

We began our service tonight with a famous prayer: “*Hin’ni He’ani Mima’as, Nirash v’Nifchad Mipachad* – Behold us, of little merit, trembling and afraid – agitated, almost paralyzed by fear.” The prayer gives voice to the inadequacy and self-doubt that we feel in the face of daunting responsibility. Ultimately, the prayer concludes that it is the collective merit and worthiness of the entire congregation that holds the potential to transform misfortune into renewed life. The words were written in a different time and place and yet they are strikingly contemporary, surprisingly fitting for our own “here and now.” Behold us, trembling and afraid...

These days it seems like everyone with whom I speak is feeling afraid.

The moment which we now inhabit is fraught with fear. We are facing a political climate that is precarious and unpredictable. For many of us life feels fragile and tentative.

That precariousness, that unpredictability, that fragility, that tentativeness...leads us to fear and could easily lead us into despair. We could easily wake up any day this week and legitimately wonder if we are closer to nuclear war. We could easily become obsessed with worry about the rise in overt expressions of racism and anti-Semitism. We could easily anguish about climate change and about those who deny it. We could easily be wondering about who is really running our country. We could easily be brought down by the petty, partisan, political bickering and back biting that paralyzes our State and Federal governments and demeans the very concept of public service. We could easily become depressed looking at our troubled world, knowing that millions of people are without a home and unsure about whether they will have food tomorrow. How easy it is to become disheartened and discouraged. How easy it is to become angry and frustrated. How easy it could be to let fear paralyze us. How easy it could be to begin to feel helpless and hopeless.

But we are Jews. And Judaism teaches us to have hope!

The Jewish historical memory of hope can be a source of strength for us in our time. In the earliest days of our existence we instituted the most hopeful custom there is – Shabbat. Before we invented the idea of a week, all measures of time (the day, the

month, the seasons, the year) were according to natural time which is cyclical and repetitive. For the ancients, living solely on natural time, each day was essentially the same as every other day. So, folks would instinctively assume that today is “as good as it gets.” There was no reason to think that tomorrow would be any different than today – and no reason to have hope. But we Jews introduced the idea of the week – a superimposition of human consciousness onto the passing of time. There is nothing in nature that divides time into weeks – we have to learn it from the Torah. But more than a new way of marking time, we added the idea of vectored time – each day was the next day on the way to Shabbat – the goal and the pinnacle of the week, and a foretaste of the ideal time to come. With vectored time came the idea of history, the prospect of progress, and the possibility of hope.

On Shabbat, we dare to hope. We dare to dream that God will bring us to a time when there will be no hunger, no hatred, no sickness, no evil in the world. Our idea of Shabbat embodies the idea of hope.

It seems to me that we can use that hope to fend off that sense of helplessness and hopelessness. We can let that hope motivate us towards taking action - whenever we can. Margaret Mead famously said: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.” Instead of allowing our fears to stoke the perception that our problems are so bad, our challenges so insurmountable, that we cannot possibly make a difference... We have a choice. We can choose to speak up and we can choose to act.

During this past year, we have witnessed - through the #MeToo movement - a powerful example of the changes that can come from people taking action, by speaking up and speaking out. We are continuing to witness how speaking out against sexual harassment and sexual assault is leading to a long overdue change in our society and our culture. To be sure, there is still a long way to go. But we know that when people assume that there is nothing that can be done, then nothing is done. But when we speak up, and speak out, and act – then we can achieve significant results.

Take also for example, my friend Imam Abdullah Antepli. He works at Duke University as the Chief Representative for Muslim Affairs and adjunct faculty of Islamic Studies, and has served as the university's first Muslim chaplain. Imam Abdullah became concerned about the growing fear in America, specifically fear that manifested itself in Jewish Islamophobia and Muslim Anti-Semitism. So, he decided to act. He approached the Shalom Hartman Institute of Jerusalem (where I have been studying for the past few years) and proposed the creation of a Muslim Leadership Initiative. Its purpose would be to build relationships of understanding, respect, and trust between North American Muslim and Jewish communities - inviting North American Muslims to explore how Jews understand Judaism, Israel, and Jewish peoplehood. As Imam Abdullah told me: "I started this program because I wanted to have a deep conversation with people with whom I disagree."

By now, dozens of young Muslim leaders have completed the Initiative and are beginning to build bridges in their home communities. Here in Chicago, graduates of the Muslim Leadership Initiative have reached out to form a dialogue group with rabbis, like me, who have participated in the Hartman Institute's Rabbinic Leadership Initiative. Alas, Imam Abdullah's approach has not been met with universal approval in the American Muslim community. Some think that he is selling out by even engaging in conversation with the "other", but I think that his example should inspire us.

We can choose to be swept along by the partisan tribalism and the petty bickering and the drive to win at all costs – or we can choose to seek out real dialogue and conversation – civil discourse with those with whom we might disagree. That choice might involve some risk and will likely take us out of our comfort zone. In the process we might find that while we disagree on some things we might agree on others – and if we are willing to listen, we might be able to find common cause

That has been my experience right here in Skokie. I have been a member of the Niles Township Clergy Forum for 31 years. During that time, I have met many liberal Christian clergy who have been enthusiastic about interfaith gathering – but mostly we have just been a friendly professional group that gets together every month to chat. More recently, however the group has expanded to include some clergy who

are less liberal in their faith orientation, and a little more strident in their political orientation, and our conversations have become more interesting. I have found myself in deep disagreement with some of these pastors on some pretty fundamental issues - like the nature of human life, like immigration, like gun control – and yet we can come together each month to talk and we can come together each year during the week of Thanksgiving to celebrate that which we share in common, to express our gratitude for the bounty we share, and to raise our voices and open our wallets to respond to hunger and homelessness in our community.

These days there are people who are trying to make the message of fear overwhelm the message of hope. Everyone from our national political leaders to our television meteorologists have learned that instilling fear is an effective tactic. They know that fear motivates some people to vote in a particular way, or to support some political position. They know that fear keeps us tuned to a certain television or radio station to hear more and more bad news. If we let it, fear can paralyze us. If we let it, fear can lead us to work against our own best interest. If we let it, fear can be the beginning of the path to helplessness and hopelessness.

But we are Jews. And Judaism teaches us to hope! Specifically, Judaism teaches us to hold on to the kind of hope that leads to action. Judaism teaches us to take the stones upon which we stumble and build something useful. Judaism teaches us to imagine that the world does not have to be the way it is - that it can and should be better – and that we have the responsibility to work to make it better. Judaism teaches us about the hope of truth-telling, the hope of protest, the hope of generosity.

So, now, on this Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of a New Year, I challenge each of you to consider what you might do to fend off that feeling of fear and malaise; what you might do to hold on to hope; what you might do to join hands with others and act to make the world better?

I suggest not to focus so much on what keeps you up at night – that’s what stokes your fear. Rather focus on what motivates you to get up in the morning – what is it that motivates you to act?

If you are concerned about the plight of refugees, for example, you can connect with Chicago HIAS or RefugeeOne and act to make a difference. If you are concerned, for example, about gun violence you can connect with People for a Safer Society right here in Skokie and act to make a difference. If you are concerned, for example, about climate change and protecting the environment, then you can connect with Hazon, the Jewish lab for sustainability and act to make a difference. If you care about the direction our country takes, then you must vote this November.

Instead of allowing our fears to stoke the perception that our problems are so bad, our challenges so insurmountable, that we cannot possibly make a difference... We have a choice. We can choose to act in small ways and grand ways - at any and every opportunity. Each small act of kindness in which we engage increases gratitude and improves the world. Each time we listen sincerely to the ideas of others, even those with whom we disagree, we remove some of the mean-spiritedness from the world. Each time we speak out for fairness and fight for equality, we add to the bulwark of justice that holds up the world. Each time we vote, we are reinforcing the democratic idea that every voice matters.

We began our service tonight with a famous prayer: “*Hin’ni He’ani Mima’as, Nirash v’Nifchad Mipachad* – Behold us trembling and afraid.” They are words written in a different time and place and yet they are strikingly contemporary, surprisingly fitting for our own “here and now.” Behold us trembling and afraid...” But we need not surrender to that fear. We have a choice about how to respond. So, let us resolve to act at every opportunity, no matter how small, to work to improve our world, our society, and the lives of others. That is how we will fend off fear and find hope.

We have more than enough bad stories in our lives. It is time for us to craft the good stories and to tell them over and over again. Instead of repeating the stories that stoke our fears, let resolve to use this time of prayer to calm our agitated spirits, to share the stories of hope and success. Let us resolve that in this New Year we will tap into the wellspring of hope – and there find courage and inspiration to join hands with others to act for the betterment of society.

*Ken Y’hi Ratzon.*

