

Dealing with fear and uncertainty

Yom Kippur morning 2025

Rabbi Nancy Rita Myers

A father passing by his son's bedroom was astonished to see that the bed was nicely made and everything was picked up. Then, he saw an envelope, propped up on the pillow. It was addressed, 'Dad'. With the worst premonition, he opened the envelope and read the letter, with trembling hands.

Dear Dad,

It is with great regret and sorrow that I'm writing you. I had to elope with my new girlfriend because I wanted to avoid a scene with Mom and you. I've been finding real passion with Stacy. She is so nice, but I knew you would not approve because she is so much older than I am. But it's not only the passion, Dad. She's pregnant. Stacy said that we will be very happy. She owns a trailer in the woods and has a stack of firewood for the whole winter. We share a dream of having many more children. Stacy has opened my eyes to the fact that marijuana doesn't really hurt anyone. We'll be growing it for ourselves and trading it with the other people in the commune for all the cocaine and ecstasy we want. Don't worry Dad, I'm 15, and I know how to care for myself. Someday, I'm sure we'll be back to visit so you can get to know your many grandchildren. Love, your son, Joshua.

P.S. Dad, none of the above is true. I'm over at Jason's house. I just wanted to remind you that there are worse things in life than the school report card that's on the kitchen table. Call when it is safe for me to come home!¹

Oh, anyone who is still in the children rearing phase of life can relate to this. We have so many fears if our children will be healthy, well adjusted, get into a good college, find work, and be decent human beings. Worrying about our children is as timeless as parenting itself. However, our worries and concerns are not just limited to our offspring. We are scared about our own well-being. We are worried about the safety of our family and loved ones. Some of us are scared to come to public venues. Others wonder if it is even safe to come to synagogue or other Jewish events. There is an enormous amount of fear and anxiety. How many of you are worried that you or someone you care about could face some Antisemitism? Our concerns today are more than they have been in decades. And, in many ways, they are valid.

In October 2018, the shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, alarmed the Jewish community greatly. This event led to increased security measures at synagogues and Jewish institutions around the country. This past spring, in Washington D.C., a young couple, Yaron Lischinsky, a Christian German-Israeli, and Sarah Milgrim, an American Jew, were murdered outside of the Capital Jewish museum. The gun man yelled, "Free, free Palestine," as he was

taken into custody. What makes this even more tragic is that the victims were both devoted to diplomacy and the peace process in Israel.² Then in Denver, Colorado, at a rally for the hostages, a man, who said that he wanted to kill all Zionists, threw two incendiary devices into the crowd. Eight people were injured including an 88 year old Holocaust survivor.³

As a result of these incidents, our people are understandably scared. Some are tucking in their star of david necklaces or not wearing them at all. People are rethinking whether to wear a kippah out in public or not. Some wonder if they should even admit to being Jewish for fear of being blamed for the war in Gaza or targeted by right wingers who believe America is only for white Christians.

I know and see the concern. This is why our synagogue has implemented so many security procedures starting with our gated parking lot, metal fencing around our perimeter, ballistic front doors, a policy on never leaving a door opened without a watchful eye, thirty two cameras actively surveilling our property, and panic buttons to alert authorities. We have a very close relationship with the Westminster P.D. and the chief of police, Darin Lenyi, has Jewish ancestry. He was very excited two years ago to have some challah at our Friday night oneg. Often I feel that we are safer here than anywhere else in public that we may go. Really, safer than the mall, a hair salon, church, movie theater, parade, school, and work place. Sadly, we know that shootings have taken place in all of these locales.

As you can see from so many other places where violence has taken place, that we as Jews are not the only ones who can be targeted. We are not the only ones who are afraid. I think you are aware that anyone with dark skin is more likely to be sought after by police. Our own Robin Harrison has harrowing stories about this. Those who are Muslim are scared. Anyone who wears a turban is fearful that they could be attacked. How about those who are gay? They are terrified that their families can be torn apart. Transgender are scared that they will face active discrimination or even be attacked. Asians have been targeted so many times that my cousin Wendy started a "Stand with Asians" group in the wake of an attack on a nail salon in Atlanta in 2018.⁴ Politicians, judges, and political figures are fearful for their safety and that of their families. We have seen, in just the last few months, the killing of Charlie Kirk, Minnesota representative Melissa Hortman and her husband, and the fire-bombing of the home of governor of Pennsylvania Joshua Shapiro.

Oh, how about immigrants? I'm not just talking about those who are here without papers. Those who are law abiding and here legally are currently terrified that a simple parking ticket or temporary lapse in work could lead to their legal status being revoked. I have heard that many good people who follow the law, are terrified that ICE agents could pick them up and without any due process be sent to a detention camp. Even more so, they are afraid that they could be moved around so much that their families and attorneys won't know how to reach them. And

then, lastly, that they could be deported to a third world country, once again, without any due process. This is a topic for another sermon.

What I am trying to get at, is that we as Jews, are not the only ones who are scared. Many people are concerned for the wellbeing of their family and friends. The policies of our current government is the cause of some of this but for most of the concerns, it is much more complicated.

We are living in a time of social upheaval. There have been many kinds of rapid change in our society that impact one's ability to make a living, get a degree and pay for it, and to socially connect with other human beings. Industry and the work place have been changing swiftly. We are already seeing the effects of Artificial Intelligence taking away jobs and there is uncertainty of what impact it will have on the future. People are questioning their own role in society and in their family systems. The American dream where the children will have a higher quality of life than their parents, seems diminished or at times, impossible.

And then there's the isolation and loneliness. During the Covid 19 pandemic, school and work place shut downs over two years, starved people of social contact leaving them psychologically stunted. And most detrimental are the ubiquitous devices and social media sites where so many people don't even leave their bedrooms and rarely meet others in person. I believe Utah Governor Spencer Cox was correct when he called social media a "cancer" in the wake of the murder of Charlie Kirk. We are learning more and more that on select websites and gaming venues that the lonely can become radicalized and be inspired by Antisemitism, racism, misogyny, hatred towards immigrants and to those who hold different political viewpoints.

And so, in this complex stew of rapid change, dislocation, isolation, whipped up into a frenzy on social media; fear, anger, and frustration have mushroomed. And in response, unstable or unhappy people choose scape goats, i.e., someone to blame. This is as ancient as human history. And we know better than most what it's like to be targeted. We know what it is like to live in times of change and disorientation.

There have been many times of tumult in the last or so hundred years. Just think of the turn of the twentieth century with all the quotas limiting Jewish immigration to the US. World War I brought women into the work force and changed our society forever. World War II ended the depression and the horrors of the Holocaust will never leave us. Our American society went through massive change in the 1960's and 1970's spurred on by the Women's movement, Civil rights movement, and Vietnam War. We could go further into American history on wars and internal struggles and how it has pitted people against one another but I want to focus on Jews.

Going back further into our history, Jews have endured pogroms in Eastern Europe, struggled to be recognized as citizens of the countries in the 1800's in Europe. We have experienced major transitions during the Renaissance in 16th century in Italy, the Golden age of Spain, and

then suffered during the terrible crusader period. We have both thrived and been tortured and killed under the Roman and Greek Empire. We were sent into exile by the Babylonians in the 6th century BCE. We lost the 10 tribes of Israel in the 8th century BCE to the Assyrians. And, well, you know about our time in Egypt, as that is the Passover story.

And so, how have Jews managed or coped during times of upheaval and even persecution? We have consistently refused to let go of our values. Our Torah portion this morning entitled, *Nitzavim*, reminds us that we have a choice between blessing and curse and life and death. The Torah reminds us to remember God, follow the mitzvot, and then we will have a life of blessing. Jews, throughout our history, have clung to our Torah, our traditions, and our rites and rituals. Why is that? It is because it gives our lives meaning. We are rooted in ancient teachings that still speak to us. We are connected to each other and our people throughout the world. And we have known that a life without our values, our identity, isn't much of a life at all.

Emil Fackenheim, a 20th century philosopher and Holocaust survivor, wrote a book, To Mend the World. I was honored to take a class with him at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem when I was 22 years old. He was hunched over and soft spoken. He spoke about the 613 commandments but in the wake of the Holocaust, Fackenheim audaciously proposed an additional commandment. He said that Jews are forbidden to hand Hitler posthumous victories. This is the 614th commandment. Fackenheim states that we are commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish. We are commanded to remember the victims of Auschwitz, lest their memory perish. Finally, we are forbidden to despair of the God of Israel, lest Judaism perishes. Fackenheim beckons us despite great evil in the world to continue to be Jews. To do anything less is to give the haters, Antisemites, and terrorists victory.

And so Fackenheim advocates, even or especially, in times of darkness to not give our enemies premature victories. His 614th commandment suggests that we are not to cower, retreat, or be self-defeating. I am not advocating, by the way, rash behavior nor am I endorsing a lack of reasonable precautions. I am, though, reminding us to focus on why we live. What is the purpose of our lives? What is it that we do that gives it meaning?

On a personal level, I have always believed that we must think not on the many ways our lives can be shortened but rather on how to live fully and deeply. This philosophy led me during the dark days of Covid to differ from my colleagues as they completely shut down their synagogues and retreated to zoom services out of their living rooms. I believe our spirit, our mental, and psychological health have to be considered alongside physical safety. And so, I supported everyone here to have choices to honor what you believed to be in the best interests of your health and well-being. We are complicated. Some days, we may be more cautious than on other ones. Sometimes we may have good reasons and other times not, but that is okay. Regardless, in the midst of uncertainty, I want to remind you that the quality of our lives is important. How

we live each day is significant. And, while there is a lot going on around us and there are potential threats, our lives can still have meaning and there can be joy and beauty in our days.

One of my favorite philosophers is William James, the father of Pragmatism, a philosophy of living with meaning. I loved his book, the Will to Believe, when I was in college. He argues for optimism in the face of doubt and uncertainty. He writes, “It is only by risking our persons from one hour to another that we live at all. And often enough our faith beforehand is an uncertified result is the only thing that makes the result come true. Suppose, for instance, that you are climbing a mountain, and have worked yourself into a position from which the only escape is by a terrible leap. Have faith that you can successfully make it, and your feet are nerved to its accomplishment. But mistrust yourself, and think of all the sweet things you have heard the scientists say of maybes, and you will hesitate so long that, at last, all unstrung and trembling, and launching yourself in a moment of despair, you roll in the abyss....Refuse to believe, and you shall indeed be right, for you shall irretrievably perish. But believe, and again you shall be right, for you shall save yourself.”⁵

And so, when one is wavering with insecurity, James advocates for a leap of faith. A leap that things will be okay. That we will live and flourish. We are to believe that life is worth living. If we cling to this faith, then the leap we take in our day to day lives, will more likely make it come true.

And so, we can take precautions but we should not allow ourselves to become paralyzed. We need to draw strength from our Torah and our people’s ancient wisdom because it has helped our people in far more difficult times. We need to follow Fackenheim’s 614th commandment to not give our enemies any victories over us. And we must take a leap of faith that life is not only meaningful but to know that we are not alone. There are many people who are caring, understanding, and good. Most of the individuals we interact with are just wanting a personal connection, just like us. They want to help others and our community. Most people are caring, conscientious, and strive to do good.

We are part of an incredible people living in a diverse nation. We can be strong. We can make a difference in our society through many ways. And we can, in the words of our Torah portion, choose life. We can choose to live with meaning, courage, and resilience. And we can take a William Jamesian leap that we will get through this tumultuous time.

Notes

- 1 Fearful father finds an envelope <https://upjoke.com/fear-jokes>
- 2 ² (<https://www.cnn.com/2025/05/22/us/lischinsky-milgrim-israel-embassy-shooting>)
- 3 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c74n3122pgpo>)
- 4 (<https://standwithasianamericans.com/about/>)
- 5 The Will to Believe by William James, page 59