

Erev Tov/Good Evening.

Have you ever had the experience, the more you dislike something, the more that thing has to teach you? Truly that is something in the human condition that makes no sense to me. Why do I need to learn from things that I do not like? Not the way I would have created humanity. Not that I was consulted.

Recently, I realized how much I have to learn from is a prayer/song that I have disliked for at least 40-50 years. It is a popular prayer/song; our choir has sung it; and most recently, Cantor Kintisch has composed a new melody for it which you will hear later on in the service. Truly it is not the music I dislike. For that matter, it is often the music that redeems this prayer/song. What I dislike are the words.

כָּל הָעוֹלָם כְּלוֹ גֶשֶׁר צָר מְאֹד וְהֶעֱקַר לֹא לִפְחָד כָּלֵל

The whole world is a very narrow bridge and the main thing is to have no fear at all.

The truth of the matter is that I have never had any problem with the first half of this verse. The whole world is a very narrow bridge. Anyone here ever misstep, maybe 30 seconds of mind wandering and then broken a bone? I have. Have you ever had an unusually bad day at school or work and said in 2 minutes something that would haunt you for weeks? Or have you ever been minding your own business and all of a sudden you are hit by a physical flood or a metaphorical one? One only has to listen or read the news to know that the amount of violence in our world, the scams and ecoli outbreaks, the abuse and misuse of technology, to know that the world truly is a narrow bridge. Sometimes it is a bridge like the Chesapeake Bay Bridge that can carry trucks, cars and RVs. Other times it is a wooden foot bridge with hand rails that only carries pedestrians and bicyclists. And, I hope, not too frequently, it is one of those bridges that you walk across, swaying with the wind, with nothing to grab onto. The whole world is a very narrow bridge.

The part of the prayer/song that I have never been able to truly wrap my arms around is the second part, the response to this narrow bridge. According to the prayer/song, the response

to this narrow bridge is to have no fear at all. It seems to me that when your political rights are being taken away, when you are bullied at work or at school, when anti-Semitism as well as all hate crimes are on the rise, when schools are seen as soft targets, when “running while black” can be a death sentence, or when tap water is filled with lead, fear is a natural response and, in fact, a very healthy one.

The truth is for most of my life I just sang the prayer/song when someone else picked it and, most of the time, ignored the words. It just did not seem worth the effort. Recently, more and more congregants have been talking to me about fear, fear of aging, fear of death, fear of our political climate, fear of change. And then Cantor Kintisch wrote a wonderful melody to these words, and I thought I really must have something to learn from these words that everyone else in the Jewish world seems to love. So I thought I would start with the source of this prayer/song. Does anyone know the source of this prayer/song? It is a quote from Reb Nachman of Bratslav, who lived in Ukraine from 1772-1810. You will find this quote in part two teaching number 48 of the book *Likutey Mohoran*, or rather something that is almost the same as the prayer/song words. The one word that prayer/song writer changed was לפחד, to fear. Reb Nachman used a different form of this verb. In the original, Reb Nachman said, “*She’lo yitpached klal*”—the Hebrew verb is reflexive, and it literally means, “He shouldn’t make himself fear at all.” A reflexive verb is used when you want to express that you are doing something to yourself. It is not referring to actions taken against you or things you do against someone else or things that just happened to you, but rather actions you actively do to yourself. It is important to acknowledge that Reb Nachman would not have understood mental illness and anxiety disorders as we do today. If he did, I can only imagine he would have delineated between the kind of fear we can control and the kind that we cannot. Generalized anxiety and associated stress disorders, like panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, social anxiety, specific phobias and post-traumatic stress disorder, are the most common forms of mental illness in the United States. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, about 18% of Americans age 11 and older

experience some kind of anxiety disorder. For 22.8% of these cases — that's 4% of the adult population — the condition is classified as "severe." Although doctors agree anxiety disorders are among the most treatable disorders in psychology, nearly 60% of those suffering from any one kind of anxiety disorder go untreated. That truly is one of the saddest statistics to me. 60% of us who are suffering from one form of anxiety disorder do not get the treatment that could help them.

I can only imagine that Reb Nachman would have wanted us to avail ourselves of all the tools at our disposal to get across that narrow bridge, including counseling, support groups, prescribed medications, and coping mechanisms, including but not limited to, meditation and prayer/song. If you suspect that you or someone you know suffers from an anxiety disorder, please get help. There are hot lines. I, like half the people in this room, have names of people to whom I can refer people. There is no shame in getting the help we need to live healthier lives.

Reb Nachman was referring to people like myself at low points who can make a list of everything that could possibly go wrong—much like commercials for different medicines. By the time you are done with all the medical disclaimers, who wouldn't rather be sick than get treatment? Reb Nachman is trying to encourage us to delineate the times when something else is frightening us and when it is something we can learn to control.

Fear is one of the emotions expressed in Jewish literature from the beginning. Unfortunately, as Anglo speakers, we often do not notice that there really are two different words for fear in Hebrew, in effect two very different kinds of fear. One is פחד, the one found in this prayer/song. The other is ירא. פחד is the kind of fear that has the potential to immobilize us, like a deer in headlights. We are so frightened by the real or self-inflicted doom that we cannot move, cannot save ourselves. ירא is the kind of fear we are asked to confront—to try to negotiate with, to find people, medications, and coping skills that allow us to still continue walking on this very narrow bridge. For the truth is, when we feel this consuming fear, we often fall off the bridge or become paralyzed, unable to move. We don't see the handrails or the alternative

routes, we ignore the people down below with nets willing to catch us. We are so frightened that the entire world is scary we don't take advantage of coping mechanisms that would help mitigate that consuming fear.

The other kind of fear ירא is the kind of healthy fear that is mixed with awe. For ירא means both awe and fear. As progressive Jews, we often talk about finding Gd outside in nature. There is no question this summer when I was driving for miles and miles on major highways with no signs, no people, very few houses, it was absolutely gorgeous. But as Rabbi Harold Kushner reminded us, as nature has reminded us this last week, flooding, tornadoes, hurricanes and sink holes are also part of nature. They might be accentuated by global warming. But they all existed before as well. Nature is something to be in awe of, and yes, at times frightened of. For a healthy amount of respectful fear is found in awe. So when we are told to fear Gd, it is not פחד used, we are not to run away from Gd as we would someone trying to rob us, rather it is ירא. We are to admire, acknowledge, and be in awe, in fear of the power that exists in the world to both destroy and to heal.

For Reb Nachman ירא was connected to another phrase. *“Know before whom you stand.”* דא לפני אתה עומדת. This phrase is found over arks in synagogues all across the world. Its source is found in the Talmud, B'rachot 28b. It reminds us who the ultimate judge, the ultimate authority, is. Even if we do not accept a supernatural Gd, many of us believe in some power, some force that binds us together that is bigger than any one of us individually. It is that force that some name Gd. It is that force that we are held accountable to, for it is our actions that either strengthen or weaken that force. So when I am frightened, according to Reb Nahman, I am to determine before whom I am standing. Ultimately, am I standing before my teacher, my boss, or the neighborhood bully? Or am I clear that the only motivating fear, the only fear that allows me to reach my higher self is by fearing/being in awe of/ respecting that force some of us

call Gd. For when I am aware that I stand before Gd, I am able to acknowledge the community that will lend a hand, the mitzvot that will guide me, the moral center that will strengthen me, the courage I need to walk on that bridge, regardless of what forces might or might not succeed on pushing me off.

This poem was written anonymously with the goal of explaining this teaching of Reb Nachman:

Dear God,
Please help me to remember,
even at those moments when I feel suspended over the abyss,
that my fear of falling is what trips me up.
If I can only hold on
to the certainty that You're with me,
of what could I possibly fear?
The bridge is narrow...
but it runs all the way to the other side.
(Based on Likutey Moharan II:48)

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel explains in his book Between God and Man that wherever we go we must cultivate the art of awareness of God. We learn this in worship, but not only in worship. "To worship properly," writes Heschel, "is to expand the presence of God in the world." To know that we stand before God wherever we may be is to rise to a higher level of living.

Awareness of Gd is a nice contemporary way of saying we must fear/be in awe of Gd. For Heschel does not assume that we are aware of Gd in the supermarket and then shoplift anyway. Awareness of Gd, in Heschel's work assumes that our behavior is different because we know before whom we stand. Implied in Heschel's awareness is the traditional אָרָה, the kind that allows us to continue on the bridge knowing that it might be a difficult passage, as life often is, but that the bridge definitely connects to the other side, if only we can get there. As Moshe Mykoff, a contemporary poet wrote:

Dear Gd-,

let my heart grasp
the profound wisdom
with which You created the world.
Help me understand
that life's difficulties
are in fact her opportunities;
life's endings
are also her beginnings;
life's disappointments
are her finest teachers.
(From The Gentle Weapon, p. 72)

For the truth of the matter is, I often accentuate my own fears. Not because they do not exist but because I am so focused on the feeling of fear that it paralyzes me so that I cannot get across that bridge to the other side. Thank you, Cantor Kintisch, for writing a melody to the prayer/song we are going to sing momentarily on page 924 which encouraged me to understand it is not the prayer/song I dislike--just the lack of an understanding of what kind of fear I have to embrace and what kind it is time to confront. In the coming year, there will be many things to be afraid of. My prayer/song for us is that we always remember before whom we stand, look for the mitzvot that can serve as hand rails as we cross our bridges, commit to the community that is present with a net if we fall and appreciate the natural awe that exists in reaching a New Year, this year. May it be a year of strength, courage, wisdom and אִירָא/awe and respectful fear of the amazing feat it is to have reached another year, another opportunity to grow and mature, another chance to walk farther on that bridge, enjoying the company, love, and friendship of those with whom we share our bridge, our community, all the while remembering before whom we stand as we choose to march on.