

## Don't Just Stand There

Late one night, when I was ten years old, after everyone was asleep, I snuck into the living room in my dad's house and watched, "The Exorcist." I have no idea how I knew about the movie or what possessed me to watch it, but it scared the living daylights out of me and I had nightmares for weeks. There was something chilling about a child being possessed by the devil. What if I became possessed by some dark force inside me? What if the dark, bitter anger that I saw in the film existed in the real world? It was one of the first times I realized the power fear could have over me. Of course, it didn't stop me from watching "Poltergeist" a few weeks later.

My fears have changed at different stages in my life. In my early twenties, after studying Neuroscience and Behavioral Biology at Emory, another type of fear rose up in me. I realized I didn't want to be a doctor but now what was I going to do with my life? And years later, after Julia gave birth to our third daughter, Rebecca, there were some very scary complications and an entirely new set of fears emerged. Luckily, she was okay. There's a phrase used in the military and by doctors in the ER – "Don't just do something, stand there." It's a reminder that before you act, you should assess the situation and consider your next step very carefully. That's exactly what we did last night when we marked the beginning of Yom Kippur, or as it's also called, Yom HaDin, our Day of Judgement. As we stood before an empty ark, listening to the haunting melody of Kol Nidre, we began the process of assessing our flaws and our fears.

This assessment reaches a climax with the Unataneh Tokef prayer; the one that asks who shall live and who shall die. We spend most of the year lulled into a false sense of security that we are in control and this prayer reminds us that we're not. It forces us to face our mortality and the dangers inherent in life. It systematically walks through all the ways our ancestors faced their fears on a daily basis. When it was written, a person was lucky to live past the age of 35. If you traveled outside your town, you could easily be murdered by a band of robbers. If you wandered into the forest after dark, you could be mauled to death by an animal. If you broke the law, you could be stoned to death. If you lived near a body of water, a torrential downpour could destroy your entire village. In this prayer, fear after fear was laid out for the entire community to hear and consider. The traditional Unetaneh Tokef states:

Who will live and who will die;  
Who by fire, who by water;  
Who by war and who by beast;

Our fears may be different than those of our ancestors, but we have more than our share in the modern world. Our modern day Unataneh Tokef may sound something like this:

Who by nuclear and chemical warfare;  
Who by terrorism and who by gun violence;  
Who by global warming and environmental catastrophe;  
Who by antisemitism;  
Who by the destruction of Israel or the collapse of our own political system;  
Who by not providing enough for their children or grandchildren;  
Who by not doing the work they love;  
Who by economic instability or collapse;  
Who by cancer, who by heart attack and who by dying alone;

Who by collision and who by addiction;  
Who by being silenced and who by not being taken seriously;  
Who by fear of getting caught, who by not being loved, and who by feeling invisible.

Our fears are a mix of external and internal challenges. First, we articulate them and admit to their existence – the first step is always admitting you have a problem. But we are an action-based religion – thinking and saying something is not enough. The Unetaneh Tokef prayer ends by moving us from assessment to action. So today, we move from last night’s “Don’t just do something, stand there,” to the even more important, “Don’t just stand there, do something!”

And this prayer tells us exactly how to do it. It ends by reminding us that, “*Tshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah* will limit the severity of God’s decree.”; that three things will influence just how powerful and prominent we allow these fears to be in our lives. The most basic translation of *tshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah* is “Repentance, prayer, and charity,” but we miss the brilliance of this prayer when we translate those three words so narrowly. I have a theory that when we understand them more broadly, we discover that our ancestors were actually teaching us that ALL of our fears can be addressed by at least one of these three central concepts. These three ways of living are not going to stop stock market crashes, or brain cancer, or the other challenges that are bound to come our way, but they can radically transform how we are affected by those blows and the fear they strike in us.

The first way to combat our fears is through *tshuvah*. We think of *tshuvah* as ‘repentance’ but it should be more broadly defined as ‘contemplation of our own potential,’ because *tshuvah* is the process by which we take the steps to return to our true selves; our ideal state of being. There was a woman who came to meet with me about her recent divorce. She was afraid that she would never be able to find another partner; that she would be alone for the rest of her life, and that her two young children wouldn’t have a positive father figure in their lives. We spent time talking about what she used to love doing before she got married, what went wrong in her relationship, and how she had lost track of the priorities she had set for herself. We spoke about the challenges and fear she faced trying to balance her personal and professional goals. Once she began returning to the core of who she was - her dreams, her passions, her lifelong priorities - she was ready to open up her heart and mind to a new partnership.

In his newest book, David Brooks writes about two mountains; the first is the mountain we climb to attain success, wealth, prestige, respect. The second mountain, which usually comes into our life after a valley-like moment, is the mountain where we find our true self – where we move beyond the fears and expectations related to the outside world and into a place of personal re-discovery. As one rabbi put it, “too many people die in their thirties but we don’t bury them until they’re in the nineties.” - *Tshuvah* – contemplate your own potential.

The second way of managing our fears is *tefillah*. *Tefillah* is more than prayer; it is developing, and living a spiritual life. A spiritual life is one in which we understand that we are not the center of the world; that we are part of something much bigger than ourselves; that gratitude for what we have in our lives is essential. There was a father who came to see me about his food addiction. He had been in and out of Overeaters Anonymous for years, was successful in his profession, and had a beautiful family. And yet, he felt lost. He was scared that his addiction was

always going to hold him back from all that he wanted to accomplish as a father, as a husband, and as a businessman. He was going to OA meetings, had a sponsor, and also met regularly with a therapist, so I was curious why he also wanted to meet with me.

“Because I’m afraid I’m missing something. I’ve done everything I’m supposed to and I’m still struggling. There must be a missing piece,” he told me. Over the course of several meetings, we discussed faith, where and when he found joy, the moments when he felt connected to something bigger; when he felt inspired. He talked about hiking along the coast, about the almost-spiritual exhilaration that came from his SoulCycle class; about the precious times he spent with his family. We looked at some spiritual practices that would help him remain more grateful and more aware. He still goes to meetings and he still has moments where he breaks down, but now, he says a blessing each time he eats – it adds intentionality to his relationship with food. He says the Shema with his kids each night before bed – it reminds him of how lucky he is to have them in his life. *Tefillah* has helped him value his life, his family, and himself; the benefits of *tefillah*, of spiritual practice, are exponential.

The Unetaneh Tokef’s final prescription for a less fearful life is *Tzedakah*. *Tzedakah* is more than just charity; it is the engagement in meaningful opportunities to provide for others. According to the Talmud, it is equivalent to all other *mitzvot* in the Torah and the great rabbinic sage, Hillel, stated, “The more *tzedakah*, the more peace.” As another rabbi put it, “People are worthy of being called truly human only when they engage in *tzedakah*.”

I’ve noticed a common fear amongst many of the b’nei mitzvah families with whom I’ve worked over the last several years. They’re afraid their children are growing up in an extremely insular bubble; unexposed to the complexities and diversity of our city, let alone the world. And what’s so wonderful is that these families are proactively combating that fear by doing more than just raising money for charities; they are going out into the city with their children and doing all kinds of non-profit and volunteer work. And as a result, it’s not only the children’s eyes that are opened; it’s the adults as well.

Combatting our fears, whether it be global warming, political divisiveness, antisemitism, anti-Israel rhetoric, or others, with action - by creating the change you want to see - it is one of the greatest gifts we can give ourselves. And you don’t have to go far, considering that we’ve decided, as a synagogue, that our collective fears around the issues of hunger, poverty, and class can be addressed directly through a partnership between our community and the surrounding neighborhood. The Karsh Center would be thrilled to have you.

When we tap into our own potential, whether that be to learn something new or work on our own habits, we are utilizing the process of *tshuvah*. With *tefillah* we develop spiritual practices that build up internal strength, gratitude, awe, and resilience. When we put our money or our most precious resource, our time, into a cause that truly matters to us, we honor our tradition’s central tenet of *tzedakah*.

Through these acts of *tshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah*, we move from fear being in control to gaining some control over our fears. Use these tools this year. When fear creeps in, and it will, ask yourself, what am I going to use to combat my fear? Is it *tshuvah*, is it *tefillah*, or is it *tzedakah*? When fear creeps in, don’t just stand there, do something.