

Should We Be Afraid?

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Rabbi Barry Block

After Rosh Hashanah this year, the *Forward* reported on a controversial sermon, widely shared via the Internet:

“Speaking to nearly 2,000 congregants attending High Holiday services at Congregation Etz Chaim in Marietta, Georgia, [Rabbi Shalom Lewis] delivered a 10-alarm warning about the threat that he sees posed by Muslim extremists. He urged, in the harshest of tones, a U.S.-led war against violent Islamist groups. . . .”

The *Forward* continued: “Lewis declared, ‘The fury of ultimate evil is upon us and we must act — not to contain it. Not to degrade it. Not to manage it. Not to tolerate it, but to exterminate it utterly and absolutely.’

“The rabbi defined this war a ‘holy crusade,’ and referred to adherents and sympathizers of these groups in terms that appeared to place them outside humanity.

“‘We are dealing with a moral species that eats its own, kills its young and celebrates innocent death as homage to God,’ he said. ‘These Islamist criminals are unlike us in the most basic of ways and we have yet to accept and understand their total immersion in moral debauchery.’”

One of our own congregants told me that a friend had sent her the sermon which had frightened her. I was able to tell her that Rabbi Lewis has given such sermons in the past. Two years ago, on the High Holy Days, his widely-publicized sermon was called “*Ehr Kumt*,” German for, “He is coming.” He compared Islamic extremists to early Nazis, and fearfully warned that these new would-be destroyers were on their way to overthrowing our American way of life. This year’s sermon, more ominously, is titled “*Ehr Daw*,” or “He is here,” implying that the feared Islamist takeover of the civilized world has arrived. In 2012, he asked, “Did anyone imagine in the 1920’s what Europe would look like in the 1940’s?” The implication is the world of 2012 resembled Europe in the 1920’s, while this year is a do-over of war-torn Europe in the throes of the Holocaust. Thank God, that view is false, but Rabbi Lewis would stoke fear into a holy war, perhaps best described as World War III, making his own prophecy come true. I remind you that his first name is “Shalom.” Isn’t that rich with irony?

“Fear,” they say, “is a powerful motivator.” Fear led two governors, in New York and New Jersey, to quarantine altruistic medical volunteers who had returned from missions to combat Ebola virus at its West African source. Every rational analysis about the spread of Ebola in the United States teaches us that quelling the epidemic in Africa is the only sure way to prevent the epidemic from spreading significantly in our own country and around the world. Whether the governors were playing politics, or were well-intentioned in their desire to protect the people of their states, they gave into fear. Scientists have shown that people who don’t suffer from Ebola’s symptoms cannot transmit the disease. Placing a nurse in a tent, erected inside a hospital room, with a portable toilet and no shower, would serve only to dissuade medical professionals from volunteering for truly life-saving work in Africa. Thankfully, the nurse in question, Kaci Hickox, stared down two governors and prevailed.

In tonight’s Torah portion, we read about fear. Abraham instructs his servant to go back to the patriarch’s former home, to find a wife for his son Isaac. The servant wonders why Isaac isn’t going along for the trip himself. After all, Isaac is the groom-to-be. Shouldn’t he have some say in selecting his bride? Shouldn’t any prospective bride have the opportunity to meet her groom before agreeing to an arranged marriage? Even with arranged marriages elsewhere in the Torah, the bride and groom are acquainted in advance.

Truth be told, nobody would seem to be as dangerous to Isaac as his own father. Two short chapters earlier, Abraham responds to God’s request, eagerly binding his son for sacrifice. Perhaps we can understand Abraham’s being overprotective, so soon after nearly sacrificing his own son. Fear leads Abraham to want to control his son’s every move, and to keep him close to home, not unlike plenty of parents in our own day.

Wendy Mogel, author of *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*, reminds us that we cannot isolate our children from all of the world’s potential dangers. The overprotective instinct may be natural, but it isn’t good for our kids. Sheltered children learn to fear the world. Alternatively, the shielded child may become reckless, rebelling against the parents’ protection. When we parents are motivated less by fear, but encourage our children to experience the world responsibly, we raise children who grow up to be more self-reliant, better able to identify and manage the real risks that life presents.

Fear has inspired a most destructive movement against vaccines among more than a few American parents. Unsubstantiated claims about the supposed

dangers of vaccines have led tens of thousands not to protect their children against devastating childhood illnesses that spread rampantly before vaccines were developed. Failure to vaccinate children resulted in more than 50,000 cases of whooping cough, for example, reported in 2012. Three decades earlier, vaccines had nearly eradicated that dangerous disease, with fewer than 2,000 cases reported annually in the early 1980's. Measles, Mumps, and even Polio are making a resurgence, right here in the United States, primarily in families with excellent access to health care, and certainly to vaccines. Irrational fear of vaccines has replaced legitimate concern about real and devastating childhood illnesses. Shielding their children from an irrationally perceived danger, parents are exposing their children and others to a real threat.

Examining the Hebrew words for "fear" may be helpful. The most common Hebrew word for "fear" is *pachad*, the state of being afraid of something. Another word, though, appears more often in our religious literature: *Yir'ah*, a completely different word, is also most commonly translated as "fear." *Yir'ah* appears most often in the phrase, *yir'at Elohim*, fearing God.

What do we mean, when we speak of a person's being "God-fearing?" In some religious institutions, believers are taught to live in mortal fear of God, lest they sin and be cast into eternal damnation. To be fair, more than a few traditional Jewish texts assert that we should be afraid of divine punishment. In Mussar, the Jewish ethical tradition, *yir'ah*, "fear" of the divine, is presented with ambiguity. My teacher, Alan Morinis, citing a traditional text, writes: "The fear of Heaven has two aspects: the fear of tribulations and Divine retribution, and the awe of [God's] glory, majesty, and awesome power."

In our Chapel, the Hebrew words above the Holy Ark are the same that are found in many synagogues of all stripes around the world: "Know before Whom you stand." Some may be frightened by that phrase, as it may suggest severe judgment. Others, though, live in awe of creation, and of our Creator. We may be motivated to do the right thing, to perform *mitzvot*, not because we are afraid of what may happen if we do not, but because we are awe-struck by the gift of life and its endless possibilities. We are afraid, if you will, of wasting our lives, passing up the opportunity to live well and do the right thing.

Let us live with *yirah*, with a passion inspired by awe. And then, let us seek to banish from our lives *pachad*, debilitating fright of forces we cannot control.

We have every reason to be awe-struck at the evil wrought and sought by the Islamist extremists of ISIS and the like, and to take appropriate action. Let us not, though, give into the terror that would give rise to a holy war.

Our concern should motivate us to combat Ebola, using our heads to pursue the most effective steps to stem a devastating epidemic. Join Toni and me by making a donation to American Jewish World Service's Emergency Campaign to combat Ebola in Africa, where it threatens the entire world. But let us not fearfully call for punitive isolation of the medical volunteers who would best be described as heroes.

Caring for our children, we of course don't want to expose them to unnecessary danger. At the same time, let us live in awe of the possibilities of life, not only fearful of its risks. Then, may we enrich our children's lives with opportunity, rather than restricting them out of fear.

As we seek to banish fear from our lives, we will not always be successful. Our closing hymn for tonight, *Adon Olam*, poetically suggests a helpful recourse. The last verse speaks of death and the promise of everlasting life. Its final words are, *Adonai li v'lo ira*, "God is with me, I shall not fear." In our moments of terror, and we all experience them, let us seek the divine presence. We are not alone. With awe, may we seek God's abiding presence. Then, may we live, not with debilitating fear, but with confidence and hope.

Amen.