

## FEAR AND AWE

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Rabbi Jonathan Aaron, Rosh Hashanah Day 2, September 6, 2013

Making the old new, when it comes right down do it, equals change. Change, when it comes right down to it, equals fear. Fear. Rabbi Geller likes to say that Shana Tova means both “good year”, and “good change.” I do understand why that is so. No two years of a person’s life are the same. Every year there will be change, every year we will have experiences we have never had, every year something will happen that is least expected, every year we will be challenged, chided, and charged with action. Here we are, at the beginning of one of those years, and it’s scary to think about the change coming. It’s easy to keep on going the way we always have; it’s comforting to do things the way we know how to do them. But change *is* on its way and the unknown *is* in front of us. It makes me feel like I know *some* of the possibilities, or at least in my mind I think I know a lot of what *can* happen, but I really have *no* idea what *will* happen. That unknown can be fearful, even paralyzing.

Jewish Tradition has been using the idea of fear since early in Israelite history. It is used as a great motivator. Fear promises to be an agent for wisdom. In the first Proverb we are told that we need fear: “The beginning of wisdom is the fear of God” (Proverbs 1,7). Later in Proverbs it states, “One who fears God earns life; this one shall abide in contentment.” (Pr. 19:23) The Mishnah backs up the idea, when Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa said, “Whenever a person’s fear of sin comes before his wisdom, his wisdom will endure; but when a person’s wisdom comes before his fear of sin, his wisdom will not endure.” (Pirkei Avot 3:11). The Zohar, too, explains that the only way one ascends to heaven is through fear (3:56b). This fear is a part of humanity. Jewish thinkers have been wrestling with it for millennia.

It *does* need to be pointed out that there are two major words used for fear in Hebrew. The first one is pachad: Peh-het-daled. This fear is best described as “scared.” It is the fight-or-flight reaction to stimuli that causes the body to react. Have you ever been in a situation, maybe you

were alone in your home, and you hear a noise you can't explain? Pulse goes up, adrenaline starts to flow, feel flush in the face. ...that's pachad.

There is a different kind of fear in the Tanakh and rabbinic literature that is used more often, however. It is the word Yir'e: Yud-Reish-Aleph. This kind of fear is usually thought of as awe. Like the kind of awe you feel when you see an incredible sunset. And although many do talk about this idea of *yira* being more like awe than real fear, and intellectually I am on board with that definition – it might be more accurate merely to say that *yira* is a fear, but it is not *pachad*, it is not the “terror” one feels when in danger, it is not the kind of fear that keeps you from walking down a dark alley in the middle of the night, or the kind that makes you run from a Doberman pincher who is foaming at the mouth and chasing you.

Indeed, this fear does evoke a kind of awe for the divine, but it could also lead to a feeling of insignificance and dread. Also, the fear of God or the fear of heaven, two common usages of the word in the bible, is the fear of retribution from a divine being who lives up there somewhere. It feels similar to the fear we read about in our High Holy Day liturgy – it's the big brother fear. God constantly watching us from the great camera in the sky that sees everything every individual does at every moment – and has seen everything YOU have done.

Abraham, in the Akeda, the Torah portion we read today, receives a reward because he feared God. He feared God so much, that he was willing to sacrifice his son, his beloved son, instead of incur the wrath of God. I would like to offer this way of thinking about Abraham's actions that may help us to deal with our fear of making the old new, our fear of the change that awaits us in the coming year.

In Genesis 22:12, “Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me.” That's the end of the story, so let's go back.

From the beginning we must understand was that during Abraham's time, it wouldn't have been outrageous for God to ask Abraham to do such a thing. Many have written about how this story is to get rid of human sacrifice, which was prevalent among Israel's neighbors (another example of making the old new). So in the social environment of the story, it is acceptable to ask for this. Abraham assumed that this is what God really wanted from him. It had to have been painful. He must have had doubts. And yet he dutifully went about performing his task, because he had a fear of God.

Consider this alternative way of reading the text. This fear of God allowed him to be convinced that God wanted him to do this, because if he didn't, he was scared that God would punish him. His fear paralyzed him. He didn't challenge God about the injustice of it, because he had fear. He couldn't move from the old way of doing things to a new way of doing things because he was blinded by his fear of what would happen if he did. God, too, in the end realizes that this guy has so much fear that he will indeed finish the job. So God must intervene, God had to come in and direct Abraham to do things the way God had wanted all along.

This is the kind of fear that we encounter when we feel the fear of change. The fear is about what might happen if the old way is challenge. But since we never attempt a new way, we never really know the truth. And since we can't count on God intervening, we don't risk changing even when we know staying as we are will cause us pain. But the new year is coming, the new change is coming, and there must be a way to live within that fear, so it doesn't overcome us.

Perhaps if we looked at the fear differently, it may help:

- 1) I heard recently someone call fear: **False Evidence Appearing Real**. This kind of fear feeds upon the mind. So much of what we are afraid of is really the anticipated result of actions we make up in our minds. We make what we think

could happen into what we know will happen, and so nothing happens. Lets only be afraid of things that are actually real, as opposed to appearing real.

- 2) This may sound strange, but treat the uncertain changes that await you like you would a pregnancy. You prepare, move forward, you accept the change that's about to happen. You also anticipate what day the baby will be born, but you don't attach yourself to that date, and don't attach yourself to how it's going to be done. Because it never fails that how something happens and when something happens is beyond control.

The new year is upon us. The new change will be upon us as well. When it comes to fearing that change, perhaps it helps to remember - it's alright to anticipate what may happen, if it makes you feel better...if not, then try not to anticipate (I know that's easier said than done).

And then surrender yourself to the how and when. Get yourself ready for anything, and understand that everything is possible, and you just never know when it's going to happen, and certainly not how.

You may find your own antidote to the fear of change. I guess just begin with the knowledge that things will change. And take the good wishes the next time someone says "Shana Tova," have a good change.