Kol Nidrei 5781: The Whole World is a Brief Bridge

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Kol ha'olam kulo gesher tzar me'od; vaha'ikar lo lefached klal.

This song has been bothering me for the last thirty years.

It started when I was a kid, maybe eight years old. During Sukkot that year, we were sitting in our family sukkah, finishing up the holiday meal, when my father announced that we were going to try to make our sukkah levitate. He said this was an ancient mystical belief: that if you sang the right song enough times, with enough fervor, the sukkah would start to rise up off the ground with you in it, and you would fly.

And then my father began singing the song he thought would get us in the air: '*Kol haolam kulo*.' Once, twice, three times, ten times, fifty. I think he was shooting for two hundred rounds that night. I don't think we actually got there, but at some point during those endless repetitions, the song became the mystical equivalent of 'Ninety-Nine Bottles of Beer on the Wall.' I did not feel transported, only annoyed. And our sukkah, sadly, never flew.

In my twenties, I started thinking about the lyrics of the song, attributed to Rebbe Nachman of Braslav: '*Kol ha'olam kulo gesher tzar me'od; vaha'ikar lo lefached klal*.' 'The whole world is a very narrow bridge, and the most important thing is to have no fear at all.'

What? If the whole world is a very narrow bridge, the *only* reasonable response is to live in fear! If you see the world as a ridge between two chasms, how can you be anything other than afraid? And yet Rebbe Nachman seemed to be saying: The whole world is fearful, fear-filled, *and*? We should have no fear. This felt like a maddening puzzle, suggesting a type of inner transcendence as unlikely as a levitating sukkah.

A decade later, I was in rabbinical school. And I learned that the lyrics might actually have been mis-recorded. Rebbe Nachman may not have actually said, '*lo lefached klal*' – to have no fear at all. In his book '*Likkutei Moharan*,' he'd actually written '*lo yitpached klal*' – that we should not *make* ourselves afraid.

These two possible messages from Rebbe Nachman seem to align with the two types of fear we all struggle with.

The first type is basic fear, which in Hebrew is *pachad*. *Pachad* is fear on its most primal level, fear that spurs us to meet our basic needs for food, shelter, life. *Pachad* is key to our survival.

The second type of fear is *hitpachdut*, or worry. *Hitpachdut* is the fear of change, fear of anticipated losses, fear that the world we anchored ourselves is becoming unmoored. *Hitpachdut* is the fear that curls up our stomachs like an ouroboros, feeding on itself.

Both types of fear, *pachad* and *hitpachdut*, crop up again and again in the Torah. But they're expressed most personally and poignantly in the Book of Psalms, which some of you studied with me during the month of Elul.

If you've come to services on Shabbat, you're probably familiar with psalms that celebrate nature, or psalms that praise God. But a sizeable proportion of the Book of Psalms is actually dedicated to expressing fear. So, we have 3,000-year-old poems in which the poet writes about being terribly sick, bent double with pain and afraid of dying. And we have poems in which the psalmist worries about enemies attacking without warning. And we have descriptions of a world that once seemed ordered now turned upside down, and the prayer, "If only I had wings like a dove, I would fly off and find rest in the wilderness…refuge from the streaming wind and the storm" (Psalm 55:7-9).

We can see from the Book of Psalms that our ancestors didn't shy away from naming their fears. They described the world as it really was. They refused to pretend. And they insisted that their fears were a proper topic of conversation with the Holy One.

The whole world is a very narrow bridge: Nearly seven months ago, we were thrust out onto a bridge we never imagined ourselves crossing.

The *pachad*-fears, the most basic fears of this time, are real: we're afraid of getting sick with a virus that could kill us or leave us with a compromised immune system. We're afraid our loved ones will get sick, will die. We're afraid we'll lose our jobs and not be able to access health care or feed our families. These fears are real and legitimate. And it would be suicidal, homicidal to try to model ourselves on the first meaning of '*Kol ha'olam kulo*,' to say 'I have no fear at all,' and refuse to adapt. Our fears keep us wearing masks, washing our hands, refraining from gathering in large groups. Our fears protect us and others. They keep us alive.

If our basic fears help us manage threats in the present, our worries right now—*hitpachdut*—are about what we might lose in the future. They're what keep us up at night, not because of physical pain, but psychic pain: Will my child make it through this pandemic without lasting trauma? What if my elderly parent dies and I can't be there to say goodbye? What will happen if the current president refuses to leave office? When will catastrophic climate change make its way to where I live? *Hitpachdut* is the fear that feeds on uncertainty. It keeps us worrying and wondering and it makes our hearts clench with love. It reveals what we hold most dear.

Our whole world now is a very narrow bridge. Since we've got all these fears, what should we do with them?

Well, we can name and claim our fears, like our ancestors, and find connection in that act of naming—connection to the Holy One, or to one another. We can be witnessed in our fears, and mend some of the frayed edges of our lives by letting people know what we're going through. And we can get curious about our fears, as both a useful reality check and an opportunity to explore how we engage with the world. When *pachad* comes up, we can ask ourselves, is this thing I'm afraid of a genuine threat to my physical safety? When *hitpachdut*, when worries arise, we can ask ourselves, what does this feeling reveal about who or what I care about?

There are lessons to be learned from our fears. But we would be doing ourselves and our world a profound disservice if we only stayed there.

Going back to Rebbe Nachman's song, the song that's been bothering me for thirty years now: The song ends with the word '*klal*,' which has been translated as 'at all', but really means 'totality' or 'whole.' The song is saying, do not make fear the *klal*, the whole. Regardless of which type of fear we find ourselves dominated by, we cannot let it become the totality of our vision. And on this point, I think, Rebbe Nachman is right.

Pachad and *hitpachdut*—survival-fear and worry-fear—can both be all-consuming. Both of them, if we make them the main focus of our day-to-day lives, can be paralyzing. This is because fear narrows our vision and focuses it on boundaries. Fear confines us; and we are already so confined, in our homes, on Zoom, waiting for an uncertain future to unfold.

So where do we go from here? How do we not get stuck? You'll hear people suggest trust as the remedy for fear, or hope, but I want to offer a different idea: that we actually need to lean into a third type of fear, *yirah*.

This idea is actually based on the deathbed blessing of R. Yochanan ben Zakkai, who I spoke about on Rosh HaShanah. As Yochanan lay dying, decades after he climbed out of a coffin to birth a new Judaism, his students gathered around him and asked him for a blessing. Yochanan said: 'May it be God's will that you fear Heaven as much as you fear flesh-and-blood' (*Berachot* 28b).

Yochanan lived through destruction. He understood how overwhelming fear can be, and how, when we're in its grip, it's difficult to look to what's beyond it. So Yochanan blessed his students with a fear beyond ordinary fear: *yirah*, fear of Heaven—or what we would call nowadays 'awe.'

Awe may seem like an antiquated idea; maybe we associate it with hushed sounds, heavenly choirs, lofty architecture, or a God we don't quite sense or believe in. Maybe we think of awe as a feeling that our ancestors knew, but that we, with our modern-day

worries and fast-paced lives, don't get to experience. But awe isn't about emotion. It's not about being moved or spiritually elevated. It's about vision: our sense of how we fit into the world.

If we are living only in our fear, we are missing seeing the wider world. Which could mean that we are forgetting to notice beauty, connection, and goodness. That, in and of itself, would be a mistake, even a desecration of God's creation. But more importantly, if we are living only in *pachad* or *hitpachdut*, we are profoundly limiting ourselves. We are saying: 'I give up. I can do nothing to shape this world.' We are confining ourselves to the dustbin of history before we've returned to dust.

Yochanan knew that his students needed to see beyond their ordinary fears. And so he blessed his students—as I am blessing us, this evening—with *yirah*.

How do we get to *yirah*? It starts with looking seriously at the world and ourselves, and asking the question we'll encounter during tomorrow's Amidah prayer: 'where is the place of God's glory/*ayeh mekom kevodo*?' We must ask this question not just during these Yamim Noraim, these Days of Awe, but also particularly at this moment in time, when we find ourselves on a narrow bridge of history. The prayer asks, 'where is God's glory?' And then it answers, as we must, too: 'The whole world is filled with God's glory/*Meloh chol ha'aretz kevodo*.'

Yirah means asking: where is God's glory? And remembering that it fills the world, and us. *Yirah* means remembering that we, individually and collectively, contain holy possibilities for creation, lovingkindness, righteous anger, and offering shelter to the smallest bird. *Yirah* means asking ourselves seriously: Where is there room for me to act beyond the narrowness of my fear?

We are created in the image of the One who Creates, and as long as we exist in the world, we have the capacity, and the commandment, to shape it for good. It is our duty and our birthright, no matter the fire this time, no matter what the future brings, to fill the world with God's glory. We cannot limit ourselves to only fear, only worry; we must also reach for awe of the world, our place in it, and the tasks that lie before us.

I want to close by coming back to Rebbe Nachman's song, the song that I think, at least for now, I understand a little better.

Kol ha'olam kulo gesher tzar me'od: The whole world is a very narrow bridge. I think I've been looking at the bridge all wrong. If the whole world is a very narrow bridge, and I see the world in terms of space, then of course I'll feel constrained, of course I'll stay away from the edges, of course I'll be afraid of the chasm I imagine on either side. But if I look at this narrow-bridged world not from a perspective of space, but a view of time, then its narrowness commands me into *yirah*.

Because if the bridge is narrow because our lives are finite, because we only have so many years in which to live, then Rebbe Nachman's teaching comes to remind us that we are only here for a short time on this bridge between—depending on your theology—nothingness and nothingness, or everything and everything. And this reality should fill us with awe. And we are commanded—by the brevity of our lives, by the eternity that lives in us, by the eternity that calls to us from either side of this bridge—to live a life that is infused with awe and commanded by awe into action, simply because we are alive today. That, in itself, is an unlikely miracle.

Now what will you do with that miracle?

Start by singing with me: *Kol ha'olam kulo gesher tzar me'od; vaha'ikar lo lefached klal.*