

**Al Tirah: Facing fear with Faith**  
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אל תירא ישראל, אל תירא כי גור אריה הלא אתה ואריה אם ישאג - מי לא ירא מי לא ירא. *Fear not Israel,*  
*Fear not! A Cub of Lion You are and if the Lion will Roar who would not fear?! (Yaakov Hatamim,*  
*Avihu Medinah)*

One of my most cherished memories is from those Saturday afternoons in Buenos Aires, when the youth activities at my synagogue concluded. Our beloved Rabbi, Baruj Plavnick Z"l, would join us to lead the Havdalah service. It was the twilight hour, and we stepped outside to gaze at the stars, united in song. Among his favorites was a melody he learned from his teacher - the same one I just sang. With a voice not of a great singer but emanating from the depths of his heart, he guided us in concluding Shabbat with the refrain of a modern Israeli song. Years later, I discovered why he chose that song, particularly one that encouraged us not to be afraid. In the Sephardic liturgy, as Shabbat draws to a close, we sing "Al Tirah Avdi Yaakov" - "Do not fear, my servant Jacob," echoing a biblical verse (Jer. 30:10). As darkness falls and the unknown looms, we need that reassuring voice, telling us, "Do not be afraid, I am here." For me, that voice was embodied by my Rabbi, the one who repeatedly said to me: "Do not be afraid - Al Tirah."

Every new beginning, each new year, stirs in most of us two emotions: excitement and fear. The excitement arises from the prospect of new and better opportunities, but it's shadowed by the fear that things may not unfold as expected. This evening we close, literally with Neilah, the process that we started a few days ago in Rosh Hashanah. I imagine that within each of you, excitement brews - ideas, goals, and dreams for this new year. Projects, journeys, and challenges postponed far too long. Yet, almost in the same breath, fears also take root. Unbidden and relentless, doubts, questions, and anxieties creep into our minds. Will my health hold for the journey ahead? Will my income remain stable? Can I mend the fraying relationships that matter to me? Will the national economy remain steady, or will it falter? Does the world as we know it still have a place in the future?

At this Neilah service, as we stand at the crossroads of fresh beginnings, where excitement meets apprehension, I want to candidly address our fears. At this moment when the doors of forgiveness start to close, I would like to talk about our fears. At this time of the day, when night begins and many times fears appear I would like to address them.

What wisdom does Judaism offer for confronting our fears? Just as we open a toolbox to repair something in our homes, we, as Jews, possess a remarkable toolbox to mend ourselves - the Torah, the Talmud, the Midrash, our philosophers, and our Jewish history. What tools can we employ to confront the very human fears that often paralyze us, that consume our thoughts more than they should? Fear, the Talmud tells us (Gittin 70a), is one of three factors that weaken our bodies. It often impedes our progress, it oppresses us, and it silences our voices. It's these fears that I wish to address.

Let's start with a fundamental truth that is sometimes overlooked: fear is natural, but how we respond to fear is cultural (or religious). We share with animals the capacity to experience fear (Descartes was mistaken about this!), but our uniqueness lies in our response to it. The Book of Proverbs advises us: "*If there is anxiety in a man's mind let him quash it*" (12:25). One way to tackle anxiety or fear is to attempt to suppress it, but, as we know, this isn't always feasible. Our memories are powerful, and fears have a way of resurfacing. Then there's the alternative the Talmud offers: speaking about it with others. And that's my invitation this morning: let's talk about our fears. Be honest with yourselves and with your loved ones and friends; don't conceal your fears, share them.

It's not coincidental that psychoanalysis, founded by a Jew, with its early practitioners being Jewish, resonates with Jewish culture. Sigmund Freud, though reviled by the Nazis who labeled psychoanalysis "Jewish science," essentially brought to light something inherently Jewish. According to our rabbinic tradition, strength and resilience don't primarily reside in our physicality but in our souls and minds. We inherit a culture that doesn't equate strength with suppressing feelings, fears, and anxieties but rather with discussing them, confessing them in our prayers, and making our fears subjects of conversation with others.

So here's my first suggestion: let's talk about our fears. When asked how you are, if there's something that occasionally troubles or frightens you, and if the person inquiring is worthy of your trust, don't respond with a mere "everything's fine." Dare to admit that sometimes, everything is not fine. In the movie "Encanto," they sing "We don't talk about Bruno," but in Judaism, we sing: "We talk about our fears."

## Let's Explore the Origins of Fear

Before delving further, let's take a step back to explore the origins of fear. How do fears arise? Neuroscience teaches us that fear is a mechanism that has evolved over millennia, in humans and other animals, to protect us and preserve our lives. When we spot a menacing creature approaching, fear triggers our bodies to run faster. Fear of a precipice compels us to stop abruptly to avoid falling into the abyss. In this sense, we share with other animals an innate or natural fear.

However, today, I wish to delve into a different kind of fear - one that is uniquely human. Where does the origin of this fear lie? Israeli thinker Micah Goodman suggests that human fear has two primary sources: 1) Our awareness of the future. Unlike animals, which largely live in the perpetual present, humans understand that tomorrow is likely to come after today. 2) The issue lies in our uncertainty about that future. We know tomorrow is coming, but the unknown elements of that future are what often trigger fear. None of us wishes to be confined to an eternal present, but the awareness of an ever-unfolding future and the accompanying uncertainty often cause us distress.

Today, I want to concentrate on this type of fear. Micah Goodman further posits that, over the centuries, humans have devised two tools to confront this fear: politics and religion. Politics represents our attempt to create structures that provide us with a semblance of security. We build walls to protect our borders, establish hereditary monarchies for administrative stability, and organize governments to manage our societies. In our times, the efficacy of these structures is being questioned. Western democracies, once hailed as guarantors of equality and progress, are experiencing internal and external challenges. Trust in governmental systems and leaders across the globe has fallen compared to previous decades. Who among us can confidently declare, "With this president or that, everything will be fine!" "Our governor will look after us; don't worry!" "Democracy will save us!"

As a person of faith, and as someone versed in history, I'm aware that humans will continually refine our political systems. We will adapt and find ways to organize ourselves to bring predictability to an uncertain future that unnerves us. Yet, in our contemporary landscape, where many of us can't find solace in political structures for our security, I invite you to undertake Teshuvah, to return - not just as a political return but as a spiritual return to finding

security and confidence in our religion, our Torah, our God, and our Jewish history. Let us embark on this journey together.

### **Acknowledging That Some Fear Is Beneficial: Ashrei Adam Mefached Tamid**

Just as science recognizes that fear serves as a protective mechanism against potential dangers, our Rabbis teach that fear can also be constructive in safeguarding us, not from external threats, but from our own ego, from our false sense of omnipotence. Hence, Proverbs states: *"Happy is the man who is anxious always, but he who hardens his heart falls into misfortune"* (28:14). It may sound like a Jewish jest, suggesting that a person who constantly fears is blessed. But what does it mean? Rashi, among others, links this idea to the notion of punishment. Fear of retribution deters us from transgressing. Conversely, the second part of the verse implies that if we harden our hearts, convinced that nothing will befall us, we risk facing the consequences of our transgressions. The Talmud (Gittin 55b) references this verse to caution us against overconfidence, against believing we are invincible. When the Jews declared, "Our Temple will never be destroyed," during the time of the prophet Jeremiah, and when first-century leaders harbored unwarranted confidence that the Romans wouldn't destroy Jerusalem, Rabbi Yochanan rebuked them, echoing the verse: "Happy is the man who is anxious always!" Never grow too complacent; a modicum of fear, insecurity, and doubt is essential to recognizing the transient nature of things and our continuous potential for improvement. Fear keeps us vigilant in our surroundings and prevents us from succumbing to the illusion of invincibility from our ivory towers.

### **Let's Cultivate a Life of Yirat Elohim**

Judaism invites us to embrace "Irat Shamaim," a reverential awe of Heaven (or God). A fundamental interpretation of this idea isn't just fear of punishment; it's the recognition of a moral law that transcends social norms, a truth that exists beyond societal constructs. This profound sense of "Irat Elohim" equips us with the strength and courage to protest against injustices when we sense moral wrongdoing in societal decrees. The midwives who defied Pharaoh's order to kill newborn Hebrew boys did so out of "Irat Elohim." When confronted with moral dilemmas, this fear empowers us to find our voices and speak out against injustice.

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson elaborates on this concept, explaining that "holy fear" or "noble fear" is not rooted in fear of consequences but emerges from contemplating God's

incomparable greatness and magnificence. This "awe of greatness" transcends mere "fear of harm." We don't fear God because we dread punishment; rather, it's the presence of God and His creation that inspires deep admiration and respect. This fear allows us to confront legal injustices and established orders when we feel that something is morally wrong. This fear is what often provides us with the courage and strength to protest against injustice. As Rabbi Artson concludes, "Fear of heaven is a step toward soul liberation." A soul that trembles not at human displays of might, power, or influence but at the sheer wonder of life and existence - this is the strength of faith that offers us true freedom.

### **Bitachon: Trusting More Than Just Community Security**

Growing up in Argentina, every Jew knows the Hebrew concept of Bitachon - security or protection. Many of us served as volunteers, guarding the entrances of our institutions in the aftermath of the attacks on the Israeli embassy and the AMIA. However, Bitachon in Jewish sources carries a deeper meaning. Bitachon signifies not merely security or trust in others protecting us against someone trying to harm us, but trust in God. In times of uncertainty, when we are enveloped by the unknown, children find solace in the comforting words of their parents, who assure them, "Everything will be fine." This sense of security in the face of an uncertain future is the Bitachon that often eludes us.

Let's rekindle our faith, not only in God but in ourselves. Bitachon should instill us with trust, not just in the Divine but in our capabilities. Bitachon can fortify us when we are faced with the uncertainties of an unpredictable future. Just as we sought refuge in our parents' embrace as children to feel secure, let's remember that we share a Heavenly Father who watches over us and safeguards us.

### **We have memory**

We are a people with history and memory. Let us also use our history and collective memory to avoid falling prey to the fears that the media often seeks to instill. How many times have we heard that the end is near? How many times since the 1960s have we been told that in 5 or 10 years we will run out of forests, food, and water? How often have we seen experts proclaiming that the entire world would be unemployed due to new technology? We must not ignore reality; we cannot cover the sun with our hands. Yes, there are problems in the world. Yes, democracies are at a crossroads. Yes, global warming exists. Yes, to all of it... but let us learn from our history and our valuable memory. We have witnessed great empires rise and fall, yet

we endure. For the past two thousand years, we have heard predictions of the end of the world, yet here we are, and the world still stands. Religions for millennia have garnered followers by prophesizing Armageddons, messiahs, and catastrophic endings of the world. In our times, the media and scientists seeking attention sometimes exaggerate real dangers or challenges and present them as immediate, beyond-the-point-of-no-return catastrophes. Let us not ignore the world's problems, for they do indeed exist. However, the way to address them is not by generating panic and exacerbating fears but by uniting to confront them. We have done so for millennia... and we can continue to do so.

### **Conclusion: Embracing a Future Without Fear**

Fear is a universal experience. The phrase most frequently echoed in the Torah is "Al Tirah" - "Do not fear." Abraham was afraid, and God reassured him, saying, "Fear not, Abram, I am a shield to you" (Genesis 15:1). His son Isaac (Genesis 26:24) and his grandson Jacob also harbored fears, and God comforted them with the same words: "Fear not." When Hagar was lost in the desert, uncertain of her and her son's survival, God told her, "Fear not" (Genesis 21:17). Through countless trials and tribulations, Moses, God's faithful servant, encountered moments of fear. Each time, God offered the same reassurance: "Fear not and be not dismayed" (Numbers 21:34). Moses, in turn, passed on this message to his disciple Joshua.

On this sacred time of Neilah, I extend the same message to you: "Al Tirah." Do not fear. Let's not suppress our fears, ignore them, or turn away from them.

- ❖ Instead, let's discuss them openly.
- ❖ Let's recognize that a healthy dose of fear also shields us from external threats and from the peril of believing we are invincible.
- ❖ Let's embrace a fear that is greater than the fear of humans, a fear our tradition calls Yirat Elohim - a fear that gives us the confidence to be true to ourselves, to raise our voices against injustice, and to make a stand when societal norms clash with our moral compass.
- ❖ Let's learn from history and let's use our collective memory to diminish the amount of panic.
- ❖ Above all, let's believe, let's take that leap of faith, that we have an Avinu Shebashamayim, a Father in Heaven who protects us, who is there for us, even when we cannot comprehend His mysterious ways.
- ❖ Let us trust that everything will find its place, that everything will be set right. Al Tirah - do not fear.

We have God, we have our memories, we have each other, we are a community. Al Tirah.

Gmar Tov, Rabbi Uri