



## **Be Afraid.**

Rabbi Zoë Klein Miles, Kol Nidre, 5778

I once touched an electric fence. I was walking along at New Pond Farm in West Redding, Connecticut, with its pale yellow barns, and pastures dotted with dandelions and buttercups, my hand sliding along the wire fence, when all of a sudden, a surge of voltage lighteninged through my arm, my organs lurched up, and it felt like my heart had lodged in my throat, the most awful feeling I've ever had.

So when I touched it a second time...

No, I didn't touch it a second time. Of course, I didn't. Because I was afraid to touch it. I'll probably never touch a fence at a farm again.

I want to talk about fear tonight.

There's a clip in which Jerry Seinfeld says, "Speaking in front of a crowd is considered the number one fear of the average person. Number two was death. This means to the average person if you had to be at a funeral, you'd rather be in the casket than doing the eulogy."

I want to talk about fear. Stephen King opened an essay about fear with these words: "The house is empty as I write this; a cold...rain is falling outside. It's night. Sometimes when the wind blows the way it's blowing now, we lose the power. But for now it's on, and so let's talk very honestly about fear. Let's talk very rationally about moving to the rim of madness...We won't raise our voices

and we won't scream. We'll talk about the way the good fabric of things sometimes has a way of unraveling with shocking suddenness."

I want to talk about fear, after all, these are the *Yomim Noraim*, which is translated as 'The Days of Awe'. Such a nice translation. The Days of Awww. Like what you say when you see a puppy nuzzling a bunny. No. The eighties already ruined the word 'awesome' and the twenty-tens are ruining the word 'epic.' The word for awe in Hebrew is the same as the word for fear.

These are the Days of Fear and Trembling. For our ancestors, God-fearing people, this day was terrifying. The idea of God as King struck fear because kings struck fear. "Who shall live and who shall die" is a frightening prayer. The rabbi was scary, pounding the pulpit with fire and brimstone. Today, if one thinks the rabbi is going a bit too far, one just bangs out an email, cc's the temple president, and bcc's their old college roommate, or someone they briefly dated and who weirdly became a conservative rabbi in the Midwest.

Fear is a rabbi checking her inbox after Yom Kippur.

I wanted to talk about fear, and then I got scared. Because I already gave a sermon on fear. What if everyone remembers that sermon. Then I thought, we repeat the same Kol Nidre prayer every year, and no one gets tired of that. I pulled out that sermon. Fifteen years ago. 2001. Right after 9-11. In it, I quoted reporter Paul Krugman who wrote in an article called "Fearing Fear Itself": "The goal of terrorists is to inspire terror because that's all they're capable of. And the most important thing our societies can do in response is to refuse to give in to fear." And that's what I wrote about. The resistance to fear.

I wanted to talk about fear again, but I didn't want to say the same thing. So I read thirty other sermons on fear. Most of them about not giving in to fear. And I learned a lot. I learned that it says "Do not fear" thirty-nine times in the Torah. That was interesting. But I wanted to say something different.

So I decided, I'm going to give a sermon in praise of fear. Does that make you nervous? That for the next several minutes I will be extolling that primal emotion we try so hard to overcome? Are you afraid I'm going to botch this holy moment? Or are you too concerned with exactly how long I mean when I say 'several minutes?'

Be afraid.

Here's why.

Rabbi Stephen Kushner wrote, "We need fear. It keeps us from harm. It protects us from getting burned. From falling off the cliff. From entering a place of mortal danger. It is a survival instinct. A gift from God."

You wouldn't take a friend with a death allergy to tree nuts to Souplantation, and say, "Take anything you want, don't be afraid."

You want fear. And if you have a teenager daughter, you really want fear. "If you are at a party, and you have a drink, and you take your eye off your drink, you don't come back and drink that drink. Don't go to the dancefloor and come back and drink that drink. Don't even touch that drink. That drink is now a toxic, envenomed, contaminated, putrid, radioactive, acne-causing, hair-frizzing, teeth-yellowing poison. Do you understand?"

Life is filled with fear. In nature, everything under the apex of the food-chain is afraid.

Rabbi Malka Drucker points out that in the High Holy Days prayer book, one of the prayers is translated as "Adonai our God, imbue all Your creatures with reverence for You, and fill all that You have created with awe of You." However, a truer translation of the Hebrew would be, "Adonai our God, set such fear on every human being and such dread on all Your creatures, that they will worship You with humility. Then they will be one community formed to do Your will with a whole and peaceful heart."

Huh. Wow. What does that mean? How do fear and dread lead to humility and then to one community doing God's will, and then a whole and peaceful heart?

Torah says not to be afraid thirty-nine times, however, it also says that one should fear numerous times.

Deuteronomy 10:12 reads: "And now O Israel, what does the Lord your God demand of you? Only this: to fear the Lord your God. To walk in God's ways,

and to love God, and to serve the Lord your God with all our heart and with all your soul.” Yes, it says to love, but fearing God is at the top of the list.

Proverbs 1:7 reads, “The beginning of wisdom is fear of God.”

Proverbs 19:23 reads, “One who fears God earns life, this one shall abide in contentment.”

Fear leads to wisdom, life, and contentment. Humility, community, and a whole and peaceful heart. How can an emotion so debilitating also be redemptive?

In Genesis 15:1 God says to Abraham, “Fear not, Abram, I am a shield to you.” That’s one of the 39 do-not-be-afraids. In fact, most of the do-not-be-afraids are connected to God saying, “I am with you.” But in Geneses 22:12, as Abraham is lifting the knife over his son Isaac, God says, “Do not raise your hand against the boy...for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son...from Me.” Don’t be afraid, but I’m very pleased that I terrify you. What I mean is, don’t be afraid of people who would hurt you, because you’re with Me. I got you; I’m your shield, no one’s gonna mess with you on my watch. I’m your 380 pound Bengal tiger, and you’re my Siegfried and Roy.

*Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.* What comforts me? Not thy blankie and thy cannabis. Thy rod and thy staff. The rod thou useth to thresh out sin, the staff with which thou establisheth authority. I will fear no evil in the valley of the shadow of death, why? Because You have a rod and a staff. You are basically carrying nunchucks, and that comforts me.

In Hebrew, there are actually two words for fear. *Pachad* means fear as in “eek-a-clown-in-a-sewage-drain.” *Yirah* is that fear associated with awe and reverence and trembling. *Yirah* is respect for the power of the electric fence, for the black-hole sun of a total eclipse. *Yirah* is the “awe” in both awesome and awful. *Yirah* is a soulquake.

We have a lot of *pachad*. When someone goes on vacation, people used to say “Happy trails,” or “Have a good time!” now we grasp their arm, look them deep in the eye and say, “Be safe.” We have a lot of *pachad* but very little *yirah*.

Rabbi George Gittleman tells a story of Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik and a psychiatrist ready to become a *ba'al teshuva* (ready to commit to orthodoxy). "One thing that keeps him from making the transition is fear of God. He says, as a psychiatrist, he knew that fear was bad. That was his stumbling block. Soloveitchik told him, 'I am not a psychiatrist, but I know one thing. Fear is a part of being human. Everyone has fear. Fear of failure, fear of loss of money, of aging, of sickness. There is, however, one great fear that pushes away all the other smaller fears. What is that fear? It is the fear of the Holy One, Blessed be God.'"

*Yirat Ha-Shamayim*, fear of Heaven, dislodges our lower fears, replacing them with fear of Divine Retribution. God is very clear about that. Go this way, not that way. If you go this way, good things will happen. If you go that way, bad things.

For the most part, Reform Judaism dismisses the idea of Divine retribution, God is all love. Acceptance. Forgiveness. Participation awards. But to reduce God to 1-800-THERAPY is to lose the whole point of God, even if you don't believe in God.

The whole point is Moral Accountability.

You break a rule, you pay for it. You mess with creation, you get charged. Now, the problem is that we know a heck of a lot of people who do go this way, and yet bad things happen. And we know a heck of a lot of people who go that way, and nothing bad happens. We know a lot of people who break things and never seem to have to pay for it.

If you look at the book of Job, you see a man of whom it is written right in the beginning, "[Job] was blameless and upright. He feared God and shunned evil." And yet, everything bad happens to him. He loses his fortune, he loses his children, his own flesh is diseased. For thirty-seven chapters, he rails, weeps, questions, struggling to comprehend, his friends trying to help him. Until finally, God answers Job's cries. God speaks. We know already what we want God to say. We want God to comfort Job. We want restitution. We want an apology. We want an explanation. We want a conviction. We want his innocent children to resurrected, surely that's not too much for God.

Instead, God says, “Who are you, speaking without knowledge? Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations? Have you penetrated to the sources of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep? Who cut a channel for the thunderstorms? From whose belly came forth the ice? Is the wild ox willing to serve you? Will he spend the night at your crib? Do you give the horse its might? Does the eagle fly by your command? Can you dispatch lightning? Tilt the bottles of the sky so that the earth melts into a mass and its clods stick together?” And God goes on like this until Job finally responds, “What can I answer You? I clap my hand to my mouth...I recant and relent, I am but dust and ashes.” (Job 40:4 and 42:3)

It is not the answer we want. I am powerful, you are not. However, maybe it is the answer we need. God is an electric fence, a downed power line, you can’t touch it, man cannot look at God’s face and live, this is not a fairytale, God is not adorable, the word cherub comes from the Hebrew *cherev* which means ‘sword,’ not ‘flying pudgy baby.’ God, remember? The creator of magma? And Jupiter? And malaria? And habanero sauce?

God is not a hotel concierge, “Oh Infinite One, Oh Your Mightiness, schedule my wake-up call,” “Yes, your weakness, right away oh limited, frail, perishable transient.”

The amazing thing about God’s answer to Job is: that God answers Job at all. It says in Psalms, “What is man that You are mindful of him? Yet You have made him little lower than Yourself, and crowns him with glory and majesty.” (Psalm 8:4-5) That God should bother answering at all, when everyone else you call is experiencing higher than average call volumes, and your wait time is approximately 10 hours. Please visit us online at [www.you-will-never-speak-to-a-living-being-about-your-bill](http://www.you-will-never-speak-to-a-living-being-about-your-bill). Goodbye.

Does the person contemplating an extramarital affair need to feel *more* of God’s love? Need more permission to “treat themselves?” No. Now, that person probably has *pachad*, is probably motivated by their own fear of aging, fear of death, some fear of getting caught perhaps...but that person does not have *Yirat Ha-Shamayim*, fear of Heaven, to protect them.

And what of the tiki-torch wielding protesters in Charlottesville, do they fear anything? When they shouted “Jews will not replace us!” they told us. They are

afraid of Jews replacing them. Afraid of their own inadequacies, embarrassed by their own ignorance, and so they target us. It's not new. Rabbi Malka Drucker wrote, "Judaism had been a target of fear for 3500 years, beginning with the Egyptian Pharaoh, who, fearing that the Israelites would rise up against him, turned them into slaves and killed their newborn sons." What haters need is less *pachad*, less raw fear, and a heck of a lot more *Yirat Ha-Shamayim*, fear of Heaven. That's what God tried to do, redirect Pharaoh's fear.

Albert Einstein called fear one of the three greatest forces in the world. Along with stupidity and greed. He also said that there are only two things that are infinite. The universe and man's stupidity. And he added that he wasn't sure about the universe.

You combine the wrong kind of fear with infinite stupidity, and a gluttony of greed, and you get emboldened hate groups. Racists who are no longer afraid to come out, unmasked, unashamed of their bigotry.

We are frightened. We've become a fearful citizenry, and our fear only feeds the greed. Remember the Pixar film, *Monsters, Inc*? Where the whole Monster world was fueled by the energy found in children's screams? Our fear fuels the very thing we are afraid of. We have lock down drills to teach our children to hide and cower and be quiet, quite the opposite of what Purim teaches, that in the face of evil one makes noise, rises up.

FEAR is either an acronym for Forget Everything And RUN, or Face Everything And Rise.

We live in what's sometimes called an "attention society," in which attention is understood to be a limited resource, and what better way to grab it and hold it than through shock and fear. But most people are afraid of the wrong things. Homophobia, Islamophobia. People are now afraid of skittles, for God's sake.

Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa taught: Whenever a person's fear of sin comes before his wisdom, his wisdom will endure. But when a person's wisdom comes before his fear of sin, his wisdom will not endure. (Pirkei Avot 3:11)

Our wisdom won't endure unless we tremble more and shame each other less. Our wisdom won't endure unless we start with humility, start with

acknowledging how much we don't know. Our wisdom won't endure unless we dislodge our lower fears and replace them with Moral Accountability. We will not endure unless we fear sin. Unless we fear Heaven.

Did you know that the word yarmulke is derived from the Hebrew *yireh Melekh*, Fear and Awe of the King? Talmud says, "Cover your head that the fear of heaven will be upon you."

*Yirah* is both fear and awe. According to a Hasidic master, the Malbim: It is impossible to immediately attain the exalted level of awe of heaven. Rather, one must first come to fear God's judgment, and only then ascend." Fear first, awe second.

And once we've attained the first part of *yirah*, once we've attained that sense that God is with us, surging through the wires with incalculable energy, once we've regained the respect for the voltage around us, the fences and limits of our own power, then we can fully step into the revelation of awe, to sing the body and soul electric, charged with magnetic majesty, awakened to the rushing energies and dynamic rhythms of this phenomenon called life.

For the second half of my sermon, I would like to explore with you the three ways philosophers of the modern period understand fear, and how it applies to Trump's America.

Now you are really afraid.

No. Don't worry. There's nothing here to fear, except what is represented inside that ark.

*What does the Lord your God demand of you? Only this: to fear the Lord your God. To walk in God's ways, and to love God, and to serve the Lord your God with all our heart and with all your soul.*

Shana tova.