

Do Not Be Afraid

דבריםט' אב תשע"ו

One day, on the plains of Africa, a young water buffalo named Walter approached his dad and asked him if there was anything that he should be afraid of.

"Only lions my son," his dad responded.

"Oh yes, I've heard about lions. If I ever see one, I'll turn and run as fast as I can," said Walter.

"No, that's the worst thing you can do," said the large male.

"Why? They are scary and will try to kill me."

The dad smiled and explained, "Walter, if you run away, the lions will chase you and catch you. And when they do, they will jump on your unprotected back and bring you down."

"So what should I do?" asked Walter.

"If you ever see a lion, stand your ground to show him that you're not afraid. If he doesn't move away, show him your sharp horns and stomp the ground with your hooves. If that doesn't work, move slowly towards him. If that doesn't work, charge him and hit him with everything you've got!"

"That's crazy, I'll be too scared to do that. What if he attacks me back?" said the startled young buffalo.

"Look around, Walter. What do you see?"

Walter looked around at the rest of his herd. There were about 200 massive beasts all armed with sharp horns and huge shoulders.

"If ever you're afraid, know that we are here. If you panic and run from your fears, we can't save you, but if you charge towards them, we'll be right behind you."

The young buffalo breathed deeply and nodded.

"Thanks dad, I think I understand."

Fear is something we, and every living thing in this world experience. From creaky floor board or a blasts of thunder, from heights to illness to ice on the road, it may sometimes feel like there is no shortage of things that make us feel afraid.

In Parashat Devarim, fear is mentioned 7 different times. Five of these instances are God and Moses telling B'nai Yisrael not to be afraid of some very scary things: Don't be afraid of Og, Melech HaBashan, and the army he leads; don't be afraid of going into this completely new land and living there for generations; don't be afraid to work together and take a leap of faith.

By contrast, the other two mentions of the word fear have to do with Moses reminding the people what happens when they give in to their fears: When 12 spies were sent into The Land of Israel, and you believed the 10 who claimed it was frightfully full of giants and impossible to conquer, fear spread amongst the people until even slavery in Egypt looked like a paradise by comparison. But also, when God caused fear to blossom in the hearts of the Amorites, their large and vastly more powerful army descended into chaos and the Israelites were able to safely defeat them.

Fear is not the enemy as much as being overcome by fear can be. Feeling scared can be a natural reaction to something sudden or new or just simply unknown. Being afraid of getting ill means that you value your health; feeling fear at the constant changes throughout the ebb and flow of our days should let us know that we cherish the lives we have in this moment.

I want you to think of one thing that makes you afraid. What does that tell you about yourself? How can that fear be a reminder of the ways in which you are blessed and those things that you hold dear?

B'nai Yisrael went beyond their fear, and as the Torah ends they will cross the Jordan River, with Joshua at their head, and finally settle in the Land of Israel. Fear may be a natural reaction, but our ability to transcend it, to use that fear as a bolster rather than a barricade can renew us.

I leave you with a quote by Paolo Coelho, who wrote the following in his master work, *The Alchemist*, which is, incidentally, one of my favorite books of all time:

"Tell your heart that the fear of suffering is worse than the suffering itself. And that no heart has ever suffered when it goes in search of its dreams, because every second of the search is a second's encounter with God and with eternity."