

Shana Tova! I'm Lily Goldstein, and I'm thrilled to be joining Community Synagogue this year as your rabbinic intern.

When I was a little girl, I watched the Wizard of Oz, and became convinced that the Wicked Witch of the West lived in my closet. Every night, right before I went to bed, I asked my parents to check inside, to turn on the closet light and do a whole sweep – just to make sure she wasn't waiting in there to get me.

Even though I'm mostly sure that my apartment is witch-free now, I never fully outgrew my fearfulness. I'm a chronic catastrophizer. When my younger sister takes too long to respond to a text, I worry that she's been kidnapped, when I hear a sound in the night I steel myself for an intruder, and with every sore throat or headache, I'm on WebMd in a second.

You can imagine, then, how I've been handling this global pandemic.

I know that my overactive imagination and I aren't alone in being scared right now, that we don't need to catastrophize to feel fear.

There is a lot to be afraid of: we worry about our health and the health of our loved ones, the long-term impacts of this disease on our bodies, our economy, our communities. We worry about our kids' learning, our jobs, and the institutions that we love.

Sometimes, it feels like no one and nothing is safe.

And yet, somehow, we have managed to live with what could be an all-consuming fear – we've made tough choices, taken steps to protect ourselves, and even found paths to comfort. As we come together to mark the end of an incredibly challenging 5780 and open up 5781, we have an opportunity to look forward, and consider how we can continue to manage and grow through this fear.

The turn of the year is actually the perfect time to talk about fear. The High Holidays are called the "Yamim Nora'im" which is commonly rendered as "The Days of Awe," but could just as accurately be translated as the "Days of Fear."

There are several High Holiday traditions that acknowledge and even embrace fear. Tomorrow, Cantor Cooperman will sing us the

haunting Un'taneh Tokef, a prayer which lists the many ways our lives might end in the coming year. If that prayer doesn't do it, the shofar, whose piercing blast signaled war in ancient times, calls us to attention for the high stakes of this moment. One interpretation of the tradition of wearing all-white garments on Yom Kippur is that white resembles the Jewish death shroud. On the holiest days of the year, our tradition embraces mortality, prompts existential questions, and engages unflinchingly with fear.

This approach to fear is not easy to achieve, and we're certainly not expected to arrive here instantaneously. But the Jewish calendar doesn't just throw us into this intense holiday – we have had the whole past month of Elul to get ready. One practice of Elul is daily recitation of Psalm 27. Much like reflecting, de-crystallizing honey, or getting High Holiday tickets (or zoom links), reciting Psalm 27 is yet another way that Jews prepare to welcome in the New Year. (And, it's actually recited all the way through Shemini Atzeret, a minor holiday at the end of Sukkot, so if you'd like to try it out, you've still got time!)

In Psalm 27, the author expresses anxieties about dangers posed by “evildoers,” “adversaries,” and “chaos,” but throughout it all, the psalmist trusts that God will give protection. The psalm takes us on a journey from fear to strength, and, helpfully, it outlines four key strategies for the rest of us hoping to walk the same path: identifying fears, reaching out to community, taking action, and cultivating courage.

First, Psalm 27 opens saying: *“God is my light and my help – From whom shall I feel fright? God is the strength of my life – From whom should I feel terror?”*

While these questions could be read rhetorically, let’s take them literally, because the psalmist is expressing a common challenge of people experiencing fear: knowing you’re afraid, but struggling to identify what exactly you’re afraid of. Psychology professor Brene Brown teaches that to deal with fear, we have to really feel it. In an interview shortly after lockdown started, she advised: “We’re experiencing grief, fear, anxiety, uncertainty...the *only* way through it is to acknowledge it.”¹ When we identify our fears, we

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3pHIsPlhU7o>

can better understand them, peeling back confusing or thorny layers until we get to the heart of what scares us so much.

I felt this especially acutely this past spring, as I was consumed by fears around coronavirus. There was so much to be afraid of – were my groceries sanitized? Was I in my apartment building’s vestibule with another resident for too long? Is that jogger too close to me on the sidewalk? These questions became overwhelming. But eventually, through listening deeply to myself and the advice of others, I came to realize what I was really afraid of. It wasn’t that I would get COVID – as horrible and risky as that might be. What I was really afraid of was getting my parents sick. My parents are both young and healthy, but this pandemic was the first time that I faced their mortality. Naming this fear was almost like de-fanging the beast. As soon as I said it out loud, I felt lighter. I knew what I was scared of, so I could notice the fear as it arrived, act appropriately and safely with it in mind, and then let it pass. When we understand our emotions and our triggers, we empower ourselves to better manage those anxieties as they show up.

Once we have taken the first step and identified the source of our fears, Psalm 27 suggests a second step: finding comfort in community. It reads: *“Just one thing I have asked of God; only this do I seek: to dwell in God’s House all the days of my life.”*

I can completely empathize that, after months of quarantine, it’s possible that no one here wants to sit in a house all the days of their lives, not even God’s house. But the Psalmist is crying out to be comforted – to the narrator, nothing is a source of greater protection than God’s house. We learn from this that when we’re afraid, we should seek out the people and places that make feel us most safe. By surrounding ourselves – both physically and online – with family and community, therapists and clergy, we know that we’re not alone, and we feel a little more powerful, and a little less afraid. It’s part of why I’m sharing this sermon with you today – I’m still scared about the state of our world, but when I call out to all of you, I feel less alone, and I hope you will feel the same. And hopefully, this will be the beginning of open conversations, where we can share how we’re really doing, and turn to each other for strength and help when we need it. Having regular calls with loved ones, taking a socially distanced walk with a neighbor, or joining

an online support group – maybe this is how we get to dwell in God’s house, knowing that we’re not alone.

The psalm continues with a third strategy for managing fear: taking action. *“Let me make offerings in that tent – the offerings of a joyful cry. Let me sing hymns, and celebrate the One who is eternal – Adonai.”*

In this verse, the Psalmist cries out for the opportunity to make offerings and sing to God, which was *the* way of taking action for the ancient Israelites. In addition to three daily sacrifices, Israelites brought offerings to show God gratitude, to apologize, and to ask for rescue during a communal crisis. Taking action amidst our communal crisis today definitely includes social distancing and mask-wearing, but like offerings, sometimes the less straightforward and more spiritual actions can be helpful as well.

When we are scared and feeling hopeless, sometimes doing something, anything, can help us feel better. Why do you think so many people started baking bread during this pandemic? Bread-baking gave us a project to focus on, a lump of dough with which

we could knead out our fears, a recipe to follow when everything else felt uncertain.

Yemima Avital was a 20th century healer and feminine Hasidic rebbe. She taught that one way to respond to fear is to give it less room in our souls. If we can fill ourselves up with nourishing learning, loving relationships, and meaningful work, that fullness can push away our fear. When we do this, we ground ourselves in something real and solid even amidst uncertainty.

As valuable as it is to fill ourselves up, how much better is it, then, for us to channel anxieties into doing something for others?

Even in my short time here, I've seen this impulse at Community Synagogue. Soon after I was hired as your rabbinic intern, I checked out CSR's Facebook page, and saw a slideshow from your Mitzvah Day. I was touched to see so many of you sewing masks, baking treats for essential workers, donating food, and making cards, and I have to imagine that doing this work filled you up too. These acts of *chesed*, lovingkindness, were your versions of the Psalmist's offerings. They were your way of doing something

about the difficult circumstances. Doing good work even as we're afraid gives us purpose and sustains us in scary times.

In just a couple of verses, Psalm 27 has taught us to identify our fears, to find comfort in community, and to take action. These three steps make possible the fourth and final one, expressed at the very end of the psalm: we have to develop courage. The author instructs us: “*Be strong of heart, and be bold – and wait hopefully for Adonai.*”

“*Be strong of heart.*” The Hebrew word for courage is *ometz-lev*, which literally means “heart strength.” In all of the Psalmist’s suggestions and coping mechanisms, this is what we’re aiming for – heart strength. Building resilience deep inside, so that we can withstand and overcome fear, regardless of what’s around us.

Our sages taught the following Midrash: “A man walking on a road saw a pack of dogs and felt afraid of them, so he sat down in their midst.”² If he had run, the dogs would have chased him, so he took the safe but scary step of sitting with them instead, developing

² Genesis Rabbah 84:5

his internal strength so that soon enough, he could finish his journey. *Ometz-lev* isn't about ignoring the pack of dogs, or the very real dangers around us. It's about doing the hard soul work of sitting with them, and strengthening ourselves to continue on.

These are undoubtedly Days of Awe and Days of Fear, but we're not alone – we have our bread, we have our masks, we have Psalm 27, and most of all, we have each other. This year, may we cultivate our *ometz-lev*, our heart-strength. May this courage allow us to live bravely in the face of fear, to take care of one another, and to continue to build a safer, healthier, and more compassionate world. I'm looking forward to taking it on together.

Shana Tova.