Climate of Fear Sermon
June 17, 2016

One of the worst states of being is fear. Living in fear is debilitating. It limits our potential and causes us to either retreat in on ourselves or to explode out in violence. I remember living in fear in London. The terrorist threat from the IRA was very real – indeed, my cousin was injured in an IRA bomb in the Docklands. Trash cans were removed entirely from the London Underground in order to minimize the risk of someone leaving a bomb in one of them. When bullies used to punch me every single day at school, I lived in fear of physical attacks and spent most of my lunch breaks hiding in a bathroom cubicle with my feet off the floor so that they wouldn't find me. Thirty years later, I experience fear every time I take the dogs outside, in case another coyote comes and kills another one of our dogs right in front of me. It is not healthy to live in fear.

Sometimes the fear is rational and sometimes it is irrational. When violent young boys come running into a bathroom openly discussing where you might be so that they can harm you, it's perfectly rational to be afraid. When a coyote kills your dog in front of you, it is rational to be afraid that that might happen again. So, there are times when fear can be rational. And yet that doesn't mean that that is the case every time. I, for example, am arachnophobic. While there are poisonous spiders in New Mexico – which no-one told me about before I signed my contract! - my arachnophobia developed when I was a child in England, where there are no harmful spiders. Scientific research shows us that all phobias related to animals are learned behaviour – no-one is born afraid of any animal. Sometimes, then, we learn to be afraid, even when there is no reason to be, or when the risk to ourselves is so infinitesimally small that it should be negligible emotionally.

The worst thing about fear is that it makes us open to manipulation. All the monotheistic religions in the world have used or still use fear to a greater or lesser extent and most people believe that was done to bring about greater devotion in their followers. Deuteronomy 11, the second paragraph of *Shema,* is a perfect example of this:

"And it shall come to pass if you diligently hearken to My commandments which I command you today, to love the Eternal your God and to serve God with all your hearts and with all your souls: I will give the rain of your land in its due season, the early rain and the late rain, and you shall gather your grain, your wine and your oil. I will give grass in your fields for your cattle, and you shall eat and be satisfied. BUT, take heed for yourselves, lest your heart be led astray, and you turn away and worship strange gods and bow down to them. God's anger will then be inflamed against you, and He will stop up the heavens so that there be no rain, and that the earth not yield its produce; and you will swiftly perish from the good land that God is giving you."

There are many similar examples in Torah that talk of a Divine approach that later became known as *middah k'neged middah* – measure for measure: if we do good, we get rewarded, if we do bad, we get punished.

This line of thinking was strongly developed in later Rabbinic literature. Rabbi Judah HaNasi wrote (Pirke Avot 2:1) "Consider three things and you will not come to sin: Know what is above you: an eye that sees and an ear that hears, and all your deeds are recorded in the Book." I always found this to be a terrifying concept, and an extremely oppressive one. This seems to be a pure expression of fear leading to control. And while in the same *Mishnah*, Judah HaNasi at least suggests a balanced

contemplation of our deeds – measuring reward against punishment – elsewhere in Rabbinic literature, the negative consequences became truly terrifying. Picking up on the Christian concept of hell, the Rabbis started to write of *Gehinnom*, which was a seven-leveled place under the earth that burned with fire sixty times stronger than fire on earth.[1] Demonology abounded and Jews were told to be afraid of entirely new things. Tractate *Berachot* (6b) tells us, for example, that had the human eye been given the power of seeing demons, no person could endure because of evil spirits. They outnumber us, said one Rabbi, and every one of us has a thousand demons on our left and myriads on our right. The whole world is full of evil spirits and harmful demons[2] who could be found in ruins, in latrines, in places where there is water, in shaded places and more. It is ironic that the book of Micah (4:4) talks of a vision of universal peace wherein each person can sit under their vine and under their fig tree and no-one shall make them afraid while the Rabbis saw those same shady trees as places of demons and danger and were exactly the kinds of place where people should be afraid! In medieval times, the demon Lilith, who in folklore was seen to be Adam's first wife who later herself became a demon, came to the fore. Amulets to try to ward away Lilith's evil prove how afraid people were of her. The narrative of Lilith constantly giving birth to baby demons takes on a whole new dimension when we learn that the seed for those demons is the seed of male masturbation on this earth. In other words, men were taught to be afraid of playing with themselves for fear of creating demons.

As if Jews didn't have enough to be afraid of! This is the one thing that truly amazes me. The Romans, the Inquisition, the pogroms, the constant expulsions. Those were things to be rationally afraid of. Not demons who live in lavatories. So,

---

[1] See, for example, Midrash to Ps. 11:7; 51a, 50b, Berachot 57b
[2] See, for example, Tanchuma Mishpatim 19

why with so much to reasonably be afraid of did Judaism develop such a strong strand of superstitious things to fear? The only answer I can see is control. But was this control to set their own agenda? Was it control because they truly believed in their faith but did not see any other way to convince people of it other than to scare them into it? I don't think it was malicious per se, in fact I believe that as far as they were concerned it was almost an act of love. But it was nonetheless damaging. They created a climate of fear that was irrational, that made Jewish existence seem overwhelmingly to be a fearful one. Instead of preparing for reasonable fears like expulsion or attacks from marauding Christian mobs, Jews were shaking bags of nuts at latrines to scare away demons.

But did the Rabbis have a point? Were the people so terrified of normal existence that the Rabbis merely redirected that fear and allowed them to control it? Were the Rabbis actually directing people's fear and helping them battle it? What if the fear of God, or the fear of burning in *Gehinnom*, wasn't so much about Rabbinic control of the populace to do their bidding, but helping them get control of their own fears? How do you stop the terrifying fires of *Gehinnom*? Follow *mitzvot* and then you're fine. Now you have nothing to be afraid of. Yes, fear lingers, waiting to strike at every infraction of the law, but at least the fearful Jew no longer has this to be afraid of if they follow the *mitzvot*. And once you've conquered the fear of God or of painful punishment after this life, who would be afraid of mere Romans or pogroms or expulsions? Now, I'm not totally convinced by this thesis, but I think it is at least possible. It's possible that the climate of fear that Judaism through Torah and through the Rabbis in particular created was a way of helping the Jewish community address justifiable, rational fears.

Even if that's true, it contrasts totally with today's climate of fear which tends not to be a fear about God or a fear of Divine retribution, but a fear of the unknown Other. At the moment, the UK is on what I – and every major economist around the world – consider to be the brink of economic suicide because of a fear of migrants, a fear of loss of British identity, and a fear of loss of sovereignty. The fear of migrants swarming across our borders, to use David Cameron's phrase that sounds profoundly like vermin, has ultimately led this week to the UK Independence Party producing a piece of propaganda showing lines of refugees that is identical in imagery to the propaganda used by the Nazi Party about Jews. A month ago, the leader of that party said in an interview that if the people did not vote to leave the EU, he could foresee violence due to what he sees as the loss of control of British borders. Violence because the UK decided to stay in the EU? That seemed to be fear-mongering in the extreme, until yesterday when a member of parliament was gunned down in England by someone apparently shouting "Britain First!" And the Brexit campaign continually creates a fear of a continuous drain on the UK economy made by migrants, even though the statistics very clearly show a net financial gain due to migrants to the UK. But the climate of fear that is being created is readily observable in the rhetoric being used.

And it's obviously not just in the UK. When the presumptive Republican nominee in the United States talks of migrants as criminals, drug dealers and rapists, that's deliberately creating a climate of fear. When a Baptist pastor preaches after the Orlando massacre of 49 pedophiles – not gays but pedophiles! - whose deaths only helped society, that is creating a climate of fear. And it's not fear for the people's own good to help them work through some greater fear. It's creating irrational fear in otherwise often rational people for the purposes of self-elevation – either votes in an election or more Youtube hits. Now, there are things in this country to

genuinely be afraid of. Heart disease is by far the biggest killer in the US, followed by cancer. They are terrifying. That your Syrian refugee neighbor might be a terrorist? That is a totally irrational fear. But it is a powerful one because it preys on our "what if?" – the same irrational "what if?" that leads Americans to throw away nearly $500 billion in gambling every year.

One of the reasons I believe that many faith communities around the world are in decline at the moment – not this one, I hasten to add – is because of the loss of fear. People aren't afraid of hell, or *Gehinnom*, any more. They're not afraid that God is watching them. They feel empowered, liberated from the shackles of fear of the supernatural. The irony is that so many people have replaced the fear of the supernatural with fear of the irrational.

To be clear, some fear today is rational, even if it's not often realised. People are afraid of what has now been revealed to be an extremely fragile economy. Will there be another economic collapse? Will I lose my job? My home? Will I be laden with debt? Indeed, globalization creates many rational fears, for example, the fear of employment being outsourced to somewhere far cheaper around the world. In some sectors of the economy, that is a totally rational fear. But fear of Islam? That is a totally irrational fear for one very simple reason. There are over a billion Muslims in this world. If they truly wanted every unbeliever dead, we would all be dead already. Fear of transgender people abusing children in bathrooms? That is a totally irrational fear. No transgender person has ever gone into a public bathroom and abused someone.

But that totally irrational fear has a basis, and we need to acknowledge it. It is a fear of the loss of personal identity. It is a fear born of total confusion. When your entire world is predicated, for example, on a clear binary gender system, when

you've been told by your clergy that the Bible explicitly says that there are only two genders, then anyone who challenges that, and who particularly views it as normal, is totally baffling. Their very existence and way of life totally undermines your beliefs about how the world works. That is, for some people, a very frightening experience. When you have been told from an early age by parents, teachers, friends or clergy that homosexuals are all pedophiles, and when you then see gays happily celebrating their sexuality, that is frightening. When you are told by leading politicians and the media that immigrants are terrorists and rapists, when you have no experience of them other than what you see through the media, all of which is biased in one way or another, then of course having immigrants come to your neighbourhood is frightening. Now, we in liberal Santa Fe can dismiss this as ignorance, perhaps even willful ignorance, and that's certainly a key part. But what many people don't realise is that I was once like that – I distinctly remember in my teenage years arguing against same-sex commitment ceremonies in the Reform Movement because the Bible starts with Adam and Eve, a man and a woman. That was me – the guy who last month happily performed a same-sex marriage under a *chuppah* in Santa Fe. What changed was my exposure to information, my friendships with members of the LGBT community, especially religious ones. I was totally ignorant of the gay religious community but once I learned from them, I was a different person. I started studying the transgender community initially more out of academic interest than anything else but quickly came to learn of their pain and once again I was transformed. But I'm a fairly open minded guy. Difference doesn't frighten me – if anything it intrigues me – so learning about new things wasn't a frightening challenge to my being, it was an act of liberation. But not everyone feels that way, so very often difference is frightening, not because of a physical threat but because of an existential threat.

However, because few people know how to express their existential concerns, they voice them as physical concerns, which is how we came to the nonsensical claims of transgender people abusing innocents in public bathrooms.

For us to dismiss intolerance as ignorance is not enough. "Go and learn!" is not enough of a response to intolerance. When a climate of fear has been established, telling someone that they're a fool won't change anything. But acknowledging their fear, trying to relieve their deep existential concerns, that will make a change. That's far more difficult and they may well not even want to have that conversation, but acknowledging the fear behind the intolerance is essential.

So, we need to acknowledge the deliberate creation of a climate of fear, on both sides of the Atlantic, for selfish political reasons. And I believe that we also need to acknowledge why people are susceptible to being manipulated into irrational fear – because of a sense of profound existential threat in some things that are being expressed publicly. So, what can we do about it? Internally, I think we need to look within ourselves and ask where we feel threatened and how we're responding to that. But externally, I think we need to reshape the debate into one of rational and irrational fear. And we also need to continue to develop a form of Judaism that isn't based on fear but on love and celebration. We need to not worry, as was the preoccupation in Britain for so many years, as to whether or not our grandchildren will be Jewish. Rather, we need to create a Judaism that is exciting and engaging so that, please God, when grandchildren come, they will want to be totally involved in the Jewish community. I believe that we diminish a climate of fear by addressing the fears of others and ourselves, and by deliberately creating a culture of joy and welcoming. May God guide us in that sacred work, and let us say, Amen.