

Erev Rosh Hashanah Message – 2020/5781
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Facing Our Fears

This year, instead of formal sermons, I am going to take a few moments each service to offer a special message. Each message will reflect on our experiences during the past six months, as we continue to stay inside, or keep our distance when we go outside, donning our masks and avoiding being in public places as much as possible, watch the turmoil in our country. We try to put on a good face under our masks, but we wonder, when will this end? Will things ever get back to normal?

This pandemic is global and affects us all. But it also affects each and every one of us in personal and unique ways. Some of us have known people who got sick from COVID, some know those who have passed on from the virus. For some it has meant not being able to come back to Monticello this summer. For others, it has meant not being able to see friends or family in person... not being able to give hugs to those we care for and love. It has meant staying home when we are used to going out. It has meant boredom and frustration. But if I were to sum up the one most prevalent word to describe our experiences of the past six months, my guess, is that it's the word FEAR!

Yes, things have calmed down. We are adjusting. In the first months, perhaps the key emotion was better described as "terrified." So many unknowns. Who to listen to? Will I survive? Will I get sick? Will I be hospitalized and be alone, with no one able to visit?

If you are not familiar with FACEBOOK, when someone posts a comment or thought, you have the choice of responding by clicking on an icon, a picture. The choices are: "LIKE," "LOVE," "CARE," "WOW," "SAD," or "ANGRY." You can choose only one. The one icon I wished they had during the past six months, was one to express the word FEAR or TERRIFIED. Because that is how I have felt most often during the past six months, and speaking to many of you, I don't think I am alone in those thoughts.

It is my hope, that through the various messages I offer over the next ten days, we will find ways to feel more at peace with what is going on around us and find ways to start or continue the healing process. But in order to heal, we need to name the emotions we are feeling. There certainly have been many more emotions that I have experienced. I invite you, as I am talking now, to share on chat, the emotions you have been feeling during the past six months.

Our Biblical ancestors also experienced fear.

- Sarah was frightened when she laughed as God told her she was going to have a baby in her old age because God was upset she questioned what God could do.

- Jacob was frightened as he was getting ready to see his brother Esau, after years of estrangement.
- Moses was fearful of the Israelites when he struck down an Egyptian taskmaster out of anger and they questioned his motives.
- As the Israelites were moving toward the Red Sea after escaping from slavery, they saw the Egyptians advancing after them. Their fears almost paralyzed them until Nahshon took the first step to make the sea part.
- And they greatly feared the unknown, as they wandered in the wilderness.
- And perhaps most relevant to our current situation, the Israelites were frightened when they were exiled to Babylonia and could no longer worship God in the Temple the way they had done their whole lives.

So how do we address our fears? How do we learn to live with our fears and the uncertainties we continue to face in these strange and unprecedented times?

Allow me to put on my mental health counseling hat for a moment and speak to you as Dr. Medwin. (Take off Kipah and put on stethoscope) NO I am not that kind of a doctor, but I thought it makes a good prop.

Here are some helpful guidelines.

- When you feel that anxiety is starting to take over, take a few, slow deep breaths to slow down your body's physical response to anxiety, stress and fear.
- Physically move, in whatever way that is possible for you: go for a walk, walk in place indoors, do some stretching or yoga. That releases endorphins which help to calm depression and anxiety.
- Practice mindfulness, which means focusing on and appreciating the present rather than worrying about what might happen in the future.
- Remember, how you feel is affected by what you think. If you feel emotionally wrought, stop and reflect on what your mind is thinking.
 - Is what I am thinking accurate? Yes, we can obsess about catching COVID, but if we are following safety precautions, what are the actual chances of getting it?
 - Are we still worrying about the fears that we initially had even though we know more about the virus now and can better identify the best ways to stay safe?
 - Do we expect the worst in the political arena?

I once attended a lecture by Michael J. Fox when I was at a rabbinic conference. It was years ago, when he was beginning to show more signs of early onset Parkinson's Disease. Someone in the audience asked him, "Don't you worry about what is going to happen to you?" He replied, "If I worry now, and it happens later, then I will have suffered twice."

I think of that statement often. Why suffer now about things that are unlikely to happen.

But there certainly are spiritual ways to help us deal with our stress. (Put back on Kipah and take off stethoscope.) Rabbi Medwin again.

When our ancestors were frightened, what calmed them?

They turned to God as a source of comfort.

God said to Abraham, "Fear not, Abram, I am a shield to you." Gen. 15:1

God said to Isaac, "I am the God of your father Abraham. Fear not, for I am with you." Gen. 26:24

God said to Jacob, "Fear not to go down to Egypt, for I will make you there into a great nation. I will go down with you to Egypt." Gen 46:3

In Isaiah the Israelites are comforted by God reminding them:

Fear not, for I am with you, I will be your help. (Isaiah 41:10,13)

The 23rd the Psalmist reminds us: Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness, I fear no harm for You, God are with me... You comfort me. You will lead me to a place of repose. Psalm 23:4,2

Psalm 27, which we have been reading during the month of Elul reminds us:

Psalm 27:1 The Lord is my light and my help;

whom should I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life,

whom should I dread?

And finally, the last verse in Adon Olam says:

Into your hands I entrust my soul, when I sleep and when I wake,

And with my soul and my body, Adonai is with me. I shall not fear.

So when we are feeling afraid, question our thoughts. Take a deep breath, and turn to God for comfort and protection.