

At 90 years old, after decades of waiting, Sarah gave birth to Isaac. She was ecstatic. Every milestone was significant. When she weaned Isaac, her husband, Abraham, threw a party.

While schmoozing with friends at the party, Sarah became distracted. As Isaac toddled around with other children, sipping cow's milk and munching on bread, she saw Ishmael playing in the distance.

Ishmael was Abraham's *other* son. Not Sarah's son, but the son of her handmaiden, Hagar. When Sarah believed she would never birth children of her own she insisted that Abraham have a child with Hagar.

Sarah's mind began racing. "Does Abraham love Ishmael *more* than Isaac?" "Will Ishmael get all of the inheritance because he's older?"

She began to tremble as her eyes welled with tears.

"Sarah, what's the matter?" implored Abraham.

Her eyes were fixated on Ishmael, "Abraham, you must cast out *that woman* and *her* son. He will *not* share in the inheritance with *my* son, Isaac."

What was he going to do?

As he sat alone that evening, the joyous celebration spoiled, God spoke to Abraham, “Do what Sarah says. Through Isaac your offspring shall continue, and I will make a nation of Ishmael as well, for he, too, is your son.”

Abraham hesitantly took some bread and a skin of water, placed them over Hagar’s shoulder and told Hagar and Ishmael that they must now leave.

“But Abraham!” Hagar cried, as an embarrassed Sarah ushered Isaac into their tent.

“You must go now,” Abraham cut her off, voice cracking.

He turned away from Hagar and his son.

Hagar and Ishmael reluctantly left to wander the arid wilderness.

They ran out of water. Hagar was fear-stricken. In a state of panic and despair she left Ishmael by the shade of a bush and walked away. She sat down, *closed her eyes*, and wept, “*Let me not look on* as the child dies.”

Ishmael, thirsty and frightened, cried out.

God heard *Ishmael* crying and sent an angel to Hagar, “*Mah lach*, What is with you, Hagar? *Al tiri*, Don't be afraid, for God has heard the cry of *Ishmael*. Go, lift him up, hold his hand. He will be a great nation.”

Hagar was not comforted.

Then God *opened her eyes* and *she saw* a well of water. She filled the skin with water and let Ishmael drink.

God was with Ishmael and he grew up in the wilderness. He became a bowman, married an Egyptian, and became a great nation.¹

The story of Hagar is traditionally read on the first day of *Rosh HaShanah* (while our community, alongside most Reform congregations, will read the *Akeidat Yitzchak*, the binding of Isaac, this morning).

It's a heart-wrenching story, even if resolved in the end.

¹ Inspired by Genesis 21

We can feel Hagar's panic. She is abandoned, lost, lonely, in danger, and with a young child in tow.

Hagar's fear was paralyzing.

Fear is powerful.

It *can* paralyze us.

It can cause us to shut down.

It can *blind* us.

And it *blinded* Hagar.

Isolation, abandonment, and the harshness of the wilderness were such strong forces, that Hagar couldn't see. Wouldn't see.

She closed her eyes. "Let me not look on as the child dies."

In her fear, Hagar could not even see. She was in crisis. Her fear was real. It was warranted.

“Al tir’i! Don’t be afraid,” said the angel.

It’s an absurd thing to say to a terrified person.

The angel knew what Hagar couldn’t see. That there was a well of water in front of her that had been there all along.

But the angel’s call, *“Al Tir’i! Don’t be afraid!”* couldn’t be heard by a distressed Hagar who could see no reason not to fear imminent death.

But, *“Then God caused her eyes to open and she saw a well of water.”*²

God *had to help* Hagar open her eyes.

It was not until God connected personally with Hagar, causing her eyes to open, *va-TEREH, she saw* the well.

The words from this passage *Tir’i*, “afraid” and *tereh*, “she saw,” sound strikingly similar.

Tir’i and *tereh*, fear and sight, are intimately connected. The distance between the two is determined by our capacity to handle the moments where we, like Hagar, are inclined to keep our eyes closed.

Fear can blind us.

Sight allows us to find our way out of frightening situations.

² Genesis 21:16-19

Rabbi Baruch Chait, a folk singer, composed this melody and sang these words to Israeli soldiers during the 1973 *Yom Kippur War*:³

Kol ha'olam kulo, gesher tzar meod, v'haikar lo l'fached klal.

The whole world is a very narrow bridge and the most important part is not to be afraid at all.

The song's popularity skyrocketed and to this day its words are sung at camps, synagogues, and Jewish gatherings across the denominational spectrum. Forty-six years after those words were sung for the first time, they continue to be imprinted on the hearts of members of our Jewish communities, young and old alike.

The whole world is a very narrow bridge.

And, the most important part...

...is not to be afraid?

This is what the angel said to Hagar.

“Al tiri, Don't be afraid.”

And yet...it makes no sense,

³ <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5110098>

Does telling a child who is scared of the monster under their bed, “Don’t be afraid,” help them sleep better at night?

Have *you* ever *been told*, “Don’t be scared!” before a big interview, a doctor’s appointment, or on a turbulent flight? And have those words ever successfully diminished your fear?

“You’re having major surgery tomorrow. Don’t be afraid!”

“*Lo l’fached klal*,” “to not be afraid” is the most important part?

Telling someone not to be afraid doesn’t make them feel better. Rather, it causes self-doubt.

Gesher Tzar Me'od's words in Rabbi Chait's song are adapted from a teaching of the late 18th and early 19th century Chasidic rabbi, Nachman of Breslov.

Rabbi Nachman's original quote reads:

*V'da, she ha'adam tzarich la'avur al gesher tzar me'od me'od, v'haklal v'haikar--shelo yitpached klal.*⁴

“Know, too! A person must cross a very, very narrow bridge. The main rule is...”

And the words that follow are not “lo l'fached klal,” but rather, “she'lo yitpached klal.”

The words sound similar, but their meaning is quite different.

L'fached and *yitpached* both have the same *shoresh*, the same root in Hebrew--*peh-chet-dalet*, meaning “fear.”

And the meaning of the word depends on how the root is conjugated.

The word *l'fached*, from the song, means “to fear.” The word *yitpached* comes from the reflexive form of the verb, meaning “to make oneself fear.”

Rabbi Chait said that the entire world is a very narrow bridge and the most important part is *not to be afraid at all*.

Rabbi Nachman said that we will walk narrow bridges and the most important part is *not to make oneself* afraid.

⁴ Likutei Mohara, Part II, 48:2

About Rabbi Nachman's words, Rabbi Elizabeth Dunsker of Vancouver wrote:

“... the main thing is not to freak ourselves out. Not to enfear. It's not about having no fear, rather it is about operating within the fear without letting it stop us from moving forward.”⁵

“Know, too! A person must cross a very, very narrow bridge. The main rule is...”

“...not to succumb to fear!”

“...not to enfear!”

“...not to freak ourselves out!”

Throughout our lives we cross narrow bridges--and the most important part is not to succumb to fear.

Rabbi Fabian Werbin of Congregation Beth El in Bethesda suggests that there is a reason that Rabbi Nachman chose the metaphor of a “*gesher tzar me-od*” “a very narrow bridge” as opposed to a “*derech tzar me-od*” “a very narrow path.” You can move off of a path, but a *gesher*, a bridge, urges you to move forward.⁶

We can't simply step off a bridge. In the midst of crossing we can return back to where we came from, stay frozen where we are, or continue forward. Returning back may bring us to sturdier footing by avoiding what scares us--but the bridge still remains up ahead. Staying frozen can only be temporary or else we risk falling off as we succumb to fear. Only crossing the bridge leads to progress.

⁵ <http://jewishvancouverusa.org/rabbi-dunsker/sermons/whats-to-fear/>

⁶ Washington Board of Rabbis meeting on September 3.

Bridges, no matter how safe they are, are unsettling.

They may wobble.

They may be hundreds of feet off the ground.

They may have missing slats.

They may be prone to wind gusts that cause it, and us, to sway.

And, yet, we all cross very very narrow bridges.

Sometimes confidently, other times tentatively.

Al tiri, Don't be afraid while crossing a bridge, IS NOT the message.

Our fear response is a healthy biological function that prepares our bodies to respond to danger.⁷

It was not only normal, but healthy for Hagar to be afraid.

She was on a dangerous, narrow, rickety bridge.

But she began *to succumb* to fear.

To freak herself out.

Which blinded her to the productive ways she could respond to the dangerous situation.

⁷ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/what-happens-brain-feel-fear-180966992/>

We live in times of immense fear and very very narrow bridges.

Fear of life transitions.

Fear of anti-semitism.

Fear of making ends meet.

Fear of walking into a school or synagogue and being shot.

Fear of deportation.

Fear of not being accepted for who we are as we are.

Fear of our world warming up beyond a point of return.

Fear of illness.

We are going to be afraid as we walk very very narrow bridges.

We, like Hagar, *have reason* to be afraid.

And, for many of us, crossing the bridge is easier said than done.

How come some people can just cross the bridge without any problem while others of us freeze?

Neuropsychologist Dr. Theo Tsaousides writes, “Courageous people are as afraid as anyone else. [T]heir fear...*makes* them courageous...[B]eing ‘fearless’ means knowing how to leverage fear.”⁸

He suggests seven ways that seemingly fearless people manage fear:

- “1. They respect fear...They understand that the role of fear is to warn and protect, *not* to scare and prevent.
2. They understand the mechanics of fear...[F]ear goes beyond feelings of worry and dread, and...thoughts can exacerbate...fears by making things seem scarier than they really are...
3. They explore the origin of their fear...[F]ear is not so much about *what* scares you but about *why* it scares you....
4. They focus on building confidence...The more confident you are about your ability to handle what scares you, the more secure you will feel...
5. They overprepare without overreacting....[They] don’t spend time worrying about the worst-case scenario—they *prepare* for it...
6. They take action *despite* their fear, not because of it...[They] strategize. They know when to push forward and when to pull back...
7. They are not afraid to ask for help...[F]ear...causes physical discomfort, emotional distress, and mental turmoil...[They] know...when a worry becomes excessive and anxiety interferes with daily life, it is time to consult a professional.”⁹

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<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/smashing-the-brainblocks/201512/7-ways-fearless-people-conquer-fear>

⁹ Ibid.

Hagar did not have most of these tools at her disposal. She had no opportunity to prepare, let alone overprepare. The origin of her fear was clear: she and Ishmael would perish without water. But she needed the capacity, in the midst of the bridge, to be able to find the confidence necessary to take action. She, understandably, didn't know what to do. Seemingly out of options, she withdrew, closed her eyes, and threw her hands up in defeat. She *needed help*. She could not walk the bridge alone. And so God joined her on the bridge and helped her *open her eyes* so she could see the well. So she could take the next step toward survival, toward the other side of the bridge.

Most of us, like Hagar, will not be the seemingly “fearless” type. But we can work on building the skills necessary to overcome fear.

Take a moment now. Close your eyes. Actually close your eyes. Think about a bridge on which you are standing.

Are you scared of the prospect of finding a new job or navigating your way through a new school?

Are you in the midst of embarking on a journey involving your health or an illness?

Is it our changing climate that is causing you feelings of dread?

Fear of gun violence?

Fear of being alone?

Focus on one thing that frightens you.

Picture yourself *with* your fear on the middle of that very very narrow bridge.

Take a moment to honor that fear. Know that your fear is there to warn and protect you, it is welcome on the bridge with you.

Acknowledge which parts of what you are fearing are very real and which are your own thoughts getting carried away and exacerbating your fear.

Think about why you carry this fear. Is it because something is spiraling out of control? Is it because change is hard? Is it because of a past experience? Is it because of a future loss you are anticipating?

Make a plan. What is one thing you can do after Rosh HaShanah to address this fear. Know you may not address the underlying cause of this fear this week, this month, or even this year. But you can build confidence by identifying and acting on tangible things which address the root of your fear. Maybe you need to make a long overdue appointment with a doctor. Maybe you need to join a committee doing advocacy work on the issue that is causing you feelings of dread. Maybe you need to set up some informational interviews with those in a field that inspires you.

Imagine the worst case scenario of your fear playing out. And think of something *concrete* you can do to prepare for it. Maybe it's knowing where the exits of a space are when you first enter it. Maybe it's knowing what you'll say to someone who negatively confronts you about the *magen David*, the Jewish star, you wear around your neck.

Commit to taking action *despite* your fear. Imagine yourself walking with your fear across the bridge. How can you ensure *you won't succumb* to it?

And, is this fear so pervasive that it has been affecting your everyday functioning for a period of time? If you are one of us for whom that's the case, take a moment now to commit to finding professional support in facing your fear. Fear is not something we can always handle by ourselves. The most important part is *NOT* not being afraid, the most important part is *NOT* walking the bridge alone, the most important part *IS not succumbing* to fear.

Sometimes gaining the tools necessary to *not succumb* to fear requires guidance. Hagar couldn't cross the bridge by herself. God needed to be with her for her eyes to open.

Know, too! We all must cross a very, very narrow bridge. The main rule is *not to succumb* to fear!

Between *tir'i*, fear and *tereh*, sight is the capacity to open our eyes. And sometimes it requires someone else to help us do that.

The story of Hagar is read during this time of year which we call the *Yamim Nora'im*, the Days of Awe, or the Days of Fear.

The *Yamim Nora'im* are an opportunity to honor the bridges we are on, to give ourselves ten days to work with our fears. To strategize how *lo yitpached*, *not to succumb* to them.

To work toward crossing the bridge.

The Days of Fear, are observed in community. Everyone in this room stands on a very very narrow bridge. Some of us stand on more than one. We can take comfort in the fact that we are crossing bridges together. We can take comfort in the fact that some of us find ourselves on the *same* bridge. All of us have the capacity to move from *tiri*, fear, to *tereh*, sight, once we gain the skills to open our eyes.

Rabbi Chait's adaptation of Rabbi Nachman's words will continue to be sung. And Jewish songwriters will continue to compose beautiful melodies to those words--reinforcing the erroneous message *not to be afraid*.

So, even as we sing the words that Rabbi Chait penned, may our *hearts* sing Rabbi Nachman's words.

The most important part *ISN'T not to be afraid*.

The most important part *IS not to succumb to fear*.

May 5780 be a year of owning and honoring fear and *crossing* very very narrow bridges.

And may 5780 be a year of transforming fear into sight.

Shana Tova.

[Sermon Anthem: Michelle Citrin's *Gesher Tzar Me'od*]