

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5781

It started standing in a long line at Costco trying to buy toilet paper and hand-soap, continued in those few seconds off the sidewalk letting someone else pass six feet away, and most recently while staying indoors to breathe less dangerous air while gazing out the window at an orange sun in a smoke-filled sky:

Odd situations and paused moments in which to consider them.

In those moments I've found myself self-consciously asking questions like these: Whether being at this restaurant take-out window getting dinner is really worth the additional risk of contracting Corona? Wouldn't throwing something together yet again have been enough to survive on? But the kids were hoping for a treat...

Or debating whether to send off our college-age kid to live on his own with a small group of friends rather than insist he continue to postpone pursuing his dreams while sheltering yet another semester at home.

Or wondering, since the value of family so important to us, whether to invite over a beloved nephew travelling alone through town who hoped to at least meet at the park for a brief while... or just to avoid the risk altogether – both for him to make the extra trip by train and us to see him at all...

I know many of you have had to confront similarly unexpected and exceptional dilemmas that we've never had to consider in quite this way before. Many of the situations have been more difficult than these examples, some tragically heartbreaking, and some have been actual questions of life or death.

As we all go through these extraordinary times together, I keep imagining our ancestors who wandered in the desert for 40 years. They were also collectively in an uncharted territory of experience. No doubt, they were in great fear of what was to come, and scared not to know where exactly they were going.

At the same time, they must have cherished the hope that it would all work out, that they would somehow get to a Promised Land, a better life and new

opportunities. They were in the midst of a great transition with no choice but to change.

Many of our parents or grandparents who were immigrants to the US faced a similar kind of unknown and fearful journey of uncertainty. They ventured forward and confronted their fears of the unknown. They coped with dilemmas, concerns, and dangers using strength they found from acute necessity, and the hope that they would safely get through this.

Some of you may have had a similar journey when you migrated to California, embracing the hope of building your life here, while confronting the fears inherent in the enterprise.

Whether related to the pandemic or not, many of us are in - or have gone through - a time of great transition and change in our personal lives, in our health, in our relationships, career, or business; taking on new responsibilities or relinquishing old ones, entering a new phase of life, facing sudden change...

These are the situations in which we feel pulled between wanting to play it safe, to stay in our comfort zone, to avoid failure or loss - all on the one hand, while on the other hand – being driven by the need and allure of opportunity, the potential for success, by change needed for your own safety or sense of self.

In all these:

From deliberating the risk of an outing during Covid,

To venturing on a journey towards a new, though uncertain future like our ancestors,

Or weighing a major change in the circumstances of your own life,

We see these situations through two different lenses: the lens of hope and the lens of fear.

While personally I'm inclined to see things and make decisions weighted toward hope, there is a need for balance. In fact, psychologists tell us that fear and hope are always felt together, that they interrelate as two poles along the same axes and

often moderate one another. **(Hopeful Fear & Fearful Hope: A Polar Perspective 16/05/2016, Bucks New University)**

Fear endeavors to keep us safe, sharpens our senses, and generates respect and awe, while hope gives us courage, invites action, and opens the mind to possibilities and the creation of new dynamics.

We walk a fine line between our fears and our hopes...especially during these days of pandemic. Can we gain any insight on how to walk that line gracefully?

Maimonides - the 12th century doctor, philosopher and Rabbi - offers this guidance to balance fear and hope:

He observed in his medical practice that: “To the physically sick, the bitter tastes sweet and the sweet tastes bitter.” A healthy person, however, can taste both correctly, and in the right proportions. Balance is indicative of health.

So too, says Maimonides, in cultivating your character and in your behavior: take the middle path, the Golden Mean. Extremes rarely serve us well.

We can probably see extremes more easily in politicians than in ourselves: If you don't elect me to stop it, then all these terrible things, and worse, will happen; or, ‘just imagine how we can finally fix this and solve that, and make this dream come true if you will just elect me to make it happen...

We don't trust either extreme, knowing that for ourselves we need Maimonides' Middle Path: a healthy balance of reasonable caution [in consideration of fear]; [and in response to hope]. taking positive initiative towards achievable opportunity:

This is the Golden Mean, blending the view seen through the lens of hope along with the view seen through the lens of fear.

Another strategy to balance our hope and fear is... to remember how to ride a bike. My first time mountain biking was on a trek through that same desert our ancestors traversed *en route* to the Promised Land. My colleague and friend Rabbi Jamie

Korngold pointed out that the three rules for riding a mountain bike apply as rules for life, and especially for balancing between our fears and our hopes:

“Look where you want to go, not where you don’t”

“Lean away from the curves”, and

“When the going gets tough, pedal harder.”

Fear can paralyze you. To keep your balance, you need forward propulsion every moment... the wheels need to turn. It took forty years for our ancestors to arrive in the Promised Land, but they kept going one foot in front of the other.

So, don’t let fear of a fall stop you even for a second.

At the same time, an overenthusiastic hope can also put a stop to your forward progress: like trying to make it up a steep hill without the right gears and energy, no matter how hard you try to pedal. In other words: Keep it real to keep balanced, neither paralyzed by dreaded fear nor deluded by exaggerated hope.

Lastly, there seems to be a message about balancing hope and fear that targets us at this High Holiday season in particular. It’s traditional to read Psalm 27 each day from the start of Elul, the month leading up to Rosh HaShana, and through until the end of Sukkot which concludes the holidays.

Psalm 27 is attributed to King David who of course was a heroic warrior as well as king, poet, rebel, and faithful servant of God. The opening line of his Psalm reads

לְדָוִד | יְהוָה | אֹרְתִי וְיִשְׁעֵי מַמְּי אֵיךְ אֵיךְ אֵיךְ מֵעֲוֹנוֹתַי מַמְּי אֶפְקֹד:

God You are my light. You are my savior.

Whom need I fear?

God, with You as my strong protector

from whom could I be frightened?

The concluding line reads:

קִוְיָה אֶל־יְהוָה בְּצִדְקָתוֹ וְיִצְמַח לְפָנָיו קִוְיָה אֶל־יְהוָה:

Have hope in God!

be strong and of good courage!

And keep hoping in God!

Notice how David's senses of fear and of hope are brought towards a balance by his trust in God.

As a warrior, King David was familiar with the fear of battle, yet by acknowledging God's presence and light, the search for God's guidance, mitigates his fear:

God You are my light, with You as my protector

What's there to be afraid of? From whom could I be frightened?

Even while trusting in God, fear may still be present – it's still the starting point for the psalm – but it is greatly diminished; manageable.

At the end, David encourages us to have hope that God will be involved, that God will not abandon us...and yet he nevertheless counsels us to hedge our bets, to make sure we're prepared to take care of ourselves if need be:

Oh yes - Have hope in God! And keep hoping in God!

But don't forget, also:

be strong and of good courage!

Hope is found through faith, but faith – like hope – must be realistic, not a fantasy.

I might add that our tradition says that 'Trust in God' has the additional benefit of being the basis for establishing peace of mind. Thus, a message of Psalm 27 becomes: To better balance your fear and your hope - and to gain some peace of mind -Trust in God.

As we start this New Year, more than ever, we need a balance of both fear and of hope...

-For ourselves to negotiate our way through these uncertain times and our great vulnerability, in our daily decisions, and for the big issues in life that surface in this situation.

-For our country as we vote, as the pandemic rages on, as social unrest and division continues, and the economic crisis endures;

- For the world environment as climate change accelerates, for Israel in its ongoing political crisis, for Jews seeing a global rise in antisemitism, and for the world as a whole in matters of war and peace, the economy, social and political turmoil.

As we start this New Year, we need trust in God and Trust in one another, a Golden Mean, a balance of our fears and of our hopes to keep moving forward...
Cain yehi ratzon, may it be so...