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The Narrow Bridge of Our Lives
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I was in a harness, thirty feet in the air, standing on the platform, and I could not move. All I needed to do was jump off the platform and attempt to grab the bar; a bar that from the ground looked so close to the platform. So many of my friends had done it with seeming ease. My cabinmates and the ropes course staff below kept shouting, "It's not that far. Just go for it. Don't be afraid. It's fun." But from my vantage point, that bar looked about a million feet away. I looked down. Big mistake. I suddenly felt impossibly high up. The longer I stayed frozen there, my legs shaking and my hands sweating, the louder they shouted, the more words they sent my way. I hated it. I started to cry. Don't be afraid, they said. It's not that bad, they said. None of that mattered. In that moment, I felt alone. I was overcome with fear.

Now you might say-- "Rabbi, if you were so afraid of heights, why did you attempt the ropes course in the first place?" Great question! According to my counselors, the camp ropes course is designed to test our limits, to help us experience and overcome our fears while connected to a rope, with a well-trained staff keeping us safe.

Fear, one of our most primal sensations, can easily overwhelm our higher order brain function and influence our thinking. So we have created structures and systems to help us avoid engaging with fear. We seek to control our environment so as not to be subject to people, forces, and situations that might overwhelm us or bring us harm. We learn to swim to combat our fear of drowning. We observe the speed limit because we fear a cop giving us a ticket. We choose the well-lit route home and avoid dark alleys at night. More positively - We form the right relationships. We make spreadsheets to ensure we have all our bases covered. In short, we attempt to preserve our sense of control, and mitigate fear by retaining the maximum amount of autonomy over our individual lives.

The Rabbis of the Talmud were no strangers to fear, given the dangers inherent in maintaining a minority identity in a majority culture. Their response to fear was to study it, to categorize it. They looked at four ways in which seemingly powerful beings fear the seemingly powerless.

First, there is the scorpion who fears the poisonous spider. Normally, a scorpion should always defeat a spider, but if the scorpion lets its guard down, or becomes old and infirm, the smaller spider can inflict a mortal wound. Just as fear teaches a warrior constant vigilance, so too with the scorpion. For the Rabbis, the scorpion represents justifiable fear.

Second, the Rabbis describe the elephant who fears the mosquito. Surely the elephant has nothing to fear because its thick skin will prevent the mosquito from biting! So the commentators wonder if this mosquito has flown up the elephant's trunk and is driving it crazy. Or the whine of the tiny insect entered the oversized ears of our elephant and made it think it was in more danger than it was. The elephant represents fear of psychological torment.

Third, there is the eagle who fears the sparrow. Now how could the modest sparrow concern the mighty eagle? The classical Talmudic commentator, Rashi, explains that in this metaphor, the sparrow creeps undetected underneath the eagle's wings, which hinders the eagle from fully spreading its wings and lifting off the ground. The eagle represents fear of unforeseen complications or outright sabotage - fear of the unknown.

Fourth and finally, there is the lion who fears the gnat. Unlike the scorpion's justifiable fear, or the elephant's fear of psychological torment, or the eagle's fear of the unknown, the lion has literally nothing to fear from the gnat. So the Talmud imagines the lion saying: "I am king of the jungle. But of what use are my fangs or my claws? With all that I have, I cannot do anything to the gnat." The lion represents a different kind of fear, an internal fear - the fear of inadequacy.

The Talmud's paradigmatic examples of the scorpion, the elephant, the eagle, and the lion only address the fear of those who hold power. The rabbis do not contemplate or spend time analyzing the fear of the spider, the mosquito, the sparrow, or the gnat. They don't need to parse this out because we instinctively understand that type of fear. They, like so many people and groups in our society, have very real cause for fear and concern.

Perhaps, the Talmud teaches that even those with power experience fear in these four different ways in part to emphasize just how powerless we all can feel at times, regardless of societal standing and position. We may not be able to defend ourselves from the spiders waiting to pounce when we let our guard down. There are mosquitos physically and emotionally torturing us. There are sparrows preventing us from spreading our wings fully, inhibiting our ability to reach new heights. And we each have lingering gnats ringing in our ears – feelings of inadequacies that stymie our best efforts or stop us from making the attempt in the first place. For those of you who haven't had the distinct pleasure of traversing a high ropes course, I offer another, more universal example - the quintessential act of this season: asking for forgiveness - making Teshuvah. When we hurt each other, we do so from a position of power. And when we seek to make amends, even during this season, we submit ourselves to the power of another because the practices of this Day of Atonement require us to do more than go through the motions of the liturgy. True atonement for sins between two people? That's on us. The practice of Teshuvah asks us to acknowledge our fear. It requires us to make ourselves vulnerable, by admitting our faults, going to another and asking for forgiveness. That is terrifying. And - what's more – they can say no!

And yet, this is the call of the season. To lean into our fear and vulnerability and admit our failings. Because that is how we move forward. That is Teshuvah.

The great Hassidic master, Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav, takes in all of this commentary about fear and distills it down to a single idea: Kol HaOlam Kulo, Gesher Tzar Me'od - The whole world is a very narrow bridge. Reb Nachman may be saying that the entire world in which we live is

precarious, like a narrow bridge. But I believe he is really talking about the whole world that is each of our lives. The narrow bridge is a metaphor for a human lifespan. All our lives we traverse a narrow bridge. Some moments we walk calmly and safely, sometimes we may be in danger of actually falling, and sometimes we just fear that possibility. As we've learned, that fear takes many forms: from physical and psychological threats, from powers or circumstances beyond our control, from chemical imbalances known and unknown within our bodies and minds, and from the self-sabotaging narratives that play in our heads.

Rebbe Nachman does not stop there - What is Rebbe Nachman's response to this vision - "The whole world as a narrow bridge?" Typically, he is reported to have said, "V'ha ikar, lo L'fached klal - At the essence of the matter, have no fear at all. So his whole teaching reads, "Your whole lifespan is a narrow bridge, but the most important part is not to be afraid?!" Wait a minute. That doesn't sound right! The worst thing to tell someone who is afraid, is to not be afraid! We know it doesn't work! It didn't work when I stood on the platform at camp and it doesn't work in other moments of deep, encompassing fear. Because when we feel fear, we cannot turn it off like a light switch. It's not that simple.

However, Rebbe Nachman's words are actually slightly different than they're often rendered. Instead of "lo lfached" in the popularized version of this text, the actual quote says "lo yitpached."¹ Without getting into a Hebrew grammar lesson, this slight difference in verb changes Nachman's advice in a dramatic way. Instead of telling us not to have fear - fear which takes many forms, and manifests as a base human emotion, Reb Nachman actually said lo yitpached-- don't freak yourself out.

He said: Fear is real. And we cannot afford to let it rule everything. We cannot allow fear to define the contours of our lives such that we stop moving through the world entirely.

יְדַע, שֶׁהָאָדָם צָרִיךְ לַעֲבֹר עַל גִּשְׁרֵי צָר מְאֹד מְאֹד, וְהַכֵּל וְהַעֲקֹר – שֶׁלֹּא יִתְפַּחַד כָּלֵל ¹

In our lives, we experience moments of power and powerlessness and everything in between. The reality of this constant change can be overwhelming! So if the whole world is a narrow bridge, what do we do to not freak ourselves out? To not let life pass us by?

Engaging with the world while managing our fear is an active process. Social psychologists like Brene Brown tell us that fear is what motivates us, and that the greatest thinkers and creators in our world are the ones who engage most actively with their fear. We may have heard the adage “Feel the fear and do it anyway.” Fear can empower us to make change, to break out of the boxes we didn’t know were limiting us, and engage in the world in a new, creative way.

But we’ve heard that before. And it’s not that these psychologists are incorrect, it’s just that their words don’t work in the moment when we are actually freaking out. Maybe you have tried to take one step at a time but can’t make a move; you’ve reached a certain point but can’t see your way forward; you’ve tried to break down what is behind the fear on your own but just can’t figure it out. What now?

First, we acknowledge. It’s no wonder most 12-step and mental health support programs begin this way, because it largely works. When we acknowledge that we are freaking ourselves out for whatever reason, we are better able to accept it and seek support. But even getting to acknowledgment is tough. We fear that admitting these feelings shows weakness, which feeds into our fear even more. We fear that we will put out a call for help and no one will answer. We wish those around us could read our minds and know that we need them to reach out to us. When they don’t show up, because we did not share that we needed them, we may feel left behind and alone. But that’s the fear talking. Its power lies in inhibiting our ability to think clearly, to see the possible ways out, or to understand the support around us. When we acknowledge our fear, and share what we need with another, we minimize fear’s power AND we empower others to reach out a hand and be there.

When we are freaking out, reaching out is the critical next step. This is one of the reasons why we form communities - to have others to walk beside us and support us when the fear is ringing loudly in our ears. To help us find a way out.

A story. There once was a prince who lived in a palace, with a giant forest behind it. Since he was a child, he was told to never enter the forest for it was vast and confusing, and if he went in, he would get lost. So, he stayed out of the forest, until one day, curiosity overcame him. He asked himself, "What is the harm if I just peek inside?" He walked a few steps in and saw plants and animals he had never seen before, so he kept exploring. He found himself drawn deeper and deeper into the forest, until after several hours, when it was time to return, he realized he had become hopelessly lost. He tried to retrace his steps, but could not find the exit. He slept in the forest, alone and afraid. The next day he kept searching, and the following day as well, but could not find a way out. By the end of the third day, he reached a point of despair. As he was falling further into his despair, he spied an old man out of the corner of his eye and ran to him. The prince said, "Thank God I found you. I can't find my way out, I've been lost for three days. "Three days," laughed the only man, "I've been lost in these woods for three years." The prince's face fell and he said, "you're of no use to me!" "Ah," said the very old man, "that is where you are wrong. For though I do not know which path leads out of these woods, I know a hundred paths that do not. Come, together we will find our way." And the two walked on together.

Sometimes, we are the prince who lost his way. Sometimes, we are the old man who has been there before. When we have the knowledge, the experience, when someone reaches out to us to say, I'm fearful, I need your help, it is incumbent upon us to respond Hineini - I'm here. I've been there before, or I can listen to you where you are. If you have the ability to notice, reach out. If you have the ability to walk with someone and lend a hand, reach out and steady their bridge. Part of saying the whole world is a narrow bridge but the most important part is to not freak yourself out is a reminder for us to not only propel ourselves forward on our bridge but

also to look up and out at others walking their narrow bridges beside us. To remember to reach towards those whose bridges feel unstable and unsure. Because we've been there before.

So there I was, standing on the edge of that platform, trying to figure out how I could just jump towards that bar. I felt all sorts of mosquito fear. Fear of falling, fear of looking weak, fear of failing myself. I was freaking out. But then I took a breath and yelled, Ah, I'm scared! My cabinmates responded, "I was too!" I suddenly heard the voices below me as support as opposed to voices who did not understand me and my fear in that moment. I felt the tightness of the rope that would catch me. I took a deep breath, counted to three, and jumped. I caught the bar briefly and slid off. The rope caught my fall. I descended slowly, tears streaming down my face. I landed on the ground and let go of my held breath. I had done it.

Now, this experience does not end with me becoming a thrill-seeking daredevil who suddenly loved the ropes course. I still am incredibly afraid of heights. But I will encourage any camper and staff member to try the ropes course at least once. Because while fear is an incredibly powerful emotion, the power of community is stronger. We each walk on our own narrow bridge, and we all experience moments when the bridge seems incredibly rickety and the drop down on either side looks impossibly far. In those moments, I pray that we remember to look to those on the bridges near us, and know we are not alone. That they will be there as we seek the help we need. We reach for others and they reach back to us. Because in reality, the best way to steady our own bridge is to grab the hand of those on the bridges near us. Steadying another steadies ourselves too. Yes, the whole world may be a narrow bridge, and we will get through this and thrive, one step at a time, together.