

Rabbi Pam Mandel
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton
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Rosh Hashanah Morning

When I was a child, I never had nightmares about monsters in my closet or the boogeyman hiding under my bed. No, I always had the same bad dream...one that you may have had too. It's the one where I am in class and the teacher walks around with a test. She places it face down and I turn it over only to realize that I haven't studied. I don't know the answers. I'm going to fail. The blood drains from my face, my heart sinks, and in full panic...I wake up! What a relief. It was just a dream. Unfortunately it was one that would follow me through high school and college. But since becoming a rabbi, the dream has morphed. Now I am standing in the sanctuary, looking out at all of you, and I look down and see that I don't have my sermon front of me. I don't even have any notes. I've...got...nothing.

So you can imagine how I felt a few months ago as I was on my way to temple. That Friday night I was going to be leading the alternative service with a guest speaker who was coming to enlighten to us on the topic of Older Americans and Addiction. I thought this was going to be fascinating, especially since it was something that I knew almost nothing about. And then the phone rang. It was Rabbi Levin calling to say that the speaker had been in a "fender bender" and was not going to be able to join us that evening. I'd have to take his place and do the program myself.

What!? This wasn't what I planned. How was I possibly going to pull something completely different together in fifteen minutes? I'd like to tell you that I remained cool, calm, and collected, but I didn't. I panicked. This was my worst nightmare coming true. Now I know that not everyone is a planner like me and certainly some of us handle chaos better than others. But I don't think that any of us like it when our lives don't go according to plan. We don't like to be thrown curveballs. We don't like to feel out of control.

But this is a fact of life. You know the old adage - we plan, God laughs. Sometimes our plans get thrown off course and we don't always know what lies ahead. So in many ways, we constantly live in a state of uncertainty. Earlier this morning, we read the words of the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer. In it, we acknowledge the many question marks the upcoming year holds. It is scary to admit, but we do not know who among us will live and who die. We do not know who will be healthy and who will be sick. As we heard these words, it probably made us think of friends and loved ones who are suffering. And it makes us realize that could be us. We could promise to take better care of ourselves in the New Year. We could say that we are going to take steps towards a healthier lifestyle. But at the same time, we could be getting a routine doctor's check-up and bang – life is changed forever.

The *Unetaneh Tokef* also reminds us that we do not know who will be poor and who will be prosperous. However, with the way the economy has been, we don't need a prayer to tell us this. Those of us who sit here with jobs this year know that they may not be secure in the coming months, let alone a year from now. We can be dedicated. We can work long, hard hours, only to be given the news that we have been let go. What if this happens? How will we be able to pay our bills and provide for our families? These are the doubts that many of us consider on regular basis. We don't want to disappoint the people we love or be seen as failures.

So what are we supposed to do with these fears? One option is to live in denial. We can try to make ourselves think that we have complete control of our lives. Recently, I was talking to one of our high school students. He told me that he had decided to major in science. I had never heard of high school students declaring a major. I didn't decide upon a major until I was halfway done with college – and by the time I chose, I had already tried out two or three others. But now, kids are being asked earlier and earlier to determine what path of study they want to take and what they want to do with their lives.

This young man told me that he wanted to be a doctor so by choosing to be a science major in high school he was improving his chances of getting into a top undergraduate medical program. After which, he would go on to an elite medical school, get accepted into his top choice residency in a major city, do a year's fellowship and then eventually open his own private practice. He was sixteen years old and he had his whole life planned. He was making choices and taking steps that would ensure his success. I was impressed. But in some ways I was worried for him. Not that I didn't think he had the brains or talent for his dreams to come true, but I wasn't sure if he realized that life doesn't always turn out the way we plan or the way we want it to. What if the person who read his college admissions essay was in a bad mood that day and decided to reject him? Or what if he was sitting in class one day and all of a sudden realized that medicine wasn't for him? Would he then feel forced to travel down this path since it had already been predetermined for him?

This fear of the unknown has the ability to lock us in our places and keep us from reaching our full potential. Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, put out a new book this year called, *Conquering Fear: Living Boldly in an Uncertain World*. He suggests that there is an Eleventh Commandment that we need to incorporate into our lives and it is: Don't be afraid. He explains that in the Torah, there are more than eighty times where God says do not fear. God tells everyone from Abraham and Moses to the Israelite people. Rabbi Kushner asks, "Why do we need to be told 'Don't be afraid' so often?" He says, "God commands us not to be afraid, not because there is nothing to fear but precisely because the world can be such a frightening place, and God realizes we can never fulfill our potential as human beings if we are paralyzed by fear." I agree, we must learn to master our fears of the unknown and refuse to let them "keep us from living fully and happily." We must confront them head on.

But from where can we find the courage to do this? It makes me think of a child who is scared of the dark and won't go to sleep. You can tell them that everything will be okay and that there is nothing to be afraid of. However, it is only when you tell them that you will stay with them that they feel safe. Knowing that you will be with them is what gives them the courage to face the night and fall asleep. So in the Torah, when God tells our ancestors time and again not to fear, I think there's more to it. God is saying, don't be afraid because I will be there with you. I will guide you and protect you, even when life seems scary and uncertain.

I know this because in the Book of Genesis, God commands Abraham to do the unthinkable. He is told to leave his home and leave his family and go to a new land and start a new life. I can only imagine what Abraham thought when he heard this. He was already seventy-five years old. He probably thought the rest of his life was going to be uneventful. He was going to relax and grow old with his wife. But then he is thrown this curveball and sets off on this journey. And it's not an easy one. There's a famine to survive and enemies to fight and he is not sure what else the future will hold. He wonders if they will be able to survive. When he is most scared though, it is then that God says to him, "Fear not, Abram." Then God also says, "I

am a shield to you.” God promises to be with him, protecting him, even when he is unsure of himself and his journey.

We just have to believe that God’s presence is with us at these uncertain times, because if we do we will find that it is a comfort. But we can also take comfort in knowing that though the path we walk is unfamiliar to us, there are others who have blazed the trail ahead of us. This is something that I think of often as Brad and I prepare for the arrival of our first child. We recently participated in a childbirth workshop that was supposed to get us ready for everything from pregnancy to labor, delivery and beyond. The idea was to make us feel more at ease about what is ahead but really, it just made us feel more overwhelmed and a little bit scared. This was especially true once we got to the end and were supposed to map out our labor plan. I think that bold letters would have been more appropriate, but in tiny print at the bottom of the page was written the following: It is imperative that you keep an open mind and be flexible! Sometimes labor and birth take a different path and you must be to adjust accordingly.

It was then that I realized that I have no control. I don’t know exactly when our baby is going to come, how he or she is going to enter this world, and certainly, what it’s going to be like to give birth. And then there is the job of raising the child. I have heard stories and been given advice, but there is no way to truly prepare for the joys and challenges of being a parent. I can imagine, but there is no way of knowing what it will be like to be a mother. With fears like these, I am tempted to hide under my covers until the baby arrives. But then I remind myself, I am not the first person to give birth. It is something that women have been doing since the beginning of time. And I am sure for many of them delivering and raising a child was not at all what they expected. Maybe it didn’t go the way that they planned. Yet in the face of their fears and their doubts, they found the courage to keep going on. Now I look to them as my source of strength. When others reach out to me and say that they understand how I am feeling, I welcome their love and support. Knowing that that they have been down this path before me, gives me the courage that I need.

But I also think that the courage that we so desperately need and want comes not only from God and those around us, but also comes from within. At one point or another, each one of us has certainly said, “This isn’t what I planned. This isn’t how it was supposed to go.” Yet somehow, we were able to survive and move on. I think back to that night in February when I had to give that sermon that I wasn’t planning on or prepared to give. When I think about it, it still makes me anxious, but it ended up being fine and I succeeded. Now the next time a curveball is thrown my way, I will be more confident in facing it. Life experiences like this help us realize that when need be, we can adapt to new circumstances and new realities. Within each one of us is this potential. We don’t know what lies ahead. We can try to make plans and set goals, but ultimately we do not know where life will take us. However, instead of facing the future with fear, we must face it with optimism. We need to believe in ourselves and believe that we’re going to make it. We don’t have proof or evidence that everything will be okay, but that is what it means to have faith. I think that it is our faith that will guide us through each unexpected twist and turn in the road. And with each one, we must realize that we have the strength and the opportunity to learn and grow. We have the ability to create new dreams and find new and different purposes for ourselves.

When God tells Abraham that he should not fear, and that He will be with him, God offers one more thought. God promises Abraham that his life will be filled with numerous blessings. As we enter this New Year, I believe the same is true for us. Our futures are filled with uncertainties, but the future does not have to be dark. We are able to bring in light with the hope and promise that comes with having faith and believing that everything is going okay. For wherever our

paths may take us, whatever the journey brings, I know that we will find holiness and blessings along the way. Ken yehi ratzon. May this be God's will.