

**Erev Rosh Hashanah 5771**  
**What Does Rosh Hashanah Teach Us About Fear**  
**Rabbi Dennis J Eisner**

*Shanah Tovak* and *Gut Yontif* - As my Poppy would have said. Oh if he could see me now? I am sure he would remark how things have changed!

I want all of you to know what a special moment it is in my life when I stand up here and greet all of you as we celebrate our New Year together. I am always filled with such joy as I see so many of you and, in all honesty, I am also filled with some butterflies in my stomach as I begin my sermon.

It may come as a surprise to some of you but even your rabbis get a little nervous when we are asked to share our innermost thoughts with our congregation. So I stand here tonight in awe of this moment a little fearful and a little nervous – not because I am speaking to a large crowd but because what we are doing here together – celebrating Rosh Hashanah is important and meaningful.

It's funny, I once had a homiletics professor tell our sermon writing class that when most people were asked about their comfort level with public speaking, they would report that they would rather develop some awful disease than be asked to speak in public. He then looked at this class of rabbinic students and quipped "What do think that says about you?"

I am sure you know by now that speaking in public is not something that I am fearful of. As a matter of fact I quite enjoy it. My mother jokes that I came out of the womb looking for an audience.

So what does scare me? What do I fear? What stops me in my tracks? You may find it somewhat amusing but I am serious when I tell you that there are three simple words in the English language that I fear the most.

You know what they are? I'll tell you – they are - "Some assembly required." I am not kidding you. I have an irrational fear of using tools and my hands to build or fix things.

Every time I enter a store like Ikea, Crate and Barrel or the Home Depot I begin to sweat. A sense of fear overwhelms me and I freeze. For the millions of shoppers who patronize stores like Ikea – they see the floor samples or pictures in their catalogues as affordable home décor. For me, I see a pile of wood, screws, a red screwdriver, a mini wrench and 20 pages of instruction written in Swedish. My wife often tells me I need to get over it - but fear - whether real or perceived is one of the most powerful emotions known to humankind. Fear is so powerful that it often is the motivating factor that literally moves us to action or many times, prevents us from doing something, experiencing something or trying something new and different.

I am reminded of a joke:

*Two Jewish guys are walking at night and they see two, big, burly guys walking toward them from the alley. "Hey," one Jew says to the other. "We better make a run for it. There are two of them, and we're alone!"*

Seriously, while the joke plays to a certain stereotype, it is steeped in real human behavior. We are often afraid of the unknown.

Imagine that you are enjoying a walk in a woodsy area of a state park on a beautiful summer's day; rays of sunlight streak through the leafy canopy casting shadows on the path below. You take deep breaths enjoying the pure air, while at the same time your ears are treated to the sounds of wild birds singing nature's melody. It is blissful and you are at peace until, out of the corner of your eye, you spot something in the underbrush next to your path. It looks to be large, brown and coiled. Your brain registers danger and fear begins to set in. Your heart races and blood pressure rises.

At this point the well-known physiological and psychological phenomenon known as "fight or flight" sets in and you choose to flee. There is only one problem – maybe it wasn't a snake? Maybe it was a fallen branch but you didn't stop to find out whether the danger was real or not. You beat a hasty retreat without even contemplating what you were doing.

Famed researcher Joseph LeDoux wrote in his book, *The Emotional Brain*:

There is a "quick and dirty processing pathway" that "allows us to begin to respond to potentially dangerous stimuli before we fully know what the stimulus is..."<sup>1</sup>

In other words it's human nature. Each of us translates the world in which we live through the prism of the personal courage we possess and our willingness to take on the risks of life. Often what is fearful to one is exhilarating to the next. As with our scene in the forest, the reality is that people view the same scene differently: One sees forbidding emptiness, desolation and fear of the unknown; the other sees beauty, majesty and hope in the challenges ahead.

Tomorrow morning we read from Torah –the Akedah - the biblical story of the "Binding of Isaac." This remarkable story is not only one of Abraham's uncompromising faith, but as I see it, it is also a story of his courageous journey into the unknown. It is part of the continuous story of Abraham's ability to overcome his fear of change in order that he becomes the patriarch of his family and his people.

The story teaches us that Abraham who is an old man could not sleep. He rose before dawn, prepared his meager meal and saddled his donkey. He then

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<sup>1</sup> Britten, Rhonda: *Fearless Living: Live Without Excuses and Love Without Regret*, Pg. 20, The Berkeley Publishing Group, 2001

awakened his beloved son and two trusted young servants and set out for the long journey. Mile after mile of unrelenting, bleak desert passed beneath their feet, their thirst growing unbearable; the sun beating hot and unremitting upon their heads.

Suddenly, the old man saw what appeared to be a great mountain far off in the distance, but he was not sure that his fading eyesight was correct. He turned to his two servants, and saw the fear of perishing in that forbidding wilderness a growing reality. "Do you see anything in the distance?" the old man asked. They squinted through the hazy afternoon sun. "No, we see nothing but this desolate expanse of desert that will surely kill us with its blazing heat." They share their fear with their master and plead to return. They beg that they not continue and move forward for they are afraid of what may lay ahead.

Now the old man turns to his son Isaac and says: "My son, do you see anything in the distance?" Isaac shielded his eyes. He looked far a field: "Yes, father, I do see something. I see a magnificent mountain peak and the glory of God hovering above it." The old man, our first patriarch, then directed his frightened servants to remain behind, while he and Isaac continued on their mission to prove their love of God.

What if Abraham and Isaac stood still? What if they turned around out of fear rather than moving ahead out of faith? What if Abraham or Isaac responded to God's command with the words "I don't know yet or I am afraid to decide" – rather than their historic reply of *hineni* – here I am – **I am ready!**

I recently read the following quote from Regina Brett a Pulitzer Prize winning author from the Cleveland Plain Dealer – which is Ohio's largest newspaper. She wrote:

My life used to be like games of freeze tag we played as kids. Once tagged you had to freeze in the position you were in. Whenever something happened, I'd freeze like a statue, too afraid of moving the wrong way, too afraid of making the wrong decision. The problem is, if you stand still too long, that's your decision.<sup>2</sup>

Like our Patriarchs our choices are complex, for should we take the chances involved in climbing the mountain there will be many layers of choices as soon as we set our foot upon our course. We may even choose wisely and well, but soon again, the path we have chosen throws rocks and mudslides before us - and other choices must be made; but now we're halfway up the mountain and if we turn back, we may fall. If we go forward, we still face the unknown terrors and dangers ahead.

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<sup>2</sup> Brett, Regina: *God Never Blinks: 50 Lessons for Life's Little Detours*, Pg. 10 Grand Central Publishing, Ney York 2010

Like the two servants in the story some of us may be apprehensive and fear that the road ahead is too high, that it is filled with slippery rocks from which we would surely fall.

As we know human nature has dictated that for so many of us fear of the unknown has the overpowering ability to dissipate hopes and dreams; to cut short future plans and derail ambitions.

So we learn from Abraham and Isaac.

We learn it is up to each of us to decide which mountain we shall climb, or if we will climb, at all. We are by nature after all curious, and so we go on, still apprehensive of the fate we would find along the path of our journey. So we move ahead in order that we don't become frozen like in a game of freeze tag.

I am reminded of one of my favorite movies ever, *Fiddler on the Roof*. At first glance, this masterpiece seems like a straight forward tale of Jewish persecution adapted from Sholom Alechem's depiction of Jewish life in Tsarist Russia. However, I would argue that this interpretation misses the point.

I believe the point of this story is "Tradition" and that "Tradition" changes. It is a narrative of the milkman Tevye and the *shtetle* Anatevka's fear of changing tradition. It is a poignant depiction of how an individual like Tevye, his family and his community begin to understand and accept that change was not only necessary but it was coming whether they were ready for it or not.

The story makes us contemplate what we would do in the same situation. Do we move ahead with faith into the unknown, the new and the different or do we freeze as we settle into the status quo?

Unlike so many of our great Yiddish folktales which perpetuate desired morals or spiritual behavior, this plot strikes a little deeper. The story of Tevya, his daughters and Anatevka forces us to face the reality that we not only fear change for ourselves personally but we also, and maybe more profoundly, fear change of "Tradition."

Our teacher, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote in his recent book, *Conquering Fear*:

Change is unsettling; we crave the familiar. Every priest or minister, rabbi or cantor knows that. We can preach the most radical sermon and people will listen politely. But let us change a favorite melody, let us rearrange the seats, we hear the discontent. We like to return to our favorite vacation spots and we are upset if we don't find them exactly as we remember them.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Kushner, Harold S.: *Conquering Fear: Living Boldly in an Uncertain World*, Pg 60, Alfred Knopf, New York 2009

[Old Jewish Joke]

*How many synagogue leaders does it take to change a light bulb?*

*Answer: You want to change that light bulb? My grandfather donated that light bulb?*

Altering tradition can be more than unpleasant or unsettling. It can be terrifying. It can carry the threat of serious loss, the danger that something we have cherished will be taken away from us.

The truth is like it was for Tevyah change and renewal usually means giving up the familiar for the unknown. The truth is change often makes us uncomfortable, but it is also true that change is inevitable. And, like Tevyah, when our traditions change in our congregation we become fearful, we get protective over things we don't want to lose or give up but we also begin to understand that renewal is part of our tradition.

Each Shabbat morning when I stand in front of our open ark, with our Torah scrolls majestically displayed I am confronted with some of the most important and climactic liturgy in our tradition.

Each Shabbat morning after we parade our Torah through our congregation – each of us bringing its sacred words to our lips with a touch and a kiss, after we read from its parchment and learn from its teachings we return our scrolls to our holy ark and in all of its grandeur we look upon the Eitz Chayim – the tree of life and raise our voices in prayerful song as we recite the words:

***Hadesh, hadesh yameinu – hadesh yameinu kekedem!***

**“Renew, renew our days of old”**

At this critical juncture of the service we belt out this Hebrew phrase, praying to God to return us to old times, when things were seemingly better, simpler, and happier yet these words were never meant to be taken literally.

We are taught to believe these words asking God to renew our days of old because we know we can't go back to some romanticized, happier time because we know that time doesn't really exist. Rather we are actually asking that we “Renew, renew our days as we anticipate our future.”

When Dr. Ron Wolfson was the director of the Whizin Center for the Jewish Future he commented that this phrase, *hadesh yameinu kekedem* - renew our days of old, is a call for renewal from within not from without – a renewal of self engagement, and ends with self-generated innovations that can deepen the synagogue – deepen our congregation as a sacred community.

And yet while we can intellectually understand that change is inevitable in life we still may ask the question – why should synagogues aspire to become self

renewing? Why shouldn't a venerable institution that has served the Jewish people well for over 2,000 years or in our case 60 years in the North Peninsula keep on doing what it always has?

Synagogues are not, after all, corporations, which are judged by the size of their profits. Nor are they like schools, which must meet governmental standards. Shouldn't congregations adhere to a timeless tradition? If so, why do they need to concern themselves with change?

The problem as Dr. Isa Aaron surmises is that these questions are misplaced because they assume that synagogues have not already undergone enormous change throughout their historical existence. In fact, synagogues have changed continually over their 2,000 year history, adapting themselves to fit the social and political milieu in which Jews have found themselves.<sup>4</sup>

This is of course is most clearly represented in our very own Reform movement. We are a **Reform** congregation not a **reformed** congregation. Remember reform is a verb and it inspires us and calls upon us to reform our Judaism in every generation. It inspires us to overcome our fear of change in order that we can remain relevant in our time.

Let's be honest do we really want to return to the Reform Judaism of the 1950's, 60's or 70's?"

Let me ask you, "When was the last time you read the Old Union Prayer Book?" Yes it may carry some significant nostalgia for many of us – but it is not egalitarian, it is not written in contemporary prose nor does it offer both Hebrew and transliteration. True, these changes to our liturgy were significant, but at the same time these changes have ensured that Reform Judaism continues to be germane in our modern lives. I believe without change like these we would be susceptible to becoming extinct like other faiths.

Or as the great basketball coach John Wooden once said: "Failure is not fatal, but failure to change might be."<sup>5</sup>

Before I conclude my sermon I want to make something very clear - We should never succumb to the notion that change is good for the sake of change. Yet at the same time we cannot surrender to fear that inhibits our ability to renew ourselves, to evolve and thrive.

Franklyn Delano Roosevelt said it the best in his first inaugural speech. He said:

I am certain that my fellow Americans expect that on my induction into the Presidency I will address them with a candor and a decision, which the present situations of our people impel. This is

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<sup>4</sup> Aaron, Isa Ph.D., *The Self Renewing Congregation: Organizational Strategies for Revitalizing Congregational Life*, Pg. 11, Jewish Lights Publishing 2002

<sup>5</sup> John Wooden

preeminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today. This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.

We the Jewish people – the members of this congregation owe a great debt to our Patriarchs and to the classic story of their dialogue with God in the Akedah. If Judaism were a religion in which only faith, and not doubt, if only status quo not change and renewal prevailed, we may not have retained the loyalty of our adherents for such a long time – for four millennia. We may not have survived!

On Rosh Hashanah we learn many things from our founding fathers. We learn about the need to question, the ability to risk and try a new way of life, to examine the environment and inquire instead of merely accept, to have the strength and courage to begin a new way of life, in a new land, to start a new people and plough uncharted territory.

We may not have achieved certainty, but at least we know that our fears can serve us well and lead us to a higher and stronger faith. If we keep studying, wrestling, and challenging, and not sit complacently and accept things the way they are or the way they always have been. That is not the way of the Jew.

So I say to you this Erev Rosh Hashanah – for ourselves, our community, and our world - the only thing we have to fear is stagnation, complacency and status quo. Let us not be afraid to climb that mountain together. seeking our God, through our faith in ourselves and our community. Let us possess the confidence that through our actions we will continue to evolve and advance.

Rosh Hashanah assures us, that as we recite the words, *hadesh yameinu kekedem!* - renew our days of old, we strengthen our ability to call upon our past helping us overcome our fear of the future – of the unknown.

Our ever evolving tradition is our greatest strength and helps us bring God's Kingdom to earth ensuring that the message of Rosh Hashanah rings clear: There is hope, there is a new chance, there are new beginnings, there is *teshuvah*, there is a way to begin again, to turn life around, and to change and there is the vision of our Patriarch's mountain to climb; which is our mountain, as well.

So, on this Rosh Hashanah of new possibilities, let us walk together to bring our light into the world; not only for ourselves, but also, for one another. Let us work together to overcome whatever in our nature is pessimistic, fearful and self-destructive. Let us resolve to cross the desolate expanse of our own desert in the coming year, until we reach the positive, the creative, the vibrant mountain of Abraham.

*Misheberach Avotenu V' Imoteinu.* God - May we always be proud to be descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – Sarah, Rebecca Rachel and Leah. May we be like our patriarchs and matriarchs always searching for newer and better ways to change ourselves and our world?

*Misheberach Avotenu V' Imoteinu.* God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – Sarah, Rebecca Rachel and Leah I pray that together with this great congregation filled with great individuals we can renew our world, renew our faith, renew our spirit and renew our lives.

*Shanah Tova U'Metukah*

May this be a good and sweet year!

*And we say Amen V Amen*