

KOL NIDREI
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Rita Mae Brown reminds us that studies show that one out of every four people is suffering from some form of mental illness. She tells us to check three friends. If they're OK, then it's you. Nikos Kazantzakis, through Zorba, tells us that to really live life you have to be a little crazy. To really live as a Jew you may have to be a bissel more meshuga, a little bit more crazy.

We know that babies, toddlers and little children smile hundreds of times a day whereas comparatively adults smile very little. This is one reason why we worry when seeing children who do not smile very much and find it so refreshing when we are with adults who do. There are hundreds and hundreds of scientific articles on depression and very few on joy. We live in an unredeemed world where there is more sadness than we can imagine and we can imagine quite a lot.

One reason we are sad is because we care. When we do not care about the world, other people, our families or the quality of our own lives, we are not prone to sadness. The philosopher Emanuel Levinas explains that we become fully human, in the serious sense of the word, only when we become aware of suffering and that being human is being concerned with what is right, what is ethical. Being concerned with the ethical state of affairs in our country, world and personal lives is very likely to make us sad. For me, reading the newspaper every morning can be a profound spiritual experience that frequently involves a lot of sadness. I am challenged to find my empathic self and I am challenged to not become angry or cynical and not to give up hope.

The author, Mary Gordon, observes that in our culture anger is an allowable emotion. She says that anger is kind of sexy but sadness is impossible for us to tolerate. Dr. Victor Frankel, a Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist, insists that when we do not use our sadness and pain, then we are wasting it. Denying, repressing and ignoring our personal and collective suffering and sadness only leads to more—now or down the road. When we use it to create compassion and become involved, it becomes healing. Remember, we are sad because we care. When we care, we try to improve things and when we improve things, there is less sadness.

The singer Patti Smith talks of her sadness from losing her husband, brother, dear friend, Robert Mapplethorpe, and even her sadness over the loss of her children being children. She observes how most of us, if not all of us, can access a lot of things that cause us pain. She shares that when this is happening with her she often finds herself beginning to smile and just saying: "Alright, that's how it is, let's get on with living." We can escape sadness by drinking from the part of the cup that is filled; thankfulness is an antidote to sadness.

Is there anyone here whose heart has not been broken or whose dreams have not been shattered? A Talmudic story tells of a woman who goes to the village rabbi pleading with him to help her because she was so sad. The rabbi instructs that for her sadness to

go away she must bake and eat a cake only from ingredients that her neighbors give her; but she can only accept ingredients from neighbors who have no troubles and sadness. Immediately, the woman began going from house to house and after some time she returned to the rabbi. He asked where was the cake and she explained that she could not find a single ingredient for her cake. We all are part of the human condition and experience. We just forget sometimes. Remembering can relieve sadness.

There is also the sadness and suffering that is born out of fear? One of our greatest fears, many would argue, is our fear of dying. Edward Rothstein suggests that if we knew with confidence that there really is something progressive about human understanding, that in our final confrontation with mortality, something profound takes place, that when the end is near there will be a sign as to some accumulated insight and meaning, we would be reassured, our fear would be lessened. If we knew we would be bathed in light, love and peace, we would be reassured and our fear lessened.

Rabbi David Wolpe teaches that one purpose of the shiva week is to remind us that life goes on without us. That is, traditionally when sitting shiva we do not leave our homes. It is as if we are not part of the world; it is as if we are not alive. Shiva is a foreshadowing; an opportunity to consider the day when we will not be here and the fact that life and the world will go on without us. Having this awareness—sobering, saddening and humbling as it may be—can help us live not in the grips of our fear of dying by helping us appreciate the preciousness of every moment.

What is the difference between fear and awe, between being frightened and being responsibly concerned? Though life is unstable and volatile there is a difference between serious fears and the day-to-day anxieties we live with. We fear everything from germs and flying to terrorists and bugs in our houses. We fear being embarrassed in public and losing our jobs and we fear what people may be saying about us and our children not being happy. We fear being wrong and we fear others being right. We fear not being in control and we fear being held responsible. We fear our own failure and we fear others' success. We fear growing old and dying young. Fear compromises our lives and our relationships with ourselves and others.

Fear can lead to hatred: anti-Semitism, racism, homophobia, Islamaphobia. It is usually much easier to justify our anger and hate than to understand and own our fear. Rabbi Joshua Guttoff defines the Hebrew “sinat chinam” that is given as the main reason that the second Temple was destroyed not as causeless enmity as it is normatively understood but as self-righteous hatred. Many think they only hate those who deserve to be hated and therefore, there will be no costs, no consequences. Rabbi Guttoff reminds us that the reason the Temple was destroyed was because the Jews of that time mistakenly thought that their hatred was right and therefore, free of any consequences. Of course, they were tragically and immeasurably wrong. There is a cost to all hatred, including ours.

Our fears can result in acting out against others. A vivid and tragic example is the situation of someone at night shooting and killing a person he thinks is a robber whereas it is the kid next door searching for his lost baseball. There are many today who

recognize the legitimate concern about terrorism but who are able to distinguish between a reasoned and intelligent response and an over-reactive response.

Think of the difference between phobias and fears. No one should ever make light of another's phobia. But, a phobia is a phobia and it results in limiting what we do and how we live. Much of our fear of terrorism has led to attempts to control our lives including injustices and violations of civil liberties and human rights that many now tolerate and even endorse. Dr. Victor Frankel proclaims that our fears bring about that which we are afraid of. If we are so afraid of terrorists threatening our security and way of life and our freedoms and rights as Americans, it will lead to our taking away from ourselves the very freedom of movement and the civil liberties and rights we value so much and what makes America what it is. Our response to September 11 will then be self-defeating.

Our rabbis tell us that our world would be so much better if people feared G-d as much as we fear other people and if we concerned ourselves with what G-d thinks of us as much as we worry about what other people think about us. When we fear people, we fear what they may do to us and/or what we may lose. When we fear G-d—that is, live in awe of G-d—we concern ourselves with what is right and what is wrong. Fear of people leads to a lessening of the quality of our lives whereas being in awe of G-d—not afraid of G-d!—leads to an enhancement of our lives.

Our sins make us sad and we fear facing up to them. Reb Nachman of Bratslav taught that our sins can motivate us to change and when they do, they become redemptive. He taught that each time we fall we create a new opportunity to rise. Our sins provide the leverage that can propel us higher. Sin is to remind us of never despairing and always hoping for new beginnings. This is why we should not be afraid to admit to our sins and wrongdoings. We should honestly acknowledge them and by doing so create the space in our lives for something new; be it in our life styles, relationships or Jewish living, embracing our sins creates the possibility to start again and again. What can be more encouraging?

When we acknowledge our sadness and our fears we create hope. When we accept our mortality—the reality of how fragile life is and how we do not know what will be a moment from now yet alone a year from now—there is hope because it creates the opportunity to appreciate every moment and gives us encouragement that we can, with however much time we are given, do so much with our lives. Not knowing the future can be numbing and anxiety provoking but it also can be inspiring and motivating. This is why Netaneh Tokef is so powerful. This is why it is so mind boggling, as a student recently proclaimed in class, how anyone can talk yet alone text message during this amazing prayer.

We are told in the Torah that Yaakov settled down with Esau, “vayahsev Yaakov.” Our rabbis tell us that this means that Yaakov literally settled with his family and possessions among Esau and his tribe. Rabbi Hunia tells the story of a man who was on a journey and who was greatly afraid of dogs. He came upon a place where he saw a pack of dogs and was seized by fear. What did he do? He sat down among the pack of dogs. So, did

Yaakov settle among that which he feared and thereby resolved his fear and lived in peace with Esau. Running from our fears is just that: running from our fears. Yaakov would have continued to hate his brother and the man would have continued to hate dogs. In how many ways should each of us try to be more like Yaakov and this man?

We must not deny our losses and pain, our concerns and anxieties. We can, however, dwell with them, deal with them and even significantly work our way through them. We cannot avoid the uncertainty, pain and sadness of life but we have choices as to how we respond. All of this is true every day but especially during Yom Kippur when we are able to acquire additional inner resolve and strength to use throughout the year.

The author Susan Neiman challenges us to see life—clearly and unflinchingly—as it is, but also to see how it might be, and could be, if we recaptured some of the hopes and ideals that currently escape us. She observes that many of us have sciatica of the heart. Yom Kippur tells us that we all have to do much more stretching every day of our lives. The stretching that relieves body pains is paralleled by the emotional, intellectual and soulful stretching we must do to relieve our existential pain. As with all exercise, this requires effort, commitment and discipline.

A serious source of human sadness and pain is not allowing the suffering and sadness of others to affect us. Therefore, a great source of relief and balm to our souls and lives is to care about others and to care about our world. If each of us would live more this way we would have less to fear and more reason to be hopeful; we would eliminate so much human caused sadness and pain and have more inner strength to deal with what remains.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik taught that faith comes to us when we experience something of eternal significance that intrudes on our temporal lives. Our fears and sadness come out of our temporal lives, the world of desires and things, when we cannot glimpse the eternal, when we cannot sense our being part of something bigger than us. When we think and feel that the moment we are experiencing is all there is, that there is nothing more to our lives, we are filled with sadness and fear. When we see through the temporal moment and see something more—something that began before us and will continue after us—we become part of eternity. What is more reassuring than this?

Reb Nachman of Bratslav taught that life is like a narrow bridge over a deep canyon and there are no handrails; and that the essence of living is not to be afraid. We should not be afraid to be open and vulnerable, to be empathic and sensitive, to make mistakes and to be wrong. However, we should be afraid of not caring enough and we should be sad when we, and others, do not. We should find strength and hope in being created in the image of G-d thereby knowing that like G-d we are able to be compassionate, forgiving, merciful, peaceful and loving. Can there be a better self-image?

Therefore, if when checking out three others we know, we see that they are not like this then, let us celebrate that we are the fourth, the one who is. If three others do not stand in awe of life and G-d, then let us celebrate that we are the fourth, the one who does. If three others do not feel a deep sense of responsibility to devote their lives to Tikkun

Olam, let us celebrate that we are the fourth, the one who does. If at times we are sad, let us be strengthened by knowing that it is because we care.

Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin shares that our faith is what allows each of us to look into the eyes of children—and we all are G-d's children—full of trust and purity, expectation and a little fear, and say to them: “I am so glad you were born into the world. Despite all the ugliness, we know the world possesses. Despite war and hatred, greed and poverty that spoil the planet and erode the spirit, despite even the inevitability of death itself, faith is what let's us say: ‘Dear child, it is still good; indeed, it can be very, very good.’”

GUT YOM TOV.