

Chag Sameach Everyone.

From this standpoint, I can't help but notice that we make a lovely *kehilla*. A lovely group of people gathered together for a common purpose. We are here to celebrate a new year, as well as our journey through the years together. And I have always been honored to be a part of this particular *kehilla*. This group of people who live according to the Jewish value of *tikun olam*, the reparation of the world.

But we are also a *kahal*, a room full of individuals. Individuals gathered together for unique and personal purposes. While we share a multi-thousand year old history and tradition, we are each ultimately here for our own personal reasons.

Next week, on Yom Kippur, we will start our Yizkor service with the song *Kol Ha'Olam Kulo*. That song embodies my personal reason for being here. Hearing it sung, and joining in that song, breathes life into my emotional and spiritual journey every new year.

It speaks to my *tikun ha'lev*. Unlike *Tikun Olam*, the reparation of the world, *tikun ha'lev*, is the reparation of the heart and it addresses a more individual need. One I believe we all have year after year.

These are the words to the song: *Kol Ha'olam Kulo, Gesher Tzar M'od. V'haikkar Lo L'fached K'lal*.

Kol Ha'Olam Kulo, is Hebrew for all of the world together, the whole world, *Gesher Tzar M'od* is a very narrow bridge. *V'ha-ikkar*, and the most important thing, *Lo L'fached*, is not to fear, *k'lal*, **at all**.

All of the world is a very narrow bridge, and the most important thing is not to fear at all.

I like this song because it acknowledges how scary this world can be. In fact, many would argue that these are particularly scary times. The European Jewish Association and the Rabbinical Center of Europe conducted a study of 700 European capital cities from England to the Ukraine. A poll was taken regarding whether registration for High Holiday services was higher or lower this year than in the past. The survey further asked if attendance was affected by fear for safety. Their published results from this study stated that 70% of European Jews won't go to synagogue on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur due to fear for their safety and the safety of their children.

Learning that the Jews in Europe were so scared, scared me because I know all about this kind of fear.

My personal relationship with fear started when I was very young. I was born the second of three children. I have an older brother and a younger sister. This is significant because my father was worried about having three children. Why? Because he only has two arms and if the Nazis came back, he'd only be able to grab two and run.

Having a Holocaust survivor as a parent and learning about it extensively year after year in Hebrew School as young children, my siblings and I were on high alert. Unbeknownst to us at the time, we each grew up having our own secret hiding place. One we would go to should the Nazis come looking. This was New Jersey in the 1960s yet we were prepared for a Nazi round up of Jewish children.

So given my long history with fear, not being afraid at all, is a lot to ask for. And yet, Judaism asks for this. More than that, Judaism *requires* it.

In the book of Genesis, God says *Al Tira*, do not be afraid. God said it to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and again to Joseph. *Al Tira* was said to Hagar when her precious little baby was dying of thirst in the dessert. *Al Tira* was said to an elderly Jacob as he headed to Pharaoh's palace in search of his long lost son Joseph.

Some might interpret *Al Tira* as an expression of reassurance. God saying, "don't be afraid, I'll be with you." But in *Sefer Ha Mitzvot*, Maimonides teaches that not being afraid is a mitzvah, a commandment. If God says *Al Tira*, it becomes a commandment to not be afraid.

I can understand Maimonides' perspective. If one has a complete and perfect faith in God, one would not be afraid. But, what if our faith isn't perfect?

My uncle, Rabbi Abraham Barras who was a prominent Conservative rabbi always said one does not need to have faith in God, or even believe in God to be a good Jew. Rather, one needs to act according to Jewish values. *Tzedakkah* acts of generosity. *Gimilut chasadim* acts of loving kindness. *Tikkun Olam* acts which improve the earth and its inhabitants.

After winning the Nobel Prize, there was one question my father was asked over and over again. "Do you believe in God? Can one explain the wonders of the Universe in scientific terms and still have faith in God?" I actually don't know what his answer is because Dad always dodged these questions like a skilled politician. He'd say something like, "I see great order in the Universe." This made everyone happy and people took it as confirmation that he believed whatever they believed. More importantly, he'd then steer the focus from beliefs to actions. "These are my ideas for freeing Refusenik Jews from Soviet Russia." "These are my ideas for sources of renewable energy."

A Jew is required to take action. Regardless of what we think or feel we are all required to take action.

So, what would inhibit a life of purposeful action? Certainly there's ignorance and general indifference to the suffering of others. But for me, often it's the presence of fear. I tend to freeze in the face of fear. It robs me of power.

Perhaps this is what the song *Kol HaOlam Kulo* is really about. Perhaps it is important to manage our fears, not because we are commanded to do so, but because fear inhibits purposeful action. If it is our job to repair the world, it is vital that we take action when action is called for.

I remember the Yom Kippur War. It was 1973 and I was 10 years old sitting with my parents in shul. I remember a close family friend walking through the doors to the sanctuary, coming over and whispering in my father's ear. It took no time for the buzz to spread from person to person. The fear that was spreading quietly at first grew louder, ultimately demanding full attention.

5700 miles away, Ariel Sharon was leading his troops toward the Suez Canal. As they approached the bridgehead to the canal, the song *Kol Ha'olam Kulo* was broadcast over the radios and intercoms of all Israeli tanks. At that pivotal moment, Israel's soldiers headed into battle joined in song. They actually sang. Together. And their spirits were strengthened.

This is a true story. As someone who is afraid of everything, global warming, anti-semitism, the upcoming presidential election, my son's math teacher... I find this astonishing. How is this possible? How is it possible to head into battle singing?

I believe it is because when the song played, it reminded each soldier that he or she was not alone. Each was part of a *Kehillah* and felt the certainty of those around them.

And it is this very certainty, the one I feel when I remember my kehillah, that helps me not be so afraid. I know I'm not facing global warming alone. I know I'm not facing antisemitism alone. I know I'm not facing the insanity of our upcoming presidential election alone. And I'm pretty sure if I asked one of you to come with me while I speak with Eli's math teacher, you'd do so!

But maybe not everything needs to be so scary. Let's look at the statistical analysis stating 70% of European Jews won't attend services this year out of fear for their safety.

The study stated that it represents 700 European cities. But it turns out that only 78 people answered the poll. 78 people speaking for 700 cities. I only know this because when I told my older son, Jonah, about this study, he responded with skepticism. In fact he said, “what, did they only survey Jews in Turkey?” I was annoyed by this response because clearly my attempts to traumatize him the way I had been traumatized weren’t working. So, I dug a little deeper in order to prove my point. Which admittedly was a stupid point, but that’s a whole other d’rash.

As I was digging for more information, I found an article in the Jerusalem post. The article gave voice to European Jewish leaders who, like my son, were skeptical of the study. Ukrainian Chief Rabbi Yaakov Bleich stated that there are more practicing Jews in the Ukraine than in decades past and the number of Jews attending synagogue has actually increased. The Chief Rabbi of Poland, the director of the Representative Council of French Jewish Institutions, and the Board of Deputies President in the UK all stated this statistic does not reflect the realities of their communities and that the study was sensationalist.

Now, clearly I cannot speak to the reality of the situation in Europe. I surely cannot speak to the motivations of European Jews individually or collectively. But it’s interesting to me that of all newspapers, the Jerusalem Post published an article that gave a broader perspective on the 70% reduction in attendance poll. By appealing to reason over fear, they offered us the option of not being so afraid.

Personally, I’d like to embrace that option. I’d like to embrace the option of not being so afraid. I’m not suggesting we all put our heads in the sand and ignore the problems in the world. Rather I’m suggesting, so that we can effectively respond to the needs of the world, as well as our own needs, perhaps it’d be better to not give fear so much power.

If we could all do this, just imagine the possibilities. Just imagine...

What if Israelis weren’t afraid of Palestinians and Palestinians weren’t afraid of Israelis? What if light skinned police officers weren’t afraid of dark skinned pedestrians and dark skinned pedestrians weren’t afraid of light skinned police officers? What if transgender individuals weren’t afraid of using a public restroom and those using that restroom weren’t afraid of what they don’t understand?

What if individuals who manipulate fear for their own personal gain were stopped in their tracks? What if it were impossible for a politician to rise to power based solely on a platform of fear, lies and hatred?

What if it were true that the Jews in Europe could freely attend services without worrying for their safety and the safety of their children?

There is something about these possibilities that has emboldened me. And after practically making a career out of being fearful, I feel ready to draw a line in the sand.

I cannot honestly say a miracle has occurred and I am no longer a person who is preoccupied by fear. But today I am ready to take it on. I am ready to stand with my *kehilla* and say no to fear. Together we stand strong and can take on the messengers of fear and destruction.

Am Yisroel Chai, the nation of Israel lives. And we are courageous.

This Rosh Hashanah, let's be courageous and embrace our personal purposes for being here.

Let's be courageous and reach for *Tikun Ha'lev* and repair our own hearts in preparation for a new year.

Let's be courageous and challenge our own imperfections and the imperfections of our species as a whole.

Let's be courageous and take action, despite the depth of the problem or our self-perceived limitations.

Let's be courageous and face the unknown year ahead and regardless of what happens, let's be confident in our collective strength as we carry on in our pursuit of justice and *Tikkun Olam*.

The whole entire world is a very narrow bridge. And though we really can't make the bridge much wider, we can courageously break down walls, build new bridges and cross together.

Me with you. You with me. One nation. *Am Echad*. And not be afraid.

I wish you all a good year, *Shana Tovah*.