

Rabbi Kenneth Chasen

“Balance, Truth, Faith”

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The first time I ever set foot in the state of California was almost exactly forty years ago. Summer of 1970. I was about to enter kindergarten – but before that, our family’s first-ever visit to the Happiest Place on Earth. I had never seen anything like Disneyland, growing up on the north shore of Chicago. And we were determined to try it all, joyfully handing over our A, B, C, D and E tickets for each ride, ready for adventure after adventure.

Back then, the Pirates of the Caribbean rated an E ticket. It was not to be missed. So my parents shuttled my brother and me onto that magical boat ride through a pirate’s world. And then it began. My not-yet five-year-old eyes gazed upon flames shooting up on every horizon. The whole place appeared to be burning down. But before we would die in the inferno, I would have to fend off some rabid-looking animals staring me right in the eye. And then there were the menacing-looking men chasing terrified women in endless circles. And the dog who was about to give the jail key to the scary, salivating criminal locked behind bars... about five feet from my boat. And most memorably, there were the drunken pirates hanging on every ledge, moving their pistols up and down, up and down, firing at will, narrowly missing me, again and again and again, while the fires burned all around.

Happiest place on earth? I had been given an E ticket ride straight to hell. When the ride mercifully came to an end, I was sobbing uncontrollably, dependent upon the comfort of the very parents responsible for subjecting me to this torment in the first place.

For weeks, I was afraid. I somehow convinced myself that another gun-toting pirate could be lurking behind a tree on my walk to school, or hiding in my closet as I laid down to sleep.

It took a long time – and I never forgot – but eventually I got over it. At some point, I stopped bracing for pirates around every corner. The nightmares, at last, went away.

But there was fear, and there was trembling. And for what? What did all that being afraid accomplish? What did it teach me? Was there a point to it all?

These days, I think a lot about fear and about what it does to us. And I think about what our tradition teaches us about fear and how we should respond to it.

These days, after all, are called *yamim noraim* – literally, the “Days of Fear.” Rabbi Milton Steinberg explains why: “As we sit in the synagogue at the end of one year and the beginning of another,” he writes, “contemplating the past and facing the future, what strange and awful terrors beset us. From day to day, we have been content to live on, unquestioning and unreflecting; but on this day of all days, deep in our hearts lies a haunting challenge. Who knows what the year to come will bring? Who knows what strange and awful sorrow may befall us in the twelve months which lie ahead? Over us on this day hangs a dark... fear. For the future behind its inscrutable veil holds many things... We are all of us afraid, today. Afraid of life and the hard things it can do to us.”

We are all of us afraid – and not just on this day. Afraid of life and the hard things it can do to us.

Fear is powerful – powerful enough, in many cases, to save us. All animals – humans included – are hardwired to fear first, and only later to think. It’s not a state of mind. It’s a chemical response built into the circuitry of our brains. Dr. Joseph Ledoux, Director of New York University’s Center for the Neuroscience of Fear and Anxiety, writes: “Fear is a natural part of life. A snake on a path in the woods is threatening. So is an angry human. We respond with bodily upheaval. Fight or flight. Muscles tighten in response to a threat or in anticipation of one. We come into the world knowing how to be afraid. We learn what to be afraid of.”

So we need fear, just as any other animal does. Fear can keep us alive. But there is a key difference between the human impulse to fear and that same impulse in other animals. The distinction is found in the human being’s capacity for communication. As verbal beings, we convey danger signals in a manner unlike other animals. “But,” according to Dr. Ledoux, “it is difficult for humans to communicate fear accurately. The evolution of the human brain allows us to have ideas that don’t match reality that well. This mismatch is a source of human anxiety.”

This suggests, as Dr. Marc Siegel writes in his book, *False Alarm: The Truth About the Epidemic of Fear*, that “a zebra is wise to be afraid of a roaring lion, yet we are not so wise to fear a metaphorical lion that is a thousand miles away from us.” It is only because of the sophistication of our verbal skills – and our technological acumen for employing those skills – that we are able to trigger our fear response with stimuli that are not imminent. And once it’s triggered, there’s no turning back – the response is chemical and instant, and it overrides conscious thought.

So if you’ve been watching with horror in recent days, as a pastor in Gainesville, Florida threatened to burn the Koran to mark the ninth anniversary of 9/11... or as a broad cross-section of Americans have attempted to stand in the way of the construction of a progressive, peace-directed Islamic center near the site of Ground Zero – at least you might be able to understand

the chemistry that explains what all the fuss is about. These are not reactions based upon any rational assessment of some danger represented by a book or by a mosque. This is the primal reaction of fear. It's what kept people from boarding airplanes for months in late 2001 and early 2002 – even though planes were, of course, far more dangerous on September 10th than they were on September 12th and every day that followed. It's what made people like you and me look suspiciously, even contemptuously, at Mediterranean-looking people standing in the boarding area for our flights.

Did you hesitate in any of your travel plans back then? Forgo a trip that wasn't absolutely necessary? Maybe you didn't, but I can tell you that countless people did. I remember the numerous Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrations where the grandparents chose not to fly in from out of town – too dangerous, they reasoned. I was serving a synagogue in New York at the time, and I remember congregants who wasted their theater tickets or football tickets because they felt unsafe being in a large crowd. The Reform Movement's Biennial Convention was in Boston in November 2001, and a number of my temple members who had already paid to attend chose not to go, fearing that it wasn't safe.

We know now, of course, that nothing dangerous happened at that Biennial convention – or on any other planes, or at any Broadway shows or sporting events. Those Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrations are never coming back for those who chose to miss them. The danger, it turns out, was magnified dramatically beyond what it actually was – converted into self-defeating and hate-perpetuating action by a fear response that kicks in far more immediately and far more aggressively than our sense of reason.

And it's not just creating a crazy pastor in Florida and an irrational act of discrimination in lower Manhattan. It's what sustains the war effort in Afghanistan – now the longest war in all of American history.

It's what generates the instinct to attack Iran preemptively, as the news is filled with reports of Ahmadinejad's hatred of the West – and of Israel and Jews in particular.

It's what fuels the resistance to peace negotiations between Israeli and Palestinian leaders – the fear of what will happen if this process, like all those before, fails.

It's not that there is nothing to fear in the radical Muslim world. To be sure, there are very real dangers that would accompany a nuclear Iran. We would be foolish to ignore rational opportunities to reduce that threat. But there is a reason why terrorism works on us. It is defined as the effort “to create fear in a population disproportionate to the actual danger.” And terrorists know what we will do when plagued by disproportionate fear. We will inflict the harm upon ourselves. They need only light the match. We will build the fire. And we will throw ourselves in.

You see, fear is awfully hard on our bodies. Studies demonstrate consistently that fear constitutes the number one health problem in human beings. It leads to depression, alcoholism, eating disorders, drug addiction, heart disease, stroke. And a society that lives in fear is reliably violent, inflicting pain on others and on itself in a vain effort to acquire a sense of safety that remains endlessly elusive. So long as the stimulus to fear remains present, our brains go straight into crisis mode – and the ugliest part of ourselves goes on display.

Perhaps you caught the startling piece in the New York Times back in January 2008, which asked: “Which is more of a threat to your health: Al Qaeda or the Department of Homeland Security?” It seems that statisticians have determined that the average American is about as likely to die at the hands of terrorists as to die from eating peanuts, being struck by an asteroid, or drowning in a toilet. However, the article goes on to cite research that demonstrates a marked increased risk of heart ailments among those most fearful of falling victim to another 9/11. After controlling for other health-related factors like age and obesity and smoking, the study suggests that approximately ten million Americans are so acutely worried about terrorism that they are at least three times as likely as the rest of us to develop new heart illnesses. Now, we can’t hazard a guess as to how many of those ten million might actually end up dying from a heart attack or stroke that wouldn’t have occurred if they hadn’t been so afraid – but if the number is even 1/1000th of a percent, there will be three times as many people dying from fear of 9/11 than actually died on 9/11.

So our fears can save us. But they can also kill us. And sadly, we’re not the only ones made to suffer when we give in to our own fears. Just three years ago, Newsweek Magazine featured new scientific findings to support the conclusion that our “sense of emotional security shapes whether (we) become altruistic or selfish, tolerant or xenophobic, open or defensive.” It determines whether we’ll be charitable in our dealings with other people, whether we’ll extend a loving hand to those less fortunate than we are, whether we’ll give our time to help those in need. And yes, our state of emotional security will determine the extent of our hostility to ethnic groups other than our own – sort of like we’re seeing in that ugly display of prejudice down near Ground Zero. In short, the degree to which we figure out how to manage our fear will dictate the degree to which we become the people we want to believe ourselves to be in this new year 5771.

We humans have plenty to fear in this life. If only global terror was as frightful as it got for us. Some of us here tonight fear the very real dangers our children will confront in adolescence and beyond. Some of us are fearing the genetic time bomb that might be situated in our DNA, possibly causing cancer or dementia or stroke or some other horrible illness in ourselves or those we love. Some of us fear the bad luck of crossing the intersection at the wrong time, or turning onto the same street when a drunk is headed in the opposite direction. And in these times especially, so many of us fear financial insecurity – the loss of our job or our business reputation or our savings. And in many cases, these dangers are right there in front of our eyes. They’re real. They are the roaring lion, and we are the zebra.

If our brains cannot be controlled – if we’re going to be consumed first by fear, no matter how much we would prefer to avoid it – we are left with a choice. Will we be defined by our instinctual reaction? Or will we transcend it?

Said Mark Twain, “Courage is not the absence of fear but the mastery of fear.” On this day of self-reckoning, when our souls are laid bare and our truths are to be confronted without deception, might our Jewish tradition teach us how to master our fear?

Mastering our fear is about three *alephs*: It’s about *izun* – balance. It’s about *emet* – truth. And it’s about *emunah* – faith.

Balance. Today is the tenth of *Tishrei*, the last of the *aseret y’mei teshuvah* – the ten days of repentance. It’s the time of “*Unetaneh Tokef*” – reflecting about who shall live and who shall die, who by fire and who by water.

If ten days are *yamim noraim* – days of fear – then the other 355 days of the year are about something else. Less than 3% of our Jewish year is described as a time of fear. What’s the rest of the year supposed to be about?

The calendar provides a clue. Immediately following Yom Kippur, we Jews start to prepare for our next holiday, Sukkot. Sukkot is called *z’man simchateinu*, the time of our rejoicing.

From fear to joy. Our calendar impels us to make that move. It’s teaching us that a balanced life is filled much more with happiness, security, and contentment than it is with fear and trembling.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the founder of modern Orthodoxy, teaches that it’s no coincidence that Yom Kippur, our holiday of repentance, lasts only one day, while Sukkot – our time of rejoicing, of sharing food and drink with friends, of celebrating nature – lasts seven days. These *yamim noraim*, these days of fear and trembling, their very structure and layout teach us *izun*, teach us to live more balanced lives. Fear has its purpose. It has its value. But it shouldn’t take up more than about 3% of our time.

Perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised that sanctuaries all over the world are packed today – and will be busy... but not this busy... next week when Sukkot rolls around. Fear still sells better than joy. But we don’t want to be that way. And we shouldn’t be that way, says our tradition. Might we begin with this Sukkot – this coming week – to place our fear into proper balance?

Mastering fear is also about *emet* – truth. That is to say, while we must not allow our fears to consume us, it is equally important that we face our fears and see them for what they really are.

The Book of Proverbs teaches: “Acquire truth, don’t sell it off.” Hiding from our fears will only make matters worse. We must explore them honestly and with open eyes. Only then can we hope truly to master them.

Acclaimed author and rabbi, Harold Kushner, published his newest book just this past fall. Entitled *Conquering Fear: Living Boldly in an Uncertain World*, Kushner’s volume includes these sobering words: “I have read accounts of people who would tell friends that they were bank officers when they were in fact bank tellers because they found the truth embarrassing. I have heard of people who, when they lost their jobs, would continue to get dressed for work in the morning, leave the house, and spend the entire day reading newspapers at Starbucks because they were embarrassed to tell anyone that they had been fired. I have dealt with congregants who refused to go to a doctor to discuss their symptoms, telling themselves that there couldn’t be anything seriously wrong with them because they were good people and did not deserve it. I have counseled men and women who stubbornly refused to notice evidence that their mates were seeking affection outside of the marriage, closing their eyes to a problem at a time when it might still have been possible to solve it, because the truth was too painful for them to acknowledge. They lacked the courage to look at their lives honestly, but reality cannot be denied forever... Face your problems and deal with them rather than hide from them, and you will discover that you are stronger than you think.”

Indeed, sometimes when we face our fears honestly and openly, we discover that we are no longer afraid. We get back on the airplanes, and we realize that we should never have gotten off in the first place. Of course, an honest assessment of those things that make us tremble might sometimes lead us to conclude that what we fear is as bad as, or maybe even worse than, what we worry it is. This is always a possibility. But if we wish to be grounded in reality, if we wish to have any hope of avoiding paralysis by fear, we must have the courage to face even the gravest dangers in our lives through the lens of *emet* – truth. Only the truth can leave us feeling calmer, stronger, readier.

Lastly, mastering our fears is about *emunah* – it’s about faith. It’s about cultivating a persistent belief that no matter the challenge, no matter the obstacle, we will get through it. We will somehow have the strength to deal with it, even if it ultimately vanquishes us. Even if it ultimately kills us, we will have the strength to bear it all with dignity.

Mastering our fears is about the belief that we are not alone. If we open ourselves to community, we can be strengthened by that community. If we make our relationships with friends and family a priority, their love will show us the way on our journey, no matter where that journey takes us.

And mastering fear is also about faith in God – or if that name is hard for you to hear, it’s about the belief that there is meaning in this universe... that it’s not all just cosmic randomness and chaos. There is meaning even in our suffering, even in our pain, even in our fear. And we stand a chance of mastering that fear when we allow ourselves to sense that we are not alone.

The faithful and the unfaithful among us know the psalmist's refrain – it has become a warm blanket when we face the pain of bereavement: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.”

Even in the valley of the shadow, even in the darkest times, even when we are most alone, we are reminded that God is with us.

Do we know this? Can we be sure? The truth is that we don't know this, and we can't be sure, and that's why it's called *emunah* – that's why it's called faith.

Faith is the belief that, no matter what, God is somehow with us in our suffering, in our joy, in our sorrow, in our fear. Whatever you might imagine God to be... God is there. And perhaps precisely because I cannot know this empirically, my faith – when it's strong – helps me face the darkness with courage and strength, for I am not alone. My friends are with me. My community is with me. My family is with me. God is with me. And therefore, *lo ira ra* – I will not be afraid.

So many times, I have watched as those who have professed to be faithless have called upon faith when they have needed it most. It's easy not to believe when we have little reason to be afraid. But when we're scared – really, really scared – we are desperate to believe... that it all matters... and that we will not be alone.

If we do this well – this mastering of fear through balance, truth and faith – if we do this well, what would our world look like? What would our lives look like?

We would be less inclined to descend into hatred of those unknown to us, scary to us.

We would be less inclined to do damage to our own health and well-being by allowing our chemical “first response” to be our lasting response.

We would be more inclined to become the people we are praying to be on this Day of Atonement – especially when the inevitable moments of deep fear shake us in this new year.

We know those moments are coming. Sometimes, we can see them coming – when we await the doctor's report, when we see the bank balance bottoming out. And sometimes, we have no idea they're coming... and then we're even more crippled with fear. Many of you know about the tragic accident that took place on Sunset Boulevard this past February, when a Harvard-Westlake middle schooler ran to catch her school bus. Her mother and classmates were watching as she lost her life. She was only thirteen – a recent Bat Mitzvah at one of our neighboring synagogues, with close friends at so many schools and congregations, including ours.

Seven months have now passed, and my children sometimes ask me why I am squeezing the circulation out of their hands as we cross the street. And I don't have the heart to tell them it's because this zebra is still staring down the scariest lion I've ever confronted – the fear of losing them, made imminent by another family's brutal tragedy.

I know what a freak accident it was, how unlikely it is that something like that will happen to someone I love. But so, too, do I know that there are people sitting in this sanctuary tonight who have lived that nightmare of loss – the one I can hardly bear even to envision.

Just talking about this with all of you makes me shudder in fear. The uncontrollable chemical reaction makes it hard just to breathe. But I have to keep breathing. We all do. And so I'll keep searching, reaching for what comes after the paralyzing fear. A reasonable but not excessive respect for the risk. An appreciation for having today, each day, with those I love, and a resolve not to waste it. And a deep trust, rising from the well of my soul, that should I ever be forced to survive the worst I can imagine, somehow I can do it... for I will not be alone.

Today is our final day of fear in the year 5771. With balance, with truth, with faith... let us open our hearts when tomorrow comes to joy.

Written collaboratively with my study partner, Rabbi Josh Zweiback, Director of the Year-in-Israel Program of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.