

“I fear...” [pause]. How many ways to end that phrase?! I fear some weak word-choices in this sermon; I fear for our children’s future. I fear the shul’s future through clergy transition and more; I fear we may not all be written in the Book of Life. Radically different scales; all fear.

There’s vast verbiage to describe the feeling: I *worry* about a typo, am *anxious* about the midterms, *alarmed* by climate change, *terrified* by trends in our nation; *scared stiff* about Russia and Ukraine and nuclear weapons. So many ways to say fear, at so many levels – that’s how elemental it is.

Same in Hebrew. Each overlapping synonym drips with centuries of meaning: *Eimah*, terror. *De’a’gah*, worry. *Chashash*, concern. *Pachad*, most common, generic, straight-up fear.¹

And the richest, with no sole English synonym: *Yirah*, fear and awe rolled into one, often in contemplation of the Divine – holistic, big-picture, eyes-wide-open, fear-awe. In Mussar -- our tradition’s ethics-meets-spirituality wing, where both Torah and self are sacred texts, to be ever better understood -- *Yirah* is a top personal attribute to cultivate.² It offers context for our lives and for the world.³ Proverbs (1:7): *yirat H’ reshit d’eat chochmah*, “*Yirah* (fear/awe) of God is the starting-point for wisdom.”

Today begins the *Yamim Noraim* – *Norah*, from *Yirah*. Ever heard these called the Ten Days of *Fear*? No: Days of Awe. May these days be truly ‘awe-some.’

In our Machzor, the liturgy ‘these days’ often reassures us, calming our fears: Our tshuvah can (even *will*) be successful. Forgiveness is real, and it’s coming – “*salachti kidvarecha*, I’ve pardoned you!”⁴ Assured; done. (Awesome!)

But there’s another thread, cultivating deep fear of divine judgment, even retribution. “*Chil u’r’adah*”, fear and trembling. In Unetaneh Tokef, that early medieval piyyut at the heart of our understanding of these Ten Days, even the angels tremble: “*Hinei yom ha’din*, here’s the Day of Judgment! ... On Rosh Hashanah it’s written, on Yom Kippur it’s sealed: *Mi yichyeh, u’mi yamut*: who shall live, and who shall die... Who by fire, and who by water... Who’ll be raised up; and who brought low?” Terror, indeed, given the stakes.⁵ Only

¹ They really do overlap! Per the late Rabbi Alan Lew (as summarized and popularized by Tara Mohr), *Pachad* usually points to “a fear whose objects are imagined,” to “projected” fear. In truth, these varying Hebrew words for fear are often fully interchangeable synonyms, even as each has a discernable preponderance of particular uses. Fear of God, the best kind, is most often *Yirah* – though Proverbs 28:14 says “*ashrei adam m’fached tamid*”, happy is the person who has *Pachad* always.

² In the fourth letter in *Or Yisrael*, drawing on the near-homonym between appearance / *re’i yah* and fear-and-awe / *yirah*, the founder of the modern Mussar movement Reb Yisrael Salanter notes that *Yir’at HaShem* is required for proper seeing, i.e., proper understanding of Torah, of our ethical and spiritual obligations. Other Mussar masters centered Seder or Kvod or Hitlamdut; Salanter centered *Yirah*. (Learned from R. Avi Fertig, in a Mussar Institute class on Shlomo Wolbe’s *Alei Shur*, April 2022)

³ “When a person is convinced that, wherever they are, they always stand in the presence of the Blessed Holy One, they are spontaneously imbued with fear, lest they do anything wrong, and so detract from the exalted glory of God. ‘Know what is above thee,’ said our sages, “a seeing eye and a hearing ear, and all thy deeds written a book’ (Avot 2.1).” This is Ramchal, Reb Moshe Chayim Luzzatto, in 1738, in *Mesillat Yesharim* (as translated by Mordecai Kaplan, and elucidated by Ira Stone, p. 265).

וכיון שיתברר לו שבכל מקום שהוא, הוא עומד לפני שכינתו יתברך, אז מאליה תבוא בו היראה והפחד פן יכשל במעשיו, שלא יהיו כראוי לפי רוממות כבודו והוא מה שאמרו (פרקי אבות ב:א): דע מה למעלה ממך, עין רואה ואזן שומעת, וכל מעשיך בספר נכתבים.

⁴ Dr. Elsie Stern, in a memorable musical image, calls this assurance “one melody line of the machzor” – and note, after Kol Nidrei, we quote God saying *salachti kidvarecha* not once but thrice, lest we miss the point! And, like all good sheet music, the machzor also has another melody line as a counterpoint – the fear and dread, seen so clearly in Unetaneh Tokef, below. Sometimes the two are simultaneous, almost a duet. (In conversation with Dr. Betsy Stone, 8/31/22, on a rabbinic webinar cosponsored by the RRA, CCAR, and RA, entitled “*Hinei Yom HaDin: Judgment by God, by Others, and by Ourselves.*”

⁵ Dr. Elsie Stern, of RRC, on the 8/31/22 rabbinic webinar, credited Reuven Hammer’s research in showing that this idea of Yom Ha’Din was adapted from 2nd temple Judaism’s imagery of THE day of judgment, that apocalyptic day at the far-off end of time.

through vulnerability, fear of mortality, our liturgy suggests, can we grapple with the great and grave changes we must make.

Today we're taking time to focus on fear. Fear of threats, real and imagined. Fear of little stuff, and of the Ultimate. Fear that stops us from doing what we *shouldn't* – and fear that stops us from doing what we *should*. Fear, problematic, and productive. Fear: Pachad, and Yirah.

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Some of us heard Rabbi Avi Strausberg's Elul teachings on this theme – with her young son spontaneously framing the message that fear can be good (by protecting us), and also bad. That morning, we split forces; I was welcoming a gathering of young families. Later, this subject came up with a Tot Shabbat and Asefah regular, Rachel Singer, psychologist-and-mom.

"Feelings are like the check engine light on our cars," shared Rachel – "informative, and sometimes inconvenient, but they can also tell us things: ...Anxiety [or fear] means there is something big to address." Indeed, "Fear *can* be helpful -- it [can] rev us up and help us spring into action in a crisis." Or, it can paralyze us, or lead us to unproductive behavior. Critically, says Rachel: "Rather than disregarding it or trying to eliminate it, we can try to *understand* it."⁶

We now know that saying to someone wracked with fear, "don't worry about it!" or "just cheer up!" is (to quote the expert) "stinky advice that never helped anyone." Rather, we can reassess, and *modulate*, our fear. Reframe what we're afraid of. Are the facts, and our assessment of the situation, accurate? Or are our emotions clouding our cognition? Are implicit biases, deep social messages and stereotypes, tipping the scale?

Even when there *is* real cause for concern: if we *approach* the fear, search out its causes, we're better poised to overcome it – or at least, as Dr. Brene Brown encourages, to "befriend it."⁷

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Along the way our forbearers decided that if it was good enough to enact once at the end of history, let's do it every year! She referenced an old Roman Catholic mass about the day of judgment, Dies Irae, using similar language (e.g. "how great will Be the quaking when the judge is about to come...nothing will remain unpunished") to describe the eschaton, noting: "The difference is that they kept it as a one-time event, and our rabbinic and medieval ancestors did this kind of weird thing, transposing the moment from the end of time into every year." Elsie asked, "What human experience would've led to that transposition? What were they hoping that transposition might do for us, how does it serve as a piece of spiritual technology in the context of the chagim and the work of tshuvah?" Maybe it's precisely to help us walk this tightrope, celebrating how fear can be a source of wisdom and insight, so long as we're not done in by it. She was in dialogue with psychologist Betsy Stone, of HUC, who added: "Fear is an expansive experience – it's not just that I'm little and God is big; that could be experienced as a blessing, not a curse!" Fear actually "teaches me things; helps me avoid things; leads me in important paths based on making better decisions." The point of Unetaneh Tokef is, of course, "not to make you afraid, but to make you repair your behavior."

⁶ The above quotations are all from Dr. Rachel Singer, personal correspondence, 9/18/22. Many thanks to her -- and to her husband David for asking at oneg about High Holy messages; engaging on the fear theme (including suggesting Sefer Yonah as a direction, which I'll share come Yom Kippur); then asking his expert wife to expound. And she did, offering way more material than I could use! So for the lucky reader of footnotes, here's her important and useful practical advice for this penitential season: "When harm has been caused, we can use the ouch / oops / thank you method. Ouch - you have caused me harm (emotional, physical, psychological); oops (I'm sorry I did that); thank you (I appreciate you saying that)." And in apologizing, let's remember: "A true apology has no extra clauses -- we can take ownership over our actions (even if our intent was kind). 'I'm sorry I hurt you' is very different from 'I'm sorry you felt hurt' or 'I'm sorry you took it that way'."

⁷ Dr. Brene Brown shared in "The Price of Invulnerability" (2010 TEDxKC talk): If we numb hard and difficult emotions like fear, to feel less vulnerable, we also numb positive feelings, like joy. One more good reason to face, or befriend, our fears.

Another helpful angle (drawn from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy) highlights the difference between “clean” and “dirty” emotions⁸ – pain, anger, shame, or fear.

‘Clean’ pain or fear is what you’ve looked in the eyes, named, and begun to address. ‘Dirty’ fear is unidentified, un-addressed; unmoored and unmooring; downright dangerous, damaging.⁹ Clean fear moves us, and others, forward; it drives constructive action. The midwives Shifra & Puah, though trembling, took a brave and conscious stand against Pharaoh’s genocidal regime – why; how?! תִּירָאן הַמִּילֵדֹת אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים – they had Yirah. Yet unspecified free-floating Pachad: that holds us back from our potential, and from our values.

Unexamined fear drives negativity; xenophobia; and racism. Our emotions get “dirty” as the schmutz of bias, or assumptions, or blazing hot internal reaction, covers and obscures the reality. They come “clean” once we’ve spot-checked for these, and wiped them away as best we can. Having that truer picture helps us respond better: ethically, interpersonally, and spiritually.

This distinction goes beyond real vs. imagined fear. It’s between our readiness or our unwillingness: to see clearly; constructively navigate; and address our fears – directly, and with care. Dirty fear stays in the amygdala: flight-fight-or-freeze. Clean fear comes to the cerebral cortex, to conscious cogitation.

Take anti-semitism. The old saw applies here: “Just because we’re paranoid doesn’t mean they’re not out to get us!” There is a real need, and growing effort, to better understand and explain what anti-semitism is, and isn’t; how it manifests, and how it dehumanizes; where it stands alone, and where it’s bound up with racism and other -isms. We need *clean* fear – holistic, Yirah-fear – here, and in every case.

Whenever we *feel* fear, but don’t explore and then *cleanse* it, we too easily respond from *dirty* fear in ways that hurt rather than help. Fear, broadly, leads us to circle the wagons. Sometimes that protects us. But who’s the “us”, *within* our circle of concern and care?! Which allies, or others in need of protection, do we leave out? Pachad, dirty fear, narrows us; it blocks our progress toward that more expansive “Beloved Community” we all (hopefully) seek.¹⁰

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Cleansing our fear: What a very Yamim Noraim thing to do! Much like sin – “though your iniquity be scarlet crimson, [through tshuvah] it shall yet be white as fleece” – give it a good wash. This whole season is designed to motivate us to “clean up our act.” When we err or ‘miss the mark’, we make a mess; repentance and atonement take first cleaning up the messes we’ve made, then working on *ourselves* so we make less mess next time. That means recognizing what fears or pain may have been operative when we mis-stepped. Cheshbon HaNefesh, soul-accounting, must include: examining latent fears; interrogating conscious ones; and wherever possible, channeling our less-productive fears in more enduring directions, ones tinged with awe....

⁸ My wife, Minna Scherlinder Morse, introduced me to this, having known of the “clean” vs “dirty” emotions frame from the work of therapist Resmaa Menakem, whose *My Grandmother’s Hands* applies body-centered psychology to the damage caused by racism. He and others introduce a somatic angle, as one potential tool – we may gain greater self-awareness by identifying instances when we feel our fears embodied, i.e. a “twinge” of fear, or feeling ‘ill at ease’.

⁹ Therapist April McAnally explains, “clean pain is actually going through something; dirty pain is going around it. Dirty pain will always last longer and cause more suffering in the end.” (<https://www.aprilmcanally.com/single-post/2020/05/26/the-simple-concept-of-clean-pain-vs-dirty-pain-and-how-it-can-help-you-keep-it-together-d>). She and many others credit the clean-vs-dirty distinction to the field of Acceptance-Commitment Therapy; some, such as Rory Mackay (with an interesting twist at [Clean Pain and Dirty Pain: The Two Types of Emotional Suffering \(unbrokenself.com\)](https://unbrokenself.com)) suggest Hindu roots for the concept. Midwives: Exodus 1:17.

¹⁰ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who as an influential liberation theologian (as well as activist) inspired us all with his vision of the “Beloved Community,” also wrote a most insightful sermon on “The Mastery of Fear” – see notes from it, at <https://confidentparentsconfidentkids.org/2022/01/13/from-dr-kings-sermon-the-mastery-of-fear-what-can-we-learn-today/>.

Rabbi Haim Soloveitchik said: “Fear is a part of being human. Everyone has fear. Fear of failure, fear of loss of money, of aging, of sickness. There is, however, one great fear that pushes away all the other smaller fears. What is that fear? It is the fear of the Holy One, Blessed be God.”¹¹

Whatever we mean by God; however we understand Yirat Shamayim (fear-or-awe of heaven): Can we apply this ‘sacred overwhelm in the face of All Existence,’ toward how we address our other, human fears? How do we cultivate a sense of awe; and how can that help us?

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Neuropsychiatrist Richard Sima, the new “Brain Matters” columnist at the Washington Post, says awe is “a response to encountering something more vast, complex, or mind-blowing than we had conceived of either physically or conceptually.”¹² Awe yields insights which are spiritually rich, and inquiries which advance science. Studies associate awe “with [living healthier](#) and [more meaningful lives](#)... with...[lowered levels of daily stress](#)” – even less inflammation! Sima quotes Prof. Paul Piff, who nearly describes our High Holy Days: “Awe helps us re-contextualize ourselves.” “...it gives you that sense of being a part of something much bigger than yourself.”

If you’ve been to the Grand Canyon (like I was for first-family-vacation-since 2019), you’ll relate to Mussar teacher Alan Morinis’ analogy for Yirah:

“It is possible to feel fear and reverence and awe in one single, combined inner experience. Imagine, for example, standing at the very lip of a grand valley, looking down into the vast, deep, and magnificent landscape. Wouldn’t you feel dread at the sheer drop into the yawning abyss, dumbfounding astonishment at the beauty of the vast and colorful scene, and maybe also awareness of the divine majesty that permeates this magnificent world?”¹³

I sure did: Blown away; thanking God; scared stiff – and, wanting to understand the awesome geology. All that -- even while calibrating the desire to hike further, get yet more dramatic views, with a healthy respect for the precipice (even more for the kids than for me). Fear and awe, in one experience.

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In the dark days of 1933, FDR assured Americans: “**the only thing we have to fear is fear itself** – nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”¹⁴ The line *after* the part you knew is key – again, some fear *is* justified; the base emotion is helpful, a survival skill. What’s *unjustified*, and paralyzing, is “nameless, unreasoning” fear. So let’s *name* our fears, and *reason* with them! Turn them from dirty, to clean.

Start by questioning ‘*how* justified.’ Some version of “don’t fear” (as we just heard the angel tell Hagar, *al tiri*) appears **39** times in Torah (over 100 in Tanakh). Be positive. Often it’s good advice! We do

¹¹ This was found in a 2017 sermon, “Be Afraid,” by the ever-eloquent Rabbi Zoë Klein Miles -- who herself found it via Rabbi George Gittleman. She also offers another gem: “FEAR is either an acronym for Forget Everything And RUN, or Face Everything And Rise.” See [1506971383 sermon pdf Rabbi Klein Kol Nidre 5778:2017 Be Affraid.pdf \(templeisaiah.com\)](#)

¹² Richard Sima, Washington Post, 9/15/22, “[Your brain can experience awe and that is awesome](#)” - [The Washington Post](#). He summarizes: “By transforming our sense of self and meaning, and enhancing our relationship with others and the wider world, awe has the power to [improve our mental and physical health](#).” Yay, awe! Yay, Yirah!

¹³ Alan Morinis, *With Heart in Mind*. His notes on Yirah in the indispensable Mussar guidebook *Everyday Holiness*, and the learnings that have followed his creation of the [www.MussarInstitute.org](#), undergird much of this sermon. Separately, no Jewish discussion of awe can miss naming Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who much like Salanter had awe (he called it “Radical Amazement”) at the center of his powerful theology. With awe, he wrote, we “feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal.” It can be fearsome, indeed – Yirah! – but it’s a higher fear, one worth cultivating.

¹⁴ Franklin Delano Roosevelt, First Inaugural, March 4, 1933. He may have taken the phrase from Henry David Thoreau, who in a published journal entry from 1851, said something similar: “Nothing is so much to be feared as fear.”

waste time and energy worrying about things unlikely to happen; or things inevitable but small; in any case, *de'agah*/worry is rarely helpful. Trusted reporter Dan Rather says “Despair can be infectious. But so can hope. Hope should always be tempered by reality, but it also should not be underestimated.”¹⁵ (And trusted Rabbi Rachel will encourage joy, over despair, come Yom Kippur). *Adonai li, v'lo Ira*: ‘God is with me; I’ll not fear!’

But for the heavy stuff – the straight-up scary *Pachad*; the abjectly terrifying *Eimah* – we turn to Reb Nachman of Bratslav, who famously almost said, “the whole world is a very narrow bridge; the main thing is not to be afraid at all.” A good song. Better, is what he really wrote:

יָדַע, שֶׁהָאָדָם צָרִיךְ לַעֲבֹר עַל גֶּשֶׁר צָר מְאֹד מְאֹד וְהַכֵּלֵל וְהַעֲקֹר שְׂלֵא יִתְפַּחַד כָּלֵל.

“Know that a person must pass over a very very narrow bridge: *v'ha'klal*, and the main thing; *v'ha'ikar*, the essence – *sh'lo yitpached k'lal*, is to not terrify oneself” – *pachad* in reflexive tense – not to do oneself in by fear.¹⁶

This hasn't been a “don't fear at all,” *lo l'fached klal* sermon – that would be facile. Fear of covid, of death; fear for our democracy; fear for the world order, the climate; fear for our children, and their future: real fears, all. At the other end, even if a Mussar lens might point there, the lesson is not ‘yay fear’ either.

No, the message is in the middle: **don't be done in by fear.**¹⁷ Be clear – *clearer* than is your *habit* – about what or whom you fear. Get it down to its core. Cleanse your perception of it. Approach it with curiosity, a desire to learn, to understand.¹⁸ Then, even if it still instills fear (*Pachad*), it's something you can face – like the Grand Canyon, calculating a safe distance from the edge – and even appreciate, with context, and with a sense of awe. *Yirah-as-fear* (but still with awe!) for what threatens, and separates – and *Yirah-as-awe* (even still with some fear) for what ultimately uplifts, and unites.

Straight-up fear, *Pachad*, is part of being human – but cultivating *Yirah*, that more holistic fear-blended-with-awe, pushes away all the smaller *pachads*.

Wherever possible: turn *Pachad* into *Yirah*. Free-floating fear into awe-fear. Debilitating, into productive. *Yirah*:¹⁹ examined, clean, fear-with-legs, tinged with awe. May we feel it in this Machzor -- be moved by it – and make good on it, throughout the year to come. Shanah Tovah.

¹⁵ Dan Rather & Elliot Kirchner, in their “Steady” e-letter, 9/23/22; at [A Brief Thought for a Friday Night \(substack.com\)](https://substack.com).

¹⁶ Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav, circa 1800, in *Likutei Mohoran*, II:48.

¹⁷ A creative tension worth exploring: The Mussar sense of fear (*Yirah*) as the foundation of wisdom serves as a continual goad toward “bearing the burden of the other,” a supremely ethics-centered understanding in which we can never adequately serve others. This is in direct tension with the biological reality of fear (perhaps here *Pachad*) as the necessary self-directed survival impulse, where fear actually limits how much we extend or risk ourselves in order to serve others. This underscores the classic need to balance the yetzer hatov and yetzer hara, the self-directed impulse versus the other-directed impulse.

¹⁸ From Dr. Brene Brown, in <https://brenebrown.com/articles/2020/02/13/the-courage-to-not-know/> and elsewhere: focus on curiosity. Better to *get* it right, than to [already] *be* right. We should ask ourselves questions like: What exactly is it that I am afraid of? Why am I afraid? What would it look like to act not *out* of fear, but *conscious* of that fear, with that fear befriended? What would it look like to not be afraid? As Minna Scherlinder Morse (my wife) offers, summing up Brown's relevance: “When things get tough, do we lean into vulnerability and get curious, or do we self-protect in ways that move us away from our values?”

¹⁹ In discussing *Yirah*, it's common to distinguish a lower form of *Yirat Ha'Onesh*, fear of getting caught and punished, from the higher form of *Yirat Shamayim*, fear/awe of Heaven. The distinctions can go further still – in the ultra-Orthodox Mussar world of the remarkable website Bilvavi, “there are five levels of *yirah*: 1) *Yirah* from punishment and suffering, which was explained above. 2) Fear for one's honor, when a person is afraid of being embarrassed, as Chazal say, “Each person is burned by the other one's canopy [in Olam Haba]” (Bava Basra 75a). 3) *Yirah* of a lack of *shleimus*. Since one recognizes that perfection is *deveikus* to Hashem, he fears that he might lack this *deveikus* as a result of his sins. (These three aspects of *yirah* are mentioned in *Mesillas Yesharim*, in the chapter on watchfulness.) 4) *Yirah* and awe of Hashem's greatness. When performing a *mitzvah*, he fears that he might not be doing it properly and thus detract from the honor of the King. 5) Fear of sinning. He always fears that his deeds may be detracting from the honor of the King of the World. (These last two aspects are described in *Mesillas Yesharim* in the chapter on fear of sin.)” [Bilvavi Part 1 - Section 5 Fear of Hashem | www.bilvavi.net](https://www.bilvavi.net), paragraph 149.