are study, learning, celebrating, remembering, praying, giving tzedakah, being active in community, and doing what we can to better our communities and world. The waters of Judaism nourish us and make our lives meaningful. But we also have American values as well. We believe in individual rights, protection for the minority, hard work, opportunities for all, and the ability to pursue life, liberty, and justice for all. Integral to the American ideal is for all to be able to get an education, work, and live freely in our nation. If we hole ourselves up in our homes, barricade ourselves from opportunity and experiences, we have enslaved ourselves. We have helped the terrorists, whether they are domestic or otherwise, to succeed.

When we are afraid, we can easily lose sight of who we are. There's an interesting story from Darkhe Hayyim, about a king and his son. One day the son wanders beyond the palace. As long as he was near his home, he knew he was the king's son. But days passed and he got further and further from his father's realm. No one knew him. He sold his clothing for food and started to work as a shepherd. Tending the flocks, he was able to take care of himself over the years and forgot the life he used to live. Like other shepherds, he tried to make a straw roof over his hut to keep out the rain but he found that he couldn't afford one. The king happened to pass through that province. It was customary for people to write petitions to the king in hopes that he would grant them. The king looked down at a note and recognized his son's writing and felt sadness that his son forgot who he was and where he came from."⁴

This parable for me teaches that we can forget what is most important to us. When fear dominates us, we cease to be ourselves. We cease to be the best that we can. We stop living. And so perhaps we need to work harder to remind ourselves of where we have come from and

what we wish for our future. Where have we gone astray? Have we lost our sense of adventure? How can we recover our sense of joy, wonder, and exploration?

We need to hold on to hope now more than ever. We need hope, first of all, that we can make changes in our laws and society that places a higher priority on life. We need strength to act and to hope that change for the good is possible. We must continue to live freely in our country, use the ballot box, work towards the changes we believe are necessary and not give up on life. We must remember our hopes and dreams for ourselves and children and work towards them.

During Yom Kippur morning, we read that we have a choice between blessing and curse, life and death. We can make a choice each and every day to align ourselves with our values, our mission, and vow to live each day to its capacity. Life is a gift. As we get older, we come to recognize it more and more. But it is not the length of our years on earth, it is what we do with them, day by day, week by week, and month by month. Even facing uncertainty, we can still choose life, live in a way of no regrets, live in a way that connects us with others and the world around, and live in a way where we can have a positive impact on our community. We have to remember who we are, what are dreams are, and do everything to live up to the highest version of ourselves.

There are monsters out in the world to be sure. Terrorism is for real. But let's not do their dirty work for them. Let's not let them terrorize us from living, working, learning, and loving. Maybe with enough effort, we can change laws and society for the better. Maybe with a positive attitude we can overcome fear. And one day no longer be afraid of what lurks beneath us.

Notes:

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

² La Times, Sept. 16, 2019

³ Jewish people, Jewish thought by Robert Selzer page 497

⁴ Days of Awe by Agnon page. 24