

Many of you know and may lovingly recall Bernd Simon, who passed away last month. Bernd had been arrested on Kristallnacht and imprisoned in Dachau. Judy, who later became his wife, had survived Auschwitz. They knew the terror of the Holocaust first hand. Judy told me this story. Sometime after they were married, they came to the United States, and drove across country to California. One night they stopped for dinner at a restaurant, and Bernd ordered them both a drink. The waitress looked at Judy and asked to see her I.D. Judy was horrified. What? I didn't think that could happen in this country! I never thought I'd be asked to show my identification! Just as she was working herself into a panic, Bernd stopped her and said: Judy! She just wants to check that you're of legal drinking age in America!

The moral of the story is: sometimes our fears are well-founded, and sometimes, not so much! And the moral of the story is: that our history and experiences shape the way we see events about us. And that may have a lot to do with the sense of unease, and yes, fear, that many of us have been harboring in our kishkes these last few months, and maybe these last few years. Certainly Israel's war with Gaza this summer and the ensuing anti-Israel rallies in dozens of the world's biggest cities caused us concern. The violence we saw against Jews and Jewish communities in Europe added to our sense of unease. There is a growing unease each time Israel's legitimate concerns for defense result in Israel being less understood and more vilified in world opinion. We see new incarnations of anti-Semitism, disguised as anti-Zionism. We see Holocaust history distorted and turned as a tool against Israel's behaviors. We grow more ill at ease as we watch the Middle East grow more tumultuous. Our desire to support democracy and human rights at times presents us with the untenable choice of supporting secular dictators or funding resistance groups that may harbor radical Islamic agendas. A decade invested in stabilizing Iraq swept away with the rushing wave of ISIS, and the destabilization of Syria and Lebanon. Yesterday's fears of a nuclear Iran have slipped to back page news. The United States launches an offensive to keep radical Islam in check, even as the civilized world watches in horror at the beheading of Western journalists and aid workers. We harbor real fears as we watch cities in Ukraine become scenes of confrontation, South American migrant children fleeing their own countries violence for safety, a Syrian civil war raging on Israel's border. I know that you walk into synagogue these High Holy Days with these fears for the future in your heart, because I walk into synagogue with those same fears. There is an old Jewish joke about the mother who sends her son a telegram that reads: Start Worrying. Details to Follow. We are worried...we just don't know all the details. And that "not knowing" only adds to our fears. Our history and experiences as Jews shapes the way we see the events unfolding around us.

Our High Holy Days Scripture readings give us two ways to respond to our fear. The second of these texts is the story of Jonah we read on Yom Kippur afternoon. Jonah is called by God to stand up to evil, to speak out against the immoral behavior of one human being against the other in Nineveh, the great capital of far-away Assyria. His response is to run away from speaking out, his fears of the evil and the violence overwhelming him. He does not want to get involved. And further, he has no faith that he can make a difference, or that

the people can change their behaviors. The story of Jonah, of course, teaches us that we can't run away- that there is nowhere in the world where we can go to avoid the responsibility to speak out against violent societies, or to avoid the consequences if we don't speak up. Like Jonah's ship tossed on the sea, there is no peace to be found if we don't confront the evil that is unchecked in our world. We may be a lot like Jonah, hoping that these distressing issues will be resolved by others, and that our lives can go about undisturbed. We too might have run away from Nineveh; but is there anywhere in the world we can go to avoid the reality of what is happening today in Nineveh, whose ruins are next to the Iraqi city of Mosul, a city at the heart of ISIS fighting this summer.

So it is the first of the Holy Day Torah texts that I would like to be inspired by. It is the discomfiting text about Abraham and Isaac that we read every Rosh Hashanah morning. Abraham faces his greatest fear, all of our greatest fear: the death of our most beloved one. This fear has no telegram: "details to follow." The details are known: Take your son, your only son, the one you love, and bring him to a mountain and sacrifice him to me there. Why doesn't Abraham run away, like Jonah? Why doesn't Abraham dissolve his covenant with God at that very moment? Abraham's response to his fear is not crazy; it is inspirational. He gets up early in the morning and begins his journey with Isaac to the mountains. Abraham responds to fear- real fear-the most existential fear any of us can know- with faith. Faith in the true nature of God. Faith that love and compassion and life will trump death and darkness and demagoguery. Abraham makes a choice, that the values that have guided his life so far, he will not abandon in his time of darkness. He does not know the outcome of what will happen on that remote mountaintop. He is choosing to act with faith, because he cannot act with certainty. In this test of Abraham is a lesson for all of us. Face our fears with faith in the vision of humankind that God has inspired in us. Living with courage to have faith in the goodness of humankind is the only response to evil.

You may have read a recent article in *Reform Judaism* magazine by a British rabbi, Mark Winer, who until recently was the rabbi at the West London synagogue, an area that, while once Jewish, has become what he calls "the epicenter" for London's Arab population. Rabbi Winer had a choice; fearing conflicts between Jews and Muslims, the synagogue could pull in, add more guards, isolate themselves on their block. Or he could work to build bridges. This was the choice he made, cultivating dialogue with the imams and the priests so that Jewish- Muslim- Christian support could emerge. Rabbi Winer did not stop fundamentalism in its tracks, but he did do what one person could do: reject fear and replace it with faith. He replaced the tendency to see the garb and the skin color of a person with the desire to know the inner person. In his years of interfaith dialogue with Muslim leaders and between the two communities, all was not kumbaya; there were honest disagreements, and times when community perceptions and stereotypes couldn't be overcome. But there was growing understanding, education, and-- more than tolerance-- a step toward acceptance. *Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor*: it is not up to you to finish the task; none of us can do it alone. The call to be an *ohr l'goyim*, to bring our light to the nations means that all of us, must be part of the endeavor.

Our fears for the world are real. The darkness is real. The evil that can live in the human heart is real. But consider this response, from Rabbi Harold Kushner. In his book *Conquering Fear*, Kushner reminds us that, as parents, when our child says "there are

monsters under the bed,” we don’t turn our backs, turn out the lights and close the door. We turn on a night light, to fight back the darkness. That is the kind of *ohr l’goyim* we can be to the world, that is what our history and experience has taught us, to respond to extremism not with fear, but with light. Our choice is not a choice between barring the doors or building bridges. We must do both, in measured response. We Jews can choose to see a world turning against us, and become more insular, protective, and untrusting. We can say, if I am not for myself, who will be for me? Or we can see a world where we are not the only ones who live with fear over growing intolerant extremism and violence. We need only look at Yazidis, Kurds, the traffic in women, the children who are soldiers, parents in gang-ridden Guatemala and refugees in Syria, to know that many are victimized. We Jews are very, very blessed. We have more power, more advocates, more influence than others. As Jews we know how to stand up and speak out. Hillel taught us: If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? This is our time to be an *ohr l’goyim*, to shine light in the darkness, to chase the monsters from under the bed. This is our time to pray as if everything depended on God, but act, empowered that everything depends on us. The world is a dangerous place, yet God has planted within us the capacity to contend with, and to overcome, these dangers. That capacity, begins with faith, faith in a vision of humankind that God inspires in us, of a goodness and a possibility for humanity that transcends darkness and evil. When we have faith in that vision of humanity, then we can find the courage, the creativity, the patience, to choose life, so we and our children-- and all children-- can live. Remember our collective response after we mourned September 11th? We reasoned that if evil people wanted to thwart our sense of security within our country, then we would respond by re-embracing American life, riding subways, going to ball games, frequenting restaurants. If extremists hate people based on their religion, nationality, or ethnicity, then our response is to defy their xenophobia and to deepen our interfaith coalitions and build our interreligious networks.

We must respond to fear with faith. Marianne Pearl, widow of Daniel Pearl, who was executed in Pakistan by terrorists in 2002, writes, “Terrorism is a psychological weapon. It stops you from claiming the world as your own. It stops you from relating to people. It creates fear and hatred. The only way to fight terrorism as a citizen is to deny the terrorists these emotions. The one thing they are not expecting is my happiness. That is true revenge.”

“God does not want us to live lives dominated by fear,” writes Rabbi Kushner. “Fearful people cannot be happy...or generous, charitable, or forgiving. Fear constricts the soul and keeps us from being as fully human as God would like us to be.” May we rise to this vision, of the world we wish to create, and the people we wish to be. More than 80 times in Bible, God says to our people do not be afraid. God is speaking to us. May we hear those words today, and may they inspire us as they have inspired our people for generations.