

From the Rabbi's Desk  
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## Embracing Fear!

### D'var Torah for Yizkor

**5785**

With appreciation to Rabbi Daniel Graber of Forest Hills Jewish Center, from whom I borrowed the title and a couple of good ideas and texts for this d'var Torah.



I know you are not supposed to sleep in the afternoon of Rosh Hashanah, but what can I do; I usually take a nap. This Rosh Hashanah, however, we finished lunch late and I needed to be at the shul by 5:30 PM, so to earn some mitzvah points I went to blow the shofar for some Hillcrest Jewish Center members who I knew couldn't make it to shul in the morning.

The weather was nice, and Silvia went with me.

We visited three or four members, and we left Mrs. Blaustein for the last.

Mrs. Blaustein has been a member of Hillcrest Jewish Center for years, to be more precise, since 1962, after she, her husband and children moved into the community.

Mrs. Blaustein never attended services since I joined Hillcrest Jewish Center 18 years ago. However, she has been a generous member of the shul, and I had visited her occasionally.

The last time I visited Mrs. Blaustein was about three years ago, and she was not young then, hence my hesitation before I knocked on the door. I confess (today is a good day for confessions) that I wasn't sure if she was living in the same home, or if she had -God forbid- passed away.

I knocked on the door and an aide opened it.

Is Mrs. Blaustein available? I asked.

Who are you? She replied.

I am Rabbi Kogan, and this is my wife, Silvia.

Please come in, she said.

We went into the house and a frail little old lady was lying down on the couch. I approached her, and said: Shanah Tovah, Mrs. Blaustein. Rabbi Kogan here. I came to visit you and to blow the shofar for you.

Rabbi Kogan! -She said- I haven't seen you in a long time! And Silvia (I swear she knew my wife's name). Good to see you! Her mind and hearing were perfect.

She sat on a chair, with her aide at her side.

I asked her how she was doing, and she complained about aches and pains. She pointed to the bed in the living room, explaining that she doesn't get out of the house too often, and that she doesn't do stairs any longer.

Not too bad for a 90-year-old lady -I said- knowing for sure that she was over 90 but wanting to compliment her a little.

Rabbi, she said, I am 109 years old.

109?!! – I asked in amazement. I never met anyone 109 years old, I said.

Shhhh, she said.

I guess Mrs. Blaustein didn't want me to give her an evil eye, or perhaps thought God had forgotten about her, and didn't want to remind Him.

In any event, it seems that Mrs. Blaustein, who survived her parents, siblings, husband, and children, was still cherishing life in her own way, and was not in a rush to leave this world.

We had a short conversation, and before I left, I blew the shofar and promised to return soon. Mrs. Blaustein thanked me and reminded herself (perhaps moved by my amazement at her age) that she needed to send a donation to Hillcrest.

In a few moments, we will all ask God to remember our loved ones. *Yizkor Elokim* – May God remember...

However, as Mrs. Blaustein reminded me, we may not want God to remember us too much, especially if we are afraid to die (Shhhhh), and things are going well, and we are enjoying life.

Now, personally, although this past year has not been a good one for Israel and the Jewish people (I have spoken about it in yesterday's d'var Torah as well as during Rosh Hashanah), it has been, baruch Hashem, a good year for me and for my family: I was able to finish Chaplain School, celebrated 18 years at Hillcrest Jewish Center, got to travel to Rome and to meet the Pope, and even my golf game improved slightly.

It is part of human nature: when things are going well, we don't want God to mess things up. When things are moving along nicely, we believe they will continue unchanged; forever.

One of the advantages of our new partnership with Forest Hills Jewish Center, is that I got to meet the rabbi, Rabbi Daniel Graber. Rabbis like to exchange sermon ideas, and I decided to "borrow" Rabbi Graber's title of one of his Rosh Hashanah divrei Torah, *Embracing Fear*.

Although many of us work hard to overcome fear, and believe me, this is what I did during three months at Chaplain school, as Rabbi Graber suggests, fear might not be as bad as its reputation.

To begin, in the High Holy Days' Amidah, we ask God **וּבְכֹן תִּן פְּחָדְךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ עַל כָּל מַעֲשֵׂיךָ. וְאִימְתָךָ עַל כָּל מַה שִּׁבְרָאתָ** - *Place Your fear, HaShem over all Your works, and Your awe over all You have created.* And that of course includes us.

We are asking God to bring fear into the world. But why? Why would we want more fear?

And wait a minute, didn't one of the greatest Hassidic masters, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, teach that the world is a very narrow bridge, and what is essential is not to be afraid at all?

Apparently no!

The song: **לֹא לִפְחַד כָּלֵל** may say *what is essential is not to be afraid at all*, but these are not the words of the Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. His original teaching is **וְדַע, שֶׁהָאָדָם צָרִיךְ לַעֲבֹר עַל גֶּשֶׁר צָר מְאֹד מְאֹד, וְהַכֵּלֵל וְהַעֲקֹר – שֶׁלֹּא יִתְפַּחַד כָּלֵל**

- Know that a person needs to cross a very, very narrow bridge, and what is essential is not to be that one should not be overcome by fear.<sup>1</sup>

Rabbi Nachman seems to say that fear is OK as long as you are not overcome by it, as long as you are not paralyzed by it.

Fear is, by far, the most potent emotion found in the animal kingdom (including humans). Fear is programmed into our nervous system and gives us the survival instincts we need to keep ourselves safe from danger.

Fear can be a good catalyst for growth and change when used in the right circumstances. Fear can push you out of your comfort zone, encouraging you to explore new things and adapt, which can help you develop new skills and gain confidence. Fear can motivate you to act, to achieve your goals and take on new challenges.

It is somewhat safe to say that society has been shaped by fear.

The fear of death, the fear of losing one's material possessions, the fear of loneliness, can be a catalyst for change, for action.

In a few moments we will ask God to remember our loved ones. God's memory, as opposed to ours, is infinite, constant, and flawless.

I do remember my parents, but not all the time; I remember my grandparents, but only bits and pieces; and who is alive to remember my grandparents' grandparents, and their grandparents. When it comes to remember our loved ones who passed away, we admit our limitations, and ask God, in His eternal love and mercy, to remember them for us. *Yizkor Elokim* – May God remember...

However, when it comes to remember that we won't be here forever; when it comes to the somber realization that one day someone will be remembering us as well, God cannot do the homework for us. It is up to us to embrace our fears and transform them into a catalyst for change.

*Yizkor Elokim*. In a few moments we will ask God to remember.

However, there are a few things that are up to us to remember; there are a few things we must remember.

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<sup>1</sup> Likutei Moharan, Part II 48:2:7.

We must remember who we are.

We must remember our dreams, our values.

We must remember to say *I love you, thank you, forgive me*, to the people we love.

We must remember that one day, we won't be here.

And we must remember that being afraid is OK, that fear should not be dismissed, but embraced and used as an incentive for change and transformation.

If we are not going to be here forever, perhaps it is important to let God remember our loved ones, while we start remembering everything we need to do before our time is up.

Do you have a list? If not, perhaps, you are not afraid enough. If you don't remember who you are; if you can't recall your dreams and your values; if you have not been able to say *I love you, thank you, and forgive me*, to the people you love, perhaps it is time for you to embrace fear.

And so, we pray:

Our God, and God of our ancestors...

In this sacred hour we ask You:

תָּן פְּחָדְךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ עַל כָּל מַעֲשֶׂיךָ

*Place Your fear, HaShem over all You have created<sup>2</sup>, including us.*

Help us embrace fear—not the kind of fear that paralyzes us, but the fear that inspires us to change.

וּבְכֹן תֵּן כְּבוֹד יְהוָה לְעַמֶּךָ תְּהִלָּה לִירֵאָיִךָ וְתִקְוָה טוֹבָה לְדוֹרְשֶׁיךָ

*Grant honor, HaShem, to Your people, praise to those who fear You, and good hope to those who seek You.<sup>3</sup>*

Your people Israel had a rough year, HaShem. Please give us a break, to us, to our brothers and sisters in Israel, and to people of good will everywhere.

And fulfill speedily in our days....

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<sup>2</sup> From the High Holy Days' Amidah

<sup>3</sup> ibidem

וּבִכְן צְדִיקִים יִרְאוּ וַיִּשְׂמְחוּ וַיִּשְׂרִים יַעֲלֶזוּ וַחֲסִידִים בְּרַגְזָה יִגִּילוּ וְעוֹלָתָה תִּקְפָּץ בַּיָּהּ. וְכָל הָרָשָׁעָה כָּלָה כְּעָשָׁן  
תִּכָּלֶה כִּי תִעְבִּיר מִמִּשְׁלַת זָדוֹן מִן הָאָרֶץ:

*And then the righteous will see [this] and rejoice, and the upright will be jubilant, and the pious will celebrate; injustice will close its mouth, and all the wickedness will vanish like smoke, when You remove the rule of evil from the earth.<sup>4</sup>*

ה' עֲזוּ לְעַמּוֹ יִתֵּן ה' יְבָרֵךְ אֶת עַמּוֹ בְּשָׁלוֹם

*May Hashem give strength to His people, may Hashem bless His people with peace.<sup>5</sup>*

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> ibidem

<sup>5</sup> Psalms 29:11