

## ***Al Tirah - Do not Fear***

At the conclusion of the Korean War, a good number of captured American Service men refused to return to the United States. The soldiers even renounced their citizenship. This alarmed and scared American leaders who thought that the communists had brainwashed our troops. Our government enlisted the help of Dr. Henry Murray, a Harvard psychologist. The idea was simple: Dr. Murray would test brainwashing tactics with the ultimate goal of training our troops against Communist indoctrination<sup>1</sup> .

In an era *before* modern controls and ethical standards, Dr. Murray's Harvard students became his subjects. His tests were brutal, a psychologically inflicted nightmare. Years later, all of his test subjects described lasting and long-term emotional distress. They described their participation as the worst experience of their lives.

One of Dr. Murray's student subjects was a brilliant 16 year old. Dr. Murray gave him the nickname: Innocent. He matriculated to Harvard after graduating high school early. He was polite , from a small town. He was a gifted mathematician. And he, like the other students, had a terrible reaction to the experiment, the effects of which plagued him for decades. That student's name was Theodore Kaczynski. If you don't know him by his given name – you may remember him by the title “the Unabomber.”

The fear of Communism - anxieties born from a post-war Red Scare that gave rise to McCarthyism, also set off a chain of events that ultimately shaped the Unabomber. I share this story, not as an excuse for Kaczynski or the terrorism he wrought. The story serves as a reminder. Fear and Anxiety are powerful and dangerous motivators. Fear and Anxiety lead to hasty decisions which often have unintended consequences and terrible costs.

To live is to be afraid. This is as true for humans as it is for every animal on the food chain. Endowed with imagination, we have the ability to anticipate what will happen to our health, to our security, and to our loved ones. Our ability to imagine offers us opportunities to effect positive changes. We anticipate and tackle big projects, like the elimination of diseases. We prepare our children for safety by teaching them to be fearful of fire or to be careful when talking to strangers. Fears help us act and relate to the dangers in our world with awareness, safety and imagination. But fears can also dominate our lives and become paralyzing anxieties.

It's all too easy to watch the news and just get more and more anxious. Look at our political climate and the racial divisions in our own city and across the country and we fear for our future. We hear predictions about how our "modernized economy" is leaving or will soon leave many in the dust. We see fleeing refugees drowning in seas and streaming across borders. We know that we are destroying our environment faster than we thought possible. Strange coalitions are attacking Israel's legitimacy as a nation state with anti-

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<sup>1</sup> Chase, A Iston: <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/2000/06/chase.htm> Also described in the RadioLab show, titled “Oops” (Season 8, Episode 1).

Semitic tropes - racists feel safe coming out of the shadows. And terrorists recruit, train, and coordinate attacks in the dark web.

Even still - our deepest fears are often quieter and buried inside. Fear of losing those we love. Fear of aging and losing independence. Fear of failure and of letting loved ones down. The Fear of death.

We also live in an age of contradictions. Most academic research shows that this the safest country, and the safest time in human history. Household wealth has increased. Life longevity and access to education are on the rise, violent crime and extreme poverty is down. Our air is cleaner than ever before. If this is the case, why are we so scared?<sup>2</sup> Future Shock.

"Future Shock," a book written in the 1970s, posits that in the future, we will become victims of our own success. Our technology and our planet will change beyond our wildest expectations. And we will be become *paralyzed* from fear, shocked, from the rapid change. With all the good that exists in our age, many of us may feel a "future shock" of sorts. We have become paralyzed by the present challenges, born from modern successes and ingenuity. The news of the terrible - constantly streaming - alerting us on our phones. And we are overwhelmed the volume of the news.

In the, TaNaKh, the Hebrew Bible, God comforts us with the words, *al tirah*. Thirty-Nine times, we are told: *Al-tirah* - Don't fear. God says, *Al tirah*, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and to our prophets Jeremiah, Ezekial, and Daniel. It is a timeless message for our people. *Al tirah*, don't fear. But God isn't saying to have no fears. Rather, God is telling us to push through our fears and to keep them in check.

*Al Tira* - Don't fear - because fears can prevent us from making thoughtful decisions. *Al Tira - Don't fear* - because fears can take the form of suspicion and mistrust and bring out the worst in us. *Al Tirah - Don't fear*. Because whether we are facing the uncertainty our lives, our economy, our country's future, or our world, fear should not be - and cannot be - our operating value. *Al Tirah* - is a Divine *warning*: when we act from a place of fear and anxiety we will likely fail to see the full picture, fail to think through the consequences of our actions and we will likely make bad choices that undercut our potential and our opportunities for tomorrow.

But with all that is going on in our lives and in our country, in our political climate, our city, and our world, how can we face our fears? *Al Tirah* - sounds nice. But just saying, "Don't fear," doesn't eliminate our anxieties or the very real threats.

A parable: Our rabbis tell us that Hadrian, the powerful emperor saw an old Jew planting a tree. The emperor confronted the man: "Old man, this tree will not give fruit for another hundred years; do you expect to be alive to eat the fruit of your labor?" The man replied. " My father and his father before him planted trees for me; it is my duty to provide trees for those who will come after me."<sup>3</sup> As the story illustrates, our Jewish texts invite us

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<sup>2</sup> See, "Why We're Living in the Age of Fear." <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/features/why-were-living-in-the-age-of-fear-w443554>

<sup>3</sup> Midrash Tanhuma on Parashat Kedoshim

to understand time and our place within the scope of history. In a way, this Jewish sense of time is antithetical to our modern world.

In this age, we are conditioned to expect everything now. Everyone demands an immediacy. To see the photo or video we just took. To receive an immediate response to a sent email or text. In the atmosphere of today, Yesterday is long ago and tomorrow is too far away.<sup>4</sup>

But Judaism views the scope of time differently. We've lived through obstacles before - and we've overcome them. Judaism reminds us that the human spirit is strong - our history has taught us that the whole world is a narrow bridge -and the important thing is to not be afraid.<sup>5</sup> In Jewish time, the past is the context for our present; and our present actions will set the stage for future generations. And because of this understanding of our place within the unfolding of history - we have an obligation - *Al Tirah - To not act out of fear*. Instead, we act with our values, transmitted to us through the generations.

My mentor and teacher, Rabbi David Stern, teaches "that to live as a Jew in the twenty-first century is to live with a sense of responsibility [commanded to us in the Torah]. That is not news, but it [too] has become alarmingly counter-cultural. In [our alone-together] society atomized and narcissistic, we, as Jews, must [also] have *bifocal vision* [Why?]

Because if you are a Jew who believes that so long as you are helping the world you are doing your job, but [you] dismiss the claims of Jewish peoplehood as anachronistic or tribal, the sound of the shofar calls you to recognize that we owe something particular to the other Jews hearing the shofar's call: to Jews here [in Charlotte and the broader region], to Jews the world over, to our beloved, vital Jewish homeland in the State of Israel.

And if you are a Jew who believes that as long as you are sustaining the *Jewish people* you are doing your part, then remember that on Yom Kippur afternoon Isaiah will summon us to bring food to *all* who are hungry. The shofar blast of the prophet's voice proclaims that if we do not take that mission *beyond* ourselves, we have failed in our mission of justice and compassion."<sup>6</sup>

The best ways to face our fears is by living with a bifocal vision, rooted in the values and principles of the Torah. Valuing a God who signifies justice and mercy, Creating a society that treats *all human beings* as though they are endowed with God's dignity. Ensuring that our laws are administered to the rich and the poor alike, that no one is above the law, and that the law protects the neediest and most vulnerable.

The values of the Torah help us face fear, because when we hold it tight and proudly carry it, the torah's values call us to act in ways that will ultimately make the world better than it is - for all of God's creation, and for Jews *and* for non-Jews, alike.

Another answer to fear and anxiety is courage. Courage begins when we face the truths of life. Truth is knowing life for what it is, a place of sunshine, health, love, peace and promise. And to know that life is also invested with darkness, sickness, hatred, war, and death. We are born to all of it - And Judaism teaches that we must not choose only the

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<sup>4</sup> Excerpted from a sermon given by Rabbi Jack Stern, "*Future Shock*"

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav

<sup>6</sup> Excerpted and adapted from Rabbi David Stern, *Rosh Hashanah Sermon, 2013 - Eched*

pleasant and the bright side of life OR only the side of life filled with shadows. Once we face up to reality we can then prepare ourselves to meet it.

When my wife, Ana, was in labor with our first child, I vividly remember my sweating and pacing and trying to hold myself together as best as I could without letting her know I was freaking out inside. I was going to be the strong husband! In the moments of labor and delivery, I felt an incredible tension between the hope and possibility of all that could be, of all that we had dreamed and planned for ....and an intense fear: What if something terrible happened to Ana and to the baby? In that moment I realized that I had everything to gain and everything to lose., wrapped up – all at once.

In that moment, I realized some *heavy truths*: by participating in the act of giving life, our child was going to face pain, loss, and death: our own deaths and his death. And that moment taught me an important lesson. Courage is the ability to face the fears that come from experiencing the *totality of life*: the good and the bad, the blessings of life and the certainty of death. When we know what life is really worth - that we, each of us will die. Then we can choose to live courageously, expressing our values and our principles.

While wandering in the desert, Moses spoke truthfully to our ancestors right before his death about what lay before them: the challenge and change and the "future shock" awaiting them in the Promised Land Moses said: "See, I set before you this day life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life, so you may live." We will chant those words tomorrow morning. That is our challenge today as well: to choose life in an age when fear and anxiety permeates our minds.

*Al Tirah* - Don't Fear. Fear wisely. Fear with courage. Acting with the best of our values. Because As Jews, we know the scope of history. We've faced tough times before and we can face them again. We can travel the road ahead with courage and with a sacred duty to be a light unto the nations - illuminating the path forward with the values that have guided us for millennia. On this Yom Kippur, listen to the Shofar's call: *Tekiah Gedolah* - beckoning us: *Al Tirah* - Don't just fear - fear wisely and with courage. On this Yom Kippur, listen to the Shofar's calling out: *Tekiah Gedolah*: "I [have] set before you life and death. Choose life, so you may live!"

Amen.