

“Our Awesome Fear”

Rabbi Suzie Jacobson, Yom Kippur 5779

Last year, I stood witness to the great parabola of life and death. For the better part of a year, I sat bedside, watching my beloved father slowly succumb to long term illness.

Then, after standing up from his shiva, I began a new vigil, as my then ten-week-pregnant wife JoJo began to swell with the life that would eventually become our son Nathan Yitzhak.

Nine months of pain, followed by nine months of possibility — and the entire time I was completely, utterly terrified.

During the long months of my father’s final illness, doctors with sad eyes and tight smiles offered us “wait and see” solutions, made no promises, and encouraged us to keep him comfortable.

A spectator, a witness to pain and tedium - I woke often in a cold sweat, my dreams plagued by terrified images of his demise as I struggled to imagine a world without him.

And then, as it always goes, life dwindled, pain increased and I watched fearfully as my father let go of this world.

My grief was immediately distracted. Finally JoJo was pregnant! But the finality of death and the sweet promise of new life did not resolve my fear.

Instead, we were thrust into a new phase of anxiety - Would this fetus be healthy? Would it survive? Is the heart beating now?... How about now? Are you still growing? Every new stage of development threw me into new worries, and we walked into each appointment and ultrasound holding our breath, half expecting bad news.

As queer parents who spent years in fertility treatments - we took nothing for granted.

Until delivery was around the corner, and it was undeniable that our very large child would indeed need to make his transition from potential life, to star of our universe --- we were terrified. As the non-gestational parent, I stood as constant, fearful observer to this potentiality.

To live is to be afraid -- fear is universal. Endowed with imagination, we have the ability to anticipate what will happen to our health, to our security, and to our loved ones. We live in a constant state of “what if” - leaving us anxious and afraid.

Our imagination is propelled first by our observations - how we each uniquely see the world, and then by the stories we tell ourselves. As I watched my father on his deathbed, as I watched my wife grow a human being - I stood witness to the minuscule

changes of day to day, but I crafted horrific “what if” scenarios, terrifying stories that deeply impacted my experience of reality - stories that for the most part, did not come true.

Fear lives and grows in the stories we tell ourselves

In a TED talk¹, novelist Karen Thompson discusses how human beings are often swayed by the most salacious, and least likely of fears because they make the most outrageous stories.

She tells the story of the men of the whale ship Essex, who were struck by a sperm whale 3,000 miles off the coast of Chile. They are faced with a terrible decision - head to the closest Island, Tahiti, where cannibalism is rumored, or go to the coast of South America - a known but much farther destination.

Terrified of the horrible campfire stories, they avoided Tahiti, choosing the longer trip to South America. They chose to listen to the more vibrant fear of cannibalism, rather than the more mundane fear of starvation.

In the end, the length of their trip and lack of supplies killed half the crew. And the men who survived, lived because they resorted to cannibalism.

If they had listened to their more realistic and common fears, and headed to closer land, more of the crew may have survived.

We fear serial killers and plane crashes, rather than “the subtler and slower disasters we face: the silent buildup of plaque in our arteries, the gradual changes in our climate.” Thompson teaches that “just as the most nuanced stories in literature are often the richest, so too might our subtlest fears be the truest.”

To live is to be afraid - But how we engage our fears, makes all the difference.

This message runs throughout the narratives of our Torah. Sarah feared Hagar, Moses feared failure, and everyone feared God. The story of our people, the story of each person is really the story of confronting fear time and again each day over a lifetime.

In Jewish devotional texts, the most common word for fear is “yirah”, which has the same letters as the word, “to see” “yir’eh, and to be seen, “yera’eh.”

Often in Torah the character who “yireh” sees someone or something foreign and from afar becomes afraid - “yirah.”

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/karen_thompson_walker_what_fear_can_teach_us/transcript?language=en

Here's a story -- When the Moabite King Balak² sees the numerous Israelites succeed in their travel through the wilderness, he fears them before he meets them, sending his prophet Balaam to curse them. God's power is strong — as Balaam opens his mouth to curse, blessing pours forth.

The Torah teaches that the curse of xenophobia must be thwarted with the blessing of love. King Balak's story is one of unreasonable fear.

But there are other stories, smaller stories, interpersonal stories that are less black and white -

Here's a story --

Our forefather Jacob and his brother Esau were separated for decades after trickster Jacob stole his brother's birthright.³ After many years, Jacob returns home to the land of Israel, choosing to dwell very near to Esau. As Jacob and his city of wives, children, animals and servants approach - He sees Esau from afar and is afraid. Surely this brother he wronged will now have his revenge.

He sees Esau and allows his fears to craft a story of violence and danger. Sending his wives, and children ahead, Jacob stays back waiting for death.

Instead, Esau runs to meet him, embraces him, flings himself upon Jacob's neck, kisses him and weeps.⁴

When Esau looks up and sees Jacob's large family and many possessions he does not see the terrifying army of an enemy, he sees the wealth and blessing of family.

This is the story that reminds us that our vision is not 20/20, that the fears we craft may not be grounded in reality, and the other person's heart and will are a mystery until we come face to face.

In fact, Jacob has already learned the complexity of confronting the unknown. After first escaping Esau's anger, Jacob dreams of a ladder filled with angels. God stands over Jacob, promising covenant, love, protection.

In this moment of confronting the Divine Other, standing face to face with extraordinary power and majesty, Jacob feels yirah, but he does not interpret his yirah as fear.

Rather, now, yirah takes on its second meaning - awe.

² See Numbers 22-24

³ Genesis 27

⁴ Genesis 33

Jacob exclaims - Mah Norah haMakom hazeh!⁵ How full of awe is this place, and I did not know it. How awesome is our God!

Yirah, awe, is our reaction when we come face to face with the unknown, with what is not within our control - God, the stranger, the mysteries of life and death, illness, suffering and change.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel defines yirah as “radical amazement,” he teaches that:

“The meaning of awe is to realize that life takes place under wide horizons... Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing, the stillness of the eternal.”⁶

We experience yirah when we lack control, but it is in our control how we define our yirah.

Are we terrified and fearful, filled with anxiety, making decisions out of a sense of dread?

Or are we awestruck, humbled by the expansiveness of the universe and the mysteries of human experience?

Or perhaps our yirah is not either or.

In Mishnah Pirkei Avot, Rabbi Eliezer ben Azariah teaches
*Im ein chochma, ein yirah; Im ein yirah, ein chochma*⁷

“If there is no wisdom, there is no yirah, no fear and awe. If there is no fear and awe, there is no wisdom.”

Wisdom, experiencing life and the world with depth and reason, does not exist without yirah/ awe - the humility that comes with the recognition of our own limitation; and it also cannot exist without yirah/ fear - the caution and anxiety that comes with the recognition that we are ultimately not in control.

⁵ Genesis 28

⁶ Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God In Search of Man*, p. 75

⁷ Pirkei Avot 3:17

During these highest of holy days, our liturgy helps us to openly explore our fears and to stand in awe of life and the Divine. In the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, we ask:

How many shall pass away and how many shall be born?
Who shall live and who shall die?
Who in good time, and who by an untimely death?
Who by water and who by fire?
Who by sword and who by wild beast?...
Who shall be at peace and who pursued?...
Who shall be debased, and who exalted?

When we recite the Unetaneh Tokef, we are meant to accept rather than push aside the fears natural to human life and mortality. But we are also called to stand in awe of the blessings of life, and our great fortune to wake up each and every day.

Our yirah must include an acceptance of our fears, and also a recognition of the majesty of life. Fear without awe is terror, and terror leaves us paralyzed, enticing us to make decisions based on the most lurid and unrealistic nightmares. But awe without fear is equally hollow, detached from our emotions and unrealistic - For when we love, when we truly care about our loved ones and the lives we live, it is natural to fear loss, to fear suffering.

The terrified stories of loss and suffering I told myself during my father's illness and Nathan's gestation at times brought me unnecessary pain.

But, pregnancy is truly a dangerous time - despite the best medical care, miscarriage, stillbirth and high risk complications are common. We were amongst the lucky ones - tragedy was not my family's story, but every pregnancy, and every illness brings us face to face with the fear and threat of great loss.

And it is only natural to fear living the rest of our lives without the parents, grandparents, children we adore.

But that yirah of fear is only half the story --

During my dad's illness, while I dreaded the impending loss, I stood in awe of every experience of his life.

Every shared meal was a party, every ridiculous joke brought us to happy tears, the stories we shared, the quiet moments of presence and holy witnessing were some of the most important moments of our relationship.

I sat there day after day, holding his hand, with tears of gratitude for the gift of knowing him, for the gift of his love.

And as my son grew from a great yearning to the crawling, babbling, great big bundle of joy we call Nathan Yitzy - I spent, and continue to spend every day in awe of the mysterious blessing of life, in gratitude for the holy witnessing of this miracle, for the heart expanding experience of this great love.

And of course I am still fearful of the "what-ifs," of his vulnerability in this fragile world - Such is the prerogative of parenthood.

This is my story - There are others - Esau was Jacob's teacher, the Israelites helped Balak and Balaam grow, and the beautiful black sands of Tahiti forever taunted the sad remaining sailors of the Essex and inspired Herman Melville's Moby Dick.

What do you fear in this new year?

Do you fear what is happening in our government?

Do you worry about democracy and the moral values of our country and city?

Do you fear instability?

Do you worry about your finances or your home?

Do you fear loss?

Do worry about your health or the health of your loved ones?

Do you fear loneliness?

Do you worry about your relationships, your children, your friendships, your lack of connection to community?

This year, may yirah be our teacher.

When we fear political instability may we stand in awe of collective power, and find new ways to fight for what we believe in.

When we fear loneliness, may we stand in awe of human relationship, and dedicate more of ourselves to building community and finding the connections we desire.

When we fear suffering and loss, may we stand in awe of the precious mystery of life, and commit more time and energy to the people we love and our passionate pursuits in the world.

This year, may our fears lead us to wisdom, and our wisdom lead us to awe. And may we each write our stories with compassion, bravery, and great love. Amen.