

Shoftim 5766
August 26, 2006
Worry

Shabbat Shalom.

This is a little embarrassing, but let me share with you a secret of mine. (Promise not to tell anyone outside this sanctuary.) I am a bit of a worrier. Sometimes, I worry about a couple of things: my family, our shul, the Jewish people, America, Israel, the environment, global warming, the economy, the poor, the Red Sox and Mets – all right, that's the short list. The truth is it's not my fault: I inherited this trait from previous generations. I come from a long line of worriers.

My Savta, my mother's mother, was a worrier. She worried about the big things - her son in Israel and her grandchildren. My mother is an Olympic worrier. She takes her worrying very seriously, setting aside time on her Palm pilot to make sure she can worry appropriately.

My Israeli cousins seem less prone to this constant concern, though they are aware of our inclination to worry. A good illustration of this is my first cousin, Nili's email a few weeks ago to my mother and aunt after they had phoned about her husband Shimi's being called up to fight with the Israel Defense Forces.

Dear Dodot, (Hebrew for aunts)
I just wanted to update you and let you know that for now Shimi's draft was cancelled. So you can go back to the normal worrying....
Much love and thanx for the phone calls,
Nili
Resume normal worrying.....

This summer I have been somewhat filled with worry. It began with many incidents in Israel – an attack on the soldiers near the Gaza Strip by Palestinian terrorists, killing a number and kidnapping Gilad Shalit. I worried about this soldier who grew up in a Conservative synagogue in Israel, and I agonized over what his parents and family must be dealing with.

The summer's worries multiplied as Hezbollah launched an attack, killing eight Israeli soldiers and kidnapping two more – Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser – and raining Katyusha missiles upon Northern Israel. I was filled with worry and dread as the war escalated. Israel did its best to defend itself, but was not as successful as we might have hoped, again filling me with anxiety. And I worried about my friends and relatives there and all the innocents on both sides who were at risk.

Worry continued here in America as a gunman opened fire in the Jewish Federation offices in Seattle. We were told that synagogues and Jewish institutions must be extra vigilant. More anxiety was created with the uncovering of the bomb plot to smuggle in liquid explosives on the planes from England to the United States.

And, of course, global worries only exacerbate our own personal concerns.

For some of us, not only do we worry about political concerns, Israel, and terrorism, but we also become fretful at this time of year. As the school year approaches, those of us with children and grandchildren in school or college have to reassure them as they approach what can be a stressful period. For some – resuming work schedules and leaving behind the expansiveness of the endless summer can fill us with anxiety and dread.

Worry has existed for as long as there have been human beings. Perhaps it is a survival mechanism. Being anxious can help us focus our energies on a problem, but often it simply consumes us.

Long before modern medicine and science came around, our tradition was aware of the dangers of worrying and stress. Some 1500 years ago, the Talmud presents its perspective on anxiety: “three things can sap a person’s strength: travel, sin, and anxiety.” (Gittin 70a) Or: “anxiety breaks one in half.” (Br 56b) And finally, “anxiety kills even the most heroic of heroes.” (San 100b) Worrying can drain the life force out of us. We can become apprehensive about the past, the present, and the future unless we come up with a strategy to combat that.

One can imagine Moses in our Torah reading this morning, being filled with anxiety. Here he is, at the end of his life, distressed about turning over the reins of leadership to Joshua and the next generation. Would they survive in this new land? Would they get along without him?

Perhaps that is why Moses, at this juncture, offers so many laws to the people – he wants to protect them from bad leaders, kings, abuse of power, the inequality of the socio-economic system, injustice, lying, and guilt.

He concludes with a most poignant moment: the eventuality of war. He knows that the people will have to experience this terrible event ... and they will be afraid.

Over the summer, we, too, saw this on the faces of the Israeli soldiers who had to fight the Hezbollah in Lebanon – they were filled with both fear and determination to fulfill this critical mission.

Prophetically, Moses could see that fear of soldiers going off to fight. He tells the people to try to overcome their fear, not to be afraid since God, who brought us from the land of Egypt, is with us. Moses continues: “Before you join battle, the priest shall come forward and address the troops. He shall say to them, ‘*Sh’ma Yisrael* – hear O Israel! You are about to join battle with your enemy. Let not your courage falter. Do not be in fear or in panic or in dread of them, for this is to deny your God who marches with you to do battle for you against your enemy to bring you victory.’”

These words are supposed to gird the troops, strengthening their resolve to face an uncertain, anxiety-filled moment. Perhaps that is why this verse is utilized in the special prayer for the Israel Defense Forces.

So here we are at the end of a summer of worry. Like Moses, we can look ahead and anticipate stressful moments. In fact, each year at this moment, we look ahead to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur filled with apprehension: will we be written in the Book of Life? Will we be able to transform ourselves? Will we heed the call to *teshuvah*, to change and repentance?

But just as Moshe reassured us in the *parashah*, we have been given customs to help us with our anxiety. Yesterday was *Rosh Hodesh Elul*, the beginning of the Hebrew month of Elul when we start to sound the shofar each weekday morning in anticipation of the days of awe. Like the battle trumpet millennia ago, the Shofar serves to call us to action and to encourage us to perform *teshuvah* or repentance.

Yesterday was a special day for me personally – I was born on *Rosh Hodesh Elul* and have always felt a unique bond to this particular day. Since it marks the one-month countdown to Rosh Hashanah, we can become overwhelmed with anxiety at the daunting prospect of evaluating ourselves and repenting. (For rabbis, we might get anxious about High Holy Day sermons.)

Elul can be frightening; perhaps it is too much; perhaps we are not up to the task. To counteract this trepidation, the tradition extends to us the recitation of a most beautiful and eloquent psalm each morning and evening: Psalm 27.

In this wondrous prayer, written some 2500 years ago, we hear of someone who is coping with many anxieties. The author has *tzuris*, real problems and enemies – whether literal or metaphoric - but believes that God will be his protection. The Holy One shelters him in a heavenly Sukkah, looking forward to the joyful harvest holiday coming just after Yom Kippur. God will shield us in the divine tent, a parent who lives beyond the lives of our own parents. This psalm does not eliminate or gloss over doubt, fear, and anxiety; it acknowledges them, but helps us move beyond them.

The opening and closing verses of this psalm have been rallying cries for me: “*L’David* – A psalm of David, *Adonai Uri V’yish’i* – God is my light and my salvation – mimi ira - from whom shall I fear, *Adonai Ma’oz Hayai* – God is the strength of my life, *mimi ehad* – whom shall I dread.” Even as a child, I recited this verse to give me strength; when it came time for me to choose a verse for my Bar-Mitzvah invitation and for my graduation from rabbinical school, this was the clear choice.

Our tradition has always supported us by acknowledging that we are afraid, that we can be anxious and nervous – these are normal human emotions. But then our customs hopefully lift us out of that place by reminding us not to be afraid, that we have a divine blanket, if you will, that serves to protect us, to keep us warm, and to strengthen us.

Judaism helps us work through our anxieties. God, Torah, Israel – both people and place – as well as our rituals serve as antidotes to angst. We need to draw upon the reservoirs of hope, joy, and comfort in our tradition to sustain us through difficult times.

As Isaiah reassures us with his optimistic message in this morning’s haftarah and, as Rabbi Jacobs explained, God is answering our call for help. It is the hope and positive energy that this *haftarah* offers that helped the ancient Israelites cope with their worries, and it can do the same for us today.

The antidote to stress, worry, and anxiety is being open to happiness and joy, being filled with a sense of optimism and hope.

For me personally, a cup of tea, a good book, setting aside time for family and friends, and enjoying activities and hobbies (I particularly enjoy sports, although the Red Sox have not given me much respite from worry in recent weeks) as well as other activities such as yoga, meditation, and most of all, traditional Jewish prayer that opens us up to ourselves and to God, to that sense of peace – all of these serve as the antidotes to anxiety.

As we begin this month of Elul and the new year awaits us, filled with both fear and possibilities, may we use the resources of our tradition and God’s gentle nurturing love to protect us, to shield us, and to strengthen us.

Kein Yehi Ratzon – may it be God’s will.

Shabbat Shalom.