

Less than a week ago, I was on my way home to St. Louis to spend Thanksgiving with my family. I was traveling the day before the holiday, on what is commonly known as the busiest and worst day to travel of the year, and, of course, the airport was packed with busy, bustling people like myself, excited to be heading home. But despite the excitement, I couldn't help but notice how tense it felt to be in the airport, that current of nervousness and fear that has been with us in this country since September 11 and doesn't seem to be dissipating. Waiting in line to walk through the metal detectors, no one complained about taking off their shoes-we all know that even sneakers can hold weapons beyond our imaginations. Sitting at the gate, people were nervously, not so subtly checking out the faces around them, looking for suspicious signs, potential troublemakers, terrorists. This palpable fear has become such a regular part of our existence that we hardly even notice any more just how oppressive, how debilitating it can be.

Michael Moore, the documentary filmmaker and writer, has made quite a splash during the past few years talking about this very subject. In his movie *Bowling for Columbine*, he uses the tragic shootings at Columbine high school almost five years ago as a leaping off point to talk about the issue of fear in America. Michael Moore seems to be saying many of the problems in this country, school shootings being just one of them, are not actually caused by a lack of gun control, or rock music, or even dirty politicians, but by the fear that we Americans feel on a daily basis. We turn on the news and hear horrific stories about bombings, burnings, even bad baby food-nothing is safe. In turn, we lock our doors, arm ourselves, grow suspicious of our neighbors, all because of this overwhelming, incapacitating fear. The point Moore is trying to make is this-it is not guns, or laws, or even terrorists that are our greatest foe. It is fear. And, as the great Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

And maybe in his time he was right. Maybe if we could somehow just stop being afraid, many of our problems would disappear. Easier said than done. Lets be realistic-there

are frightening things in the world, many of which we can't control, and it's only natural to be afraid sometimes. Fear is a part of our lives, and it would be unreasonable to think that we can make fear just go away. But, if we are stuck with some fear, maybe there's another option. What if our fear didn't have to be paralyzing? What if we held on to our fears but instead of allowing them to push us to lock our doors, to build up walls--instead if the fear itself could somehow push us to greater things, to acts of beauty, magnitude, wonder?

As always, the Torah has something to say on the subject, though it may come where you'd least expect it. In the beginning of this week's parasha, Jacob leaves his home, fleeing from his brother Esau, and on the way he stops for the night, laying his head down upon a stone, and he has a wondrous dream. He envisions a ladder reaching up to the sky, with angels going back and forth.

In Jacob's dream, God makes a covenant with him, so that when Jacob wakes up he says, "God was in this place, and I, I did not know." This story is probably one many of us know by heart, but what you may not know is what happens next. The next line, the next word, actually, after Jacob has this revelation-is vayeera-and he was afraid.

What is fear doing in a story like this? This beautiful moment, when Jacob's destiny, the future of his entire lineage is shown to him, when he dreamt that God was standing beside him-the only word the Torah sees fitting to describe Jacob's emotion is fear! Jacob goes on from this point and almost immediately finds fortune at the well-he meets Rachel, the woman who will be his wife-certainly his fear did not hold him back from fulfilling his destiny without inhibitions. It seems, rather, that the fear pushed him onward towards his destiny, a destiny that becomes the story of our own people.

So maybe the fear that Jacob felt after his dream of God was a different kind of fear. Perhaps, the fear that Jacob felt was some other brand, some other category of fear entirely,

one that doesn't hinder but actually helps us on our way, helps us discover the people we are meant to be, to follow the paths that we wish to choose.

Not all of us will meet God in our dreams and have the chance to experience fear in the same way as Jacob, but there are times in each of our lives where we may encounter this kind of fear that can be motivating, inspirational, if only we can learn to see it that way.

My own first real experiences with fear came my first year of rabbinical school, living in Jerusalem. My year in Israel began shortly after the latest intifada began, and spanned some of the more brutal attacks that Israel has seen in many years. I spent my first few weeks in the Holy Land restricted to the area within a tenuously self-drawn triangle between Hebrew Union College, Ben Yehuda Street and my apartment.

During those first weeks, nowhere felt safe. I found myself avoiding every suspicious looking paper bag in the street, jumping every time the garbage collectors picked up our trash. I was so paralyzed by my fears of the world out there that I could hardly move.

I'd like to be able to tell you that in the end, it turned out there was nothing to be afraid of, that there was nothing to fear but fear itself. But that's not reality, not in America, certainly not in Israel. Frightening things happen, whether we stand tall against them or bury our heads in the sand. But for me, living in Israel during the intifada, I quickly realized that living within the confines of an arbitrarily restricted area, jumping at the slightest sound, wasn't living at all. I couldn't not be scared, but I could use my own fear for a better purpose. Jerusalem, and the overwhelming fear and awe that it inspired, became just that-an inspiration. My classmates and I soon found ourselves preparing for Shabbas to the sounds of sirens, making pilgrimages to bombed out stores to show our support for merchants,

allowing our fear to propel us to live our lives more carefully, with more awareness, becoming conscious of the sanctity of every moment.

Just as Jacob awoke from his dream, scared beyond belief, and went on to become the patriarch of the Jewish people, we too have the ability to turn our fear into something powerful, something palpable, something positive. We can use the fear in our hearts as an impetus to becoming more aware of our world, of our loved ones, of the little acts we do each day. This is, after all, what much of Judaism is about in the first place, sanctifying our lives, becoming aware of how each move we make is somehow sacred. Traditionally, we say blessings over every meal, over every act of beauty we see. We pray when we get up in the morning and when we lay down to sleep each night. We find ways to remind ourselves that every moment is sacred, every moment is precious.

Fear reminds us of the same thing. Friends, ideally I would like to leave you with the message that there is nothing to fear, or as Rebbe Nachman says, "*Kol haolam kulo gesher tzar m'od, vhaikar lo lfached klal* - The whole world is a very narrow bridge, and the main thing is not to be afraid." But I think that answer can't realistically work for us, and we're too aware of our surroundings and the world in which we live to believe that for sure.

But as long as fear is a part of our lives, we don't have to run from it. We can take that fear and turn it around, use it to our advantage to be more aware of our lives and each sacred day. Jacob awoke from his dream, afraid, and went on to find true love, faith, and he was able to fulfill his destiny of fathering the Jewish people. May we look at his example and learn that fear is not something to be afraid of at all. Until we can live in a world with nothing to be afraid of, let's use our fear to our advantage, as a stepping stone to lead life to its fullest.