

Yom Kippur 2015/5776 Morning Sermon by Gita Schwartz

On that terrible September 11th when those planes flew into the twin towers in New York City, I felt a huge sense of relief in my body. I didn't know it until then but I had been waiting my whole life for this nightmare to come and it was finally at my doorstep. And when you live in Toronto, New York City is pretty much at your doorstep.

You see, my parents were concentration camp survivors – my father was in Treblinka and my mother in Auschwitz – and it had happened to them. In a moment, on the turn of a dime, their lives became nightmares. I felt relief that day because all my life I knew it could happen again at any moment, on the turn of a dime, and my life would become a nightmare. I carried that inside me without realizing and on Sept 11th I felt relief because the waiting was over.

Those of us who live in the wake of the Holocaust, or any holocaust or experiences of violence and brutality, especially as children, spend our lives looking over our shoulders, down the street and all around, watching and waiting for the next terrible thing to happen because it already has and we know there's more. We live at the edge of our nerves all the time.

I am afraid all the time.

People who know me might be surprised to hear this because I am also adventurous, bold, fun-loving, curious and interested in a great many things. I have done a lot in my life: I have run organizations, been a foster parent, raised a child, trained as a homeopath, became a Feldenkrais practitioner, traveled around the world. I have many friends and people that I love.

Yet, I am afraid all the time.

I came to understand many decades ago that there is no end to the grief and pain of being a child of holocaust survivors. I could cry a lifetime and it would not be enough, and if I were to live my life, I needed to hold those parts of my psyche that were damaged beyond repair, safely under lock and key, in a gentle way. And move through my life from a place of understanding that not all suffering can be healed. I was broken in places and that was that. Much like having a mental illness, perhaps exactly like a mental illness.

Not all psychic damage can be fixed. I don't think I am unique in this and as we struggle to be happy, we are disappointed in ourselves when we are not or cannot maintain what happiness we find. But what is happiness? A sustained elevated mood? It might be wise to redefine our view on happiness and let it include depth and meaning, melancholy and poignancy, authenticity and reflection. Yes, even fear.

The high holidays are an extraordinary time of reflection and contemplation of the old, which might not work so well anymore, and the new, which hasn't yet been conceived. How wise were the rabbis who developed our traditions and what awesome spiritual technologists they were. They take us through the joy of a new year, the celebration of the birth of the world and then ask us to think about how we live, how we treat each other and how we treat ourselves. They ask us to be ok with the melancholy and poignancy of recognizing our vulnerabilities and our errors and ask nothing less than authenticity and honesty in these Yom Kippur prayers of atonement. We promise to be better. We want to be better. We are asked to be accountable and responsible for who we are and our footprint in the world.

It is not necessary to believe in God to undertake these challenges. It is not necessary to believe in God to be a Jew. Because we are a tribe of people who walk together through significant history and an extraordinary process that is our days of awe. Awe inspires amazement but also fear and trepidation for how can we address the mysteries of life without fear and trepidation? Not just for our fate for the next year but for the parts of life that are impossible to know. The unknown is frightening.

Fear is a part of life. From the time we are children, frightened of monsters under the bed to adulthood when we are frightened for our children, be they ours or others, as they grow through their lives and finally to the time we are facing the end of our lives, fear is a part of it all.

Plumbing the depths of fear is a particular expertise of mine. I don't recommend it as a lifestyle if you have a choice but I would like to share a few things with you that I have learned about fear.

There is no end to it. If we stay in fear too long, it becomes terror and then a kind of paralyzing insanity. It is dangerous to stay in fear too long. That is not to say we shouldn't heed it, fear is sometimes a great teacher and there is something there we need to know. I am talking about the fear of fear itself. We often stand on the precipice of experiencing the fear we know is there waiting for us and it is so scary that we stop. And then we do everything we can not to experience the fear. We get busy treading water in the soup of fear. This is the most dangerous time. We are afraid of being afraid and we can stay here for a very long time. It's a very hard place to be. We spend much more time being afraid of our fears than in the fears themselves.

So, we need to get in and out as quickly as possible.

Fear is not a reason not to do things. In fact, I would say the opposite is true. Fear is a reason to plumb the depths of your experience to find that place inside yourself where you know something deep and true that reaches up to you from the primordial intelligence. Is this God? Your higher self? Your intuition? Is it trusting yourself that you will come to know something

important? Trusting the process of introspection? Trusting that things will change? These are important questions to know the answers to, so that you can remember that you know what this process is when you're in the midst of it. That you understand it. That you have faith in its meanderings.

Remembering that you know this process is an anchor as you plumb its' depths. Remembering that you know is a friend when you are in hard places.

Remembering is a theme of the High Holidays. We are called on to remember what's important. To remember our actions. To remember the process of reconnecting with ourselves and our communities.

We are called to remember our ancestors. We are called to remember where we come from. It's impossible to know where you are if you don't know where you come from. You need to know what your story is and what your anchors are in that story. You can rest in those anchors. Those anchors are your defining moments, your defining facts, your defining characteristics. Those anchors can sometimes change and they do grow and mature throughout life. The story of where we come from ripens as we grow.

Among the tragedies of being a child of holocaust survivors is that our individual stories are lost to us. The people, the places, the institutions, the language, the culture, the life, it's gone. This is a terrible psychic breach. We all need to know where we come from. We need to connect to the longer than us stories that is the continuity of our lives. This is a fundamental yearning of our psyches. Without the stories, there is only a void, a chasm where life should be teeming.

Our Aboriginal peoples face this reality today. It behooves us as Jews to step up and offer our support and understanding. Because this too is our experience.

The beautiful Shma prayer that is our defining anchor in Judaism calls out to us to Listen, to Hear and to Know that we are all one. That our bonds are greater than our differences, that fear is an invitation to go deep and grow. That our ability to look inside ourselves and each other holds great gifts. For there, we will find ourselves – true and real. There, we will find love and connection. There we will find strength and clarity.

The Torah portion we just heard describes the rituals of Aaron as he enters the Holy of Holies to seek atonement for himself, his family and all Israel. It describes in detail what he is to wear, including a linen sash and linen turban. Then comes the detail of goats for sin offerings and a ram for burnt offering, how their blood is to be used in the Holy of Holies. The minutiae of detail is striking, from a pan full of coals to two handfuls of spices for incense. The ritual is prescribed in great detail and with precision.

Imagine for a moment what Aaron must have felt and every high priest after him, as they approach this awesome and moving ritual. How must it feel to carry such huge responsibility for a whole community? Surely fear would play a role. What if I fall? What if I forget something? What if I can't do it? What if I faint? What if? And yet it is the precision of the ritual that acts as its anchors. Knowing the magnitude of the process, the minutiae act as a reminder of the task at hand. None other than beseeching God to forgive its people. Do this, then do that. Then do this. Remember where you are and why you are here. Keep your focus and when you're done, come back out and change your clothes again. The extraordinary becomes the ordinary.

"For on this day, atonement shall be made for you to purify you from all your wrongs; in the presence of Adonay you shall be pure."

In the modern world, we are each our own high priest. We gather our anchors, we step into the Holy of Holies, we plumb the depths of our experience and we return to the ordinary. We are pure.

Today, we go deep, we refrain from nurturing our bodies, we focus on spirit. The tunes we sing are mournful and beseeching. We go deep, we can't help it. The structure of the day requires it of us. We are engaged. It's brilliant. We can't help but be engaged. We leave behind the rational and the cognitive, we go into spirit, which is no less than full engagement.

Yet daily engagement in the deepening of our experience can elude us. Remembering a daily practice, or a weekly practice or even an occasional practice can be challenging. Yet without regular practice, without engagement, without going into and being in ourselves, we deny ourselves the profound and meaningful experience of our deepest knowing. We are most fortunate to have these holy days to offer engagement, meaning and community. To remind us, to have time and to have space, to remember. To act as a template, so that we may take the extraordinary into the ordinary, take this deep engagement into our everyday lives.

Last year, I changed my life. I left a very stressful job, gave up my apartment, sold my car, gave my daughter all my beautiful furniture, and went to live in Mexico for five months. Today, all my belongings fit into about 25 Rubbermaid containers and I am travelling the world to consider where I might live next. I go to Cape Town in November.

This decision came from a deep knowing that I had to change my life. I knew that if I didn't I would get very sick. Having come close to death some five years ago, this was very real to me and I acted on this deep and clear knowing. I never doubted my decision. I knew it was right and I never wavered. Yet in the months after I made the decision, I became fearful and anxious. I was not changing my mind but I was scared. I needed to plumb its depths before I could roll out all that needed doing. And then the question changed. It went from why am I afraid to why

wouldn't I be afraid. All the certainty in the world does not change the fear of the unknown, the anxiety of jumping off a cliff. Knowing with certainty doesn't guarantee fearlessness.

Many people have told me that I am very courageous for this. I don't think so. Knowing what to do doesn't take courage. It takes action. It takes understanding that life is now, there's no time to waste and that sometimes it's pretty scary. And that's just fine.

Fear is not to be conquered. It is destructive to colonize our own emotions. We need to learn to live cooperatively with our fear. In cooperation we can breathe, we can know that this too is a part of what is, that our fear means we're alive. Because surely as I am standing here – fear will come again.

My advice – be scared. Be very scared. It would be nuts not to be scared in life sometimes. But don't stop living. Be scared and live. This is our legacy. It is the human condition. The fear will transmute, it will change and settle. And even if it doesn't, be scared and live.