

*The world is a very narrow bridge and the essential principle is not to be afraid*

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A story is told about a Hassidic rebbe, who was traveling home with a group of his students after attending a wedding far from their yeshiva. On their way back, they walked along a river, next to a steep gorge and they saw a traveling circus had set up to perform for the local town. It was quite a scene. There were acrobats and jugglers but the yeshiva students, who saw themselves as serious students of the Talmud, thought that this frivolous entertainment was worth nothing so they paid little attention as they walked through the tents and the milling crowd. But when they looked around, they couldn't find their Rebbe anywhere, and they walked throughout the crowd looking to find their teacher. When they finally located him, they saw he was deep in concentration, staring at a tight rope walker who had strung a rope tautly over the great gorge, where the river rushed wildly below. The tight rope walker was slowly making his way across over gorge, from one side of the river to the other. One of the older students asked the rebbe, "Master, shouldn't we be on our way back to the study hall? But the Rebbe shushed him, pointed at the rope and said "Pay attention."

Slowly the tightrope walker proceeded across the chasm, placing one foot before the other, hundreds of feet above the raging river, while the crowd held their breath. When the performer reached the other side, the people broke into thunderous applause. Only then could the rebbe's students get his attention but their teacher was still deep in thought and the students were baffled. "Rebbe, Why were you watching a circus performer? What could we possibly learn from an acrobat?"

The Rebbe answered, "I do not know how the man crossed the rope but there are certain things that I do know. I know that he was not thinking about falling and he was not thinking about the deep chasm beneath him. If he was thinking about falling,

he would have plunged to his death. I also know he was not thinking about the money he was earning while doing this. And he was not thinking about us, the people who were watching him. Every part of his being was focused on his final destination as he walked the rope, which is how he made it across to the other side.”

This story was reportedly told of Rav Chaim Krasney but Rav Nachman of Bratzlav compresses the essence of this story into one sentence: “The whole world is a narrow bridge, and the most important thing is not to be afraid at all.”

The New Year begins and we are on a journey. Of course, we are always on a journey but in our tradition, there are some special times when we stop and pause to reflect and focus on that journey and tonight, Kol Nidre, is such a time. Often this journey feels routine: we get up in the morning and live our life, we do our work, we have fun or not, life goes on. But there are other times when work, love, family and friendships feel so much more challenging. And then it feels like the way is more perilous and difficult. Maybe it’s something small, that doesn’t feel small. We don’t do well on a test or a paper we thought we would nail and we become unsure of ourselves. A business deal unexpectedly falls apart. A friendship goes sour and we’re not sure why someone who was once our friend now seems mad or distant. We question things we once took for granted: what we thought we always wanted to study, our career plans, our connection to Judaism or to the Jewish community. Our destination becomes unclear and it feels like we are walking on a narrow bridge. This evening, I want to talk about how we might travel that bridge without feeling afraid, or at least without being paralyzed by our fear. This is a heavy topic but if you want light, come see me on Simchas Torah. This is Yom Kippur and it’s a time to be of good courage!

There are times when we are paralyzed because we are afraid what others will think of us. I want to tell you a story about this kind of fear and I know this story is a true story because it happened to me. When I was twenty-one, I came to the decision that

I wanted to become a rabbi. This was a surprise for me because all through high school and college, I had told people. "I want to be a lawyer and focus on environmental law." I liked the way that sounded and when I said that, I always got a good response from people, which was important to me when I was in college. But as I thought about the things I loved to do; to teach, to work with community, to do counseling, to talk about big questions, to think about spiritual values it became clear that being a rabbi made a lot more sense. I had always been involved Jewishly; I just never thought I would make that my profession.

But the problem was, I was terrified of telling anyone about my change in career plans. I was afraid people would think I was overly pious or I was a religious fanatic or just strange. So gingerly I told a few people to sort of try out what their reactions would be and sure enough, people started to make all kinds of assumptions about me: my girl friend broke up with me, some friends started to look at me strange. People asked me if God had told me to go to rabbinic school. (God had actually told me to go to Woodstock but hadn't said much about rabbinic school... ). And then an older friend gave me some really good advice: If you are in the process of making a big decision in your life, something you think is really important, you need to treat it like an infant that's growing, developing within you. If you bring it into the light too soon, it might not survive. Get to know why *you* believe it to be important. Don't be swayed by the quick reactions of other people. And that's what I did. I stopped talking about my change in career plans I started to think about what I might do if I actually did become a rabbi, I spoke to people who were doing the work, not to asked them what they thought about me but to ask them about their passion and experience with the work.

And after about nine months, I felt ready to talk to other people and I wasn't afraid if they thought I was strange. (By that time, I knew I was strange, or at least, taking a road that was atypical) and I didn't really care. And it was much easier to stay focused on my goal and cross that particular narrow bridge without getting pushed

off track by the snarky comments of people whose ideas about what it meant to be a rabbi had little bearing the work and life I was choosing.

So I began to ask people on campus, was there a time that you really wanted to do something and you were terrified by it? And I'll pose the same question to you now: it's a good thing to talk about with friends during Yom Kippur, the things that are deeply important to us but we are scared of doing. People had a lot of different responses to this question: One good friend, a really accomplished women who teaches at Tufts laughed and said, "Was there one time I was afraid? That's the story of my entire life. I've been terrified of everything new that I wanted to do. But then she stopped laughing and continued, "Actually, if I had to pick one time, I think it's when I was twenty six and my mother was dying from cancer. I really wanted to be there with her, not just for the occasional visit but really spend time and everything about it was incredibly hard: to see her so sick, to know she was going to die, to try to figure out what to say. I basically wanted to run away but I just knew I had to do it and as I look back, it means a tremendous amount to me that I came through for her, and came through for myself, back then.

I spoke with a recent alumna of Tufts. She had graduated five years ago and went to India on her own to study yoga and she trekked through Kashmir and the Himalayas by herself and I didn't think she was afraid of anything. She's back in graduate school now but before she returned to school, she had earned her certification as a yoga teacher and she told me that she was terrified when she had to teach her first classes. She always seemed like a natural teacher to me and I was surprised as I asked why should was afraid? She said, "When I studied yoga, my teachers were so important to me. Teaching just seemed like such a huge responsibility. I couldn't believe that people would see *me* as their teacher. What if I was terrible? What if I taught them the wrong things? She said that fear and uncertainty lasted throughout the first year that she taught and only now after a couple of years and lots of classes was she feeling more at ease. I asked her, :If it was so hard, why did you keep doing

it?” She said “I loved teaching just more enough than I was terrified of it. What? I’m supposed to stop because I’m scared?”

Let me go back to speaking personally for a moment: I like speaking in public. I actually love speaking in public. But when I started at Tufts, I would literally shake when I got up in front of a group. My hands would sweat. It was really not fun. I spoke to a friend of mine, an older rabbi who I respected and he gave some atypical, non-Talmudic advice. He said, “Jeff, piss on your fear.” Never give up on doing something you really want to do, or you feel you have to do, because you are afraid.

I find it helpful to think of the story of Moses in the Torah, when God tells him at the burning bush, “Your people need you. They are oppressed by Pharaoh and you have a mission, a destiny. I want you to go to Pharaoh and tell him to let my people go.” And of course, Moses, one of the great heroes and leaders of our people, jumps right in and steps up the plate. No, actually that’s not what happens at all. Moses goes through a litany of reasons why God has made a major mistake in choosing him and asks, “who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? And then he says, what if he doesn’t believe me? And then he says “but I’m not a good speaker (Moses was actually a stutterer). And each time that Moses protested, God assured him that God would be with him and that Moses was up to this task. So Moses stopped protesting, he spoke with his people and saw how they were suffering and he came to understand the importance of the task before him. He brought his brother with him for backup and walked into Pharaoh’s court to do the hardest thing he done in his life and if you remember the story, the stakes were high and Moses had to go back many times before he succeeded. If Moses had been paralyzed by fear, I’d probably be giving this talk on the outskirts of Cairo while we all took a work-break from building pyramids.

It is true that as we live our lives, on our journey we sometimes feel as if the world is a narrow bridge. The ground feels shaky and we sometimes get off balance and the risk of failure, the risk of falling is very real. And perhaps it’s too much to ask that

we shouldn't be afraid. The issue is to know that we can't let our fear stop us from doing what we really want to do, from being the person we truly want to become, from being the man or the woman who the world needs us to be. Once we decide that something is really important, we can't be distracted by our fear and we can't waste precious energy worrying what others are going to say or think about us. Stay focused, put one foot in front of the other and get to the other side.

May you be sealed for blessing in the book of life.