

Mika Madela, an author and relationship coach, a person like any one of us, shares a story, I think most of us can connect with it about a time that fear almost derailed her future. It was the night before a first date and she was pacing back and forth – and back and forth..... attacked by the what -ifs

*What if he didn't like me?*

*What if I repulsed him?*

*What if I reveal something embarrassing about myself (like my paralyzing fear of bunnies–true story!)?*

*What if we had nothing to say to each other?*

*I should call and cancel*

Fear was taking over. Like so many of us, she had previous relationship burns which caused her to struggle with intimacy and vulnerability. The fear of rejection prevented the real her from showing up in relationships. She felt uptight and tense, and as she reports “Like such a phony and a loser”

What if it is awful? What if he isn't what I think? What if I am not what he thinks I am? What if this is such a disappointment after I have invested so much time? Then something happened.

The night of her big date, she accidentally left her phone beside the swimming pool in her apartment complex, which was already locked up for the evening behind a tall metal fence. A part of her was completely relieved. I thought, “*Hey! What do you know! This could be my excuse to not show up because I didn't have access to my phone to confirm the time and location.*”

And then a small voice told me told her that there was only one thing she could do.

**“START CLIMBING!”**

SO this completely rational person with a grumble and a sigh, climbed over the fence, with her back pressed against the wall, and she slowly shimmied her way towards the pool's entrance. She scaled the two inch-wide ledge that kept her from falling face first into the pavement. She was 8 feet above ground and if she slipped, well then she would have really had an excuse to cancel on him.

But then something amazing happened - When she got to her phone, she felt an immense triumph washed over her. Hey – she was superwoman! She could go on that date. She married that man over 4 years ago. She reports that When you're focusing on the “what ifs” in life and what you DON'T want to happen, your fears will paralyze you–most likely validating what you feared most.

By focusing on where you want to go, instead, you'll come up with ways on HOW to get there.

Nice cute fuzzy story – we all know this is Rosh Hashanah – so lets get down to the work.

Fear is real. It can be paralyzing. It can keep us from our goals. It can keep us from the people who care about us the most. It can even change who we are. We don't choose fear. But we can begin to control how we react to the fear. Before I get any deeper into this, I want to mention that severe anxiety is more than than fear. That people who suffer with severe anxiety suffer a real and debilitating medical condition and that our medical community has many ways to support people who struggle with anxiety. We also have many spiritual resources for those who struggle with severe anxiety that can supplement in coordination with your doctor. And for those who are listening to this sermon today who struggle with severe anxiety, I want you to know you are in our prayers for healings.

In our Torah portion today we meet two women of two very different backgrounds both struggling with very real fear's about their only sons.

Sara, advanced in age, is worried that she will pass before her son is able to defend himself. In that situation, Hagar could diminish Isaac's inheritance and blessing – even get rid of him altogether. This was her son for whom she waited her entire life, he was the thing she prized the most in life, and now, when she sees the rough way Ishmael was playing with him, she is full of fear for his future. According to the rabbis, Sarah is also inspired by prophesy ( Megilla 14a, Sanhedrin 69 b seder olam rabba 2) Now- the Sara we had met previously in the Torah appears to be a person filled with extreme kindness and hospitality – someone who always invites people into her tent and welcomes them beautifully. However this is not the first but the second time Hagar causes her to feel great fear. This fear doesn't excuse her actions. *But we see how this fear changes her* - it causes her to cast out another human being – a mom with a beloved young son – just like her. It causes her to send this woman and her young son into the desert with only bread and a water.

Lets look at the “other woman” and her fear – Hagar – Hagar never chooses to be in this position. It is never her choice to have a son with Avraham. Sarah pushes her into it. Now here she is, wandering around the desert, out of water, and bread, watching her son die. So she casts him under a bush and walks away, reluctantly, crying – fearing her son's imminent death that she cannot bear to witness. She doesn'tt want him to be alone and at the same time she wants to shield herself a bit from this extreme loss. Her fear leaves her powerless.

Two women – two fears each related to their sons – two different reactions – one becomes defensive and hurts another – the other shuts down completely powerless. The one similarity is that both women call out with their fear. Abraham, with God's assurance, helps Sarah, and an angel calls out to Hagar saying, “Have no fear, for God

has heard the cry of the lad where he is. Get up, lift the boy and hold him with your hand, for I am going to make him a great nation.” Then God opens her eyes and she finds water to save them both. God has a hand in helping each of these people through her fears. They both have fears, and the fears are real. There is no way of knowing if what they feared would happen or not. According to Maimonides in his preservation of Youth written in 1198 -“Whatever a person fears may happen to him is only a matter of probability – either it will happen or it will not happen. And just as it is possible that something painful, worrisome and fearful may happen, it is also possible that because of his reliance on God, the reverse of what he feared may happen. Because both what he feared and the reverse are possible “ That is the story of Hagar and Sarah – and we might add – Isaac, Ishmael, and Abraham on their journeys.

And as we look through the eyes of Sara, and the eyes of Hagar, even through the eyes of Isaac as he wonders what his father is doing near him with a knife and no animal to sacrifice, we find we are in the same place of fear today.

This summer we stood in horror when Omar Mateen walked into the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, killed 49, and wounded 53. We held our breath as knife attacks, car ramming, and rocket fire against Israelis continued unabated, a painful reminder of how Israelis must endure. As terrorists attacked airports, trains, subways, a church in Normandy, tourists and locals walking by the beach in Nice. As school is back in session, a shooting in South Carolina. Not to mention our African American neighbors who are terrified of police and our brave police officers who are now fearful of their lives more than ever when they are on patrol. We remember the brave officers in Dallas who were murdered while protecting others who were staging a peaceful protest. Of course we feel more fearful. Not to mention – our society peddles fear – the news thrives on it to receive ratings, store sales increase if there is fear of a major snow storm – not only do terrorists want us to be afraid – so do some people who could profit from our fears.

Even things meant to make us feel safe, can make us feel fear. All of children have practiced lock down drills this fall in school. We all sent our children to school the

next day, but how many of us felt more scared- felt this a bit closer to reality than the day before their children spoke of the drill. We have dear family friends of ours recently sent their oldest child off to college in upstate New York. Initially they were really excited for him. Yes they would miss him, but this was his opportunity. Several weeks later when we were visiting with them, we noticed his absence, and his father told me how he read about a student near his son's campus who had been attacked and killed, and he felt so nervous then about the idea of sending his son away to school, outside of his protection, and even though as we say, "When you love something, set it free," it's not always so easy. Our friend didn't let this fear fully overtake him. He left his son at school –but it definitely gnawed at him.

Rabbi Harold Kushner teaches "Fear is essential," Kushner says, "but there is a line where vigilance transforms itself into panic, the way hot water will transform into steam. That's the point where it becomes disabling. But if you're alert you can cope with something that can happen."

Harold Kushner tries to teach us that when we feel the fear is to try to connect with rational thoughts. One of his prescriptions is simply to use the rational mind: Why avoid flying when your odds of having an automobile accident are so much higher? He quotes the late psychoanalyst and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl. "[Frankl] would even say, 'Do what you're most afraid of,' " Kushner notes. "I say to people facing, say, cancer surgery, 'Think back to when you had to do something scary. You didn't think you could get through it, but you did.' " we can get through this fear too.

On that note – I feel like I have been discussing fear as something negative – it doesn't always have to be negative – it can be transformed positively – According to Brene Brown

Vulnerability is not winning or losing; it's having the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome. Vulnerability is not weakness; it's our greatest measure of courage.

This feeling cannot overtake us – cannot compel us to stay only behind guarded doors and not carry our message any further. The power of Rosh Hashanah has always been the motivation to reshape the world whose birthday we're celebrating today. We can take our fears and use it to transform our lives and the world around us. We can use them for good.

The great philosopher and teacher Mordecai Kaplan helps to put things into perspective for us here looking out, it is a rather lengthy quote – but well worth our attention even as

it was written originally in 1948, a year of both great hope and fear for us, *“In our modern life, when the whole structure of our civilization is menaced by sinister forces, it is only too easy to be so hypnotized by their display of violence that we lose faith in those spiritual values which make civilization worth defending, in human freedom and the dignity of the individual soul, and in human solidarity and brotherhood...If the evil in the present world engrosses our whole attention, we, too will fall under its spell, will lose confidence in our power to resist...Only as we feel sincerely grateful for all the good that is today being menaced, and as we permit our experience of the good to strengthen our faith in a God who will not abandon us, can we make life worth living for ourselves and for the generations after us.”*(Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew*, 1948, p. 305)

Our lives are worth living. These negative forces will not destroy us. We may be afraid – but we will not be changed negatively by this fear.

The great Rabbi Nahman of Breslev, whose name is plastered in holy graffiti all over the Land of Israel, teaches a lesson that our students sing aloud in school, youth group, and camp, “Kol ha’olam kulo gesher tzar me’od, ve’ha’ikar lo lefached klal.” All the world is a narrow bridge, and the most important thing is not to fear.

Yet I am convinced that the the Great Rebbe of Breslev does not teach us to eliminate fear altogether. After all, fear is one of the emotions with which we approach God, yir’ah is the word for fear or awe, that we feel when se stand before God in judgment. That is a healthy type of fear as we stand before God as a small but important part of the bigger plan, hoping to contribute this year toward the mission with which we began

this morning, leaving the world a little better than we found it. It is also healthy to have fear so that we drive safely, and so that we take care of our health and more. (SEE MORE ABOUT HEALTHY FEAR \_ AND TOUCH ABOUT FEAR OF GOD)

Rebbe Nachman wants us to avoid unnecessary fear, and to trust in God.

He teaches us,

*“One who wants to taste the taste of the hidden light - the secrets of the Torah that will be revealed in time to come - must elevate the attribute of fear to its root.*

*This is done through Judgment. Examine yourself and your life and carefully weigh all your various activities and interests . This will enable you to dispel all your fears of people and forces other than God. These are called "fallen fears". You will then be able to elevate your fear and attain true awe of Heaven.”* (Likutey Moharan Chp. 1, 15)

This year as we begin a new year in the Jewish calendar, as we confront a world that is scary and unpredictable, as we wait to see how the election will play out and what the result will mean for us for our country for Israel, let us do what Rebbe Nachman suggests and not only identify the roots of our fears but also be willing to share them by supporting each other here, today, and going forward, on Shabbat and holidays, in a class, over coffee, let us find the strength together to face our fears with hope, with courage, and a joyful heart, but let's not stop there. Let's commit to responding to the fear by pushing the boundaries of our comfort zones as we push back against its sources. If as FDR once said we've come to the point where we're afraid of fear itself, and feel that we cannot have any impact, then now is the time at this New Year for each of us to remind ourselves that we are each created b'tzelem Elo-him, in

God's image, to be God's partners in the ongoing creation of the world whose birthday we celebrate today, and so each kind and welcoming word we speak, each small act of giving, each time we advocate for what is important to our lives, each time we are creating a Shana Tovah u'metukah, a good and sweet New Year. Amen.



Again and again God calls out to Joshua and the Israelites as they get ready to cross the Jordan into the Holy Land just as we get ready to enter a New Year together, (44 in Bible ) times God tells us not to fear, to have courage, that the peoples of the region have heard of God's miracles and are melting away like wax.

And then we also hear about how we will always be a small people, subject to the uncertainties of climate and rain in Israel, that we will live under the rule of others and be at their mercy, and still we should keep faith with the Creator, whose love, compassion, judgment, and mercy are more powerful than that of any flesh and blood ruler or government on earth.

And so let's agree that we can begin by admitting our fears, by confronting them, also by noticing that sometimes the fears are about what is real and menacing and what we must take in seriousness, and sometimes we make ourselves afraid – work ourselves up until we've convinced ourselves of a threat whether real or imagined, and other

moments we face for sure what is real and scary but something comes from the situation that may not assuage the pain, but that gives us new hope we never thought possible.

“The pessimist resembles a man who observes with fear and sadness that his wall calendar, from which he daily tears a sheet, grows thinner with each passing day. On the other hand, the person who attacks the problems of life actively is like a man who removes each successive leaf from his calendar and files it neatly and carefully away with its predecessors, after first having jotted down a few diary notes on the back. He can reflect with pride and joy on all the richness set down in these notes, on all the life he has already lived to the fullest. What will it matter to him if he notices that he is growing old? Has he any reason to envy the young people whom he sees, or wax nostalgic over his own lost youth? What reasons has he to envy a young person? For the possibilities that a young person has, the future which is in store for him?

No, thank you,' he will think. 'Instead of possibilities, I have realities in my past, not only the reality of work done and of love loved, but of sufferings bravely suffered. These sufferings are even the things of which I am most proud, although these are things which cannot inspire envy.’”

— **Viktor E. Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning**

Anxiety is different – doctors can be helpful

Isaih 41:10

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner tells story of just such a moment.

He describes how about 30 years ago he was shopping at Marshall's with his wife and kids. He caught a glimpse that evening of a tall, carefully made-up, attractive woman out of the corner of his eye who seemed to be distraught. She was accompanied by a man and she was pregnant.

They were gently moving toward him to try and catch his attention.

"Aren't you Rabbi Kushner?"

"Yes I am. Have we met?"

"Not exactly, we attended a service you did. My husband thought you were very nice."

Before he had a chance to acknowledge the compliment she opened up, "Oh Rabbi, we were at the doctor's this afternoon. The third opinion. He says I have an inoperable tumor. I'm going to die. He says that the baby will be fine, but I've only got six months at the most."

Her husband was trying to look strong, but his eyes seemed abnormally red.

Kushner responded to them, "Oh my God! I'm sorry. Is there anything I can do?"

They introduced themselves, gave the details. They'd been thinking about joining the synagogue there. Their world had collapsed. Why has this happened? Would I do the funeral? They joined. She bore a daughter. She died.

And Rabbi Kushner did the funeral.

The story does not end here. He continues.

Not long ago, I was sitting with the other members of my synagogue's high school faculty over a Monday night pizza supper. We were surveying the students. Even after a long day of school their energy astonished us. My glance settled on a short, vivacious, red-haired girl of seventeen...Her face had a grin as irrepressible as the sunrise. Everyone laughed with her. She is popular. The group erupted with joy. A few minutes later, she came over...and asked if I would read over a creative worship service she had written...I love that girl. I am honored she looks up to me....That girl's father never did remarry. Last week, I whispered to another teacher, her dad told me that his daughter was thinking of becoming a Rabbi...[and] I can't get it out of my head that somehow God is mixed up in the whole horrible, holy and joyous thing..."

This story has always chilled me to the core and also energized me as well. There is only so much we can control, and so much more that we cannot control, and so we should live joyfully every moment when we are able , to smile, to breathe deeply, to look at our loved ones and friends and say "Hineh tov me'od", Behold, it is very good – the words God said on the 6<sup>th</sup> day of creation when looking over all of creation just before the very first Shabbat. (TOO Polyanna – cant just say good without recognizing the bad – maybe open with this story)

Living with joy does not mean that we wipe away all fear.

Please introduce yourself to me after the service & please join me and our community on this journey into the New Year.

The screenshot shows a Google search results page for the query "Jewish quotes fear". The search results include several images with text:

- DE WISE IN DEEDS**  
JEWISH PROVERB  
@KINDLOVINGWORDS
- "Above all, don't fear difficult moments. The best comes from them"**  
- Rita Levit-Montalcini
- his hand revealed, then comes the ready cry of persecution and it echoes through the world press. The real cause of the persecution (which is the oppression of the people by the financial practices of the Jews) are never given publicity.**  
- Henry Ford, Sr.  
May, 1920
- "FOR I AM WITH YOU; DO NOT BE DISMAYED, FOR I AM YOUR GOD. I WILL STRENGTHEN YOU"**  
ISAIAH 41:10
- conscious self; they can only come about "by mistake."**  
Charles Swain, 1840; Swain, the Beggar of Norwich
- SO HE CREATED MOTHERS.**  
Joel Pritchard

A large Pinterest pin is overlaid on the search results, featuring the text:

**SO DO NOT FEAR, FOR I AM WITH YOU; DO NOT BE DISMAYED, FOR I AM YOUR GOD. I WILL STRENGTHEN YOU**  
ISAIAH 41:10

The pin is attributed to Evelia Torrez on Bible Verses... and includes a search bar and related image thumbnails. The Windows taskbar at the bottom shows the time as 11:46 AM on 9/29/2016.