

Parashat Lech Lecha 5770, 2009:

Understanding Fear

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra *alehah hashalom* and to the *refuah shalaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and HaRav Shimon ben Chaya Hakohen.

Most religions, in line with their idol-worshipping origins, make their founders and heroes larger-than-life figures. These mythic-like individuals perform endless wonders and miracles, and often share little in common with the religion's followers. Thus, their hallowed texts are rife with stories of super-human feats and accomplishments that violate the laws of nature and normative human behavior.

In stark contrast, Judaism has embraced a naturalistic approach to the men and women who grace the pages of Tanach (Torah, Prophets, and Writings). This is particularly the case when it comes to the Avot (Patriarchs) and the Emahot (Matriarchs). Avraham, Yitzhak, Yaakov, Sarah, Rivka, Rachel, and Leah are portrayed as real people who very often face the same trials and tribulations that you and I face amidst the vicissitudes of daily living. Since they faced our real-life challenges, and in the process actualized their potential, they have become beacons of light to us as we traverse the stormy seas that we call our lives.

Fear is not an emotion that we commonly associate with the Avot and Emahot. Yet, Hashem assured each of the Avot with the expression "*al tira*" ("do not be afraid"). In our *parasha*, G-d told Avram (later, Avraham): "After these incidents, the word of the

L-rd came to Abram in a vision, saying, ‘Fear not, Abram; I am your Shield; your reward is exceedingly great.’” (*Sefer Bereishit* 15:1, this and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) He repeated these words to Yitzhak in Parashat Toldot (26:24): “And the L-rd appeared to him on that night and said, ‘I am the G-d of Abraham, your father. Fear not, for I am with you, and I will bless you and multiply your seed for the sake of Abraham, My servant.’” So, too, in the case of *Yaakov Avinu* (our father Yaakov) in Parashat Vayigash: “And He said, ‘I am G-d, the G-d of your father. Do not be afraid of going down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up, and Joseph will place his hand on your eyes.’” (46:3-4)

Why was Avram afraid? Based upon several Midrashic sources, Rashi (1040-1105) suggests that Avram’s fear was motivated by the incredible military victory he had just achieved against “Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him” (14:17). Thus he states:

After this miracle had been wrought for him, that he slew the kings, he was worried and said, “Perhaps I have received reward for all my righteous deeds.” Therefore, the Omnipresent said to him, “Fear not Abram, I am your Shield” from punishment, that you will not be punished for all those souls that you have slain, and as far as your being worried about receiving reward, your reward is exceedingly great. [from *Aggadath Bereishith* 16:2; *Tan. Buber*, Lech Lecha 15; *Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer* ch. 27]

According to Rashi, Avram’s fear was two-fold: He was afraid that he would be punished in some manner for the lives that he had taken during the military campaign, and he was afraid that he had no more rewards forthcoming; since the battle had been so one-sided in his favor. In both instances, Hashem assured him that he had nothing to fear, that he would not be punished and would continue to receive great rewards.

Yitzhak, it appears, was also haunted by two fears: the fear that G-d might abandon him and the fear that the Almighty might not bless him and provide him with many children. Thus, Hashem assured him with the words: “Fear not, for I am with you, and I will bless you and multiply your seed...” While Yitzhak was great in his own right, it is fascinating to note that these reassurances were not a result of his unique and holy stature. Instead they were derivative in nature and were, in fact, “...for the sake of Abraham, My servant.” This teaches us the incredible power of *zechut Avot* (the merit of our progenitors).

Yaakov’s fears are far more difficult to understand than either those of his grandfather, Avraham, or his father, Yitzhak. After all, Hashem comforted him with the promise “*al tira*” precisely after he learned that his long-lost son, Yosef, was alive and the viceroy of Egypt, the planet’s most sophisticated and powerful nation! The words “Do not be afraid,” seem particularly out of context and strangely out of place. We must, therefore, ask ourselves three essential questions:

1. “Why was it crucial to assure Yaakov that there was nothing to fear?”
2. “Why did Yaakov receive the divine promise that Hashem, via His *Shechinah* (Divine Presence, *Talmud Bavli, Megilah, 29a*), would escort him and his family to Egypt and bring him up from there?”
3. “What overwhelming fear lurked in Yaakov’s heart that only *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*’s divine revelation and promise could remove?”

My revered rebbi and mentor, Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known by his students and followers as “the Rav,” provides us with a brilliant insight that enables

us to understand Yaakov's fear and trembling. He suggests that two separate and distinct covenants (*britot*) with Hashem have existed within the history of the Jewish people. The first, and the historically more ancient one, is the *Brit Avot* (the covenant of the Patriarchs). The second is the *Brit Klal Yisrael* (the covenant of the entire Jewish people) that was entered into at Mount Sinai when we proclaimed our most famous and angel-like words: “*naaseh v'nishmah*” (“we shall do and we shall hear,” *Talmud Bavli, Shabbat* 88a). The first covenant differed from the second in both kind and degree. The *Brit Avot* was, by definition, limited to Yaakov's immediate and extended *family*. In addition, it was only obligatory in *Eretz Yisrael*. Thus, when Yaakov was outside of our land, he married two sisters. Moreover, even though *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) teach us in a variety of sources that the Patriarchs kept the entire Torah, up to and including rabbinic ordinances, this was **only** in *Eretz Yisrael*. In stark contrast, the *Brit Klal Yisrael* encompasses an entire *people* and is universally applicable independent of time or place (with the exception, of course, of those commandments that depend upon our holy land for their fulfillment).

The Rav used this distinction to explain why Yaakov was quite literally petrified of going down to Egypt. According to his view, Yaakov, of all people, was quite cognizant of the limitations of the *Brit Avot*. He felt, therefore, that his family and future extended family were on the brink of the greatest tragedy that they could possibly face. He felt that their soon-to-be exile in Egypt was synonymous with a loss of connection to Hashem. He felt, in a word, that the *Brit Avot* was about to be ripped to shreds and vitiated forevermore. Hence, mortal fear enveloped him. The only antidote to this poisonous dread was

Hashem's promise: "Do not be afraid of going down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up...." Once Yaakov was assured that the Divine Presence (*Shechinah*) would accompany him, he no longer had anything to fear. With G-d "standing by his side" in Egypt, Egypt itself would be transformed into an extended portion, so to speak, of *Eretz Yisrael*. The *Brit Avot* would remain in effect and the future of Yaakov's family would be guaranteed. Therefore, Hashem told him not to fear and bestowed upon him His divine revelation and His promise to accompany him to, and bring him up from, Egypt.

We live, to say the least, in troubling times. The economy of the United States, and perhaps the entire world, has been damaged in some ways beyond repair. Nearly everyone knows someone who was formerly successfully employed and a financial leader of his or her family who has now joined the ranks of the unemployed or under-employed. The United States is at war on two fronts, and terrorists within our own borders threaten to destroy us. Our beloved nation, Israel, is ceaselessly condemned at the United Nations, while Iran denies the Holocaust and prepares, G-d forbid, for a potential nuclear war. Yes, there is much to fear. Little wonder that there is an ever-strengthening sense of trepidation and foreboding tearing at the deepest recesses of our souls.

Like our *Avot* of old, we too long to hear the words "*al tira!*" We too need Hashem's reassurances that "*yaish tikvah l'Yisrael*" ("there is hope for the Jewish people"), and for the entire world. G-d willing, these words will soon be uttered by *Mashiach Tzidkeinu* (the one and only righteous Messiah) as he gathers us together from the four corners of the globe, brings us back to Israel, rebuilds the *Beit Hamikdash*, destroys the final vestige

of Amalek, and returns the Torah and its laws to their true greatness. May this time come soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html.

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