

“Hope over Fear”
Rabbi Rachael Jackson
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I was walking outside recently and I saw the clouds zoom across the sky. There were brown, dried pine needles blowing across the pavement. In the low trees, the small birds were chirping excitedly, but high in the sky the birds of prey were gliding on the wind currents. Honestly, this could have been any day in late summer here in Hendersonville. But it was this last weekend. When we were all on edge. When the slightest difference made some of us jumpy. Were the clouds moving so fast because Hurricane Florence was really on its way? Were the birds getting ready for a deluge of rain? Was I ready? Was the synagogue ready, or my house, or my family?

These questions were less based in reality and more based in fear. I come from the west where there is strong wind, called a tornado, and it lasts a few minutes. And there is rain, called a thunderstorm, and it lasts a couple hours. Never the two together, and never for extended amounts of time. Added to my own life experience were the stories from so many here who have weathered severe hurricanes. And then add the incessant, inescapable news. It all equals a palpable fear.

How can we deal with this? What do we do with fear when it seems completely overwhelming? How can we cope?

I propose that we cope by doing two important, intangible things: we must hope, have faith that the world will get better. And in order to do that, we must understand of what it is we are afraid. We get to the bottom of what it is we truly fear, and therefore for what it is that we are hopeful. And then we use that hope to soften, or ameliorate, or even eradicate that fear.

Take, for example, a famous midrash about the Israelites when they were facing the Red Sea, based on these lines from Exodus:

As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites caught sight of the Egyptians advancing upon them. Greatly frightened, the Israelites cried out to the Eternal...But Moses said to the people, “Have no fear! Stand by, and witness the deliverance which God will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again. The Eternal will battle for you; you hold your peace!” Then God said to Moses, “Why do you cry out to Me? Tell the Israelites to go forward¹.

The midrash goes like this: None of the Israelites stepped forward. And then, Nachshon, the son of Aminadav, stepped into the water. His family and friends looked on with horror and amazement. They cried: “What are you doing? Where are you going?” Nachshon walked forward like a man possessed — up to his knees, his waist, his chest.

¹ Exodus 14:10, 13-15

The second the water came up just over his nostrils, the second when he is fully submerged, at that moment he must have been absolutely terrified of drowning and not a second before, the sea split. And the people were able to walk behind Nachshon to liberation, to a place of singing and joy².

Nachshon transformed his fear into hope and took action on his hope with courage. Because he had hope that whatever lay in front of him is better than the past or the present and he used his courage to get him through the unknown. Besides often telling this story at Passover, we also use it to demonstrate the power of one person taking action to affect a community. But I think that he is a symbol of an idealized reaction of the human condition. He was afraid: but he had hope in the future, and he faced his fear. And he moved beyond fear to redemption and true living.

We can learn lessons from Nachshon's story. He gave us the ability to look inward and ask of ourselves: what are *we* afraid of? For most of us, fear can probably be boiled down to our health, our safety, our happiness, and our loved ones.

We do not only look inward however because we live in a much bigger world. And if we are to listen to the news, it might have a different list of things we ought to fear. And why? Because in a twenty-four day, always on, television crews need to keep us watching, so there are promises of new information, or a new threat, or new scariness that we need to watch out for. Even the weather, perhaps especially the weather, does this to us. Seriously, have you ever heard a forecaster say, "Tune in at 10p to hear about more great weather coming our way with moderate temperatures and, best of all, moderate humidity." No, you have not, because that doesn't sell. It's predicated on the fact that we will tune in only if there is a fearful incentive.

The point of this is not to rail on the media. It's to say that we are now exposed to much more in our world, more than we ever have before. But, we also have control over what we are exposed to. No one is forcing the TV to be on, the computer to be open, the phone alarms to be active. We have a choice when and what will come into our midst. This is how we can combat the fear that is attempting to infiltrate our inner lives. Just because someone is selling it, does not mean we have to buy it.

What good is it doing? I'm also not suggesting that we hole ourselves up and never address the greater community. Only that we have the power to address it on our terms, not someone else's.

² <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/children-of-nachshon/> referencing: B. Sotah 36b-37a

Of what are we afraid? A sampling of what I am told to be afraid of includes³:

- Mentally ill men with guns
- ISIS inspired terrorists with guns, knives, or trucks
- Cops
- Donald Trump and republicans
- Hillary Clinton and democrats
- Antisemites
- Pit bulls
- Black Lives Matter activists
- Mosquitos
- Climate warming
- Rapists
- Robbers
- and Strange People Driving Around the Neighborhood

This list only serves me well if I use the hope that I possess in order to do something about these issues. If I am urged into preparation, then it serves me well. If I am urged into activism, then it serves me well. If I am urged into modifying my behavior, then it serves me well. Hope tells me that I can do something about whatever I see and that I can make a difference in our greater world. We can make a difference, most importantly, in our attitude, toward the way we act every day, how we approach the world.

But let's once again focus on ourselves, specifically our potential views of death. Some of us are afraid of the act of dying, some are afraid of death itself, some are afraid of the unknown which happens after we die. And some are afraid of no longer living.

You might have heard of this story: a beautiful young woman named Claire Wineland. She was born with cystic fibrosis which is an overproduction of mucus throughout the body, especially the lungs and other internal organs. There is no cure, the treatments are extensive, invasive, and repetitive. Even a double lung transplant is not a cure.

Well, Claire has this powerful charisma and stellar personality. A few years ago, she began recording videos on Facebook and essentially became a social media star and eventually an inspirational speaker. In every video, she smiled and laughed. And she wore an oxygen tube. She talked about her lengthy hospital stays, her inability to gain weight even though she ate as much as a sumo wrestler. She talked about her friends and what it was like to live with CF. And she taught everyone who interacted or watched her. She taught us that no matter what your life is, you can be happy.

She talked frankly about fear. Or, rather, what one can do with the lack of it⁴:

³ <https://coffeeshoprabbi.com/2016/07/26/fear-and-the-jewish-way/>

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/dailygoalcast/videos/249685645600460/> [note: this excerpt was amended by removing references to hospitals]

We get so stuck in the idea that life is supposed to be good or bad; that if we're sick, it's supposed to be cold and sterile and we just have to live with it like that. We don't let our self realize, we don't let our self see, ...we can make our lives into a piece of art. We all have that ability, we all have that capability as human beings to turn these lives into something really beautiful. We look at sick people and we pity them because we believe that their lives must be inherently less joyous than everyone else's. [explicative] Life is not going to stop unfolding itself to you just because you're sick or because your life isn't how you think it's supposed to be. There is still going to be beauty.

I have lived my life as one that all of you spend your entire lives running from. I have been sick and dying my entire life, and yet I am so proud of my life. We're waiting to be healthy, we're waiting to be wealthy, we're waiting to find our passion, we're waiting to find our true love before we actually start living. Instead of looking at everything that we have, looking at all the pain, looking at all the sadness, looking at all the beauty, and making something with that.

A little bit after sharing that message, she shared another. One which was much more filled with pain as she begged to live. She had decided to be placed on the transplant list for new lungs because "a steep decline in her health that robbed her of the energy and ability to do what gave her joy and purpose. She wasn't done contributing."⁵

She wasn't afraid to die, she wasn't afraid of death. She was afraid of not living. Just before her surgery, she made a video in which she closed by imploring people to "Go enjoy your life. Really. I mean that seriously," she said with her signature smile and laugh, her eyes not yet dry. "Go enjoy it, 'cause there are people fighting like hell for it."⁶

Claire Wineland did not live life in fear of death, but rather she feared not living it fully. She did not fear mortality, but had a fear of the lack of immortality. The fear that we're not done living, and that when we die, everything about us will die too. She took that fear and turned it into action to inspire others, to give them hope and courage. Claire teaches us that fear is a powerful force. It can consume us if allow it. But it can be stopped by realizing our hopes and having the courage to act upon them.

Claire, like Nachson, teaches us about our internal fears and ways to use hope and courage to combat them. As we started to talk about on Rosh Hashanah, of what are you afraid? Now is the time to address those fears with your hopes.

For example, if you are afraid that you'll go another season without speaking to your family, then find the courage to pick up the phone in hope that you can repair the relationship. Or, if you are afraid of being sick and not being able to care fully for yourself, use your courage to set up those provisions now. If you want a new pet and are afraid it might outlive us, we can get one anyway and give it love and affection and receive that same love back.

⁵ <https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/03/health/claire-wineland-obit/index.html>

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEXgmpkjS3Y>

Or perhaps you are afraid of something less tangible. Talk about it, address it, see where you can find the antidotes of hope and courage.

We are all Nachshon, we can all *be* Nachshon. In this coming year, I encourage each of us to enumerate our own fears, even putting them down on paper. Let us visualize them. And then let us address them. Let us turn those fears into hope, to use what might paralyze us and convert it into something which strengthens us. Let us dig deep and find the courage to not only survive, but really live and thrive. Let us fight for what we have and where we want to be in the future. And most importantly of all, let hope lead the way.

Ken yehi ratzon and G'mar chatima tova

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