

It's been a great year for our family. We moved into the house on 23 Acorn Lane, settled into our life in Plainview and got to know so many of you, the members of our PJC family. But the true highlight of the past year was when our son Yoni became toilet trained.

Our next challenge is to get him to use the bathroom all by himself.

These days, things go fine until after he is finished with the task. Then, from out of the depths of the bathroom, I will invariably hear Yoni call "dad, will you flush the toilet for me?"

It's not that Yoni can't flush the toilet. He's just afraid. What exactly is he afraid of? Is it the loud sound the toilet makes when it flushes? Is Yoni afraid of getting flushed down the toilet himself? I haven't figured out the answer yet. But I know that eventually he will conquer this fear—and that there will be more fears to follow.

Children are naturally fearful And why shouldn't they be? They don't have a lot of control over their lives They are exposed every day to many things they don't understand.

As we progress toward adulthood, we grow out of these childhood fears. But we grow into other fears These fears may be grounded in reality: like fear of being robbed if we walk through a bad neighborhood at night. Or the fears may be completely neurotic: like the fear of flying in an airplane, Or they may fall somewhere in between.

No matter where our fears come from, we grapple with these fears every day In spite of the possibility that we will get into an accident, we get into our cars and go where we need to go. In spite of the possibility that we will pick up germs, we shake hands with strangers and give our friends and family big hugs. In spite of our fear of failure, we go out and do our jobs and get the work done.

Yet, today we also face fears that are far more acute than these "normal fears" We are living through what has become known as the Great Recession; an economic downturn that started nearly three years ago. Unemployment is still at near record levels. People are still losing homes--and all of our homes are still losing value The stock market is still down. And no one knows when, or if, the economy will recover.

At the same time, our country is engaged in a protracted war against terror. This war I taking place not just in Afghanistan, but also right here in this country. Attacks are being attempted on American soil and against American targets. Even though we are winning the battles so far, it's truly frightening knowing that there are people out there right now planning the next round of attacks.

In addition, we have seen this year just how vulnerable our environment is and how little protection we have from environmental disasters. We have also watched the growing threat to Israel's existence as Iran pushes to create nuclear weapons—a threat that should be as alarming to the rest of the world as it is to us as Jews.

All in all, as Americans and as Jews, we live in a time of acute insecurity; living every day with the fear that our livelihoods, our safety, our country and our homeland are all incredibly vulnerable. Every day we are living with the fear that the very foundations of the good life we in this room enjoy are threatened from every side.

How do we live everyday in the shadow of these fears? How do we respond when the world around us has become a dangerous, unstable, and unreliable place for us and for our people?

As Jews, we have a tremendous advantage in addressing this question. First of all, our tradition tries to make sure that we have no illusions about how precarious even normal life can be. Every year during Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur,, we acknowledge our ultimate vulnerability by reciting the *Unetnaeh Tokef* prayer.

On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed,  
And on Yom Kippur it is sealed.  
How many shall pass away and how many shall be born,  
Who shall live and who shall die . . .  
Who shall be at peace and who shall be pursued,  
Who shall be at rest and who shall be tormented,  
Who shall be exalted and who shall be brought low,  
Who shall become rich and who shall be impoverished.

In its graphic depiction of all the dangers that lurk out there in the world, *Unetaneh Tokef* can inspire fear in even the most complacent among us. Of course, *Unetaneh Tokef* has never been just a theoretical exercise. Jewish communities throughout much of our history have had to cope with the very real threat of persecutions, dislocations and pogroms described in the prayer.

We have learned a few important lessons from our long history of living in fear. One of these lessons is dramatized by the story of Hagar and Ishmael in this morning's Torah portion. After Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael away, they become lost in the desert. When she sees that her water is running out, Hagar stops in her tracks, paralyzed by fear. She sets her son Ishmael down under a scrub bush and then throws herself on the ground a few hundred feet away and begins to cry.

Just then, God sends an angel, who tells Hagar "Don't be afraid, for God has heard your voice". Pushing through her fear, Hagar looks around her and sees a well of water that had been in plain sight all the time.

Hagar's story illustrates what can happen when we let ourselves become paralyzed by fear. When we are truly afraid of something; many of us instinctively engage in avoidance behavior. We may shut down, like Hagar. We may deny the reality of the circumstances we are in or the feelings we have. We may even try to run away.

When we engage in any of these avoidance behaviors, like Hagar, we lose our ability to see clearly what is in front of us. We lose any chance we might have of addressing the problem that lies behind our fear. And we condemn ourselves to certain failure instead of giving ourselves the best possible chance to succeed.

Even in normal times, one of the most common fears we have is dealing with our finances. Because of this fear, dealing with our finances may be the number one thing people avoid. I know I often fall into that category—whether it’s waiting to pay the bills until the last minute—or later—or taking every extension I can on my taxes. That’s why I let my wife Illyse handle our family finances.

In this difficult economy, fear has become an even bigger factor. More of us are afraid of not being able to meet our financial obligations or achieve our financial goals. But fear is keeping us from taking action. Like Hagar, we are paralyzed by the threats, real or imagined, to our financial well-being.

I am hardly qualified to give anyone financial advice. But I know that those who are qualified are telling us that this is not the time to avoid. Especially now, we need to overcome our fears of dealing with our finances and take the steps we need to make the best of this bad situation. Even for those of us who may face only difficult choices, making these choices is far better than letting them be made for us. Despite our fear, we must hear in angel’s words to Hagar words of encouragement to each of us. “Al Tirae--Don’t be afraid”.

We don’t always shut down when we are afraid. Sometimes we overreact instead; looking to alleviate our fears by finding someone or something to strike out at. According to Midrash Bereshit Rabbah, even the angels aren’t immune to such behavior.

In our Torah portion this morning, we read that “God heard the voice of the boy from where he was”; answering Ishmael’s cries by showing his mother Hagar a well of water. The rabbis imagine that the angels in heaven are outraged that God decides to save Ishmael’s life.

“The descendants of this man Ishmael will in the future kill your children by denying them water, yet you create a miracle for him and provide a well?”

In response, God asks the angels, “is this man Ishmael himself righteous or is he wicked?”

“Righteous” they answer.

“And for that reason,” God declares, “ I will answer his cries.”

The angels in the Midrash can see the future. In a thousand years, the Ishmaelites will cruelly deny the Israelites water as they are being marched into exile. Afraid for the lives of the future Israelites, the angels beg God to let Ishmael die. But God does not let the angels fear override God's justice. God judges Ishmael for his own actions; not the actions of others who happen to share the same ethnic or religious background.

During the last month, both the news headlines and our discussions here during our Saturday morning Kiddush have been dominated by one topic: the Islamic Center planned for 51 Park Plaza in Manhattan. I have learned a lot from the conversations we have shared on this topic, and from what I have read and seen in the media.

Clearly, we are still traumatized by the 9/11 attacks. Every time there is a new threat like a car bomb discovered in Times Square, we relive some of that horror. After nine years, we are not healed, and the threat of terror, keeps us feeling both wounded and afraid. And because we are still so wounded and so afraid, the proposed Islamic Center has evoked incredibly strong reactions both here and across the country.

I am not here today to take a position on the Islamic Center. I believe that it is far more important for me to speak about the dangerous role that fear has played in this debate.

Fear, and overreacting to that fear, has too often lead to people involved in this debate to branding all Moslems as terrorists and scapegoating all Moslems for the 9/11 attacks. For example, there are those who argue that the organizers are really terrorist sympathizers. There are those who insinuate that the Islamic Center is really meant to be a triumphal monument to the terrorists. There are those who warn that the Islamic Center will become a breeding ground for Islamic radicals. And there are those who claim that Islam is a religion that encourages terror and violence and is responsible for the 9/11 attacks.

At this critical point in our country history, we cannot allow fear to push us into overreacting. We need to follow God's example and judge each individual by his or her own actions; not by the stereotypes created by the actions of a small group who happen to share the same religious background.

The organizers of the planned Islamic Center have proposed a project dedicated to building bridges of understanding between faith groups. It is simply unfair to question their motives just because they are Moslems. It is practically obscene to suggest that, whatever they say, they are part of a secret worldwide Moslem terrorist conspiracy.

These accusation are "just the fear talking" We have to stamp out that fear before more New York cabbies get slashed, Tennessee mosques get burned down or piles of Korans are set on fire in Florida. And we have to "just say no" when ambitious office seekers like Sarah Palin, Newt Gingrich and Rick Lazio attempt to play on our fears to build up their candidacies.

We cannot allow our fear to push us into scapegoating American Moslems, or any other group. We as Jews have been targets of this kind of fearful scapegoating throughout our history. We know the kind of damage it can do. We cannot let others be persecuted as we have been. We know what happens when people stand idly by. Of all peoples, we should be the first to stand up for any group that becomes a target because of religion or ethnicity.

Whatever opinion we have about the proposed Islamic Center, and I believe there is room for debate on this issue-- we must separate it from our fear of the threat of terror that still weighs so heavily upon us. We must judge everyone on the basis of where they are now, and not on the basis of our fears for the future.

It may seem like the greatest challenge we face in these uncertain times is living with our fears. But there is an even greater challenge that we must face the challenge of living with hope. While we experience an abundance of fear these days, we are having a hard time mustering up much hope.

This shortage of hope is every bit as dangerous as our excess of fear.

If we don't have hope for a better future, we will not invest our hard work and our resources in building and maintaining our homes, our neighborhoods, our schools and our communities. If we don't have hope for a better future, we won't invest our emotional resources in building and maintaining our relationships with family members, co-workers, and neighbors.

In short, things will never get better unless we have the courage to hope.

The story of the birth of Isaac that begins today's Torah portion teaches an important lesson about hope. When God first called Abraham and Sarah, God promised them a child who would carry on God's covenant. Even though Sarah was already well past childbearing age, they picked themselves up and moved hundreds of miles to the land of Israel at God's instruction.

For twenty five years, Abraham and Sarah waited for God to fulfill the promise. Sometimes, their hope wavered. But no matter what disappointments or adversity they faced, Abraham and Sarah always pulled themselves back on track.

Finally, at the beginning of our Torah portion this morning, Abraham and Sarah got what they hoped for; their son Isaac was finally born.

It would have been easy-and quite understandable—if Abraham and Sarah had given up. But instead, they consistently chose hope. Their actions were always informed by the belief that things could get better, and that they could help make it happen. That's why Abraham risks his life to rescue Lot. That's why Abraham continually reaffirms the covenant with God. That's why Abraham argues for the righteous of Sodom and Gemorrah. That's why Abraham negotiates a peace treaty with his long time enemy Abimelech.

Just as Abraham and Sarah chose hope, we too can choose hope.

Just as Abraham and Sarah, even in the face of adversity, did what they could to make the world a better place, so too, each of us, even if we are truly suffering, is capable of affirming hope by reaching out to others and giving of ourselves. We can reach out in small ways, like sharing a kind word with a stranger or making a call to someone we know is lonely. We can reach out in big ways, like volunteering to collect hundreds of pairs of shoes for those who would otherwise go barefoot, or making a major charitable contribution

The important thing is that we choose hope; that we act on the belief that no matter how bad things might be for us or for our country, there can be a better future.

It's not easy to choose hope, especially in these difficult times. But Jewish tradition reminds us, especially at this time of the year, that we have resources to support us in our choices. We have role models in our history, like Abraham and Sarah, and in our own communities, who can inspire us and encourage us to hope. We have children, in our families, and in our synagogue, who embody every day the potential for a better future. And we have God's constant, encouraging presence in our lives.

This season of the year has become known as the *Yamim Noraim*—which can be translated as the Days of Fear—the days when our fate hangs in the balance. We come to the *Yamim Noraim* this year with a heightened awareness that it is not just our personal fate that hangs in the balance, but the well-being of our entire country. We need not let this time in our history become the *Shanim Noraim*, the Years of Fear.

We can choose hope instead.

We can choose to turn to each other and say “*chazak v'amatz*”—be strong and have courage.

We can choose to turn to God and proclaim, as we will at the end of our service today--- and at the end of every Shabbat morning service--in the concluding line of *Adon Olam*: “*Adonai Li V'lo Era*”—God is with me, I choose to have no fear.