



**Fear Destabilizes, Tribe Revitalizes**  
**Kol Nidre Sermon 5779**  
**Rabbi Joel Nickerson**

Late one night, when I was ten years old, after everyone was asleep, I sneaked into the living room in my dad’s house and I watched the movie, “The Exorcist.” I have no idea how I knew about the movie or what possessed me to watch it, but it scared the living daylights out of me and I had nightmares for weeks. There was something chilling about a child being possessed by the devil. What if I became possessed by some dark force inside me? What if the dark, bitter anger that I saw in the film could actually exist in the real world? It was one of the first times I realized that each person has a dark side and that if someone were to let his/her dark side take control, they could do terrible things to themselves, to the people they love, or even to complete strangers. Of course, it didn’t stop me from staying up late a few weeks later to watch “Poltergeist.”

After watching a horror film, dark and shadowy places may scare us and weird sounds might make us jump, but what about those deeper fears we have; the ones we develop that never seem to go away: fear of our children being abused, that our health won’t last, that we’re irrelevant, fear that we’ll be alone, that we could lose it all, fear of being forgotten, of being inadequate, of coming off like an idiot, of being weak, fear that we can’t protect ourselves or our loved ones, fear of dying, of traveling to certain places, of another mass shooting, fear that the rise in antisemitism is going to lead to another Holocaust, fear that Israel is going to be destroyed, fear that our country is going to fall apart. The list is never-ending. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum says, “[Fear] threatens to destabilize democracy, since democracy requires all of us to limit our narcissism and embrace reciprocity. Right now, fear is running rampant in our nation: fear of declining living standards, fear of unemployment, of the absence of health care in time of need; fear of an end to the American Dream, in which you can be confident that hard work brings a

decent and stable life and that your children will do better than you did if they, too, work hard.”<sup>1</sup> Bob Woodward’s new book is entitled ‘Fear’. He says he chose this title based on an interview he had with President Trump, during which Trump stated, “You know, real power, the real stuff, is fear.”<sup>2</sup> We’re living in a time when our leaders and our sources of news and information are doing a masterful job of whipping up fear. We’re experiencing a fear feeding-frenzy. And we’re eating it up. Many of us spend the majority of our time just trying to hold it all together and the fear seems to be leading us in a few different directions. It’s either paralyzing us, making it hard to move forward at all, or it’s making us so angry, so vindictive, and so resentful that it’s tearing us apart and driving us further and further away from each other. For most of us, the deep damage is that it causes us to stop living our truths.

There’s a story in the Talmud about the difficult challenge of harnessing our fear; of making sure it doesn’t destroy us and the world around us. The story takes place at a time when the Jews were ruled by the Roman government, an oppressive and powerful force. They controlled the Jewish community with fear-tactics that were both physically and spiritually destructive. So of course, these took a toll, turning fear into other destructive emotions among the Jews. The story tells us that one day, two rabbis are sitting together, talking politics, and Rabbi Yehuda says to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, “Isn’t it amazing what this Roman government has created – they established marketplaces, bathhouses, and even bridges.” Rabbi Shimon responds to his friend with disgust. “Everything they established, they only did it for their own needs. They created the marketplaces so they could have a place for their prostitutes, they made the bathhouses to pamper themselves, and they built bridges so that they could collect tolls.” The rabbi’s angry outburst and rage against the government gets back to the Romans, who are determined to kill him and his family. Rabbi Shimon is forced to hide in a cave with his son and when they finally emerge, twelve years later, the first thing the rabbi sees is men plowing a field and sowing seeds for new crops to grow. But instead of seeing the farmer’s work as an opportunity for new growth and new beginnings, the anger and rage that had built up over years of exposure to fear had become his new normal. So he scoffs at the farmers and declares, “what a waste of time – all this day-to-day work doesn’t matter.” As soon as he says it, everything he looks at bursts into flames. A voice from heaven calls down and says, “What are you doing? Did you come out of your cave just so you could destroy my world?! Go back into that cave!” And so Rabbi Shimon and his son have to return to the cave.<sup>3</sup>

It’s a weird story (like most Talmudic stories), but it’s one of the many examples of our tradition reminding us that fear destroys. Fear destroys. Just think about all the ways that fear causes us to respond to the world around us. It makes us suspicious and distrustful of people. It forces us

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<sup>1</sup> Nussbaum, Martha C.. The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis (Kindle Locations 848-852). Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/11/podcasts/the-daily/woodward-interview-daily-transcript.html>

<sup>3</sup> BT Shabbat 33b

to retreat into caves. It blinds us to the potential for new growth. It leaves us bitter, poisoned, pathetic. It makes us feel inadequate. It makes us feel small and weak and insecure. It makes us afraid to play and to have fun. It keeps us from fulfilling our goals. Most of all, it squeezes our vibrancy and diminishes our joy for life.

When we're born, fear is our first emotion. Babies cry because they have no idea how they're going to make it through another minute of their life. As Nussbaum points out, "The baby, on whom caregivers ardently dote, has no way of surviving except by making slaves of others. Babies are so weak that they must either rule or die. Incapable of shared work or reciprocity, they can get things only by commands and threats, and by exploiting the [worshipful] love given them by others."<sup>4</sup> It's for this reason that fear is so narcissistic and selfish. It forces us to believe that the world revolves around us and our own needs.

When I was a young kid, I took the Ashamnu and Vidui sections of Yom Kippur very seriously - those are the prayers where we talk about all our sins and we make a fist over our hearts. I used to pound on my chest so hard during those prayers that I would be sore after services. It's because those prayers and all those sins brought up my deep-seated fear of failing myself and those around me. The only way I felt like I could address that fear was to beat myself up in that moment. It's as if self-destructive behavior was going to make it easier for me to enter into the new year; that the only way out of my fears was to pound it out of myself; to languish in the pain associated with fear. But we don't have to suffer and bleed and bruise to protect ourselves from our fears. Now, more than ever, it's time for us to massage our hearts; to open ourselves up and welcome change.

We don't need to let the non-stop tweets of a president knock us off course and we don't need to let the unending list of failures about our city, our state, our country, our Israel, and our world, all laid out to us through the news and social media, bring us to a halt. We don't need fear to make us stop participating, stop acting, and stop hoping. When we do that, we're being the selfish, narcissistic babies we were at birth.

There seems to be a belief that overcoming our fears is something we have to do on our own. During these holidays, we hear the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, which holds no punches as it lays out all the ways we could die in the coming year. We get together to reveal our biggest fears about our mortality and suffering in public, all together. This is one of those places where you bring all those fears that you've been hiding from the rest of the world; those fears that you thought you had to handle and control on your own; and you put it out there in a communal space. And then you realize that a lot of people have the same fears you have. The Unetaneh Tokef prayer ends by saying 'repentance, prayer, and *tzedakah*' can help us avert God's decree

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<sup>4</sup> Nussbaum, Martha C.. The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis (Kindle Locations 376-379). Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition.

and together, maybe we can come up with ways to overcome our own fears and turn them into opportunities for growth and transformation. Ritual has been the driving force of tribal life – it is the language of a community’s values and message to the greater world. Do you realize that in today’s world, you are part of a miniscule minority who are willing to spend your time listening to ancient prayers, standing up in unison, fasting, and marking Jewish time? This is one of the few remaining tribal opportunities that exists in the world and instead of seeing it as a burden, we need to embrace it with full force. We need to be thanking God, and each other, that we are willing to show up and overcome the inertia of apathy and share our fears without repercussion. This is your tribe.

We used to live in tribal societies and being a member of a tribe, up until recently, was the way in which humans found purpose, safety, and support in order to survive. If you remember from our own Torah, the Israelites were a tribal people. Our ancestors marched from slavery to the Promised Land as twelve separate tribes, with distinct personalities and purposes, yet whenever we stopped along the journey, those twelve tribes encircled the Tabernacle, uniting as one; protecting one another. It’s this tribal instinct, to both nourish and protect, that has kept the Jewish people alive throughout our history, despite unsurmountable odds. The great modern philosopher, Immanuel Kant, said that we all have a duty to embrace hope as we attempt to achieve the highest level goals of our society. They are: love of others, morality, and justice. But Kant also believed it was very difficult to sustain a commitment to these goals in isolation. Everyone, he said, has a duty to join a group of like-minded people in order to bring more love, morality, and justice into the world.<sup>5</sup> Religious communities, like ours, are uniquely positioned to provide a tribal experience that can both feed our souls and protect our values; to foster hope-building and hope-sustaining communities; to help us transform our fears from paralyzing forces into forces for change and common purpose.

This is where we recapture and sustain the ancient practice of tribal loyalty and service; where we are given the gift of being tasked with acting for a greater good; of being given a purpose beyond our own financial success and our own climb up the status ladder.

We are your home at the intersection of tradition and innovation; a place where you are embraced by thousands of years of rituals and values and at the same time, you are challenged to bring that tradition into the 21<sup>st</sup> century in relevant and resonant ways. And as we look to the next few years, we want to be the place where every member of this community is embraced wholeheartedly - flaws, fears, talents, passions, and all. We want to be the place where our differences are seen as strengths and where you walk into our building and feel loved, cared for, supported, and protected; a place where fear isn’t the guiding principle. We all need to have each other’s’ backs, the same way intensive training and danger create what is known as ‘unit

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<sup>5</sup> Nussbaum, Martha C.. The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis (Kindle Locations 3084-3087). Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition.

cohesion' among platoons of soldiers. We want to be that place where we care for each other without question.

And we're going to be a place where you transform all those fears you have about our city and our country into action. We're going to build an expectation that each one of us participates in some level of civic engagement and justice work, whether that be volunteering, advocating, or organizing. And we're all going to experience the gift of acting selflessly for the common good. And as a result, each of us is going to become a more whole and fulfilled person...and a little less fearful.

Did you know that the most 'liked' tweet ever is by former President Obama and it reads, "No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin or his background or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite." To combat the rising tide of fear, this community is going to educate our children and ourselves about the lasting and profound impact of love. We are going to help each other to learn about the love of self, love of the other, love of tradition, and the love of learning.

Fewer people in this country are attending worship services, where they can hear messages of hope or have uplifting interactions with neighbors, but we know that ritual has the power to reinforce messages of hope and comfort; to energize and stimulate; to inspire and uplift our souls. For example, parents fear, 'will my child have friends? Are there going to be people who are going to take care of and support him/her?' That's why our tradition developed a *brit milah* or baby naming – to show parents that there is a whole group of people, a tribe, who are going to protect and take good care of their baby. Hope is the antidote to fear and ritual is developed specifically to spread and strengthen our sense of hope. We have a responsibility to maintain the rituals of our tradition, but in this community, we are also going to build on the foundational elements of those rituals in order to create bold, creative, and inspiring new interpretations that draw you closer to hope, to God, and to one another.

The only fear you should feel as a member of Isaiah is FOMO – the fear of missing out. So don't miss out on small ways to combat fear, to experience being embraced by the tribe, to build trust and strength. It starts with something as small as introducing yourself to someone you don't know on your way out tonight and when you show up here tomorrow. And it just builds from there - when you participate in one of the many civic engagement initiatives at Isaiah; when you explore the relevance of Jewish texts and values in your secular life; when you show up to Hip Hop Shabbat or one of the many rituals that build hope and inspiration.

Remember the weird Talmudic story I told earlier about the rabbi and how he incinerated everything in sight and then was forced back into the cave...well, twelve months later, he and

his son finally come out of the cave and this time, the rabbi's perspective has changed. He starts to see the beauty and opportunities laid out before him. And one of the first things he does is to go to one of the bathhouses that he had so passionately railed against before he had entered into the cave. And it's there in the bathhouse that he is finally healed from the wounds and scars he endured from the many years of living in fear.

Right now, we're not sure how to live in a society that seems to be breeding divisiveness, hate, and indifference. The rabbis realized that instead of hiding in caves and burning everything down, we needed to be out in the world and we needed to claim places where we could use our power and our passions to bring about transformation and healing. That's what it means to be a part of a tribe, like this one. By creating nurturing places that can heal us from the scars of our fears, we can bring a sense of wholeness to ourselves and help to transform the world.

This is your tribe. Here, you don't need to be scared. Here, you gain comfort, you gain power, you gain confidence, you gain strength, you gain skills.

The Maggid of Mezritch once taught that God is a gardener. Each good deed that comes when we turn our fears into opportunities is a seed. God plants those seeds in the Garden of Eden and they grow into trees. And then, together, we begin to plant our own new Paradise. It's time for us to begin planting.

*Gmar chatimah tova.*