

Living With Fear and Uncertainty

Rosh Hashanah 5782 Day 1 -- September 7, 2021

Rabbi Jonathan Spira-Savett, Temple Beth Abraham

The last two words of our service today in Hebrew are: *V'lo ira -- and, I will not be afraid.*

I know some of you are going right now to the joke about the rabbi who asks the congregant, "What's your favorite prayer?" and the congregant says "Adon Olam", and the rabbi says, "Oh, what do you love, is it the beautiful poetry or the theology?" and the congregant says, "No, it means the service is over and we get to eat." That's just a story, right? Anyway, if that's where you went let's regroup.

The last two words of our service are *V'lo ira. And, I will not be afraid.* One of the reasons we're here this morning is to get to those two words. It's not that for sure in an hour you'll be able to say absolutely *and now I will not be afraid*, but hopefully *I will be less afraid, because of what we did and learned here together.*

These days we get up every day to one particular source of fear, of uncertainty about life and death. Greeted with a color-coded guide to how much fear we should have on a county-by-county level, with charts that break it further down by age and other categories. Periodically the authorities give us new guidance for how to assert some control over the uncertainty that we're all sharing.

We need that guidance. But the charts and the color codes don't reach other questions: How do we live in the face of life-and-death uncertainty? How do we see ourselves, see the world, see our responsibilities? How do we also keep in the foreground *hakarat ha-tov*, a recognition of good things and mitzvahs being done, in a climate defined by fear?

How we will live in the face of a fear that has monopolized our attention for so long, when the monopoly is over but not the uncertainty?

And as Dr. Betsy Stone, a psychologist at the Hebrew Union College, reminds us, for well over a year we've been told that the main thing we have to be afraid of is each other. Hence the crazy way we are assembled today. How can we come to be less afraid of each other in the new year?

I used to think *v'lo ira* at the end of Adon Olam meant "I am not afraid." Hebrew poetry is a bit flexy with the present and future tense, and wouldn't it be a nice way to end a spiritual morning: *And now I have no fears?* Since Tree of Life and Covid-19, I've come to pay attention to the "and", and the future tense. *V'lo ira* is not a moment now of no fear, but a hope just ahead that I am moving toward. The *v'* in *v'lo ira* means "and" or "and then". Meaning: after this service, after being with this group of people in this way, *v'lo ira*, then I'm closer to not being so afraid.

What comes before the "and then" that helps us get to less dominated by fear? I talk a lot here about tribal wisdom, the life wisdom from others in this community. Tribal wisdom is different from articles and TED Talks, or even listening to me. It's applied wisdom from people whose lives are in the same place as yours, who care about you just because you're connected here to Beth Abraham or the Jewish community, however you are connected. It's wisdom that I really believe has its roots all the way back on the shores of the Red Sea and the foot of Mt. Sinai, where our souls all got acquainted for the first time.

So I've been talking to people in our community for months and over the past week in particular about living in the face of fear and uncertainty, and I want to share

some insights from them. Partly because what they have to say is wise, but more importantly so you'll think about this community as a source of wisdom. I want you to come back for more in the coming year, not just to listen to me tell you secondhand but to talk directly to each other.

Our guides this morning include people who work in professions that are all about advising people around uncertainty -- a medical doctor, a financial advisor, a couple therapists and teachers of the profession, spiritual teachers -- and they're people who reflect on personal fears and uncertainties around their own health, their physical and emotional wellbeing, and their children. I won't quote them by name, in case what I took away from their words isn't exactly what they intended.

I am sharing some of their insights by making them interpreters of the major prayer about uncertainty that comes between this moment in the service and *v'lo ira*. The most challenging and riveting paragraph forces us to state our fears -- who will live and who will die, who will be serene and who will be tormented -- and teaches that there are three things we can do, that don't deny or reduce our uncertainty but orient us in the face of fear. *Teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah*. *Teshuvah* is coming back, to ourselves and our values and our own key people. *Tefillah* we usually call prayer and I'm going to need our tribal elders to help flesh that out. *Tzedakah* is giving of ourselves to help others toward the lives they deserve. *Teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah* are intrinsically valuable, and if you forced me to boil Judaism down to three words it would be *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah*. But the prayer *Unetaneh Tokef* reminds us that they are specifically three ways of living in response to the deepest and unsettling uncertainties about the year ahead.

So let's learn from the tribe, first about *teshuvah* -- coming back.

When I asked how you deal in general with living the face of fear, a couple of them said stop, let's actually define fear.

One said that fear is an emotional state that's in the body. I have my own specific fear history, and sometimes today's concern puts my body in a state that reminds itself of some specific past time, in a way that makes it hard for me to see clearly or access my own resilience. What I've learned is to recognize that, and to remember that these states sometimes pass on their own. In a few days, I will probably come back to my settled mind. Fear can be a kind of exile, and I can return from it. Sometimes I just come back, sometimes I can bring myself back, and sometimes I need a practice to hold myself in place and help me wait it out. Fear means knowing when not to trust myself and when I can. I don't judge myself for being fearful or angry today, because I know I've come back before and I can again. *Teshuvah*, coming back from the physical state of fear.

Another person said to me: It's important to clarify what we're actually afraid of. This person said many sources in our media culture are skilled at the science of afraid-making, as a way to keep our attention. So we might feel or think or even know we're afraid, but we have to dig deeper than that. Am I afraid about losing something, or losing out on something I don't yet have? Do I even know?

Teshuvah means in the face of fear coming back to who you are and declaring what matters. In the Torah reading today, Hagar is sent off with her son Yishmael, separated from her family with only enough provisions for a short time, and she is afraid for her son's life. But the divine messenger who comes to tell her *al tir'i*, *don't be afraid*, first says to her *Mah lach Hagar* -- literally, *What is yours?* What is at the core of your life? What all is at stake for you? Only when Hagar hears that question

can she hear *don't be afraid*, and see a well of water that someone has already put there for her, and pick up her son in her arms.

Teshuvah starts with *mah lach*, it's coming back to what is yours deep down. In this current reality, what has been merely inconvenient and what is at your core. For me, on top of the fears I have for my family, my fears are about not coming through for you enough. I'm afraid of a year of not being able to use my unique talents for you. I'm afraid of losing another year of teaching and serving in ways that have more impact than speaking from this bimah. And I'm afraid of losing what I'm good at, because I haven't been able to do as much of it. I'm afraid that even if I have the fortune to live to a much older age, I will lose another whole year of working toward multi-year dreams, a year that I can never get back.

That's some tribal wisdom on *teshuvah*, coming back. What about *tefillah*? We usually translate it as prayer, but I want to widen the frame.

Tefillah is the orienting we do individually, the routine declaration of our values and the regular systems-check that get us into the day. So one congregant, a doctor who I imagine would not use the term *tefillah* for this, described for me a kind of practice around gathering information in a situation of uncertainty.

We need information to weigh the decisions we make about living with different risks -- gathering and traveling for instance, or deciding on a course of medical treatment. In the pandemic it's harder, because scientific information comes out rapidly and there are fewer central resources that aren't bundled with opinion. So this congregant and spouse have developed a routine for scanning information from a set of sources, every day, over breakfast, and rechecking every so often what those sources should be. It's a way to hold onto being logical, because making risk

calculations based on information and logic is harder in our cultural and media environment, even compared to a year or two ago.

Some say that this kind of practical empiricism is the opposite of spirituality. But I would call this a kind of *tefillah*, partly because it takes time and concentration. Twenty minutes a day, they said in this case. What I mentioned just before about stopping to ask what am I actually afraid of, coming back to my core -- that's also *tefillah*, that also takes focus and work we can easily overlook.

The doctor, along with a couple other people I talked to, said they know that alongside a routine for information gathering is the importance of gratitude. Coming to middle age in particular teaches us that tragedies happen to people like us. We should do our best to live carefully, but we can't control everything and need to remind ourselves of the blessings in our lives every day. *Tefillah* in the form of gratitude doesn't eliminate fear; it's a reminder that fear isn't all there is; it's a way of restoring beauty and joy in the face of all of life's uncertainties.

The financial advisor said that of course the market changes from day to day, and that can be frightening to someone thinking about their future wellbeing in retirement. But it's impossible to deal with those changes unless you're in touch with what doesn't change. *Tefillah* requires both a practice of gratitude, and all the obvious self-care things, from exercise and diet to hugging your grandchildren.

Of the three responses to fear, *tzedakah* is the one we're most familiar with as a concept. It's giving in a way that helps someone else live as they deserve to. But how is *tzedakah* a response to fear?

It's remarkable how many people I've spoken to in our congregation who say in the same breath: I have real fear and little hope about the direction of our country, and here is this new thing I started doing that probably won't make a difference in the big picture but I can't help but do it. I spoke to a congregant the other day who I stood by the river with one year ago today for *tashlich*, who was very active in the presidential campaigns nonstop from the primaries all the way through the general, who said by the river once the election is over I know I'll need time to take a break. And when I checked in recently, that person had not taken the break, but had volunteered for a new, even more responsible position related to getting good people elected, and is considering some major work on immigrant issues in our local community.

As one congregant put it to me directly: God heals me when I'm not thinking about me, and the only time that happens is when I am working with someone going through a harder time than me.

This is how *tzedakah* is a response to fear. In Hebrew the same word I've been using for fear also means awe. Rabbi Shai Held quotes his teacher Bernard Steinberg: "Awe is what happens to fear when it stops being about me." Awe is the moment when fear focuses us and we refocus, a moment when we move from *Why me?* to *Why do I matter in the scheme of the universe, what is it that makes me necessary?* That's awe -- that I matter for what I do to make the world a place of wonder for others as they face their own fears.

This is just some of what your fellow Beth Abraham-ers have to teach about living in the new year in the face of the fears and uncertainties that will be with us. You are surrounded by teachers of *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah*. They didn't use those words specifically, but they enlarged my understanding of the Jewish terms I speak

about every year. And you are teachers too. We are a tribe full of wisdom for each other. I hope this year as a congregation we can all find our ways to conversations that surface tribal wisdom, whether it's on the side of a program or at a Shabbat meal, through the connections we discover through our kids, or in more planned gatherings around these themes.

This year our fears are particularly obvious. But every year Rosh Hashanah forces us to say out loud what our irreducible uncertainties are, as well as the answer to them: *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah*, not all by yourself but with all the people who around you for this gathering today. These won't erase fear, but they will help you live in the face of it.

We are always on a path from fearfulness toward flourishing, and none of us are alone. So this year, in addition to the stats and the color-coded charts and the latest CDC guidance, look here -- look to your tribe. Spend another hour today in each other's presence, and other times during this year. *V'lo ira* -- and then, perhaps you will be less afraid.