

## What Are We So Afraid Of?

Rabbi Sam Pollak

There's something thrilling about watching another person perform an extraordinary feat, past the boundaries of our own fears.

Take, for example, Alex Honnold. He is a rock climber, a “free solo” climber, which means he scales immense cliffs without a rope. Imagine hanging by just your fingertips, and maybe a big toe, suspended a thousand feet off the ground—for fun. No rope to catch you if you slip, no net to break your fall. Many climbers have died during free solo attempts.

In June, 2017, Alex Honnold became the first and only person to free solo climb El Capitan, the magnificent, 3,000-foot granite cliff that graces Yosemite National Park. El Cap, as the climbers call it, is a favorite challenge for only the most experienced adventurers, but it was largely considered too dangerous to do free solo. Until Honnold did it.

Turns out, Alex Honnold is built differently than most of us. While the fear center of most of our brains, the amygdala, lights up with activity at the sight of a frightening image, Honnold's amygdala remains dark.<sup>1</sup> He is wired to experience less fear than the typical human being.

But that doesn't mean Honnold is fearless. On his first attempt at free soloing El Capitan, Honnold calls it quits. He was too frightened to move forward confidently, and there is no room for error in a free solo climb. His friends were relieved to learn that he is just like the rest of us; even the most courageous person can be afraid.

Free soloing entails extreme vulnerability: every hand placement and footstep must be perfect, or the climber dies. Most of us don't face these kinds of stakes in our daily lives—we get to make mistakes, and, almost always, we get to try again or move on. But we all do experience fear, and that means we all have the chance to be courageous. What is it that we're so afraid of?

The Days of Awe, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, could just as easily be called the Days of Fear. In Hebrew, they are called the *Yamim Nora'im*, which has dual connotations: awe and fear. On these days we are called to face our fears, to recognize that our fears are a part of us: to be human is to have the capacity to be afraid.

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<sup>1</sup> Vasarhelyi, Elizabeth Chai and Jimmy Chin, directors. *Free Solo*. Performance by Alex Honnold, National Geographic Documentary Films, 2018.

Of all the unique prayers we recite on these sacred occasions, perhaps none exemplifies the Days of Fear more than the *Unetane Tokef*, the centerpiece of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur morning: “*Unetane tokef k’dushat hayom, ki hu nora v’ayom*. Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day, for it is awesome and full of dread.” Then we read that litany which is so theologically and existentially challenging to us: between this year and next, some will live and some will die, some by fire and some by water, some in poverty and some in prosperity. Before we can even ask what we’re afraid of, the prayer book lays our fears out in the open.

That doesn’t mean we have to let our fears get the better of us.

Dr. Gregory Ellison, of Emory University, runs a program called Fearless Dialogues. He brings members of the public together for hard, heartfelt conversations.<sup>2</sup> Unlikely partners ranging from gang leaders to corporate executives<sup>3</sup> discuss their suffering and anxieties, the state of their communities, and the potential to create change in the world.

Ellison and his team know that engaging in hard, heartfelt conversations with strangers requires profound vulnerability—and most of us hold too many fears at the outset to begin. Even so, Ellison believes that by naming our fears, by being aware of what’s happening around us and in our bodies, we enable ourselves to move forward with *less* fear.<sup>4</sup> That’s why the program is called Fearless Dialogues—but *fearless* here doesn’t mean “without fear.” It’s a compound word: *fear* plus *less*. The goal not to be fearless, but “fear+less.” We may still be afraid, but we have a little less fear. We are a little more free.<sup>5</sup>

That’s what Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur call us to do: not to be fearless, for that is impossible, but to be fear+less. The high point of the *Unetane Tokef* reinforces this message: “*U-teshuvah, u-tefillah, u-tzedakah maavirin et roa hagzeira*. Returning, prayer, and opening our hands to others—these transcend the harshness of the decree.” They don’t make our fear go away, but they make it sting a little less.

Three things—returning, prayer, and opening our hands to others—these are our paths of fear+less living.

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<sup>2</sup> Ellison, Gregory C. *Fearless Dialogues: A New Movement for Justice*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2017. Page 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* Page 28.

<sup>4</sup> “Episode 11: A Conversation with Author, Educator & Activist, Gregory C. Ellison, II, Ph.D.” *The Growing Edge*, created by Carrie Newcomer, and Parker Palmer, performance by Gregory C Ellison, season 1, episode 11, 31 May 2019.

<sup>5</sup> *Fearless Dialogues*. Page 7.

The first path: *teshuvah*, returning.

When explaining Fearless Dialogues, Ellison always shares stories from his own life. Once,<sup>6</sup> a few months after 9/11, Ellison and his fiancée were riding the 1 Train uptown in New York City. A man boards their car, and says, “I’m fifty-seven years old. I just left St. Luke’s Hospital, where I stayed for sixty-eight days. On 9/11 I was stabbed outside the train station. I’m recovering, but I need help. Food, money, whatever you can offer.”

Ellison reaches for his back pocket, forages through his wallet, and fetches the first bill his fingers find. It’s as if the world freezes: chatter around him ceases, people sit upright and gaze his way, his fiancée grabs his other hand. “Are you really going to do this?”

How often has each of us been in a nearly identical situation. I know I have—on the very same train, no less. Someone enters the car we’re on with an empty cup or a harmonica or shuffles through forlorn, and we’re called to respond. The world freezes; it feels like everyone is looking at us. But they’re probably feeling the same fears we are: the fear of being the first to act, the fear of giving too little, the fear of someone who looks different.

Ellison’s eyes are downcast as he lifts the dollar bill, and the man will not accept it. Ellison finally looks up. Catching [his] eyes with his own, the man responds, “Thank you.”

*Pirkei Avot* teaches that we acquire Torah through forty-eight qualities, and one of them is fear.<sup>7</sup> But not all fears are created equal. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato, the 18<sup>th</sup> century leader in the *Mussar* ethical tradition, taught that the most worthy kind of fear, the kind that brings us closer to Torah, is fear of the Divine Presence—or rather, fear of doing something that *diminishes* the presence of the Divine. Such an action is a sin, and a healthy fear of sin distances us from actions that cheapen our world.<sup>8</sup>

When Gregory Ellison raised his eyes to the other man, he acknowledged the divinity within him. And that person taught Ellison something important: more than a couple bucks, what he needed was to be seen.

Which fear is more worthy, the fear of what others will say, or the fear that we’ll diminish another’s humanity? What are we so afraid of?

Such reflection extends to public life. Rabbi David Stern, past president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, laments the harmful effects of today’s political polarization: “When

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* Pages 85-87.

<sup>7</sup> *Avot* 6:6

<sup>8</sup> Luzzatto, Moshe Chaim. *The Path of the Just*. Translated by Yosef Leibler, Feldheim, 2004. Page 168.

every issue becomes a hot button or a third rail, in the name of civility we simply avoid argument altogether,” he teaches. “But our avoidance is dangerous. Because while we’re busy avoiding unpleasantness, too many people still go hungry, and too many people can’t afford their medications, and too many people hide in the shadows, and too many die as the result of gun violence.”<sup>9</sup>

Which is the greater sin?

This is the first path of fear+less living: *teshuvah*, returning. Returning to the right kind of fear and using it to overcome those fears not worthy of our attention. We return to the values we claim to uphold, and we let them inspire strength.

The second path: *tefillah*, prayer, introspection, meditation on what our hearts contain.

To do what is right instead of what is easy, to hold our fear of sin as more worthy than our fears of unpleasantness, requires courage. Etymologically, the word *courage* comes from the Latin root for “heart.” (It’s first four letters, c-o-u-r, spell the French word *cour*.) Suppressing our fears, even the unworthy ones, is akin to cutting out a part of our hearts.

Having courage means having a whole heart. It means asking ourselves, “What are we so afraid of?”, welcoming our fears into our hearts, and getting to know them.

Susan Kaplow is a New York psychotherapist-turned-visual-artist. She tells the story<sup>10</sup> of being diagnosed with cancer: how at first she felt only fear. “I can’t do this,” she would say. She didn’t want to face the mastectomy and chemotherapy that lay ahead.

Every night, at 2am, she would wake shaking and drenched in sweat. One night, unable to sleep, she wandered around the house scanning shelves and closets, looking for anything to distract herself. She happened upon her *tallit*, her blanket-like prayer shawl. She wrapped herself in it, lay down on the couch, and fell asleep.

Kaplow awoke the next morning still wrapped in the *tallit*, and the sense of security she felt inspired a new personal ritual: As soon as the sun lit up her house every morning, she would wrap herself in the *tallit* and say the morning prayers. When it came time to say the *Sh’ma*, she adapted the

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<sup>9</sup> Stern, David. “Leading Towards Justice.” *CCAR Journal: The Reform Jewish Quarterly*, edited by Elaine Rose Glickman, Summer ed., Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2019, pp. 115–127. Page 122.

<sup>10</sup> Kaplow, Susan. “Ritual for Allaying Fear.” *Ritualwell*, Reconstructing Judaism, [www.ritualwell.org/ritual/ritual-allaying-fear](http://www.ritualwell.org/ritual/ritual-allaying-fear).

traditional practice of winding the fringes around her fingers. For each thread, she named one of her fears aloud. Feeling that God was holding her fears with her, she prayed the *Sh'ma*.

Naming her fears with reverence opened the door to fear+less-ness. She still felt afraid, but now she had courage.

Proverbs teaches, “Happy is the person who is always afraid, while one who hardens their heart falls into misfortune” (28:14). A supple heart, a resilient heart, is one that holds its fears and steps forward anyway.

Fear+less living doesn't have to be easy, it just has to be possible.

The third path creates that possibility: *tzedakah*, opening our hands to others.

Once upon a time,<sup>11</sup> Moses ascended Mount Sinai and entered the cloud at the top of the mountain. There he found the Blessed Holy One awaiting him. The Holy One, who has no body, no limbs, no seat, was nonetheless seated on the Throne of Glory—The Throne of Glory, that spot that somehow exists everywhere and nowhere, from which holiness radiates into the world. And as befits any monarch on a throne, the ministering angels surrounded the Holy One in attendance. It is said they could breath fire.

When Moses approached, the angels spoke before the Holy One, “O Sovereign of the Universe! What business has this mortal human among us?”

The Holy One answered, “He has come to receive the Torah for humanity.”

The angels replied, “That secret treasure, which you hid for nine hundred and seventy four generations before the world was created! What is this man, that you should pay him any mind? Your name is majestic throughout the earth, and your Torah is placed in the heavens!”

The Holy One turned to Moses, and said, “Answer them. Tell them why you are worthy.”

Moses trembled. “O Sovereign of the Universe, I am afraid. I am terrified to speak, lest they consume me with their fiery breath.”

The Holy One said, “Hold on to My Throne of Glory, and answer them.” It's the closest thing God could say to “take my hand, and let me give you strength.”

Moses took hold, and, in front of the Holy One and the angels, he spoke...

Sometimes we feel like Moses, surrounded by fire-breathing creatures, beset by those that would do us harm. We know there are real threats in our world; we live in frightening times.

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<sup>11</sup> Story adapted from Babylonian Talmud, *Berachot* 88b.

Some of us are afraid we'll lose our jobs to a changing economy.  
Some of us are afraid to hold hands with our lovers in public.  
Some of us are afraid to go to school without a bulletproof backpack.  
Some of us are afraid the climate will collapse.  
Some of us are afraid our parents will be arrested and deported.  
Many of us are afraid of illness or injury.  
Many of us are afraid of those who have hurt us, of those we have hurt.  
Many of us are afraid to seek forgiveness, to grant it.  
Many of us are afraid that we're not who we claim to be.  
Most of us are afraid of others' fears, of our own.  
Most of us are afraid we'll be left alone.  
Most of us are afraid of our own deaths.  
All of us are afraid of something.

We all may feel like Moses; does that not make us want to be like God? Does that not make us want to reach out to our neighbors, open our hands and say, "Hold onto me; let me give you strength"?

What are we so afraid of?

We like to watch others perform extraordinary feats, like scaling cliffs without a rope. Those people show us it is possible: it is possible to live with less fear, it is possible to be courageous.

Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day, for it is awesome and full of dread. Returning, prayer, and opening our hands to others—these are our path to fear+less living.

On this day, may we practice *teshuvah*, guided by our fear of sin rather than our fear of unpleasantness. May we practice *tefillah*, nurturing the whole-hearted courage that comes from acknowledging when we truly are afraid. And may we practice *tzedakah*, lending our strength in solidarity to those around us.

Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day. Let us be fear+less.