Fear, Curiosity, Courage and Hope
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When I was a junior, in High school, while in woodshop class, I cut off the tips of my left index and middle fingers on a tables saw. How's that for the opening line of a sermon? Let me identify for you what you are thinking. Many of you had a visceral reaction to what I just said, clenched your fist, flexed your hand, breathed in sharply, exclaimed as you shook your head, "Jews and Tools, like ham on a bagel".

I will spare you the gory details of the event, and please in almost seriousness, like that scene in Jaws where they are all sitting on the boat comparing scars from this or that accident, in the receiving line after the service, it is not necessary to show me stumps and gouges and scars. I believe you; everyone has a scar, and indeed every scar has a story.

The story of my scar, is, well more than skin deep. It's the kind that we should share with one another, because for many of us our scars are not only physical, they are emotional as well. They leave lasting impressions, not only on our skin but on our soul – on our very being.

So my story is this, as a teen I wanted to be a cabinetmaker, and in fact in High school I was seriously considering making that my life's work. I took woodshop 2 times a day and spent lunch and many after school hours honing my craft and developing my trade. My shop teacher, Mr. Huffman encouraged me, made me his teacher's assistant and hired me to do small jobs for his cabinet shop that he ran on the side.

It was while serving as the class T.A. and demonstrating to the new students how to make a particular cut on the table saw that I lost focus on my work, probably because I had never before talked and cut at the same time and well, lets just say I reached for my scrap of wood next to the spinning blade and missed.

A thousand times I have replayed that moment in my mind, and a thousand times I pull back my hand - just a second too late. Some people tell me that over time the memory of that incident will fade, but I recall every detail as if it just happened. The rest transpired as you might imagine, paper towels, ice, baggies, ambulance, emergency room, my mom repeatedly saying to me between tears, "Danny what did you do, what did you do?"

The wound did eventually heal, left a great scar and many versions of the story you just heard. But what it also left me was a terrible fear of table saws. A table saw is by the way, that piece of shop machinery that has a flat steel table and a round spinning blade that rises from its center. Until last month it had been 17 years, 10 months and 4 days since I had last used one. I had used tools, and continued to build things, but avoided the table saw at all costs. Then while spending part of my summer vacation with

30 other Reform Jews from around the country building a house for Habitat for Humanity, the organization that constructs houses for the poor, I found myself standing yet again before the steel table with the spinning blade.

Knowing my background as a woodworker, though not my story, the foreman asked me to trim and frame a window in the house we were constructing for low income families. He pointed then at the table saw and said, "Know how to use one of these?" Now, something happens to men when they put on a tool belt, its kinda like chewing gum, or standing before a BBQ, we get, well a little too confident. I turn to the foreman and say, "yeah sure no problem". He leaves, and I spend the next 10 minutes in a cold sweat, flexing the fingers of my left hand, the rest of my body frozen in fear.

Nearly 18 years to the day, equivalent to the Hebrew number chai, which means life, I confronted a choice that in my mind was between life and death. There I stood staring square in to the face of my biggest fear.

Fear is a very powerful thing. Fear paralyzes us, it takes away our freedom, our freedom of choice and our freedom of action. Fear traps us in a lifestyle, it confines us to a path in life that we don't want but can't move from. Fear is a prison of the spirit; an enslavement of the mind.

We fear spiders, heights, flying, terrorism, disease, dying. We fear isolation, we fear conflict, we fear love, and we fear the end of love. We fear loneliness; we fear being lost in the crowd. We fear change and we fear that things will never change. We fear the unknown, we fear that which we know to be true, we fear failure and we fear success. We fear we will loose it all, our children, our wealth, our free time, our job, our status, our perspective, our youth, our innocence, our ability to cope. And we fear we will never have those things in our life. We fear, as Franklin Roosevelt admonished us not to, we fear - fear itself.

Some say that people hold on to fear, but in truth it is fear that holds on to us; in a relentless, unflinching grasp. It is fear that enslaves the essence of our very being, confines us to an endless struggle with ourselves. An infinite loop of; Can I? No I can't! But I have to! But I am scared! But you must! But I'm afraid!

We are experts in fear - it is not something new, while we may have outgrown some childhood fears, the monster in the closet, the dark of a bedroom late at night, adult fears are even the more frightening. Who among us would not trade that which scares us now as an adult for that which scared us then as children?

Many in this room, you have stood up to and faced down your fear's, you have done it from hospital beds and gravesides, in front of your children, your spouse, your boss, your rabbi; every person has a fear you they have confronted and triumphed over. Yet even still, I have never in my life met a fear-less person. And we are not alone, as far back as the very beginning of the world, the story of humanity is a story of our continuing struggle with fear. Eve feared the snake, Cain feared Able, Noah feared God. The story

of our people, the story of each person is really the story of confronting fear time and again each day over a lifetime.

> "And Jacob heard his brother Esau was nearby and he sent out messengers and the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, We come from your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you and with him four hundred men. And Jacob was filled with fear; And Jacob prayed, O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, Save me, I beseech you, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, whose birthright I stole, whose blessing I stole; for I fear him. And Jacob sent all who were with him away and Jacob was alone; and there in the night he wrestled, *eish imo*, and Jacob wrestled with himself until the morning. And his name became Yisrael, the one who struggles with God. And in the morning Jacob lifted up his eyes, and looked, and, behold, Esau was upon him, and with him four hundred men. And Jacob was filled with fear as he came near to his brother. And Esau his brother, ran toward him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him; and they wept.
>
> (Gen 32-33)

Why didn't Jacob run away? Why did he send messengers to greet his brother? Why did he ultimately after much struggle, after wrestling within himself, confront his fear? The popular answer is that it was courage that brought him out to meet his brother. Our tradition would hold that Jacob had heroic and unique courage and only that allowed him to conquer his fear. But it wasn't courage that brought Jacob from his tent. Courage as admirable a quality as it is, is not the product of fear, rather it was the bridge between courage and fear, it was <u>curiosity</u> - that brought Jacob out to meet his brother. Curiosity was his response to fear.

The most successful remedy for fear has been throughout time, curiosity, wrote Cambridge historian Theodore Zeldin. It is only boundless curiosity that can be effective against fear. Zeldin taught that one of sciences most important discoveries about fear is that its physical symptoms, in terms of the chemicals produced to defend the body, differ only by degree from those produced by curiosity. And that is why those who are fully absorbed in achieving a goal behave as though they are profoundly courageous. But it is not courage, rather curiosity that moves us forward. It was curiosity in seeking his brother again that overrode Jacob's fear and freed him from his internal struggle. It was curiosity that caused him to struggle and wrestle with himself, that brought him out of his safe place and put him in danger. It was curiosity that moved him along the path to a moment of courage.

The great Chassidic master Reb Nachman of Bratslav taught *Kol haolam kulo gesher tzar m'oad*. The whole world he said is a very narrow bridge. *v'hayikar lolefached klal.* But the most important part is not to be afraid.

Standing before that table saw, my entire world narrowed to just me and that saw. There was my fear right in my path, as though it stood before me on a bridge. I could not

go around it, not to the right, nor to the left - for each side was an endless abyss. My only choice was to going forward or to turn and run from it. My whole world was indeed a very narrow bridge, but I wanted to get to the other side, I wanted to get past that fear, get on with living, break the chains that bound me. I was curious, not at that moment courageous; I wanted to see the other side, move along the bridge.

We can't go backwards in life, clocks don't tick backwards, you gotta move, you gotta move forward. Fear begets curiosity and curiosity propels us forward. Think of all the advances we have made in science, in industry, in medicine. Many have their impetus in fear, but their product is the result of curiosity, of asking the question, what if? - and then taking that courageous step out along the path.

The Talmud asks the question, what things is a father obligated to teach his son? The response from our tradition is that a father is obligated to teach his son Torah, to teach him a craft and to teach him how to swim. "Why to teach him how to swim?" the rabbis ask, "because his life may depend on it!" they answer.

What is swimming? Swimming is courage; swimming is navigating the rough waters of life, without any support, entirely on your own. Swimming is what is necessary if while walking along the bridge of fear you fall off. We teach a child to swim so that he we will know courage, know to overcome fear, will know that whether in his curiosity he walks along the narrow bridge and is victorious in facing down his fear, or he wavers and falls off, if you can swim, if you can call upon the resources of courage that dwell within each soul, then we can always make it to the other side of any divide, we can always triumph over fear.

Courage is doing that which you have to do, that which is necessary even when you don't want to, even when you are afraid, even when you might fail. To subdue the fear that enslaves us in our lives we must be willing to risk losing, we must be willing to risk failure. If we are not willing to risk loss or failure to achieve freedom of the spirit and soul, then we are indeed slaves to fear, and I believe and our tradition believes that we were born to be a free people, slaves to nothing.

Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, "The most valuable insights into the human situation have been gained not through introspection or scrutiny, but rather through [the] surprise and shock of dramatic failure. Indeed, it is usually in the wake of frustration, in moments of crisis and self-disillusionment, and rarely out of astonishment at our achievements, that radical self-awareness comes to pass.

If fear is slavery and imprisonment of the very essence of who we are or would strive to be; then overcoming fear, confronting the terrifying - whatever it is, is the purest form of freedom. Courage in the face of fear proves our very existence, it is to have a life of meaning as a free person, it is saying yes to an internal no.

When Reb Nachman made his observation about the world being a narrow bridge he himself had just endured a fearful and harrowing experience. Nachman more than

anything else in his life wanted to travel to the land of Israel, a journey that in the medieval age in which he lived was fraught with peril and hardship. But it was an essential value of Nachman's life, that man's task in this world is to ever do battle with the physical and mental barriers that oppress and enslave the soul. Thus at great personal risk he made the journey to Israel. It was a harrowing trip, it cost him his life's fortune, he was held hostage, his boat was nearly swamped at sea not once but twice. Yet upon his arrival in the land of Israel, Reb Nachman said to his students.

> "I believe, and indeed I know well, that of all the movements, thoughts and deeds that one undertakes in order to perform some holy and necessary act, not a single one is ever wasted. For after all the obstacles have been broken through and the act has been completed, all those internal struggles that took place while one was still weighing the act… are elevated to the highest state of holiness. Everything is recorded in heaven above for the good, including every move one had to make along the way. Blessed are those who mange to overcome all the obstacles and to complete some good deeds." (Green p.82)

Nachman teaches through his own example that the product of a courageous act is not only the conquering of fear, but the perspective of renewed hope which comes when we free up our souls from those things that so constrict and constrain our very essence our very being. When we confront and subdue our fears, we give ourselves the freedom and the ability to dream again. Anything becomes possible. The whole world may indeed be a very narrow bridge, but when curiosity and courage triumph over fear, hope springs eternal and we desire only to keep walking, moving forward.

We are in essence the sum total of our hopes, a person is what he aspires for. In order to know myself, I have to ask, what are the ends I am striving to attain? What are the values I care most about? What are my greatest yearnings? It is not enough to simply dream of an end to our fears, we must go out and confront them, even if reason tells us otherwise. Reason may force the mind to accept intellectually the reality of a situation, but <u>curiosity</u>, <u>courage</u> and <u>hope</u> can change the reality to a <u>new</u> reality.

Eighteen years later I turn on the table saw, I had forgotten how loud it was. It comes to life in a rush, like a mighty roar! The teeth of the spinning blade are like the claws of a lion or tiger, they leap forward as if to grab and ensnarl me. The whole machine shakes and rattles with wild power. It was into this mighty wave of energy that I was to push my meek little piece of wood, like one who would feed a tiger just a morsel of food, bit by bit. The blade spun and roared and I roared back at it. NO MORE! YOU'RE NOT THE BOSS OF ME! I'M GOING ACROSS TO THE OTHER SIDE. Filled with fear, and curiosity and courage and hope all bundled up together, I carefully pushed the board into the hungry blade and made a good and clean cut into the wood. Then again, and again and again, till all the old confidence and skill came back into my hands. In my mind, Reb Nachman's words sang forth, "*Kol ha-olam kulo gesher tzar me'od*, the whole world is a narrow, rickety, unstable bridge*, vhikar lofached klal*, but the most important thing is not to be afraid."

Friends, the root of Judaism is walking out along that narrow and rickety bridge. That is the daily test and struggle of our very existence, so that we don't live our lives in fear but are guided by an unceasing curiosity to know, to experience. To be emboldened and empowered by a deeply rooted courage that moves us forward along the narrow bridge of life. To stand upon the other side of our fear and to allow ourselves to dream, to hope unfettered - a free person. To recite every morning the blessing, *Baruch attah adonay eloheinu melech haolam she asani ben horin*. Praised are you adonai my God, master of your own domain, who has made me master of my own life, who created me to be free.

Henaini, Here I am, looking back at my fear, having crossed the bridge, standing now upon on the distant shore, free of at least that one fear. What a view, what a grand perspective - filled with wonder and hope; in the new year that has just begun, come join me, walk across the bridge, its perilous and narrow I know, but so is a life imprisoned by fear, *lo lefached klal*, don't be afraid, make the journey, the whole world awaits you.