



“TRANSFORMING FEAR INTO OPTIMISM”

Once, a father and a son explored the jungle. Wandering, they heard noises and saw shadows. The deeper into the journey, the more nervous they became. On the third day, the son whispered: “What if we come upon a hungry lion?” The father replied: “Don’t worry. We read that book about dealing with wild animals. If we come upon a lion, we will stand still and stare him in the eye.” And the two of them walked on together. The son then asked, nervously: “Ok, you’ve read the book and I’ve read the book. But what if the lion hasn’t read the book.” (sermonillustrations.com/a-z/f/fear.htm, adapted. Remember stories come from many sources.)

I know, an old joke, not really a midrash on the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac. However, fears, both known and imagined, are quite real. Today, we read Genesis’ description of Abraham and Isaac, walking for three days. Most of us would have been quite fearful, in either of their sandals. Surprisingly, much of the traditional commentary understands both father and son as approaching the Akedah bravely. The Torah itself hints towards more complicated feelings. Ten chapters after this chilling journey, Jacob, Abraham’s grandson and Isaac’s son, speaks of “the God of Abraham and Pachad Yitzchak, the Fear of Isaac.” (Genesis 31:42) Both terms refer to God. Jacob’s inherited understanding that Isaac feared God, comes from this morning’s Torah portion. However, the term is a confusing one. How could Pachad Yitzchak, the Fear of Isaac, refer to God, just one generation later?

Even if our people have more names for God than some proverbial Northern dwellers may for snow, Pachad Yitzchak, the Fear of Isaac, is a strange term for God. Sure, fear and awe are near synonyms, but Pachad is more naturally understood as straightforward fear. The term appears twice in the Torah; both times in Genesis 31. Apparently, it is absent in the entire Talmud. I found the traditional commentary unsatisfying in its attempts to explain Pachad Yitzchak as a positive term for God. However, in a recent article, psychologist Josh Gressel, offered a more useful explanation. Gressel wrote:

“The concept of ‘Pachad Yitzchak’ is about religious relief experienced in the aftermath of extreme emotions.”
(Sh’ma Now, September 2017, page 3)

Thus, let’s understand Pachad Yitzchak, the Fear of Isaac, as signifying not the build up of fear as Abraham walked his son to Mount Moriah, bound his son to the altar, and raised his knife. Rather, Pachad Yitzchak more appropriately indicates Isaac’s transition from that increasing fear to the relief Isaac must have felt at the end of the story. The knife is lowered peacefully and the harsh Divine command averted. The Fear of Isaac is transformed into relief and, thus, newfound possibility. Sadly aware of the journey that brought him to the Akedah, Isaac is now confronted with new opportunities for the future. His own relationship with God can be reconstructed, as he arises from the fear. Isaac can now move forward with a fresh perspective.

The late Elie Wiesel clearly understood this “religious relief experience” as opening up new possibilities. We think of Wiesel

as writing about the past, but so much of his perspective was future-focused and broadly conceived. For example, in 1981, Elie Wiesel was interviewed regarding a hunger crisis in Cambodia. The Noble Prize winner said:

“I am pessimistic now. I am pessimistic because I do not trust history. But at the same time, I am optimistic. Out of despair one creates.”
(April 7, 1981, New York Times, page C11, Henry Kamm
“Marchers with Food Aid Get No Cambodian Response”)

Knowingly, Elie Wiesel shifted his attention from pessimism to optimism; from the Fear of Isaac, if you will, to faith in possibility, for “out of despair one creates.” His constructive attitude is severely lacking today. It seems that few of us-- Jews, Americans, humans-- are open enough to this transition of emotions. In 2017, I sense that we are in the midst of an extended moment in political history where we arrive at our positions based on fear not upon optimism. Our very lack of trust in history leads us to doubt the possibilities of the future. Western democracies, such as the United States and Israel, are particularly vulnerable to such a mindset. Our very governments and societal structures thrive when citizens and leaders have a sense of hopeful potential. We need to remember that fear can be transformed to optimism.

Let’s focus on America first. Nowadays, and for many days, all sides of the political divide seem to be motivated primarily by fear. It is easier to speak of anxieties and predict traumatic outcomes, than to propose hope-filled, consensus-based visions of the future. Last year’s election illustrated and exacerbated this gap, but the public distress preexisted the Fall of 2016. Choose the issue and listen to the speeches and dinner table conversations. It feels like in all cases, those speaking are stuck in a fearful mode.

Consider for example:

Immigration: Some are afraid that we are diluting our opportunities and security by allowing too many foreigners into the United States. Others are concerned that by keeping immigrants out, the United States damages its values, its relations with other countries, and its economic future. Or

Health Care: Fear pervades among those who might lose their coverage, those whose premiums have risen, those who are concerned that government has become too involved in healthcare or those who insist that government must be involved in sorting through such a crucial societal need. There is more than enough fear to go around on that issue.

Choose any other current issue and we hear far more fear than hope in our discussions. The tone is even worse when you glance at, or more likely obsess over, your social media feed. Let’s skip the contemporary policy quotes, because we are already swimming in the podcasts and news articles, the speeches of leaders and conversations with family members. Driving here this morning, your radios likely shared frightful predictions about legislative possibilities. Such painful frustrations are likely to continue over

Rosh Hashanah lunch. I wonder if our children and grandchildren may ever see a day free of the intense, hateful polarization that passes for policy debate in America.

Surely, we face complicated issues without clear solutions. In our interconnected world, we sense that so much is beyond our direct control. However, maybe we should pause for a moment. Maybe, we should remind ourselves that we are not the first generation to face looming challenges. This is not the first decade to grapple with ongoing, existential concerns. Life in the Ancient Near East was not easy, yet the Torah manages to turn Pachad Yitzchak, Isaac's very Fear of God, into the religious relief that allowed for the building of a future. Other generations have managed similar transitions. We should acknowledge our real fears today and yet hold onto the possibility that together, we can find solutions, even partial solutions. Fear can be transformed to optimism.

In 1903, Rabbi Adolph Guttmacher managed to face the challenges of his day with a hopeful tone. Rabbi Guttmacher, BHC's rabbi from 1892-1915, wrote a book entitled Optimism and Pessimism in the Old and New Testaments. In a time ripe with Anti-Semitism, he encouraged:

"The main distinction between Optimism and Pessimism is that while the former looks upon evil as temporary and alterable, the latter regards it as final and unalterable."
(Freidenwald Company, p.15)

In his lengthy defense of Judaism as the more optimistic of the two faiths, Rabbi Gutmacher focused on Judaism's belief that the world, as we experience it, can be improved. He pragmatically accepted reality's flaws, but didn't give in to despair or panic. Our congregation's leader encouraged his readers to view life's problems as "temporary and alterable," to use his words. Rabbi Guttmacher and Elie Wiesel offer us the same advice. Don't ignore history; but still find the strength to envision a better future. Fear can be transformed to optimism.

I was lucky enough to study in Israel for two weeks at the beginning of July. Debbie and I learned at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, where we explored a range of perspectives and texts related to the biggest decisions facing Israel. Israeli policy debates seem stuck in the same rut as American ones. Fear dominates the discussions, be they religious, economic, or security in nature. Dealing with Iran and its proxies brings a certain kind of stress. The extended complications between the Palestinians and the Israelis are a different challenge. In attitude, Israel echoes America. It doesn't matter whether you are listening to Knesset members shout, newscasters argue, or relatives debate over a meal.

One of our instructors, Israeli negotiator and scholar Tal Becker, invited us to consider how "zero sum thinking" was influencing decision making on all sides. For those unfamiliar with the term, zero sum thinking assumes that there can only be one winner and one loser. Think of a game of checkers. Tal Becker encouraged us to seek possibilities that are more dynamic, where both sides might win a little or lose a little. A good example is the Middle Eastern shuk, where when a negotiation works properly, both the shopkeeper and shopper walk away pleased. Like many Westerners, I frankly always feel a bit uncomfortable in the shuk, maybe even before we start negotiating. Ironically, the different groups in the Middle East don't seem to apply shuk thinking to large policy questions. Becker suggests that all sides are stuck at zero sum. He would encourage us to look beyond viewing life's

big decisions as zero sum games. In order to successfully deploy such a strategy, we need to grapple with our own anxieties. Being dominated by our fears and seeking out only win-lose approaches to policy decisions are not constructive. In discussions about the Western Wall and Pluralism or about foreign policy, Israelis must find a way to communicate beyond their concerns. When talking amongst themselves or with Diaspora Jews, their leaders need to find more productive strategies. Fear can be transformed to optimism, even if the actual policies will only unfold slowly over time.

This morning's Torah portion presented a terrifying choice turned into religious relief only at that last moment. For Yom Kippur, Reform Judaism specifically chose a reading that presented a more clearly uplifting message. On that morning, Deuteronomy 30 recounts God's presentation of options: blessings and curses, life and death. We are taught that our attitudes and actions have a tangible impact on reality. Just possibly, next week's Torah portion is offering us some advice towards conquering our fears regarding life's challenges. Of course, the term Pachad Yitzhak doesn't appear in Deuteronomy, but the attitude is present. If we can make choices, than the future can be altered. Further, if our own decisions can change, than isn't it possible that the positions of others just might shift, no matter how fixed they may seem. I suggest we keep that last point in mind regarding our own families, let alone regarding government leaders.

This morning, we will have an early liturgical hint of Pachad Yitzchak, of Isaac's Fear being transformed into religious relief. Our third and final set of shofar calls is named Shofarot. As explained on pages of our prayerbook:

"We call this final set of shofar prayers and reflections the Voice of Hope, for the climactic t'kiah g'dolah is a crescendo of our most profound hopes as a people, of our deepest personal hopes on the threshold of a new year...Today we stand before the shofar to hear its voice of hope—resilient and strong, proclaiming freedom, promising redemption."
(Miskan Hanefesh, p.278 and 281)

That redemption will only draw closer, if we all learn to calm our fears. As we hear our final shofar calls, may we ponder the tone of our national dialogue and of Israel's exchanges. As we explore the jungle of lives, may we embrace this message of Pachad Yitzchak, of the Fear of Isaac. The challenges of our day, of any generation, may seem overwhelming. Let us not be frozen on an altar of inaction, but rather may we feel the relief and possibility taught by Jacob and our prayerbook, by Elie Wiesel and Rabbi Adolph Guttmacher. It may only happen slowly, but fear can be transformed into optimism.

Ken Yehi Ratzon. May it be God's will.