

I was seated next to a man and woman in the back row of an airplane. They were a wealthy and influential couple, on their way to New York for a fundraiser at the Waldorf Astoria. They told me the king and queen of Thailand would also be at the event. I couldn't help but wonder why a couple like that would travel in the back row of the plane! Why not first class? Why not a private plane? So after a long conversation, I asked the husband. He replied, "My wife is more comfortable in the last row. She's read about planes that have crashed, but she's never heard about a plane being rear-ended."¹

This story sounds very familiar to many of us. Of course, we would never do something as silly as this woman did, but if we take a moment, we can conjure up many of our own actions that are driven by fear.

Fear is both harmful and helpful. Fears are what propel us into action and also paralyze us into inaction. Both action and inaction are the correct responses in certain scenarios. We are grateful when children naturally have stranger danger. We want our kids to fear the fireplace or be wary of an adult that is too interested in them. Fear often keeps us safe.

Each of us reacts differently to fear. Typically, I am propelled by fear, and this is not always the healthiest. Sometimes it would be better for me to step back and take a moment to think. Fear is often the driving force when we react too quickly and say things we can't easily take back. When we are acting from a place of fear, we make mistakes.

¹ Kushner, Harold. *Conquering Fear*, 12-13.

Yet being propelled by fear is also often helpful. When the fires broke out, many of us were propelled into action—actions that greatly benefitted the community. Franz Rosenzweig, a German Jewish philosopher, wrote, “All knowledge of the universe begins in the fear of death.” Therefore, everything that we learn and accomplish is because of our underlying fear of death.

If we weren’t afraid, says Rosenzweig, then we would have no reason to get anything done, no reason to learn anything or to teach anything or to pass anything on. Our own mortality – and our profound awareness of it – is what makes us most creative and most human.

Yet, if fear always drove us to action, many of us would never rest. Our teeth might be completely grinded down, and we might be spinning our wheels. Conversely, if fear always paralyzed us, we might all be stuck in our seats.

Jewish tradition teaches us about two distinct kinds of fear. There are two Hebrew words for fear, *pachad* and *norah*. According to Rabbi Alan Lew, an acclaimed author and spiritual director, ‘*Pachad* [is] projected or imagined fear . . . It is astounding how often such fears become the organizing principles of our lives and how much they close us off from the world.’²

Pachad is paralyzing. It stops us in our tracks. *Pachad* makes us sit in the last row of the airplane.

Norah, according to Lew, “ is a very different kind of fear. It is the fear that overcomes us when we suddenly find ourselves in possession of considerably more

² Lew, Alan. *Be Still and Get Going*

energy than we are used to ... a mixture of fear and awe . . . we call this bristling energy . . . *norah*. *Norah* [tries] to push us open. The fear we experience . . . is simply our resistance to this opening.”³

Rabbi Sarah Mason Barkan explains, “This *norah*, this fear or awe, is a surge of adrenaline. *Norah*, or awe, forces us to comment, to make a change. *Norah* urges us to reach out to those who are hurting. *Norah* motivates us, strengthens us. *Norah* makes us brave.” *Norah* is not just fear but amazement and awe... like amazement at the natural world, standing at the edge of the ocean, the depth of a cannon or the peak of a mountain. Additionally *norah* is the same as the *Yamim Norahim*, the Days of Awe... the holiest days of our Jewish year. Like *norah*, these days are like standing on the peak of a mountain and looking around.

Most of us have both *pachad* and *norah* fears. I know that I have many universal fears of global warming, nuclear threats, losing reproductive rights along with more particular fears about finances, aging, falling off a camel and job security. The scariest fears are the ones we keep inside, the ones we often conveniently leave off the list, like the fear of being alone, getting cancer or having people see our true selves.

When we hear the word “fear,” many of our thoughts automatically go back to the evening of October 9th of last year. Anyone in Sonoma County knows where we were when we heard about the fires: awakened in the middle of the night by police standing over our beds, watching it on the news from Los Angeles, or hearing about it

³ Lew, Alan. *Be Still and Get Going*

while vacationing in another country. The fires took so much from so many of us, even those of us who didn't lose our homes. The fire stole a false sense of safety and security.

During these first traumatic weeks, people reacted very differently. The fear of losing everything raced through our veins and, for some, this propelled us into action... running to help in any way we could think of. Others were stuck, shell shocked, really: walking around with a crying heart, not knowing which way to turn first or what to do next, waiting for the air to clear. Almost a year later and sounds, smells and pictures bring back some of our initial fears.

Humans have always grappled with fear; Judaism has always grappled with fear. In the, *TaNakh*, the Hebrew Bible, God comforts us with the words, *al tirah*; don't fear! (same root as *norah*) thirty- nine times. God says *al tirah* again and again and again. It is a timeless message for our people: *al tirah*; don't fear. But God isn't saying to have no fears. (That would be unrealistic.) Rather, God is telling us to take a deep breath and push through.⁴

Al tirah, don't fear, is like a biblical warning, because fears can bring out the worst in us. They can make us act in irrational ways; they can fuel us when we need to take a moment to breathe and think. *Al tirah* is a warning before saying something or doing something we can never take back. Don't fear is a warning so that we don't just let our anxiety rule our rational brains.

My first year of rabbinical school, while living in Jerusalem, I was crossing the street from my apartment to school on a crosswalk with stopped traffic on both sides.

⁴ Rabbi Asher Knight

The next thing I remember is diving face first into the pavement. The heaviness of the motorcycle that was white lining in traffic was on my legs and people around were screaming. Hours later, I was discharged from the hospital still covered in blood but free of any internal damage. I was so lucky, yet, after that, I was petrified of crossing any street in Israel. This was a huge obstacle for living in a pedestrian city. A wise rabbi, Rabbi Wilfond, better known as Gingy, helped tremendously. He instructed me to say the *shema* and walk... take a deep breath and walk... "You can't stop walking," he urged.

He was really saying *al tirah*... push through the fear. Don't let your *pachad*, your fear, paralyze you. To this day, I am still jumpy walking on the streets in Israel... but I push through.

This lesson was profoundly true last *Simchat Torah*. *Simchat Torah* is supposed to be one of the happiest holidays in the Jewish calendar. It's exciting for rabbis, because it is really the end of the High Holy Days. It's a joyous holiday filled with dancing, singing, drinking and merriment. The holiday marks the end of reading the *Torah* and starting our learning over again. Last *Simchat Torah* was celebrated by few. We barely had enough people to unroll the entire *Torah*... who could blame us? The air was filled with smoke, the fires were still burning around us and no one felt like celebrating.

As we began our commanded holiday, there were tears, and heavy hearts... yet the intimate group who could make it that night had a profound experience. We remembered that Jews have fled from their homes countless times over the centuries, yet Judaism has survived. Judaism has survived natural disasters, discrimination and

many forms of systematic persecution. It was awe-inspiring that we were able to stand together and read from our holiest scripture. The act of being together lessened the fears inside of us.

Community can be incredibly powerful to insight or calm fears. Your closest friends can be the ones to either ignite your anxiety or release it. Yet, I would argue that each of us has the power to release anxiety by differentiating between what is within our control and what is not. The American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, in his wisdom, wrote the Serenity Prayer, which, when practiced, is successful at calming anxiety. “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Our modern day technology makes this differentiating difficult. While preparing to leave for Israel this summer, I grappled with whether or not to leave my Nixel alerts and Red App alerts active. Nixel is our best emergency system in California, and the Red App is Israel’s emergency system. I felt like having the alerts going off could only provide anxiety, while a colleague argued that the alerts could also provide solace, letting me know there were no immediate threats near me. This change of perspective, this surrendering to things beyond my control, was calming.

The most famous Jewish quote about fear is also a popular camp song. *Kol ha’olam kulo gesher tsar m’od v’haikar lo l’fached klal*: The whole world is a narrow bridge, but the essence (really... the crux of the matter) is not to be afraid.⁵

⁵ Rabbi Chaim Nachim of Breslav

Rabbi Steven Arnold a modern day Reform Rabbi found that this famous quote was actually corrupted when it was turned into a song. The original quote was not *lo l'fached k'lal*, don't be afraid at all but rather *sh'lo yitpached klal*, man shouldn't completely enfeared himself. Or, better 'paralyze himself with fear!' You shouldn't freak yourself out!"⁶

This makes a lot of sense, because I can't really tell you, Judaism can't tell you... don't be afraid and poof! Rather, we learn from the rabbinic wisdom that, of course, we are going to encounter things that are frightening, awe-inspiring... scary. We need to not "freak out." We need to not paralyze ourselves with fear. *Al tirah* teaches us to push through, embrace the fear and ultimately put fear in its place so that we can move through life not paralyzed or continuously propelled.

We have to look in all directions, look to community, friends, loved ones and wisdom to calm our fears and be able to live productive joyful lives.

May this year's winds be more like gentle breezes. (Amen)

May this year be a year filled of calming rain. (Amen)

May this year shine with rainbows of promise. (Amen)

May this be a less frightening year for us all. (Amen)

⁶ CCAR: Central Conference of American Rabbis Member Group. In Facebook Member Group. Retrieved September 7, 2014 from <https://www.facebook.com/groups/ccarmembers/>.