

Stop Worrying, Details to Follow
Rabbi Daniel Gropper
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When my sister Naomi (z'l) was entering her junior year of high school she spent a few weeks at Outward Bound. Outward Bound is the leading provider of experiential and outdoor education programs for youth and adults. For two weeks, Naomi participated in challenging learning expeditions that inspired strength of character, leadership and service to others. She hiked, backpacked, rock climbed and slept outdoors. She learned skills that were to lead to the ultimate test - the famous Outward Bound Solo.

Armed with nothing more than a tarp, some string, a few matches, a sleeping bag and a small packet of food, this 5 foot nothing 15 year old prepared to spend a night in the woods... alone.. She built her lean-to, built her little fire, prepared her small meal, spread out her sleeping bag and, under a star-lit sky, bedded down for the night.

In the middle of the night she woke up. It had snowed. There were also footprints. Her first thought was fear and panic. "I'm alone in the woods and someone was sneaking around my lean-to." And then, finding a place of calm, she thought to herself, "yes, those are strange footprints and I'm still here. I'm okay." That calm led to curiosity. "I wonder where the footprints lead?" Putting on her hiking boots, she followed them. They wound up... at her instructor's lean-to. In the middle of the night her instructor had come to check on her. What did Naomi do? Knowing that the best way to stay warm in the outdoors is body heat, she crawled into her - *female* - instructor's sleeping bag, snuggled in and spent the rest of the night warm and cozy.

I love this story. It speaks to my late sister's ingenuity. It also reminds me that in any situation where we may find ourselves afraid, we often have a choice as to how to confront it.

We can be paralyzed by fear. Or, we can take a breath, slow things down, assess the situation for what it is, explore our options, and calmly move forward. Naomi also realized that she was not alone, but that's a subject for Yom Kippur.

An old Jewish telegram reads, "start worrying, details to follow." Well, my friends, it feels like the details are here. With the hottest summer on record, we should rightly worry about the kind of planet we will leave our children and grandchildren. As the Parkland massacre did nothing to halt the scourge of gun violence still facing our nation, we *should* worry about our own personal safety and that of our family members. Many of us worry about the growth of extremism in politics, from the right and the left; how tribalism is leading to greater populism, a populism that feeds on fear and scapegoats the weak and powerless.

Many of you have shared other fears you carry. We worry about affording our own retirement. We worry that our kids won't have as bright a future as we do. The rising cost of healthcare and post-secondary education should be cause for real concern, for we may well be mortgaging our future. Our beloved Israel, passing laws that drive a deeper wedge between Israelis and Palestinians laws that drive deeper wedges between liberal and orthodox Jews only fuels flames of anger instead of quenching them in waters of peace. There is much in our country and on our planet to be concerned about. Thomas Paine once said, "These are the times that try men's souls." And they're trying ours now.

The **Talmud**¹ tells us there are four kinds of fear: when the scorpion fears the spider; when the elephant fears the mosquito; when the eagle fears the swallow; and when the lion fears the gnat.

¹ Shabbat 77b

Each is a case of a larger animal fearing one much smaller. In each case, there is a reason why: The first kind of fear mentioned by the Talmud is when the **scorpion fears the poisonous spider**. The scorpion's concern is justified. Despite its size, the spider is capable of inflicting a mortal wound. Though the scorpion is himself a potent warrior, he fears he may someday not be able to defend himself.

The second fear mentioned is when the **elephant fears the mosquito**. Unlike the scorpion's fear of the poisonous spider, the elephant has no rational reason to fear the mosquito. Commentaries inform us, however, that this particular mosquito has traveled up the elephant's trunk and is driving it crazy.

A third fear mentioned in the Talmud is when the **Eagle fears the sparrow**. What cause for concern would a sparrow create for the mighty eagle? Rashi, the 11th century commentator, explains that the sparrow creeps underneath the wings of the eagle and hinders it from spreading its wings. Prevented from fully extending its wings, the eagle is unable to gain altitude, and ultimately cannot fly.

A fourth kind of fear is when the **lion fears the gnat**. Unlike the scorpion who is physically threatened by the poisonous spider, or the elephant who is psychologically tormented by the mosquito, the lion has nothing to fear from the gnat. The Talmud points here to a different kind of fear, that of inadequacy. "I am the king of the jungle," says the lion. "But of what use are my fangs, or my razor sharp claws? With all of my resources, I can't do anything to the gnat."

Each of us has fears. Some fears, like open or closed spaces, heights or public speaking are very real. Each of us fears something different from the person beside us. In some cases, like the Elephant with the mosquito, our fears drive us crazy. In others, we want to fly but our

fears hold us back. And in others, we feel inadequate, incapable of doing anything to offset the fear.

Lest you think you are the only one with fears, think again. Everyone is afraid of something. Even a lion fears a gnat! The question is, how can we, like my sister did on that snowy night, find a way to reframe our fears and to live in a way that allows us to live with hope, joy, purpose and awe?

The English word “fear” is really quite imprecise. Hebrew, on the other hand, is more nuanced. Hebrew has two words for fear. The first is *pachad*. *Pachad* is projected or imagined fear. It is the fear of the phantom, of the monster under the bed, of the disease that hasn’t been diagnosed, of the rejection that hasn’t occurred.

The second term for fear is *yirah*. *Yirah* has an element of fear in it but is a fear based in awe, awareness, clarity. It’s the feeling you might have standing at the lip of the Grand Canyon; the way you felt the first time you held your child. I remember thinking, “I have absolutely no idea how to care for this baby, let alone raise him but somehow, I know I’ll be fine.” *Yirah* is the feeling that overcomes us when we suddenly find ourselves in possession of considerably more energy than we are used to. That feeling can be so overwhelming that we can actually get to the point where we tremble, like we would when we are terrified, but this time we tremble, with awe.

Living with *pachad* causes us to close gates, to think narrowly and with a fixed state. *Pachad* is both immobilizing and destabilizing. *Pachad* results in nativism, isolationism, in zero-tolerance.² As the great sage from Star Wars, Yoda once said, “Fear leads to Anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering³,” a suffering where we dehumanize, persecute, imprison,

² Jon Meacham, “The Soul of America,” p. 4

³ Yoda, Episode 1, “The Phantom Menace.”

enslave and even murder others. Perhaps this is why in 1944, the theologian and thinker Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary." "Fear," as John Meecham says in his new book Our Better Angels, "tears down the notion of democracy." Some think that power comes from creating fear. It doesn't! The only thing that comes from fear is fear... and chaos. Living with hope, with awe, with the possibility that things can get better lifts up the spirit that our founding fathers had in mind when they birthed this great nation.

This spirit, this idea of hope, the notion that things can get better is what our tradition means when it speaks of *yirah*. *Yirah* allows us to live with a growth mindset, to see, dream and strive towards possibilities. *Yirah* makes us realize how we are part of a much greater whole.

A short story: There are two waves drifting along in the ocean, one a bit bigger than the other. The bigger wave suddenly becomes very sad and upset. The smaller wave asks what's wrong. "You don't want to know," the bigger wave says. "What is it?" the small wave asks. "No - really - it's too terrible. If you knew what I knew, you'd never be happy." The small wave persists. Finally the big wave explains: "You can't see it, but I can see that, not too far from here, all of the waves are crashing on the shore. We are going to disappear." The small wave says, "I can make you happy with just six words, but you have to listen to them very carefully." The big wave doesn't believe it -- what does the small wave know that he doesn't -- but he's desperate. After a while of doubting and mocking the small wave, the big wave finally gives in, and asks the small wave to tell him. And so the small wave says: "You're not a wave, you're water."⁴ Living with this awareness, living with *yirah* puts things into perspective.

⁴ Story told by Ram Dass found at <http://tobyjohnson.com/wave.html>

How might we do it? How might we *lean* into *yirah* instead of being paralyzed by *pachad*. Here I turn to the teachings of two great rabbis, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks and Rabbi Alan Lew (z'l).

Rabbi Sacks suggests three things we can do to overcome fear⁵. The first he calls, “The Us of Relationship” - moving beyond the echo chambers that put cones of silence around us. The second is “The us of identity” which asks us to reconnect with our core narratives. And the third is “The us of responsibility,” which asks us to think more in terms of “we” and less in terms of “I.”

The us of relationship asks us to renew face-to-face encounters with the people *not* like us, to remember that we can disagree strongly and still stay friends. Interacting with those with whom we disagree causes us to reflect, to think, to grow. The narrowcasting promoted by Google filters and Facebook algorithms give us the news and information we *want* but it outsources our thinking. If I wake up hating one politician or another, I can go to my “trusted” sources and find ten more reasons to hate them. Our task should be to move back to relationship, to listen to each other, to pay attention to the ties that bind. It's in those face-to-face encounters where we discover that the people not like us are just people, like us. And actually, every time we hold out the hand of friendship to somebody not like us, whose class or creed or color are different from ours, we heal one of the fractures of our wounded world. That is the us of relationship.

The us of identity asks us to tell our collective story, who we are, where we came from, the ideals by which we live. This helps us to overcome fear because it reminds us that we are

⁵ Sacks, Rabbi Lord Jonathan, “How we can face the future without fear, together,” Ted2017 (recorded in Vancouver, Canada). Found at: https://www.ted.com/talks/rabbi_lord_jonathan_sacks_how_we_can_face_the_future_without_fear_together?language=en

part of something much greater than ourselves. Rabbi Sacks leads his listeners through a thought experiment: have you been to Washington? Have you seen the memorials? There's the Lincoln Memorial: Gettysburg Address on one side, Second Inaugural on the other. You go to the Jefferson Memorial, screeds of text. Martin Luther King Memorial, more than a dozen quotes. Now go to the equivalent in London in Parliament Square and you will see that the monument to David Lloyd George contains three words: David... Lloyd... George. Why the difference? Because from the outset, as a nation of immigrants, America had to create an identity. You create an identity by telling a story. We learned this story at school. We read it on memorials. The story unites us. It helps to define our core values.

And the us of responsibility? Rabbi Sacks points out that his favorite phrase in politics is “We the people.” It says that we share a responsibility for our collective future. “It isn’t prudent,” he says, “to put our hopes and dreams into the hands of a strong leader. History is littered with the outcomes of people doing that.”

Instead, Rabbi Sacks reminds us that, “the only people who will save us from ourselves is we the people, all of us together. When we do that, when we move from the politics of me to the politics of us, we rediscover those beautiful, counterintuitive truths: that a nation is strong when it supports the bottom, that a nation is mighty when it believes that survival of the unfittest is a measurement of its greatness. The us of relationship, the us of identity and the us of responsibility. Those are three things we the people can do to overcome fear.

But what if we are too stuck in our own fear, in our own *pachad* to approach even that? What if we can’t think of others because we are still so consumed by our own angst? What new approach might we take to get us up in the morning, to allow us to face each day with hope, with purpose, with the expansive open-minded awe of *yirah*?

Soon after the Children of Israel leave Egypt, they come to a critical moment where, paralyzed by fear, they cry out, “weren’t there enough graves in Egypt that you had to take us out here to the desert to die?” In that moment of being stuck, of being pressed, Moses and God come up with a plan, a five step program to help the Israelites get unstuck. In Exodus 15 we read: “But Moses said to the people, *Al Ti’ra’u*, **Don’t act on your fear!** *Hityatzvu*, **collect yourselves.** *Ur’u*, **see** the deliverance which Adonai will work for you today; *Tacharishun*, **be still.** Then God said to Moses: *Va’vis’au!* **Move!**

Al Tir’au - Don’t act on your fear. You can feel fear but don’t be paralyzed by it. Don’t go running around after a ghost that isn’t there. The Israelites were afraid of the Egyptians bearing down on them but it was an unfounded fear. According to the Torah there were 600,000 Israelite men of fighting age and only 1800 Egyptian chariots. The fear and panic were based on a myth. When they realized their fear was not founded, they could move to the second stage...

Hityatzvu - Pull yourself together, collect yourself. “Mountain Pose” is a foundational pose in Yoga. I’m doing it now. It’s where you stand firmly and balanced on your feet, hands at your side, spine straight, head looking forward. Standing firmly allows you to just stand still and to collect yourself.

Once you are standing still, you can begin to see. *U’ru*, the Torah says- and look. When we stop running around after our imagination - of what might be, of what could happen - we begin to see our experience as it really is. Seeing asks us to look at things as they really are. And things are usually better than we imagine them to be.

This brings us to our fourth stage, *Tacharushin*, be still. Intentionally standing still is an action. It’s a state where we are completely present. It is a state of non-reactiveness which creates greater calm.

Finally, *Va'yis'a'u* - **Just get going**. Just act. Move! Rabbi Lew notes that this command comes from God, not Moses. It is the call to move that wells up from within but it is a call we can only hear in the stillness, when the chatter of the world and our own minds can quiet down enough so you can hear the still small voice. In the stillness, the action you're to take becomes utterly clear. You know it for certain in your bones. After weeks or months of trying to coax a solution by force of will, we stop trying and the sea parts. When we attempt these five things: Don't act on your fear, collect yourselves, see, be still and move, we can move from *pachad* - from an immobilizing fear to *yirah*, to the place God wants us to be - a place of calm, a place of clarity, a place of forward motion, a place of awe.

Now, if you're like me and remembering anything beyond three things is hard (whenever Tamara asks me to run errands and the list is longer than three, I say, "just a minute, I have to write this down), during our little kids service, Rabbi Frankel reminded me of a simple way to recall this idea of slowing down and thinking before acting. It is based in the core prayer of our worship service, the *Sh'ma*, the watchword of our faith. The first word, "*sh'e'ma*" has three sounds. they can represent the three stages of moving from fear to clarity. "Shhh" (put finger to lips), get quiet. "Mmmmm" (put finger on temple like you're thinking), think. "Ahhhh" (put hand out in a gesture of awareness) become aware of the clear thought that bubbles up from within (repeat the action). And when we do all this, when we slow down, think and arrive at a new place of clarity, as Rabbi Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir taught, God's seal will shine on your face⁶.

Long before Roosevelt said, "the only thing to fear is fear itself," the Hasidic master Nachman of Bratzlav taught, "*Kol HaUlam Kulo, Gesher Tzar Me'od* - the whole world is a very

⁶ Ohr Ha'Me'ir, Bechukotai (in CLP3 Materials)

narrow bridge. *V'ha'ikar, Lo Lefached Klal* - the trick is not to be afraid. Nachman had much to fear. He was an *illui*, a brilliant student and teacher but he lived in challenging times. He lived in 19th century Russia where it felt like a Cossack hid behind every tree. Of the eight children born to his wife Sasha, four died before they reached a year and a half. Sasha herself later succumbed to Tuberculosis. In 1810 his home was destroyed by fire.

Based on his teachings, many have postulated that he suffered from bi-polar disorder. With all that, he managed to preach a theology of optimism encapsulated by those words, *Kol HaUlam Kulo, Gesher Tzar Me'od* - the whole world is a very narrow bridge. *V'ha'ikar, Lo Lefached Klal* - and the trick is not to be afraid. It's a good message. The whole world is full of *tzar*, it feels narrow... constricting... threatening. And the trick is not to fear. But... on deeper examination, these words don't make sense. It isn't helpful to tell someone else not to be afraid. We are the only ones who can quench our own fears.

How refreshing then, when I learned what Nachman really taught. His original teaching is not an active verb tense. It is reflexive. Instead of "*lo l'fached Klal*, do not be afraid," it's "*lo l'hitpached klal*," loosely translated as "don't freak yourself out." Things can scare you. The trick is to figure out how you're going to respond.

My friends, these days are known as the *Yamim Nora'im*, the days of awe. They are not the *Yamim Pachadim*, the days of fear and terror, even though some of the prayers do terrify us for they lay before us the possibility of what may be.

These are *Yamim Nora'im*, Days of Awe because they ask us to hear the call of the shofar, to collect ourselves, to see, to be still, and only then to move, asking ourselves from that place of clarity, "who am I? Who do I want to be? How might I get there?"

These days ask us to step back from our over-programmed lives to notice the beauty of the world around us and the beauty of the person next to us. These days tell us to be still and then to get going, to make our lives a work of art. A person who lives in fear is paralyzed. A person who lives with *yirah*, with Awe, settles oneself, sees the experience for what it really is, listens to what bubbles up from within and, finds a way to move forward.

On this day, from now until Yom Kippur and throughout this year, may you find moments to do just this. May you find time to listen to that still small voice. May you then find the courage to act on what you hear. May you be captivated by awe - because you are awesome - and may that sense of inspiration inspire you to move to a new place of hope, of understanding, and of clarity. May it be so. May the sound of the shofar pierce the fear, calling you forward... towards the life God wants you to lead and the type of person God wants you to be. Amen