

Rabbi David Booth
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5770

I'd like to start with a story. In his story the Lost Princess, Rebbe Nahman tells of a King who, in a moment of anger with his beloved daughter, says, "May the Evil One spirit her away!" and indeed she disappears the next morning. The King's viceroy, seeing how upset the King is, sets out in search of the missing daughter. After much searching, he discovers a castle, guarded by soldiers. There are high turrets, a moat. The castle, at first glance, seems entirely unapproachable. At first he is very afraid, but then decides to try and see if he can gain entrance. Surprisingly, the soldiers do nothing to him, they don't even move. He walks among them, towards the entrance to the castle, and they seemingly don't even move. For they are only illusions. And inside he finds the Princess! He easily brings her out, because the soldiers can't even move.

Like all of Rebbe Nahman's stories, this one has great psychological depth. This story alerts us to the ways in which fear keeps us from hope. Rebbe Nahman is also telling us that this kind of fear is illusion, more a reflection of our own hopelessness than anything real that can actually hurt us.

Well, it seems like a good time to talk about fear.

This is the season of our anxieties. And this year they are many and legion. I remember standing here last year

when the dow stood at nearly 11000. By the time Sukkot was over, it was 8400. In that same time, unemployment has gone from 6% to almost 10%, and surely much higher in our area. When I drive along el camino, I feel my anxiety level rising as I see all the for rent signs. All around me are friends, family, people I know and care about, hurt and deeply affected by this ongoing turmoil.

We want a miracle. Maybe even we come here hoping that if we pray hard enough, sincerely enough, our financial worries will improve. We won't be out of a job this year. God will help us make our rent. But prayers aren't magic. We lack the power to compel God, and we lack the comprehension to understand when and where God's hand is in our lives. This is the meaning of God's answer to Job in the whirlwind. The world appears capricious and I stand insecure, frightened by that which I cannot understand or see.

Honest prayer reflects the deepest wishes of our heart. It is a yearning in which this room or more accurately this community, can transform fear into hope, despair into newfound faith. It is an admission that I need God's help, that I am insufficient in myself. By putting our fears out honestly when we are surrounded by Holy community and a sense of God's presence, we gain power over our fears and reassert a connection with our truest selves. In partnership with God, we find the way to enter the castle filled with our truest hopes.

Our fears and anxieties are driven by our own experiences and what we care about. They are driven and brought into being by who we are, by the narrative of our experience. That means for one thing there is always something to worry about. Because we are always in the middle of our lives, sometimes looking back and sometimes looking forward. We are always in the middle of the narrative of who we are.

Which is why our reading tomorrow starts in the middle of things, in the midst of Abraham's life. Abraham, in traveling the land of Canaan, finds himself in Avimelekh's kingdom. Afraid that the people will kill him because of Sarah's beauty, Abraham lies and claims that Sarah is his sister. As a result, Avimelekh takes Sarah into his household, at which point God acts and closes the wombs of all his other wives. Avimelekh discovers what has happened and frees Sarah. He then request Abrahams help,

אשתו ואת אבימלך את אלהים וירפא האלהים אל אברהם ויתפלל
:וילדו ואמהתיו

which is then immediately followed by the start of our reading tomorrow:

דבר כאשר לשרה יקוק ויעש אמר כאשר שרה את פקד ויקוק

Rashi explains the linkage for us;

המבקש שכל ללמדך לכאן זו פרשה סמך - 'וגו שרה את פקד 'וה (א)
שנאמר, תחילה נענה הוא דבר לאותו צריך והוא חבירו על רחמים

קודם כבר שפקד שרה את פקד'וה ליה וסמיך'וגו ויתפלל (יז כ לעיל)
:אבימלך את שרפא

Abraham's own prayer is immediately answered because he prays on someone else's behalf and discovers his own place of deepest yearning. Abraham's prayer is filled with his own reflected anxiety - he is so afraid that he won't have his own baby- and with his own deepest yearning - please give me a child. And in the midst of all these fears, anxieties, rivalries - he says something true and prays to God.

This kind of prayer has nothing to do with magic. Abraham prays to God - *lhitpalel*- he judges himself, he wrestles with something internal, and then is able to say something honest. And that honest process of self judgement leads him to a transformation that is incredibly fertile. That inner transformation then affects a real outcome in the world. So prayer, even for something external, is about allowing our inner selves to be transformed to rediscover and redirect our actions in new, fertile ways that can change the circumstances of our life.

I'd like to pause for a moment as we orient ourselves towards RH and YK to ask: What is your deepest fear, something you are afraid to even mention? And related: what is your deepest hope, the real yearning of your heart?

It is the season of our anxieties - *yamim noraim* - but also the most hope filled time of the Jewish year. Yom Kippur

is incredibly hopeful because it asserts that we can change, that our fears don't hold us prisoner. It is a very activist means by which we discover ourselves- we discover ourselves through our actions and our choices. And that is incredibly hopeful. External situations may circumscribe some of my actions, but my essential self can always be redeemed and free.

Put another way, Yom Kippur reminds us to keep our imagination alive even amid our anxieties.

Fear causes a variety of biological reactions that focus us on the moment, so that we only see the soldiers. That is why fear is the greatest enemy of hope. When we are afraid, we lack the courage to challenge the soldiers and so we lose our hope sitting in the midst of the castle. Even joyous moments lose their flavor because fear stalks our soul at its roots. Yet fear of this type is illusion as we learn from Rebbe Nahman's stories.

We are taught: the market runs on fear and greed. And both lead us into disaster. Because both fear and greed cloud our ability to make good choices, they paralyze us, and we make poor decisions. I thought I had made conservative investments - but the only good thing about my savings this year were the tax write offs. And it's scary as I try to plan for the future. Bernie Madoff tricked us, almost ruining the Jewish charitable world, because he understood how to con us with our fear and our greed. People now aren't spending, aren't hiring, more out of fear than out of thrift.

This is true beyond the market. I know that when I am especially nervous about making a good connection with someone my fear gets in my way. I know that when I most want something, I can become the most hesitant. I stand on the outskirts of the castle, afraid, and so give up my hopes.

We can't necessarily overcome every external situation but we can control our own reactions. I notice my fear: but don't have to react to it, don't have to be pulled into that cave in which the world is without author or meaning. And I know that I can't do this with my own resources, that I need help from God, from a power greater than I. And that's what teshuvah is - realizing that I choose by my actions the person I become.

And that process is immensely hopeful - because then I rediscover, I remember - I reassemble myself.

So that gives us a serious homework assignment for these holidays. To place on the table our own fears, our own anxieties. To notice them, to see them for what they are: a mirror image of our hopes, of our deepest yearning.

I'd like to end with a story as well. Rabbi Brad Artson, Dean of the Rabbinical School at AJU, has two children. And he always imagined as a young man sitting with his children and teaching them Torah. You can see why he became a Rabbi. So when his daughter began to develop

intellectual interests, it became clear that Torah learning with her dad wasn't among them.

Now Rabbi Artson's son has severe autism. So he thought there was no chance of being able to study Torah with his children, that God had told him no. But then, as he sat with his autistic son to get him ready for his bar mitzvah, he discovered that his son really wanted to study Torah with his father. Rabbi Artson couldn't see past his own fear, the barriers in the way, until he realized that his dearest hope, his heartfelt prayer, remained right in front of him, ready to be taken from the castle. That moment was incredibly fertile for Rabbi Artson -it transformed his faith and the quality of the Torah he teaches.

I pray this year that we can find such moments, to realize that our dearest hopes are there in front of us, ready to be realized, because it is God who every day reminds us to rediscover hope through blessing.

Lets end with a Rebbe Nahman chant - gesher tzar meod.