

THE TWO SIDES OF FEAR

Erev Rosh Hashanah
5769

It was a Saturday night in the winter of 1972. Actually, it was a Sunday morning. About 3 a.m. I was driving home to Detroit from a Saturday night with my girlfriend at Michigan State University in East Lansing. My car was a 1968 Ford Galaxy 500. By today's standards, it was about as big as a small tank. The front seat was one big piece of vinyl, from door to door. No console. With that *old car* smell. I can't really describe it to you, but most of you know what I mean. It was the opposite of the *new car smell*. To this day it reminds me of my grandparents. In fact, that Ford Galaxy 500 was an old person's car. It was so big I could just see over the dashboard. But hey, it was a car. My dad had bought it from a guy he worked with for \$300. And it drove fine. Except for one thing—the speedometer cable was broken. So I would never really know how fast I was going. (At twenty-two years of age, this was not exactly a concern of mine.)

But that night I was very tired. I didn't want to come home. My body was telling me to stay in East Lansing. But my mind was reminding me that I had to teach religious school at 9:00 a.m. So I reluctantly got in my car, that 1968 Ford Galaxy 500, the one without an operating speedometer, and headed toward Detroit on I-96. It wasn't long into that drive however, that I fell asleep at the wheel. Maybe 3 or 4 seconds away from a concrete bridge abutment. At 70 miles an hour.

Now perhaps you're wondering how I could have known how fast I was going as my car was veering off the road toward that bridge? No speedometer cable, right? Not quite. As the car was veering off the road—the speedometer cable...caught. And as it caught it made a kind of ratchety sound. A loud, rapid, clicking sound. It woke me up. I saw the bridge. I quickly righted my course. Pulled back onto the highway. Averted a certain death. And I stayed awake for the rest of my journey.

That night I tasted *fear*.

The next morning, before classes were about to start, I recounted this mid-night encounter with death with my fellow teacher and long-time friend Lois Clamage. Lois was a free-spirit. A hippy. Today we would call her *spiritual*. She listened intently to my story. And then she said something to me that will stay with me for as long as I live. "Somebody wants you alive. It's just not your time yet."

I stood there stunned. Lois had opened for me that doorway. Like Jacob who awakes the morning after his dream of the ladder ascending into heaven and exclaims, "Surely God was in this place and I did not know it; this must be none other than the *gateway to heaven—mah nora ha-makom hazeh*—how *awesome* is this place!" Lois awakened in me the insight that *maybe*, just *maybe* there is another level of reality that normally eludes us? On that day, that grey and wintry Sunday some thirty-six years ago, I had been given just such a glimpse.

That morning I became acquainted with *awe*.

I owned that 1968 Ford Galaxy 500 for three more years. The speedometer cable never worked again.

There's a reason we call these High Holy Days *Yamim Noraim*. Days of Awe. Because to live our lives fully, to truly embrace the power of our lives, we need that spiritual fear—not the emotion you get when you watch Freddy and the hockey mask and the kitchen knife, but the humbling gift of awe—to truly appreciate the wonder and beauty and potential of this thing we call *life*. Unlike the fear an animal needs to keep itself safe from harm, *yirah* or “awe” is God's gift to human beings allowing us to have perspective, to place things in context.

The difference between *fear* and *awe* is subtle, but significant.

It's predictable when studying Torah that someone will say to me, “...but I'm really troubled by this ‘You shall *fear* the Lord your God’...I just don't see why it is that we should *fear* God.” (And they always say that when we're reading the passage about *fearing* your mother and your father, too.) And that's when I get to point out that Hebrew has two words for “fear”, *pachad* and *yirah*. The former, *pachad*, is what we normally think of as *fear*. But *yirah*, which is better translated as “awe”, means something else. It's more than a reaction, it's more than a physical or emotional response to a given situation. *Yirah* is an awareness, a spiritual and existential affirmation. It's not an autonomic response from our nervous system. It's an acknowledgement from our soul. It is the very essence of what makes us human.

And that is why the Torah readings on these days of *Rosh Hashanah*—the abandonment of Ishmael and the binding of Isaac—are so troubling. Not just because they violate everything we believe to be good and true, but because they challenge us to examine all that we hold to be good and true. They challenge us to examine ourselves in relation to God, the Determiner of all that is good and true. Søren Kierkegaard labels these tales as the “teleological suspension of the ethical.” They challenge us to keep in perspective that it is God who makes the rules. And if God wants to change the rules, then God can change the rules. To have *that* awareness, to assimilate *that* truth, necessitates more than reason and logic. It requires humility. And that breeds *awe*. *Yirah*.

Yirah, more than just the ability but the willingness to subdue one's ego in the presence of the holy, is what allows us to transcend our innate animalistic tendencies. *Yirah* is God's gift to us that enables us to actualize our potential to become, as Psalm 8 sees us, being created just “a little lower than the angels.” *Yirah* is the ultimate blessing of humanness.

Every time I talk about *yirah* or awe, I'm reminded about Mel Brook's movie *History of the World, Part I*. In the early part of the film, during the prehistoric period, there's the scene where man first discovers “awe”. It's when Murray died. All these cavemen dressed in furs and holding clubs are standing over Murray's body and, in unison, they all say: “Aw.” But in its humor is also something coincidentally and ironically profound, because there is nothing more at the core of *yirah* than our personal awareness of our own mortality. *Death* has a way of giving us perspective, especially when it first confronts us.

I remember years ago, when Aviva and I were driving home from Garden State Plaza one Sunday, and I noticed that she was crying. She was about five years old. “What's the matter?” I asked. And out of nowhere Aviva says, “Daddy, I don't want to die.” The day before I had showed her a video of my dad, after whom she is named. He died three months before she was born. It was clear. Aviva had just begun to comprehend the stakes of living. She was, for the first time in her life, confronting the inevitability of our terminal condition. And although she would not have recognized it as such, she was also getting her first lesson in the development of *yirah*. It's a lesson not so much in fear but rather humility. It all begins with wonder.

Yirah is good. Feelings of awe are central to our existence as human beings. *Yirah* is what gives life meaning. *Yirah* is what lays the foundation for acts of love and goodness. Because it is only with a reverence for life, with an abiding sense of humility that we are capable of acting in service of others. Our compassion for the suffering of others, our passion to pursue justice cannot be without a foundation that there is something greater than ourselves in this world. None of this happens unless we embrace the foundational truth of our heritage that all human beings are created in the image of God. And however you want to define what that means, at a minimum it affirms that all human beings are created equal. *Yirah* is the seed from which this truth grows.

But *yirah* has an evil twin.

Elie Wiesel once said that the opposite of love is not hate but indifference. It would be too easy to dismiss the evils we inflict upon each other as the product of hate. The holocaust, the genocides of Darfur and Bosnia and Armenia, are not simply the consequence of hate, but indifference. A turning away. An abandoning of our fellow human beings. An abdication of our personal humanity.

But I would go a step further than Wiesel. I would add—if love and caring and compassion, if acts of goodness and justice find their root in *yirah*, in the humbling awareness that we are all bound to each other, then—hatred and contempt are rooted in *yirah*'s evil but subtly twin brother: *pachad*. Fear. If awe is what has the power to unite us, then it is fear that tears us apart. Fear is what makes us run and hide. Fear is what drives us to strike out at others. Fear is at the core of our hatreds and prejudices. Homophobia. Racism. Xenophobia. Anti-Semitism. Fear of the *other*. While awe is the seed of our potential holiness, fear is the gatekeeper that unleashes the animal within us.

Now let me be clear: fear is not intrinsically bad. On the contrary, it is essential. We need it to survive. Fear is what protects us from harm. Fear is our instinct that keeps us from walking down dark alleys. Fear is what makes sure we don't do things that will come back to haunt us later. But fear can also lead us to do things we later regret.

I have a confession to make. I wasn't really upset when we took out Saddam Hussein. I wasn't in favor of a military option. I wasn't in favor of an invasion in 2003. But I wasn't violently opposed to it, either. Hussein was a bad guy. He was a *really* bad guy. The world is a better place without him in it. But is the world better off because we invaded Iraq? I don't think so. I was wrong.

In retrospect I realize that my *sympathies* were profoundly influenced by my fears. Because I remember what Saddam Hussein did to Israel in the Persian Gulf War. The *scuds*. Those non-directional missiles fired from mobile truck launchers. No one knew where they were going to land. No one knew if they would be armed with chemical or biological agents. My fears were well-founded. They weren't irrational. But the decisions with which those fears found favor led to regrettable—many would say catastrophic—consequences.

Of course hindsight is 20/20. Perhaps those of us who were fearful for Israel can be forgiven for our sympathetic support. But in fairness to those who opposed the war, there was no immediate threat to *this* country that could have warranted Iraq's invasion, certainly not as precipitously as we ultimately acted. We allowed our fears of terrorism, our fears of *rumored* weapons-of-mass-destruction to lead us into a political and moral quagmire that has resulted in

thousands of deaths and a diminishment of America's influence that will be felt for years to come.

And yet, even then we can be forgiven for such fears. We are, after all, human. As Sharon Begley wrote in Newsweek last year, "The evolutionary primacy of the brain's fear circuitry makes it more powerful than the brain's reasoning faculties... So although it is sometimes possible to think yourself out of fear ("I *know* that dark shape in the alley is just a trash can"), it takes great effort and persistence. Instead, fear tends to overrule reason..." But what then are we to say about those who exploit our fears for political and strategic ends? It's one thing to excuse us for giving in to our fears, but can we justify its use as a tool of manipulation? By politicians? By clergy? By parents and teachers and coaches?

Fear may be a natural, inherent part of our composition, but awe is implanted within our soul. Fear not merely draws its life-blood from our inner, animalistic survival instincts, it also is that within that makes us behave like animals. But it is *yirah*, it is awe that enables us to see that we are but dust and ashes, that all human beings are created equal, in the *image* of God. It is *yirah*, it is awe that brings us together, that emboldens us to realize our most lofty potential.

One of the most extraordinary stories I have ever been privileged to hear comes from my friend and colleague Rabbi Shifra Penzias. The story is about her aunt who was trapped on a bus in Nazi-occupied Europe. As would often be the case, two Gestapo boarded the bus to examine the papers of the passengers. There was nothing she could do. As the Gestapo slowly but methodically made their way toward the back of the bus where she was sitting, the man next to her noticed that she was behaving in an anxious manner. "What's the matter?" he asked. "I don't know what to do," she said. "I know they're going to arrest me. I'm a Jew." He said nothing. A couple of minutes later, as the two officers were just a couple of rows away, this man who was sitting next to her stands up, and starts yelling at her. "You disgust me. I can't stand you." The Gestapo stop what they are doing and immediately come to this man, now standing in the middle of the bus' aisle, and inquire. "What is this about?" He looks at them. He looks back at her. He looks back at them. And he says, "I can't believe this. My *wife*. She forgot her papers again. I am just disgusted." The two Nazis laugh, and then walk off the bus.

What possesses people to act in such *awesome* ways? How is that people, ordinary people, are capable of doing such extraordinary acts? To what can we attribute acts of such deep and profound love when fear and the instinct of survival make so much better sense?

Of course there is no answer. Not a logical one, anyway. Because acts of love defy reason. They don't make sense. But then again *yirah*, the awareness of a deeper reality transcends all empirical examination. It can't be measured. It can't be explained. It can only be felt. It comes from that place deep within. And it moves us to act in ways that are genuinely sacred.

We come here on these days not only to reacquaint ourselves with the power of awe, but to remind ourselves of how easy it is to fall prey to the power of fear. We come here to examine ourselves, to do a *cheshbon ha-nefesh*—a personal accounting of all the times we succumbed to our instincts and failed to heed the still, small voice, the voice that is ever-present, the voice that continually whispers in the depths of our souls: "You are a child of God."

Perhaps these *Yamim Noraim*, these Days of Awe will be different? Perhaps we can try, with just a bit of introspection and wonder, to reacquaint ourselves with the awe that accompanies the mystery of this gift we call *life*. Perhaps we can see all that we have is a blessing. And perchance we can figure out how to allow our *yirah*, our awe, to overpower our *pachad*, our

fears, and guide us into the new year filled with feelings of humility and gratitude that lead us to acts of love.

I hope I can.