

Do Something That Scares You: From *Pachad* to *Yirah*

Sermon for Kol Nidrei 5786

Rabbi Greg Weisman – Temple Beth El of Boca Raton

In the 1990s, there was a viral hit song called “Wear Sunscreen.” It was a spoken word record in the form of a commencement address¹, a litany of short and shorter pieces of advice for a life well lived, that began and ended with the simple suggestion, wear sunscreen. It told us to travel the world, to settle down, that we might marry or we might not, to respect our elders, and not to worry too much about the future, because worrying about the future was “as effective as trying to solve an algebra equation by chewing bubble gum.” And, it said, “Do one thing every day that scares you.”

When the song came out, Berlin Wall had just fallen and the Soviet Union crumbled. It was a time when freedom and democracy had broken out all over the world. Our economy was booming. Technology was advancing at an incredible pace. There was real hope for peace between Israel and the Palestinians, and in the US our people were thriving. In that period of relative peace, stability, and opportunity, challenging ourselves to do something a day to scare ourselves was a way to grow. It was a way to push ourselves into wonder, to have experiences that would open our souls to the beauty of our world in ways that we could not from the safety of our homes and communities. In the comfort of 1997, do one thing every day that scares you was the perfect way to shake things up for the better.

Today, to tell someone to do something that scares them feels either abusive or masochistic. Climate change, gun violence, inflation and rising economic uncertainty, social media, terrorism, human rights violations, and crumbling democratic norms, are each enough to keep us plenty scared day to day. That is to say nothing of the unique fears that we as Jews face. The precipitous rise in antisemitism from across the ideological spectrum and the effort to isolate, ostracize, and delegitimize Israel finding new support all over the world have prompted Jews abroad and in the US

¹ It was originally written by Chicago Tribune columnist Mary Schmich, and then recorded by filmmaker Baz Luhrmann.

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to wonder whether we ought to be hiding our Judaism to keep ourselves safe. We Jews have the whole being scared thing figured out pretty well, thanks to a couple thousand years of persecution and victimization. As Tirzah Firestone wrote, “No matter what a Jew’s ancestry or where Jews have hailed from, Jewish identity today is bound up with some facet of victimhood. Whether through family stories, media, education, or personal experience, Jewish victim identity comes to us via trauma images and sensory information deposited and carried in the bodies and minds of Jewish people everywhere.”²

For generations we have been forced to live with existential fears...and for generations we have sought spiritual outlets to address and ally those fears.

What is fear? “Fear,” writes psychologist and neuroscientist Tracy Dennis-Tiway in her book *Future Tense*, “is the immediate, certain response to a real danger in the present moment that ends when the threat is over.”³ Fear is something that many Jews have faced at times throughout their lives, and many of our ancestors faced over the generations. Fear is what our brothers and sisters in Israel felt on October 7, as the world watched thousands of nearly defenseless kibbutznikim, young people dancing at a music festival, and small units of soldiers mutilated and murdered by terrorists, while hundreds were taken hostage, some alive and some dead. Their fears pierced our souls. The next days brought more fears- from Hizbollah, from Iran, from the Houthis, and from protestors around the globe threatening the safety of Jews in their midst.

That fear, the fear of the imminent threat, has its own word in our tradition: *pachad*. *Pachad* is the fear we feel from things around us that might hurt us, do us harm, cause us pain. It is that evolutionary “fight or flight” instinct that kicks in when we feel threatened. This fear, as our great

² Tirzah Firestone, *Wounds Into Wisdom: Healing Intergenerational Jewish Trauma*

³ *Future Tense: Why Anxiety is Good for You (Even Though It Feels Bad)* by Tracy Dennis-Tiway, PhD. Page 11.

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teacher Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel described in his seminal work *God in Search of Man*, is “the anticipation and expectation of evil or pain.” There is feeling of certainty to *pachad*, that the thing we are fearing will undoubtedly come to pass. We will read a story of *pachad* tomorrow afternoon, when we read from Jonah. When he ignored God’s call to go to Nineveh and call on the people to relent, and Jonah instead hopped a ship to Tarshish, God sent a storm that nearly sunk her. The sailors on that ship, in their *pachad*, threw Jonah overboard lest their ship would be broken apart by that storm. The feeling of certainty in *pachad* can be overwhelming.

But *pachad* is not our only emotion that brings feelings of overwhelm. The sages in our tradition often contrast *pachad* with *yirah*. *Yirah* is awe, wonder, gratitude, sometimes mixed with a twinge of fear. Heschel taught that *yirah* is the sense of wonder and humility, what he called “radical amazement.” We feel it in moments of mystery. One way to imagine *yirah* is to imagine looking over the edge of the Grand Canyon. We can gaze upon its overwhelming beauty, but looking down, realizing how small and vulnerable, how insignificant we are, how mortal we are if we were to fall over, that is awe, *yirah*. We feel *yirah* if we are blessed to watch our children be born into the world, overwhelmed with amazement of seeing life come to be. I had a unique moment of *yirah* just a few weeks ago. On a Friday evening, I was invited by a family in our congregation to be with them as their nine-year-old daughter Chloe underwent a heart transplant. For twelve hours we sat together in the hospital, holding our breath each time the phone rang or the nurse came into our room with an update, a pang of *pachad*. But when we learned that her new heart was beating on its own, that they had removed her from the bypass, and when the surgeons came in to tell us that everything was done and gone well, the sense of fear and worry was overwhelmed by relief, by joy, and by gratitude. That was *yirah*.

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Yirah is also what brings us here this evening. Yom Kippur is the final day of the *Yamim*

Noraim, the Days of *Yirah*. On these days, as we lay our fate to be held in judgment and plead to be written and sealed into the Book of Life, we acknowledge how small and vulnerable we are before the Holy One of Blessing, like grass that withers and fades. *Yirah* is knowing what has been asked of us as humans and as Jews, and knowing that we cannot always live up to those expectations. *Yirah* is examining our behaviors and our decisions, our actions of the past year, and to hold them up against the moral teachings of our tradition. The *yirah* we seek on this day is a humble wondering, “am I the best version of myself that I can be?” When the answer is “not yet,” as it always is, we use this day and these days to wonder to ourselves “how can I become that version?”

Heschel taught us how *pachad* can challenge us to seek *yirah*. He knew what fear and pain looked and felt like. Heschel saw with his own eyes threats that would pull any of us into a state of *pachad*. Born in Germany, he escaped the Nazis with the help of the American Jewish community. He cast himself into the pain and terror of the Jim Crow south, famously praying with his feet while marching alongside the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. He stood up against fascism and war, holding the *pachad* of so many of his fellow human beings along the way. After seeing Alabama State Troopers attack peaceful marchers on Bloody Sunday in March, 1965, he set aside the *pachad* of that moment and met it with *yirah*, a desire to see the spirit of a religiously and racially mixed group of people standing up for justice, no matter what the cost. Reeling from the visuals of that terrifying Sunday, he did something scary, full of awe, nonetheless. His life and his writings challenge us over and over again to push ourselves through our experiences of fear, of *pachad*, and into the place to seek *yirah*. *Yirah* is the way to wisdom, he taught, the wisdom from our tradition that has survived 200 generations.

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Yirah is hard to seek, though, when we are mired in *pachad*. Jews in so many communities, in Europe and here in the US, have been living in fear of outwardly identifying as Jews, let alone as *Ohavei Yisrael*, Zionists and lovers of Israel. Members of our congregation and their families have been targeted with vile words, acts of vandalism, and physical attack for expressing our Judaism and our Zionism in public, and we know their stories are just a few of the thousands and thousands that have contributed to four consecutive record-setting years of antisemitic incidents. Earlier this year, the ADL reported that 2.2 billion people, nearly half of the world's adult population, hold antisemitic attitudes; double the number from a decade ago.⁴ These attitudes do not necessarily lead to direct threats on our people, but we cannot be so naïve as to ignore them.

Just saying these words brings up a sense of fear, of *pachad*, within me. How can we not look back on the generations, the centuries, of moments of hatred turned into persecution turned into pogroms and worse, and not feel fear in our bones? But *pachad*, is backward looking, rooted in the present and the past, but not the future. If we as a people wish for a future, we cannot only think about our past. We certainly need to protect ourselves from the threats that might lead us to *pachad*, but we must at the same time seek out *yirah*.

In her work studying fear, Dr. Dennis-Tiwary has found something very interesting about worry, and dread, and nervousness, and distress over uncertainties, and panic- all signs of fear that we could easily call *pachad*. She has found that, as real as these feelings are, our brains are wired to find our way through, and ultimately out, of them. They are stops along a journey- not a destination- and that journey is full of potential.

“Anxiety is apprehension about the uncertain, imagined future and the vigilance that keeps us on high alert...Anxiety exists because we know we are being slowly and inexorably pulled into a

⁴ <https://www.adl.org/adl-global-100-index-antisemitism>

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future that is either potentially unhappy or potentially happy.”⁵ There is no doubt that the apparent spread of antisemitism leads us to worry that the future is potentially much more unhappy than the one we desire. We feel uneasy, uncomfortable in this world that we thought we knew so well, and she writes that “we are hardwired...to dislike that discomfort...and take the steps necessary to change a situation for the better.” Fears and “uncertainty,” she suggests, “are the starting pistol of the race and anxiety [is] part of the energy, muscle, and sinew that power[s] us through to the finish line.” It “is a wellspring of creativity” to address the discomfort, which prompt us to “take actions that will make our lives better and create the future want.”

What Dr. Dennis-Tiwary calls anxiety, the feelings that motivate us, feed us energy, prompt us to act, we call *yirah*, as Heschel called it “the acquisition of insights which the world holds in store for us.” Rather than simply sit in our place of fear, of *pachad*, we always have the opportunity to seek *yirah*. *Pachad* comes from outside of us; it is the result of things happening to us. It is instinctual, arising when we sense a threat. We cannot control whether or not we feel it. *Yirah*, on the other hand, comes from within us. We choose to see it and when we do we exert some control over our lives. When we decide whether to seek *yirah*, we are in control. The question is how.

Sarah Hurwitz, in her recently published *As A Jew*, confronts the *pachad* of deeply dangerous anti-Israel sentiments and antisemitism with striking clarity. This rise in anti-Zionism, the rise in those who question the Jewish people’s right to self-determination, she writes, will lead to insecurity for Jews in and out of Israel, because it always has and it always will. As she eloquently warns us, “measured intolerance is not within human capacity.”⁶

⁵ *Future Tense*, 11.

⁶ *As A Jew*, Sarah Hurwitz, page 202.

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There is no doubt that there is what to fear as a Jew today. But, there should also be no doubt that we should be able to expect ourselves to move through those fears and find ways to thrive as a people, because we have the generational knowledge on how to do so. We have been passing our tradition down for 200 generations, a tradition filled with wisdom and insight. It has taught us how to treat our fellow human beings, inspired us to seek peace with those around us, and reminded us to think of the needs of the most vulnerable in our community. Sarah Hurwitz noted in her book that our tradition has time and time again given our ancestors the confidence to navigate difficult times, just as it did for Heschel in his generation. It can do the same for us in this moment that we face. Those who seek to harm us might wish to see us cower in a state of *pachad*. Our response ought to be, needs to be to remind ourselves that our Judaism, the very reason they might seek us harm, inspires us with a sense of *yirah*, of responsibilities to the world for peace and goodness, that we will not abandon. Our ancestors did not abandon it; they held it as an inheritance for us.

What we cannot do, what we must not do, is let our *pachad* get in the way of our *yirah*, let our fears get in the way of us seeking the awe this world has to offer.

We must not let our fears paralyze us, preventing us from being the light unto the nations we know our tradition charges us to be.

We must not give those who wish to see our light extinguished the satisfaction of even seeing it diminished.

Our *pachad* may be physical and emotional, but our *yirah* is spiritual and eternal.

We might feel *pachad* from the rise of antisemitism at this time in history, but our *yirah* should make us fearful of what happens if we abandon our tradition.

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Thinking back to the wisdom of “Wear Sunscreen,” the charge to do one thing every day that scares us might still feel overwhelming. But perhaps there is more than one way to hear that advice. We need not hear her call in the vein of *pachad*, seeking out things that make us wonder about our personal safety or our emotional well-being. For thousands of years it has been our commitment to search out, to strive for, and to welcome moments of *yirah*. Tonight marks the last of the ten evenings of these *Yamim Noraim*, but my prayer for us tonight is that in this new year 5786, despite the *pachad* that very well may come and God willing will go, it can be a year of *Yirah*, of awe, that can help us become better, stronger, more emotionally connected and spiritually grounded versions of ourselves, versions that are inscribed and sealed for goodness in the Book of Lives Well Lived.