

Courage

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“Truly, I live in dark times!” Wrote the poet Bertolt Brecht in 1939.

“The guileless word is folly. A smooth forehead

Suggests insensitivity. The man who laughs

Has simply not yet had

The terrible news.”¹

Our world today is often full of darkness. Oppression, cruelty, and terrorism are around us. We fear what might be next – in America, Israel, across the world, and in our own lives. This is not to say there isn't beauty and promise too, but it is a scary time. One fears turning on the news and discovering, as Dorothy Parker supposedly used to answer her doorbell, “What fresh hell can this be?”² Fear comes alongside living.

In a world of fear and despair, how do we respond? The Tanakh encourages us to fight fear. “We are told thirty-nine times in the Tanakh: *Al-tirah* - Don't fear. God says, *Al-tirah* to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. God says, *Al-tirah* - don't fear - to our prophets Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. It is a timeless message for our people. *Al-tirah*, do not fear.”³

What do we do in the face of fear and despair in our lives? We need something more tangible than being told not to fear. We need a positive action to reach for. And so we are learn, in the face of fear, we should hope.

Many of you remember the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*. A banker named Andy is sent to prison for life for a double homicide that he says he didn't commit. Despite the miserable conditions, the physical attacks, and the seeming absence of a future, Andy remains hopeful even telling his friend, “Remember Red,

hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief rabbi of Britain, agrees writing, “To be a Jew, is to be an agent of hope in a world serially threatened by despair... Judaism is a sustained struggle, the greatest ever known, against the world that is, in the name of the world that could be, should be, but is not yet.”⁴

Or put more simply in the Psalms, “I wait for Adonai, my soul waits, and in God’s word I hope.”⁵

Although we are often told to hope, I don’t believe that is the answer. Hope is an easy response without a solution. Hope is a quick meaningless reaction in the face of despair. Our hopes and thoughts and even prayers are statements of inaction. How many people, most especially our politicians, have tweeted their hopes or “thoughts and prayers” after a school shooting. There is even an online game called “Thoughts and Prayers” that show how ultimately useless that response is.⁶

On Rosh Hashanah morning, I said hoping for miracles was not going to be a solution. It was making miracles, being the miracle, that made a difference. Hope is a fallback response, and as Red told Andy in *The Shawshank Redemption*, “Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane.”

If hope is not the response to fear and despair, what is? Jewish history is a series of stories of living in fear and despair – slavery in Egypt, wandering in the wilderness, attacks by the Romans, the Spanish Inquisition, the Holocaust, and on and on. And the lessons we uncover from those times isn’t a simple, *al-tirah*, do not be afraid. Hope offers nothing more than a feeling, which does little to consequently help another in pain. Hope is ultimately inaction disguised in sympathy. The Torah tells us we cannot stand idly by while your neighbor bleeds.⁷

In the face of despair and fear, we need action and intention. At times of loss and pain, we need courage. Courage is a response. Courage is not letting things just happen, but making new things happen.

Courage doesn't always mean charging in and fighting the good fight. Courage means standing up for your values. Our values don't change just because the world does. If anything, our values are more essential when they are challenged and attacked. Courage means not standing by and watching the world head down a path in opposition to our values.

Think of some the great acts of courage in our history.

Rev. Martin Niemöller could have avoided any notice under Hitler's Nazi regime. But he chose to speak out and was punished for it, eventually being imprisoned in the Sachsenhausen and Dachau Concentration Camps from 1938 to 1945. He spoke against indifference and apathy, fear and despair, in his most famous poem:

First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out--

because I was not a communist;

Then they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out--

because I was not a socialist;

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out--

because I was not a trade unionist;

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out--

because I was not a Jew;

Then they came for me--

and there was no one left to speak out for me.

When Senator Joseph McCarthy was attacking men and women across the country as traitors and Communists, many were paralyzed in their responses. During an interrogation focusing on a young lawyer in his firm, Joseph Welch has finally had enough and famously responded, “Let us not assassinate this lad further. You’ve done enough. Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?” Welch then refused to continue speaking at the hearings resulting in applause from those in attendance. Many see this as a turning point in the end of McCarthyism.⁸

The late Senator John McCain lived a life associated with courage from his five years at a Prisoner of War to political actions that stood in defiance of his political party and in consort with his values. In 2004 he wrote, “If we lack the courage to hold on to our beliefs in the moment of their testing, not just when they accord with those of others, but also when they go against threatening opposition, then they’re superficial, vain things that add nothing to our self-respect or our society’s respect for the virtues we profess. We can admire virtue and abhor corruption sincerely, but without courage we are corruptible.”⁹

Courage comes in all backgrounds. Malala Yosazfai was an 11-year-old in Pakistan when she began blogging for the right for women to be educated. At age 15, she was shot in the head by the Taliban in an assassination attempt. She barely survived. The shooting resulted in an international condemnation on the Taliban. Malala became an advocate for women’s rights across the world. She was the youngest winner of the Nobel Peace Prize and continues to show courage and defiance towards those that would silence her. “Even if they come to kill me, I will tell them what they are trying to do is wrong, that education is our basic right.”¹⁰

Just a few days ago, we remembered the heroism of so many on September 11, 2001. The police, firefighters, and other emergency service workers who perished responding to the World Trade Center. And we think of the passengers, the men and women of United Flight 93 who showed incredible courage bringing down the plane before it could be used to kill more people.

“You cannot be truthful if you are not courageous. You cannot be loving if you are not courageous. You cannot be trusting if you are not courageous. You cannot inquire into reality if you are not courageous. Hence courage comes first and everything else follows.”¹¹

We have the opportunity to be courageous every day. To respond to our fears and dismay with the courage to help another and stand for our values. We need not do it alone. We have communities to stand beside us, families and faith to give us strength.

Nearly every Friday night we’ve read this poem during services:

*Standing on the parted shores of history
We still believe what we were taught
Before ever we stood at Sinai’s foot;*

*That wherever we go, it is eternally Egypt
That there is a better place, a promised land;
That the winding way to that promise
Passed through the wilderness.*

*That there is no way to get from here to there
Except by joining hands, marching Together.¹²*

It is stories we find every day in New York City of strangers coming together to help defend or stand up for someone being abused, harassed, or even attacked. Together they show courage in the moment as a community.

An act of courage in the face of fear and despair played out last summer. 156 women spoke up, most for the first time, sharing their stories of sexual abuse by Dr. Larry Nassar over more than 2 decades. The women had been little girls and teenagers, and included the athletes on the US Women's Gymnastics Team. They responded to the worst times in their life by speaking out for themselves, for other victims, and for all the children who have suffered at the hands of monsters such as Nassar. US Gold medal winning gymnast Aly Raisman spoke to her abuser in court, "Larry, you do realize now that we, this group of women you so heartlessly abused over such a long period of time, are now a force" – she paused and lifted her eyes, then turned and faced Nassar, looking at him the way a person might gaze at the bottom of her shoe after realizing she had stepped on a piece of gum – "and *you* are nothing."¹³ Nassar was sentenced to a minimum of 120 years in prison.

Following her testimony, Raisman used her courage and the power of action to create Flip the Switch, an organization to help adults do what no one did for 20 years with Nassar, help protect children from sexual abuse.

Opportunities for courage are often thrust upon us unexpectedly and unhappily. Think of the teenagers attacked at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. 17 teens and staff were killed that day with a semi-automatic. Not willing to be another tweet on politicians "thoughts and prayers," many of them have become national activists founding Never Again MSD and

helping make some cracks in the need for gun control legislation in the US. In response to tragedy they brought courage.

Our job is not make all the changes, but to have the courage to face despair and fear and make a difference. Rabbi Tarfon famously said, “It is not your responsibility to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.”¹⁴

There is a way we can all be courageous. The midterm elections, an opportunity to stand up for values, are in less than 50 days. Statistics show only half of adults actually vote in them. As a kid, my parents always took me to vote back when NYC had the cool election booths with the lever and switches. And I have voted in every election since I was old enough. Take your kids to vote and teach them the value and gift and courage in voting your beliefs.

But there is a bigger need than just encouraging us to vote. Studies show that 74% of seniors say they are “absolutely certain” they’ll vote this November. But for those aged 18 to 29, only 28% are as certain. If just 50% of those twenty-somethings voted, it could shift any close election. So we must make sure that all of us, 18 and up, must register and vote. In New York, the deadline for registering for the midterms is mid-October, so there’s still time. More importantly, our younger voters may need some encouragement. If you have a child, grandchild, sibling, niece, nephew who is 18-29 or so, make sure they are registered to vote and committed to vote in November. Feel free to withhold your love and gifts until they do. And if they have options where to register, maybe pick a state that has some exciting action this Fall. Voting is an act of courage in response to the world we encounter. We must all engage in that courage.

Facing entry to the land of Canaan and the battle against the Canaanites ahead, Joshua, the new leader of the Jewish people, told them, “I charge you: Be strong and resolute; do not be terrified or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”¹⁵ We face challenging times. We can dwell in fear, we can yearn for hope, or we can stand for our beliefs in courage. You aren’t in it alone. Find the hand of someone who shares your beliefs and we can get from here to there together.

¹ <https://www.ronnowpoetry.com/contents/brecht/ToThoseBorn.html>

² <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2017/10/01/fresh/>

³ <http://templebethel.org/bww/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Kol-Nidre-5777-Rabbi-Knight.pdf>

⁴ <http://rabbisacks.org/future-tense-how-the-jews-invented-hope-published-in-the-jewish-chronicle/>

⁵ Psalm 130:5.

⁶ <https://www.thoughtsandprayersthegame.com>

⁷ Leviticus 19:16.

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_N._Welch

⁹ <https://www.fastcompany.com/50692/search-courage>

¹⁰ <https://www.pendoramagazine.com/essays/2016/01/23/from-anne-frank-to-malala-the-voice-of-teenagers-in-the-world>

¹¹ Osho, *Courage: The Joy of Living Dangerously*

¹² Michael Walzer, *Mishkan Tefilah*, p. 157

¹³ Aly Raisman Takes the Floor, ESPN The Magazine July 30, 2018.

¹⁴ Pirke Avot 2:16.

¹⁵ Joshua 1:9.