

“Fear the Lord”

Rosh Hashanah 5772 Day 2

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This morning, I want to define fear.

I'll start with this past Sunday. I woke up to our 7 year old son Elyon running in our bedroom happily proclaiming that he learned how to password lock the computer. YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT FEAR?! I was thinking about all the material I had on the computer, including my sermons for these holidays which I hadn't yet printed. I asked Elyon, "What's the password?!" He said he couldn't tell us because it's a secret password. NOW THAT'S FEAR! I was still struggling with the reality that my seven year old son knows how to password protect our computer, when on Monday morning, he woke us up yelling from the office, "Emma – what's your email address? They are asking for it on the computer!"

That's the kind of fear that gets you going in the morning!

Of course, most folks tread through parenthood with the normal fears that their children are going to hurt themselves somehow or that they're walking too close to the street. My young father will tell you there are four reasons he's got that scholarly looking head of white hair – Uri, Zeke, Jonathan, and Elik.

He used to joke with me that he couldn't wait until I had a few kids. Then he would come over and give only one of them a nickel. I think he wanted a little payback. I was already afraid of parenthood and it hadn't even begun.

Recently, my kids set up a hose over our backyard slide to make it go faster. The only problem is that the end of the slide is about 6 feet from the brick wall of the house. Before I could stop this I saw our little lightweight Itai fly off the slide a good 5 feet. His eyes were wide open. I couldn't tell if he was afraid or exhilarated! I know that my heart was pounding.

There are many joys in parenthood, but fear is also a constant companion.

But all of us face many other fears as well – such as the fears involved in taking care of an elderly parent. Fears in the workplace of maintaining our jobs. Fears of not being able to bring home enough money to pay the bills. Fears when we encounter illness and death.

So when we come to shul, I imagine we are all looking for some peace to calm some of those fears. Relief from some of those anxieties. Maybe a teaching to channel those fears in a productive way.

But instead, there sometimes seems to be just more fear.

I remember my shul Rabbi during middle school years... We used to joke that he must have been a linebacker in a former life. He was 6 foot, with a long square chiseled beard, and built like a tank. When he gave his sermons, he would always start off quietly and then slowly build into the classic fire and

brimstone fervor with his deep, booming voice. I think he could have given Charlton Heston a run for his money. As a kid, you trembled when he spoke and you tried not to be there too often. He was a bit terrifying.

But for many people, he fit the part. He helped instill a bit of *Yiryat HaShem* – a Fear of God in the congregation. And many people were looking for that, after all, our Torah teaches (Devarim 8:6):

וְשָׁמַרְתָּ, אֶת-מִצְוֹת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ, לְלַכֵּת בְּדַרְכָיו, וּלְיִרְאָהוּ אֹתוֹ.

“And you shall keep the commandments of God and... walk in God’s ways and Fear Him.” Part of the religious experience seems to be one of fear.

God states this clearly to Moshe as the people are brought out of Egypt (Devarim 4:10),

הַקֹּהֵל-לִי אֶת-הָעָם... אֲשֶׁר יִלְמְדוּן לְיִרְאָהוּ אֹתִי, כָּל-הַיָּמִים אֲשֶׁר הֵם חַיִּים עַל-הָאָדָמָה

“Gather the people to me so that they will learn to fear Me all the days that they live on the Earth.”

Fear is also the central experience of the Binding of Isaac. At the end of our reading this morning, the Angel says,

וַיֹּאמֶר, אֱלֹהֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל יְדַבֵּר אֵל-הַנֶּעֱר, וְאֵל-יַעֲקֹב לוֹ, מֵאֲוָמָה: כִּי עַתָּה יִדְעֵתִי, כִּי-יִרְאֵהוּ אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶתְּךָ

“Do not stretch out your hand against the lad nor do anything to him for now I know that you are a God fearing man.”

The message of the text appears clear: Fear of God is our religious mandate.

This is also the sense of our Rosh Hashanah liturgy – a day called by the Rabbis as *Yom HaDin* – the Day of Judgment. As we prepare to hear the sound of the shofar, we remember the words of the prophet Amos (3:6) who said, “Can a shofar be blown in a city and the people not tremble?”

The shofar on the Day of Judgment is meant to invoke the Fear of God.

It seems clear then, that one of the main objectives of our service is to instill fear of God.

So this year, I decided to complement my pure white kittel with a new look:

[open kittel to reveal T-shirt with blood red letters]: “FEAR THE LORD”

Maybe this is the appropriate message for these high holidays! It’s time for more fire and brimstone sermons!

But the truth is, I just don’t have it in me. I’m not exactly the Rabbinic type who is trying to instill the fear of God. It might be because of my afro style hair which doesn’t allow me to grow out a long beard. I think I would be able to be much more intimidating that way.

Instead, I tend to find myself in more contemporary circles, were you more often hear “love of God” being stressed, rather than fear of God. I am drawn to the classic Chassidic approach where the word “*Yirah*” tends to be translated, not as fear, but as awe.

The problem is, when I think about certain Biblical stories, or when I think about my middle school Rabbi, the best I can do is imagine the experience of an awesome fear. The awe is there, but the fear hasn’t gone away either. It’s very much a part of our tradition.

How are we to understand our apparent religious mandate to be filled with fear of God? And even if the pious amongst us are capable of the humility and self-nullification such fear requires, how is this a message that will encourage our youth, and frankly, all of us, to continue wanting to come to shul and to identify with Judaism if we portray it as a religion of fear?

One of my teachers, Rabbi David Aaron, once shared a story with me about a woman he met at a spiritual retreat. He was giving a talk about conceptions of God, and she told him afterwards that her notions of God were shaped in her childhood. She doesn’t remember what it was, but she must have done something terrible because all she remembered was her mom chasing her around the house yelling, “God is going to punish you! God is going to punish you!” She had locked herself in the bathroom and screamed back at her mother. “No, he won’t. God can’t get me in the bathroom!” But that only made her mother angrier and she yelled back, “You’re wrong! God is everywhere. Even in the bathroom!”

This woman has always struggled with her faith as an adult – but who wouldn’t if you thought God was going after you in the bathroom!

The societal reaction to this portrayal of God, is a flip to the other side, and a notion that God is just like the Force in Star Wars - a warm, glowing light that gives energy to the world. There is nothing to be afraid of. God isn’t coming after you. God isn’t even particularly interested in you.

I know that this is going to sound heretical, especially in my Star Wars loving family, but while the Force is a sweet idea, it’s not very Jewish.

In our tradition, we speak of a personal God. But hopefully not so personal that God is chasing us into bathrooms.

An old friend of mine, David Ingber, believes that many Jews suffer from what he calls Post Traumatic God Disorder. He uses PTGD to describe what happens to people when they struggle with an image of God from their youth, ultimately become disillusioned with God, and often want to throw out the whole concept of God, or at least to turn to other religious disciplines.

I happen to agree with David. Many of us do struggle with Post Traumatic God Disorder. And some others who don’t, probably just choose to ignore the parts of our tradition that invoke Fear of God.

But this morning, I would like to take the next few minutes and offer a different definition of fear of God. I’m not interested in removing fear of God from Judaism – I can’t. It’s a part of our tradition. But I

am interested in uncovering a different kind of God fearing tradition - one that I believe is truer to our texts, liturgy, and tradition.

My definition is rooted in the teachings of Nechama Leibowitz, a famous 20th century Torah teacher in Israel, who set the standard for which classic commentaries would be studied along with the weekly parsha.

Nechama wants to demonstrate the “Fear of God” is a universal quality – not something unique to being Jewish. She offers four Biblical examples where someone outside the covenantal family is evaluated for their level of “God Fearingness.”

The first example is taken from Avraham, who asks his wife to call herself his sister when they traveled to the Kingdom of Avimelech. The reason he offers for this deception, which is ultimately discovered, is

כִּי אָמַרְתִּי רַק אִין-יְרֵאת אֶל הַיָּם, בְּמָקוֹם הַזֶּה; וְהִרְגוּנִי, עַל-דְּבַר אִשְׁתִּי

He thought that surely the fear of God is not in this place and that he would be killed on account of his wife (20:11).

The second example is from the Yosef narrative. The brothers are not yet aware that the number two man in Egypt is actually their long lost brother. And they have come before him to beg for food to bring back home to Canaan where a famine is raging. Yosef accuses them of spying on Egypt, but assures them that he will release them from captivity and provide food for their father’s household anyway, because, as he says, “*Ani Yareh*” – I fear God.” (42:18)

The third example is of the Egyptian midwives who continued to deliver Jewish babies against the decree of Pharaoh. There the text reads (1:17),

וַתִּירָאן הַמִּילְדוֹת, אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים, וְלֹא עָשׂוּ, כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֲלֵיהֶן מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם; וַתְּחַיֶּינָהוּ, אֶת-הַיְלָדִים

“The midwives feared God and they didn’t do as the King of Egypt spoke to them. Instead, they live the children live.”

The fourth and final example is in the decree to destroy Amalek where the text reads (Devraim 25:17),

זְכוֹר, אֶת אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה לְךָ עַמְלֵק, בְּדַרְךְ, בְּצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם. אֲשֶׁר קִרְךָ בְּדַרְךְ, וַיִּזְנֹב בְּךָ כָּל-הַנְּחֻשְׁלִים אַחֲרֶיךָ-- וְלֹא יָרָא, אֶל הַיָּם.

“Remember what Amalek did to you. How they met you on the way out of Egypt and attacked those in the rear of the encampment who were most vulnerable. And they did not fear God.”

Looking at all four examples, what’s the common criterion that determines if someone is a God fearing person?

Their God fearingness is measured by their attitude towards those that are the most vulnerable in their societies.

In Avraham's case, where fear of God is lacking in Avimelech's Kingdom, Avraham assumes that a stranger in such a place is liable to be killed – especially if he is an impediment to a beautiful woman.

In Yosef's case, as someone playing the role of an Egyptian leader, his fear of God assures the brothers that he will release them from captivity and provide food to their starving families.

In the Egyptian midwives case, their fear of God is what leads them to disobey the evil decree of the Pharaoh and care for the new mothers and babies.

And in Amalek's case, where this heathen nation fears no God, they stoop to surprisingly low levels of immorality, striking first at the infirmed, the young, and the elderly in the rear of the camp.

In all four instances, fear of God translates into respect for the most vulnerable members of the community.

And where there is no fear of God, there is fear that those same individuals will suffer.

This is how the philosopher Emanuel Levinas (*lecture talmudique*, Berachot 33b, "Of Religious Language and the Fear of God") understands it:

Fear of God is not the fear of punishment.

Fear of God is manifest in the fear *for* the other human being – the fear lest God's creations be hurt, harmed, or die.

The same message is communicated in our Torah reading this morning. Some commentaries teach that when the Angel says to Avraham, "Now I know that you are a God fearing man," the lesson being taught is that we NEVER worship God through human sacrifice. Unlike the other pagan cultures of his time, Avraham had to be shown, in a visceral manner, that our religious mandate is not to die for God, but rather to support each other in living for God.

How do we fear God? By fearing that the Divine image will be harmed. And therefore acting with love to His Creations. And by doing good for one another. By taking care of the orphan, the widow, the poor, the sick, the homebound, the stranger, the newborn, the new mother, the elderly, the hungry.

With this framework in mind, allow me to illustrate what I consider true fear of God:

A year and a half ago, our member Harold Bruchis passed away at Woldenberg Village. His son Joe asked me if I knew anyone that might be able to benefit from some of the medical equipment Harold had accumulated in his final years. It included a TV camera/television reading system, with a stand, for low vision reading, as well as an electric wheelchair. I didn't have anyone in particular in mind, but our conversation sparked an idea to create a Gemach.

A Gemach is a Hebrew acronym standing for the words *Gemillut Chassadim*, which means acts of lovingkindness. The term "Gemach" was adopted to refer to free loan programs – typically ones that provided items like wedding dresses, baby toys and accessories, bicycles, books, medical equipment, etc

– mostly things that are used for a set period of time and that tend then to accumulate in people’s garages. In Israel, in the back of a phonebook, you will find literally hundreds of gemachs listed for all sorts of things. In most large Jewish communities in America there are also a number of working gemachs you can call.

So Joe Bruchis’ thoughtfulness launched New Orleans’ first gemach, which is a free loan medical equipment gemach. Due to some potential legal concerns, Gemachs are typically hosted and managed by generous individuals in communities and I am very thankful to Alan Katz for offering up his garage to store the equipment and arrange for drop-offs and loans. This medical equipment gemach is just getting started, so its inventory is quite small, but everyone here could rapidly build it up if we were to consider all of the unused medical equipment/supplies that we have lying around our homes. Remember, you’re not giving anything away. You are just allowing it to be used more regularly.

Currently, the gemach has:

- a. standard wheelchair
- b. an electric stair chair, which takes quite a bit of work to install or to remove
- c. a TV camera/television reading system, with stand, for low vision reading
- d. one pair of wooden crutches
- e. two canes, one of which has a wide floor plate
- f. several commode chairs, at least one has never been used
- g. and a tub chair.

Until this past weekend, the gemach also had an electric wheelchair. It was then that Sherrie Goodman was visiting with Phyllis Bruchis Finger at Woldenberg Village, bringing her fresh baked Challahs and honey for Rosh Hashanah from our shul’s chessed committee. Sherrie discovered that Phyllis’ electric wheelchair had recently broken. That was when Sherrie decided to call and connect Phyllis’ family with the medical equipment gemach which led to her borrowing Harold Bruchis’ old electric wheelchair.

I spoke with Phyllis on Monday afternoon, just after her family had dropped off the wheelchair, and this is what she said in her high pitched jolly voice,

“Today I got the surprise of my life! It was the wheelchair that my cousin Harold Bruchis owned. I thank God I have that. You would think it’s brand new!”

Friends, for me, a God fearing community is a caring community.

There’s a place for the good old fire and brimstone and classic notions of God fearing Jews. But for me, fear of God is about fear for God’s creations, lest they be hurt, harmed, or die.

Avraham taught us that a God fearing community is one in which we feel safe with each other and know that even a stranger or a newcomer amongst us will be taken care of during joyous and difficult times. And Yosef taught us that no matter the past, in a time of need, we will be there for one another. And the midwives remind us that our new mothers and the babies are so vulnerable, both emotionally and physically, and need our support.

And Amalek teaches us that we can never again leave our elderly and infirmed in the rear. They have to be front and center in our communities.

Rabbi Avi Weiss used to pound into our hearts in Rabbinical School the following principle: the strength of a community is measured by how it cares for its most vulnerable members. He used to say that there are only the sick and the not yet sick.

And this brings us back full circle to the quote from Amos (3:6) who said, “Can a shofar be blown in a city and the people not tremble?”

In just a few moments, we will blow that shofar and I invite you to let it fill you with fear. But not the kind of fear where God is chasing you, but rather the fear for the well being of God’s creations that reminds us that our religious devotion should not only carry us upwards, or inwards, but also outwards to our larger family.

I invite you this year to think of one new way you can be a God fearing person in this manner.

I invite you this New Year to drop off some equipment at Alan’s garage, or help link someone up with the gemach who might need it.

I invite you this New Year to participate in our shul’s chessed committee to care for our elderly, our infirmed, our mourners, our new mothers, and our new members.

I invite you this New Year to join our chevra kadisha as we provide *chessed shel emet* – an absolute form of kindness – the type that can never be repaid. We are desperately in need of someone to coordinate this for the shul and for others to assist.

And as I invite fresh faces, I also want to thank everyone who has been able to dedicate your time to these worthy causes over the past year. Your actions have inspired me to doctor up the t-shirt I showed you before. I decided to add a little something on the back.

[turn around to reveal back of t-shirt]: “FEAR THE LORD... BY LOVING HIS CREATIONS”