Fear: We Are The Author

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I've never been a fan of ghosting. I've never been a fan of just randomly disappearing from someone's life. In fact, I'd consider myself an anti-ghoster. If I'm having a challenge with a friend or colleague, I value conversation. I value truth. I value vulnerability and openness. But on October 8, 2023, I became a ghoster.

When I first moved to New York City in 2020, I made it my mission to get to know the shop owners on my block. I wanted a go-to bagel shop, corner store, and coffee shop—and, because of my personality, I naturally wanted to build friendships with the people who worked there. One man, especially, became a good friend. His name is Sohel. He ran the corner shop just three doors down from me. Every time I stopped in, we caught up on our days, and over time he became more than just the guy at the register, he became someone I trusted.

But on October 8, 2023, the day after the attacks in Israel, I ghosted Sohel. He's Muslim, and his shop was always filled with other Muslim workers. Over the years, I had shared stories of my trips to Israel with him, and he had always been curious and open to listening. But in the wake of October 7, I was scared. I was angry. And I avoided him.

At first, I caught myself feeling a vague suspicion toward anonymous Muslims I passed on the street. But what really shook me was when I realized I was doing the same to someone I actually knew, someone I trusted. I started walking past Sohel's store without going in. And each time I did, I felt awful. My inner voice kept

shouting: *"Ashira, this isn't you. He didn't orchestrate October 7. You cannot demonize an entire people. This isn't who you are—get it together."*

Eventually, I let that awareness push me toward repair. And I realized that the emotion keeping me from Sohel wasn't really anger, it was fear. And in that moment, I saw how quickly fear could hijack my values. How instinctively I strayed from the path I want to walk, the path I believe God calls us all to walk.

For me, fear showed up in ways I never expected and I don't think I'm alone. Whether it's fear of rising antisemitism, fear for our fragile democracy, fear of gun violence, fear of Israel's future or even fear of a neighbor or co-worker, each of us carries our own set of fears.

My friends, fear is a natural and universal part of being human. It can lure us into illusions of safety and tempt us to compromise our deepest values. When we don't notice it, fear can quietly steer us off course, pulling us toward choices and behaviors we never would have imagined for ourselves.

Rosh Hashanah calls us to cast off what weighs us down and return to our truest selves. This morning, I want to explore how fear shapes our lives, both as individuals and as a community, and how we might choose to live with courage and faithfulness, even while carrying these very real emotions.

When fear takes over, we do the most natural human thing, we cling to what feels safe and comfortable. We close our eyes, we gravitate toward people who share our fears, and we retreat into echo chambers that validate and reinforce them.

On the surface, this can feel like protection. It can even keep us psychologically, and sometimes physically, safe. But if we stay in that place too long, we lose sight of the reality in front of us. That safety becomes an illusion, because we cut

ourselves off from learning, collaboration, understanding, and creativity, the very things that lead to deeper, lasting safety.

Since October 7th, how many of us have unfollowed people on Instagram, unfriended on Facebook, or pulled back from certain relationships? I know I have. I've seen accounts I once loved and felt inspired by, post things about Israel that make my stomach churn, that cause me deep heartache. Each time, I wrestle with myself: "Should I unfollow them? Or do I keep following because I need to see what people outside my echo chamber are saying, even if it hurts?" It's a constant struggle.

The danger of this illusion of safety is that it pulls us away from community, distances us from people who see the world differently, and walls us off from the very experiences that can help us learn and grow.

From the very beginning of our tradition, fear has driven people into hiding. When the spies reported giants in the land, the Israelites decided it was safer to go back to Egypt—back to slavery—than to risk the unknowns of freedom. Torah shows us that fear can close us off and hold us back. But hiding is never where life, or growth, or connection are found.

The challenge is this: how do we acknowledge fear without letting it close ourselves to others? How do we resist letting painful or hateful experiences dictate how we show up in the world?

In moments of fear, it is natural to shift our priorities. But once the dust settles, we are called to ask: Does harboring this fear compromise our other deeply held values?

We see this clearly in Torah. When Moses ascended Mount Sinai, the people panicked. They feared he was gone forever, that they had been abandoned in the wilderness. Out of that fear, they compromised their deepest commitments. They melted down their gold and built the Golden Calf, trading their covenant with God for the false security of something they could see and touch. Their fear didn't just build a calf, it broke the very covenant that had given their journey meaning.

And yet, fear does not always win. My close friends Raya and Tamir, who live in Israel, show what it means to stay true to your values even in the shadow of fear. During two years of reserve duty in Gaza, Tamir served as a medic, tragically losing many friends and even holding one in his arms as he took his last breath—only to have to later stand with his parents at the funeral and tell them he had done everything he could.

While he was at war, Raya searched for a new apartment for them. To my surprise, they chose Jaffa—a mixed city of Jews and Arabs, tense with division since October 7th. On their building was graffiti that read: "Stay Human."

I asked Raya how, after all they had endured, they could choose to live there. Her answer gave me chills: "It was important to us not to abandon our values of openness. We didn't want fear to strip us of our humanity."

If anyone had reason to let fear redefine them, it was Raya and Tamir. Instead, they chose to stay rooted in their deepest commitments.

Fear writes the very story we're afraid of. It clouds out the good and fixates our attention on the negative, shaping a reality that reflects only what we fear. For us as Jews, fear can shrink a tradition of four thousand years, rich with ritual, wisdom, and beauty, into being defined only by antisemitism. As FDR reminded the country

in 1933, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself”, because fear, left unchecked, can take over everything we see and everything we become.

Antisemitism is real. Jewish students are harassed on college campuses.Temple Beth El now has armed guards who have now become our friends. People are spat on or assaulted for wearing a kippah or a Jewish star. Holocaust memorials are defaced. Jewish businesses vandalized. These aren’t distant stories, they’re happening here, in America, today. And yes, we must name them, confront them, and defend ourselves.

But antisemitism is not the whole of who we are, and it does not define us. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks warned:

> *“If Jews distrust the world, they will not seek to understand it and learn how to make their case and win allies in the world. They will see antisemitism where other factors are at work. They will lend Jewish identity a negativity that will encourage many young Jews to leave rather than stay. They will fall into the trap of moral self assuredness, of talking to themselves in terms only intelligible to themselves. The phrase ‘a people that dwells alone’ will become a self-fulfilling prophecy that will not augur well for the future of Jews, Judaism, or Israel.”*

When fear corners us, it whispers: Maybe there’s something wrong with us? Maybe Israel is corrupt? Maybe I should hide my Judaism to fit in? Each question taps into the fear that who we are, or what we love, makes us unsafe.

We have a choice. Let those questions fester and define us—or name them, speak them aloud, and refuse to let them swallow us. That’s how we reclaim the power fear tries to take.

Pirkei Avot teaches: *Eizehu gibor? Hakovesh et yitzro*, "Who is strong? One who overpowers their impulse." On this Rosh Hashanah, true strength lies in refusing to let fear write our story. We can acknowledge it, even honor it, without letting it dictate our lives. Instead, we are invited to choose a different path, one marked by courage, curiosity, and intention. And the question before us now is: *How?* How do we begin to live beyond fear, both as individuals and as a community? I want to offer three ways.

First, we should learn to lead with curiosity, about others, and about ourselves. Fear tempts us to retreat, to label, to close off. Curiosity is a way of stepping toward that fear instead of away from it. It asks us to pause and examine our assumptions: *Why am I feeling threatened here? What might I not understand about this person or situation?*

As Rabbi Sharon Brous writes in *The Amen Effect*:

> "Curiosity is the birthplace of compassion, but the greater the psychological distance between us and the other, the less curious we are about one another. When we don't wonder what the other is thinking or feeling, or where the pain comes from, when we don't interrogate our presuppositions, our hearts close to one another. This leaves us less understanding of other perspectives, more entrenched in our own dogmas and narratives, and more susceptible to dangerous, fringe views." (p. 155)

Our tradition itself calls us to ask and to wonder. The very method of the Talmud thrives on questioning, debate, and exploring multiple perspectives. Rabbis constantly ask, *"Why?"* and *"What if?"*, modeling a way of life in which curiosity is not just encouraged, but sacred.

Second, when fear tests our values, it is courage that will keep us steady.

Fear tempts us to shrink, to abandon our values, and to retreat from the world. Courage, Ometz Lev, is the key that allows us to hold fast to everything else we care about. It is the backbone that lets us act with compassion, uphold justice, show respect, and remain connected to others, even when fear tells us to turn away.

Courage doesn't mean the absence of fear. It means acting in spite of it.

Our tradition offers powerful examples of this kind of courage. Noah entering the ark, and the Israelites leaving Egypt, each moment brimming with fear, uses the Torah's repeated phrase *be'etzem hayom*, "on the bone of that day." The word *etzem* literally means "bone," but shares the root with *otzma* (strength) and *atzmaut* (self, independence). Just as bones give the body structure and the ability to stand upright, courage gives us the inner framework to act decisively, even when fear tempts us to hesitate or retreat.

In each of these stories, fear was present—but courage allowed them to step forward and protect what they held dear. Courage doesn't erase fear; it gives us the strength to face it, so we can live with purpose and faith, not just survive.

And finally, in the face of fear, we have the responsibility to help write the story of Jewish life for our children, the next generation of our faith. In his memoir Fear No Evil, Natan Sharansky recalls his childhood with one haunting line: "In those days the beginning and the end of my Jewishness was an awareness of antisemitism" (p. xi). Fear had defined his identity. We cannot allow that to be the Jewish inheritance of our children.

Bret Stephens, editor-in-chief of Sapir Journal, sharpens the point. He reminds us to "invest in Jewish thriving, which is not the same thing as thriving Jews."

Thriving Jews, he explains, are individuals doing well in their careers and communities, where Jewishness is incidental. Jewish thriving, however, is collective: a Diaspora proud of its heritage, a flourishing and self-confident State of Israel, homes filled with Shabbat tables, children raised Jewishly, and the conviction that our Jewishness is the most cherished element of our identity, a priceless inheritance for the next generation.

And we don't build that life only through the "big" moments. We build it in the small, steady practices that shape our days: lighting Shabbat candles, hanging a mezuzah on the door, singing the Shema with children at bedtime, gathering around a table for holiday meals, learning Torah together. Each small act is a statement of presence - we are here, we are proud, we are thriving.

Jewish thriving does more than preserve our people, it actively disarms fear. It gives us strength, dignity, and the ultimate response to those who wish us harm: We are still here, not defined by fear, but by life.

The imagery of *Avinu Malkeinu* captures everything we've wrestled with this morning. *Avinu*, our Parent, calls us back to compassion and tenderness, to the soulfulness of staying human in a threatening world. It is the fight to hold fast to our values when it would be so much easier to let them go. And *Malkeinu*, our Sovereign, reminds us of strength and conviction, of the reality that there are real threats we must face, real choices we must make. It grounds us, not in rose-colored glasses, but in the obligation to act wisely, rationally, and courageously to protect ourselves and those we love.

That is why we say *Avinu* and *Malkeinu* together. Because we need both. We need the compassion that keeps us tender and the strength that keeps us standing. We

need to see the world as it is, and at the same time to hold on to the vision of what it can yet become.

On this holy day, may we feel *Avinu*, the presence of love that guides us with gentleness and care. And may we embody *Malkeinu*, the strength to stand upright, to live with clarity and courage, and to face this world not ruled by fear, but by conviction and hope.

Ken yehi ratzon, may it be God's will.