

***How We Can Stop Worrying, Even When the Details Follow***  
***Erev Rosh Hashanah 2018 ~ Rabbi Yael Ridberg***

Do you remember the joke about the Jewish telegram? The text says: Start worrying. STOP. Details to follow. STOP.

Put aside the fact that people have no need for telegrams now with texting, email, and international SIM cards. The joke is still relevant because Jews have always worried. We can't be too warm when cold, too full when hungry, too loved when we feel alone,

Worry is built into our legal codes, our liturgy and literature. Jews have worried throughout the ages about the external threats: all those who wish to kill us, and the internal threats: all the ways we are killing ourselves. We have worried in times of trouble and we have worried in times of relative calm.

If you are like me, since we last came together at Rosh Hashana, there's been a whole lot to worry about. The news cycle has often felt like swimming in the ocean with heavy surf. After every wave—which we can barely ride—another comes crashing down, another and then another...

So we come here holding all of the worries of the last year. There is uncertainty and anxiety—and because of it, we suffer also from terminal uniqueness: a sense that it has *never been this bad before, and oh my god the world is on fire.*

We read in Genesis that when the angel finds Hagar in the wilderness, the angel tells her, "*al tiri*" do not fear. The angel says it to Hagar and then shows her the well. God says it to Abram and then shows him the stars. God says it to Jacob and promises to accompany him down into Egypt and out the other side. Moses says it to Joshua and hands him the reins of leadership. Isaiah says it to the Judean exiles in Babylonia and encourages them to find their way back to Eretz Yisrael. And on and on. *Al tira.*<sup>1</sup>

But since we are already unsure, worried, or afraid, this has to mean something else. It has to mean "don't be afraid to turn *toward* the world; don't turn *away* from the world. Don't be afraid to face the frightening world

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<sup>1</sup> Based on remarks by Rabbi Les Bronstein, 2004

with all your heart, your soul, and all your might. With all your beliefs. With your whole self. *Al tira*.

Now, it's possible that this seems impossible. I know. The anxiety I have felt is like a constant low-grade fever I can't shake. Sometimes it rages actually – but rest and fluids seem to help, and for many, Zoloft is a godsend too.

I've heard from many of you and friends too: we have less patience, we have gained weight, we bicker with family members more, and yell at our kids too often.

The daily assault on what we know to be just and right has left us with an overwhelming sense of incredulity, fragility, and even paralysis. It's not a surprise in some ways.<sup>2</sup>

Built into our collective DNA is the memory of our brutal enslavement in Egypt for more than 200 years. Yet, when Moses signaled that liberation was near, he said to the people: "God will free us from bondage and bring us into the promise of a new land!"

But the Torah imagines that the people *could not hear Moses* because of *kotzer ruah v'avodah kasha*—their crushed spirit and hard labor.<sup>3</sup> Think about it—slavery that seemed never to end, yet when Moses tells them their liberation *is* finally at hand, their incredulity, fragility, and paralysis were so bad, they couldn't hear him.

This happens, whether our foundation is shaken by a political reality or a personal one. We, like the Children of Israel, suffer from a crushed spirit that makes it hard to hear, let alone figure out how to fix it.

That's where many of us are, these Holy Days: suffering in our incredulity, fragility, and paralysis. It seems to me, that there are ways to mitigate these uncertain feelings and times. To rediscover the unsuspected power of the spirit in service of our continued commitment to transforming the world from what it is into what it might yet be – communally, globally, personally.

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<sup>2</sup> The opening formulation in this sermon was inspired by Rabbi Sharon Brous' 2017 sermon, *It's Hard to Breathe*, as is the use of the midrash of the *birah doleket*.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 6:9

And while we have experienced so much this past year that makes us worry, we have also seen many ways that people have found to rally together, stand up or kneel for important commitments, cultivate empathy, demand accountability and be willing to learn from unlikely places.

Over the course of these *yamim noraim*—the days of awe—I will explore with you just what *are* some ways, we might regain some stability and redouble our efforts to transform the world in holiness. Not to eradicate the anxiety, but to use it in service of something greater than ourselves.

As an image to carry forth, one of my favorite midrashim on the character of Abraham, tells a parable of a traveler en route from one place to another when he saw a *birah doleket*—a palace consumed in flames.

He stopped and asked: how can it be that the palace burns, and no one is taking care of it? Who is the *manhig*—who is the caretaker responsible for this place? At that moment, the owner of the palace responded: “I am the owner of this place!”

The Midrash says about Avraham that he looked out and saw that the world was on fire, and he wondered: ‘How can it be that the world burns without someone trying to save it? Who is the *manhig*—who is the caretaker responsible for the world? At that moment, God responded: “I am the owner of this place!”

There are so many layers to this story. I love that the traveler, who clearly is on the move, lifts his gaze from his feet long enough to notice that something is on fire. It’s important that he is a traveler—someone who isn’t completely rooted in place but looks beyond his own life to explore the world. Yet, as a traveler, he also has a kind of an out. It isn’t his town, after all, he can keep moving, he isn’t responsible to put out the fire.

But he stops and asks, “Who is the caretaker?” making the moral assumption that someone *must be responsible*. And it is *that* question that prompts the owner to take responsibility.

I am inspired that the question “Who is the caretaker,” prompts the answer:

“I am the owner...” which ultimately means *you, you* who noticed that my house is on fire, *you* are now the caretaker.<sup>4</sup>

Out of this story comes three cues for dealing with a world on fire, and we are the caretakers. The first is **awareness** – being awake to the world. The traveler *notices* the fire and *realizes* something is wrong.

I’ve always been struck by the words spoken by an angel to Hagar when she flees Sarai’s wrath and Abram’s silence: “Where have you come from and where are you going?”<sup>5</sup> says the angel. Hagar ran to the desert from a place of harm and hopelessness. After her encounter, she set forth.

Later of course, when Ishmael is ailing, and she set him beneath a bush in order not to witness her child suffer. That’s when the angel of God called to Hagar and told her *al tiri*—“Don’t be afraid.” The text imagines that God opens Hagar’s eyes to enable her to see a well and give Ishmael a drink, thereby saving him. Sometimes we really are blinded by our fear so much that we cannot see what lies in front of us.

Being aware enough to see what is behind you, what is ahead, and even something that can help you be connected to another person, is a profound indicator of awareness that can mitigate against the struggles and anxiety we bear.

A second response to worry is bearing witness. One of my favorite authors, Zora Neale Hurston said, “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside of you.”<sup>6</sup>

Every day we are witness to situations and experiences that the elders in the room thought they would never see again, and the younger generation sitting here is facing a pivotal moment, facing down monsters that they thought the previous generation had vanquished.

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<sup>4</sup> *The use of this midrash is inspired by Rabbi Sharon Brous’ use of it in KN Sermon 2017, I Need You to Breathe.*

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 16:7

<sup>6</sup> *Dust Tracks on the Road, 1942*

“Bearing witness is a term that, used in psychology, refers to sharing our experiences with others, most notably in the communication to others of traumatic experiences.

Bearing witness is a valuable way to process an experience, to obtain empathy and support, to lighten our emotional load via sharing it with the witness, and to obtain catharsis. Most people bear witness daily, and not only in reaction to traumatic events. We bear witness to one another through our writing, through art, and by verbally simply sharing with others.”<sup>7</sup>

In legal terms, witness is derived from a root meaning "to bear in mind;" "to remember;" "to be careful." The Torah teaches in Deuteronomy 19:15: “One witness to a crime is not enough to pursue justice - according to two witnesses or according to three witnesses a matter shall stand.”

It is isolating to witness events in the world and think each of us is the only one who has seen what is going on – but standing together in the face of actions against our values, unites the witnesses, whose job it becomes to establish the reality and seek to change it for the better.

Finally, a third response to our worries is the gift of resilience and continuing on in the face of difficulty. How has the Jewish people even survived over millennia? Judaism’s focus, both spiritual and practical, on helping people get on with living in the face of challenges, pain and tragedy, has helped the Jewish people to survive.

Our morning liturgy declares: *hamechadesh b’tuvo b’chol yom tamid ma’aseh bereishit*. Every day, creation is renewed. The Latin source of the word resilience is to leap back. But when facing crisis or difficulty, going back to who you were before the fear set in, is impossible. In Hebrew the word designating resilience, *chosen*, means to be inoculated, impermeable. But resilience comes from first being vulnerable.

So neither of these terms describe the Jewish concept of resilience. Judaism teaches us that we always need to strive beyond the moment. You have to expand in order to be able to contain the new you, shattered

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/meaningful-you/201312/the-power-and-strength-bearing-witness>

though you may feel. Resilience, then, may be about *becoming*, not *overcoming*.

To return to our midrash, without **awareness, without bearing witness, and without recognizing there are likely ways to extinguish the fire**, the traveler is just a passerby, a spectator, and the rabbis would have no reason to see him as an exemplar.

The world is burning. Avraham asks God: “What are You doing about it?” God asks Avraham: “What are YOU doing about it?” Together, they go to put out the fire.

We are descendants of Abraham, and for all his complexity as a character, this midrash offers up his example of what it means to be awake, aware of one’s surroundings, and to be more than a spectator to the challenges of the world.

But there is one other reading of the text that offers a kind of redemption to the idea that the world is on fire.

The word *doleket* could mean bringing light, as it contains the same root as the word “*l’hadlik*” in the candle blessing, to bring radiant light.

Perhaps, as Rabbi Sharon Brous has taught, perhaps, the traveler was on his way when he noticed a magnificent palace, radiating beauty, and it stopped him in his tracks. “How can it be that such beauty exists in the world?” he asked. “Who’s responsible for this place?” And just then, the owner appeared and said, “Thank you for noticing my creation. Come, let’s work together to care for it.”<sup>8</sup>

It seems to me that *we are called* to mitigate these uncertain feelings and times. Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav teaches, *Kol HaOlam Kulo – the entire world—Geshet tzar meod—is but a narrow bridge—V’haikar lo lefached klal—and the most important thing is not be afraid.*

Over the course of these *yamim noraim*—the Days of Awe— I will explore these three ways I think we can use to shift between a world on fire, and a

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<sup>8</sup> *I Need You to Breathe*, Rabbi Sharon Brous

world radiant with light, to use our worry to help our community, our country, and ourselves find our way.

**Awareness, witness, and resilience.**

We are here in order to remember who we are and who we are yet to be. *Shanah Tovah*—may our journey towards the light be inspired.