

***Al Tira – Do not Fear***

Kol Nidrei 2013

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Of all the phrases that God says in the Bible, what phrase do you think God repeats more often than any other?

I'll give you a moment to think about it...

More than eighty times God says *al tira* – fear not, don't be afraid. God says it to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. He says it to every one of the prophets and tells them to repeat these words to the people of Israel.

What we witnessed this past Spring, right here in Boston, reminds us how fragile life is, how it can change in an instant. We are cheering runners one moment and running for our lives in the next.

There is fear in our hearts when we contemplate how vulnerable we are to forces outside our control – from terrorism in this country to war in the Middle East, from the loss of jobs to the loss of health.

And for many of us, there is fear in our hearts when we contemplate the changes that we ourselves feel we should initiate - changes within our control that will help us pursue lives that are authentic, compassionate and spiritually alive. Changes like mending relationships, starting a new job, finding time to volunteer or just slowing down.

We wonder - will we find the courage to look honestly at our lives and identify what needs changing? Will we have the courage to initiate these changes? Will we succeed in our efforts? But despite our fears - of outside forces and those within our power to control, our tradition encourages us to go forward and tells us, as God told our forefathers, - *al tira* - don't be afraid.

This is exactly what, Abraham, the first patriarch, shows us is possible when, at age seventy-five, he leaves behind all that is familiar and embarks on a journey towards an unknown destination.

Similarly, when it comes to the story of the Jewish people, here too we come face to face with what it means to enter un-chartered waters. The story of our people begins with leaving Egypt as slaves - for a life we can't begin to imagine, and being so fearful of what awaits us that every now and then, we are tempted to call it off and go back.

I had a visual reminder of what it means to move forward as I watched the children in our Nursery School graduate to their next class this past June. At our end-of-year ceremony, the children walk over a small wooden bridge placed on the *bima* in the Chapel to symbolically mark this moment of transition. I brought it here as a reminder of that moment.

As I saw these little ones making their way across the bridge, the words of the Hasidic Master, Reb Nachman of Bratslav, came to mind:

*The world is a narrow bridge but the most important thing is not to be afraid.*

Our task, as teachers or parents is to instill in our children the desire to explore, and to foster within them the courage to cross over and confidently face the challenges that lie ahead. And we too need to remind ourselves of these important lessons. We too need to find the courage to say, *hineini*, here I am!

*Hineini* is the word Moses uses when God speaks to him at the burning bush. But this word of confidence eludes him when later in Exodus, God calls upon him to convince Pharaoh to free the Israelites from bondage. Perplexed, Moses responds: “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?” And despite assurances that God will be by Moses’ side, he is still afraid and pleads with God saying: “Please, O lord, I have never been a man of words; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue. Make someone else Your agent.” Moses is convinced that he won’t measure up to the task; his fear is palpable. But God reassures Moses that his brother Aaron - an excellent communicator, will also be by his side. And with this knowledge, Moses finally moves forward. This is not the story of a “fearless leader” but of an individual, like many of us, who doubts his abilities and who needs encouragement and support to take the next step.

Interestingly, a few years ago I read a passage that turns this idea on its head. It claims that our deepest fear is not the fear of failure - the fear that Moses experienced, but rather, the fear of shining too brightly. And I quote:

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.' We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous?*

*Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people will not feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone and as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give others permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.*

These words were authored by the contemporary American writer and activist, Marianne Williamson. To me, it was surprising to find out that they were actually written by a woman. In my own experience, I have found that the fear most women suffer from is the fear of not being good enough rather than shining too brightly and obscuring others in the process.

You might recall that this discrepancy between the way men and women approach challenges was recently highlighted by Facebook's Chief Financial Officer, Sheryl Sandberg, in her best-selling book *Lean In*. The first chapter opens with the following rhetorical question that she addresses to all women: What would you do if you weren't afraid?

She presents data to show that the US has, what she calls, "a leadership ambition gap." Even among Millennials – the youngest group in the workforce, more men than women aspire to the most senior jobs, according to this data. What keeps women from aspiring to leadership positions? Her response is FEAR. Fear of not being liked, of making the wrong choices, of drawing negative attention, of overreaching, fear of being judged, fear of failure. Capable women, says Sandberg, are plagued by self-doubt.

As you probably know, Sandberg's conclusion -that this leadership gap is, more than anything, a function of a woman's personal determination, created quite a stir. And while I don't agree with Sandberg -that personal determination is the principal factor holding women back I do believe that the fear she describes is real. And like her, I am convinced of the important role that a loving partner or friend can play in giving us the needed courage to take on challenges. I would add, however, that at times, the challenge is not about moving forward professionally but rather, purposefully stepping back in order to pursue other priorities and contribute in different ways. And here too, the support of our loved ones is key to helping us change course.

We have a story in Tanach – the story of Queen Esther, which shows us the importance of being that inspiring person, that catalyst to help someone else take on a challenge. You might remember that the Book of Esther is one of two books in all of Tanach where God is not mentioned.

Unlike the story of the Exodus from Egypt, where God appears to Moses and provides moral and practical support for the liberation of the Israelites, God does not appear to Esther to help her save the Jews. It is Mordechai, her uncle, who gives her the courage to risk her life - to plead with the King on behalf of her people, without being summoned to his presence. Mordechai suggests that maybe Esther became Queen for just such a purpose - to be her people's advocate. After absorbing this message, Esther turns to her community and asks the Jews of Persia to fast for three days before she approaches the King. She needs to know that they are right there, with her. In the end, as you might recall, Esther does come before the King and succeeds in rescuing the Jews. More of the story on Purim!

The question, however, is this: had it not been for Mordechai's support and that of her community, would Esther have found the courage to intervene?

Like Esther and Moses, we too need the support of our loved ones – of our friends, our family, our community in order to take risks and change course. Since most of us don't experience a God who calls out to us from a burning bush or who saves us by splitting seas, it is up to us to be God's partners and to help each other find the courage to make both big and small changes in our lives.

This evening we began with the haunting melody of Kol Nidrei; we began by considering the vows, the promises that we make to ourselves in the coming year. What do these promises look like? What changes in ourselves, in our lives, underlie these promises? On Yom Kippur we envision gates that open and shut as the day comes to a close, bringing a sense of urgency to the work of *t'shuva*. Tonight I invite you to take a moment for quiet reflection and in place of "gates" to envision a "bridge" and ask yourself:

Have I crossed the bridge that takes me from the side of judgment to the side of compassion? That challenges me to ask for forgiveness and motivates me to forgive others?

Have I crossed the bridge that takes me from self-doubt or from being fearful of shining too brightly, to realizing the potential within me, within the unique person I was meant to be?

Have I crossed the bridge that takes me from a place of constant motion – of "doing" and "creating," to a place where I also give myself the opportunity to just "be," and to "appreciate my blessings."

And then, take another moment to consider how you might be the catalyst for a loved one to help them turn towards their best selves .....

I'd like to share the challenge that I, myself, took on when a few years ago I envisioned such a bridge and saw a wonderful journey of spiritual growth before me.

Many of you know that the rabbinate is my second career but what you probably don't know is how late I came to learning Hebrew and Torah.

It wasn't until I was thirty five years old that I learned my first Hebrew letter!

It is this journey – a journey dear to my heart and one that I can speak of from personal experience – that I'd like to tell you about and that I'd like you to consider for yourself.

Yes, I know that there are real obstacles to embarking on this journey as adults, beyond the obvious time constraints that we all face. For one, we need to open our eyes, to see clearly those areas where we might be deficient in our knowledge. We also need to deal with the vulnerability – the feeling of discomfort, even shame that often accompanies this awareness as adults.

I remember when after years of wavering, I finally enrolled in an Adult Bat Mitzvah class. There were eight of us at that first meeting. We went around the room introducing ourselves and responding to our teacher's question about our knowledge base –our Jewish literacy. When it was my turn to speak, I told the class that I had only recently learned how to read Hebrew. At the end of the session, one of the members of the class approached me and in a very friendly and jovial manner she said: "I am so glad you're in the class. I was prepared to stick this out as long as I wasn't the one in the group who knew the least!" She had been totally open about her own vulnerability and had somehow figured out that because I was so desperate to learn, I had overcome my own sense of inadequacy. We laughed then and continue to do so today, when we think about that moment! My new friend was right. For me, the eagerness to learn along with the support I received from my family, did, in fact, help me overcome the sense of vulnerability I felt as a latecomer to Jewish learning.

So, today I wish to extend a personal invitation towards those of you who at one point or another might have thought about embarking on a journey towards spiritual growth, no matter how old you are:

I know first-hand how enriching an opportunity this is; how Torah can inform the way we live our lives and how meaningful it is to engage with others when we learn together. I know as well how exciting it is to participate more fully in services when you have greater Hebrew fluency and a deeper understanding of the prayers.

We have many adult learning opportunities here at Ohabei Shalom – including adult Bar and Bat Mitzvah classes, as well as offerings through partnerships with the greater Jewish community. But whether or not we embark on this journey is, of course, up to each of us.

*Al tira* – do not be afraid!

Each week we conclude Shabbat -as we will do tomorrow, with the *Havdalah* service. The opening words of *Havdalah* are: *hine el yeshuati evtach velo efchad* – Behold, God is my salvation, I trust and do not fear. As we begin each week, we know there is much that we can't control and outcomes we cannot predict. We face this uncertainty and are reminded to be open, to trust in each other and in God's presence at our side and not be afraid.

May we go forward with courage, fearing neither our own power, nor our inadequacy to do the work of *t'shuva* – changing course where necessary; to engage in *tikun* – repairing relationships and perfecting ourselves, allowing our full potential to grow and flourish

Yes, the world is a narrow bridge. Most importantly, let us not be afraid. Let us give each other the courage and the support to say *al tira!* Do not be afraid!