

**Parshat Bo
Living with Fear
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So there was a fair amount of good-natured kidding that took place before our daily *minyan* in the chapel yesterday morning. As we were getting ready for the Service to begin and putting on our *tallit* and *tefillen* we couldn't help but comment on the fact that what we were doing – in a different context, say on a US Airways flight – could be considered suspicious, and dangerous – it could even get us arrested! Who knew we were such a subversive group – we daring minyanaires.

Come on – you knew that was what I was going to talk about – I mean how could I not? Here is the account offered by Lt. Frank Vanore a spokesman for the Philadelphia police about what took place on US Airways flight 3079 out of La Guardia bound for Louisville on Thursday after what was described as a 17-year-old Orthodox Jew put on *tefillin*, the prayer garment made from a pair of small leather boxes containing scripture and connected by leather straps, shortly after takeoff:

“He wrapped the straps around his head,” Lieutenant Vanore said. “He wrapped one box around his hand and straps around his arm. He was in the process of praying with his sister next to him. The flight attendant was next to him. He gave the explanation that he was in prayer. She alerted the pilot. The pilot erred on the side of caution and decided to radio that in and to divert the flight.”

The lieutenant said that there was never any panic aboard the plane and that the young man was “completely cooperative.” The flight attendant, the lieutenant said, apparently mistook the leather straps for cables or wires. “She said it had wires running from it and going up to his fingers,” he said. “When they notified the pilot of that, he had to follow his protocol.”

First came the humor: If the flight would have crashed they would have had three black boxes to search for and investigators would likely have found a faulty *klaf* to blame. When wrapping your *tefillen* around your index finger make sure the finger is not extended toward the flight attendant. On *Rosh Hodesh*, make sure to take off your *tefillin* before the flight attendants come by on their last sweep to pick up trays, newspapers, etc.

And thanks to this story – most of America has now learned the English word for *tefillen* – which is phylacteries, which come from a Greek root, *phylassein*, meaning, “to protect”. If you actually want to see the word – it is found in today's torah reading – in our *Humashim*, in our Bibles on page 392 the note on verse 9. In fact the mitzvah of *tefillen* is mentioned twice in this week's torah portion. Maybe if the people on the plane were studying their Bible – this whole affair could have been avoided. Although in their defense – the Bible only describes *tefillen* as “a sign on your hand” and a “reminder on your forehead.” It is in the Talmud that we learn that this sign and this reminder are to be the black boxes and straps we know as *tefillen* – so I guess we can't blame the people on the plane for not being Talmudic scholars. I never liked the word: phylacteries, I always thought that we should just use the word *tefillen* – because if they know the meaning of phylacteries they probably know the meaning of *tefillen* and phylacteries is always confused with another English word having to do with

contraception. Or as one of my colleagues put it that she was anti prophylactics, but prophylacteries."

And then after the humor came the educational. Maybe in this day and age – everyone has to be more sensitive to the fears of the traveling public – especially on airplanes. While it is a bit incredible to think that no one on a plane out of La Guardia, for God's sake, (even though it was going to Louisville) – could reassure people that it was only *tefillen* – we have to understand that our customs might indeed strike others as strange – and strange is not a good thing to be when traveling on an airplane these days.

I agree with this young man's rabbi and his comment is the advice that I give – when travelling – if at all possible do your *davening* before or after the flight. If it is a long flight – *daven* as quietly and sensitively as possible in your seat – and put on your *tefillen* later when you arrive at your destination. I am not a fan of *minyanim* in the aisles of the airplane – even on El Al – it is intrusive and annoying and lacks any sense of sensitivity to the needs of fellow passengers. There is a Rav Sperling at Machon Meir, a *da'ti le-umi yeshivah* in Kiryat Moshe of Jerusalem, who teaches that *davening* on the airplane with a *minyan* is an act of *ganeiva*, theft, because it "steals public space" from the passengers on an airplane. According to this rabbi, you may only *doven be'yachid*, pray privately, on a plane. If you are interested in more of the *halacha* of these issues we can speak at another time.

And then, after the humor, and after the learning – there remains a more profound aspect of this incident and that is the fundamental reality that we no longer trust each other any more and we now live in a world where, to be different is frequently equated with being dangerous. And from where I sit – that is a very sad state of affairs.

Last week Retired Lt. General Tom McInerney of the United States Air Force was quoted as saying: "If you are an 18-28 year old Muslim man, then you should be strip-searched at the airport." And part of me reacts by saying that is ridiculous and outrageous – and part of me reacts by saying – you know that makes a lot of sense. And it is the second reaction that really makes me wonder about myself and what I am becoming and what fear is doing to me.

When I was a child, my mother taught me to say thank you if someone offered me a piece of candy. Today we teach our children to avoid anyone who would offer them candy. When I was a child – we went from house to house on Halloween, by ourselves, with little thought to any possible danger involved in the enterprise (yes I went trick or treating as a child and look how I turned out!) Nowadays Halloween is a carefully choreographed affair where children are driven by their parents to houses of people they know – the idea of taking treats from a stranger's home – is verboten! When I was a child my rabbi pinched the cheeks and hugged all the children he came near – today I never touch someone else's children – at the end of our services when the children join us on the steps of the bema – I will embrace a child who runs up to me – I will not reach out to embrace a child. Isn't that a bit sad?

We have installed a sophisticated security system with automatic locks and remote cameras to make our parents feel that their children are safe and secure while they are in our Early Childhood Center or Religious School but in the process we have made our building less accessible and a bit more remote - -it is not and cannot be the open place it was, not so very long ago.

There are two ways to relate to the unknown – we can confront it with fear or with trust – and there is little doubt that the default posture of most of us has changed from trust to fear over the last number of years.

Once upon a time, not so very long ago – the sight of a young man putting on strange black boxes and wrapping himself in straps might have occasioned a friendly inquiry – “what are you doing? Why are you doing it?” Today, we just alert the flight attendant who calls the pilot who immediately declares an emergency – what was the term they used, “out of an abundance of caution.” That is precisely what we have these days – an abundance of caution and a paucity of trust.

This week’s torah portion, *Parshat Bo* describes the dangers of living in a world where there is an abundance of caution and a paucity of trust. We are in the middle of the bible chapters that deal with one of the great confrontations in human history between Moses and Pharaoh. Pharaoh trusts no one – the term most often used by the Bible to describe him is.... hard-hearted. Twenty times the book of *Shmot*, the book of Exodus, will use this expression to describe Pharaoh. He is a hardhearted, stubborn, fearful megalomaniac and look where it gets him. Now Pharaoh’s in Egypt were not always this way. Earlier we read of this Pharaoh’s predecessor who was a very open and trusting kind of a guy. When Yosef first comes down to Egypt, Egypt was a very different place than it was in the days of Moses. Difference was not a thing to be feared but embraced. Here is Yosef – an obvious foreigner – he doesn’t speak the language, clearly is dressed differently – has different customs and traditions but that does not stop Potifar from hiring him and placing his trust in him and ultimately placing Yosef in charge of his house and his wealth and his wife. OK. He may have gone a little too far with the wife thing and that ultimately does get Yosef into a bit of trouble – but still it does not challenge my contention that Egypt in the days of Yosef was a very tolerant, embracing, trusting kind of place. And if this was not proof enough – look what happens when Pharaoh has his dream problems. Pharaoh is having this dream which none of his experts can seem to interpret to his satisfaction – until his servants say, “You know when we were in jail, we met this Hebrew – this foreigner –who was pretty good at interpreting dreams you might want to check him out.” Can you imagine Glen Beck seeking advice form a Democrat? Or Rush Limbaugh from a liberal? Or Lou Dobbs from a Mexican or Ret. Lt General McInerny from a Muslim? Yet good old Pharaoh number 1 does not hesitate for a second to enlist the help of Yosef. Not only is he open to the possibility that this stranger, this foreigner might be able to help – but he comes to embrace him so much that he makes him the second most powerful person in all of Egypt. Pharaoh trusts him with his life and his kingdom!

Vayakam melech hadash... asher lo yada et yosef – these may be some of the most telling words in the entire Bible – “There arose a new king, who did not know Yosef...” There arose a new king – who had a very different way of looking at the world – there arose a new king who did not trust strangers but feared them, who did not embrace difference but suppressed it – there arose a new king whose default position was not trust but fear. “There arose a new king who did not know Joseph and he said to his people, *hinay am b’nai yisrael rav v’atzum mimenu* – “Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us.” These people are not like us, they are different and who knows in times of trouble they might join our enemies – we should fear them, we should be very afraid of them – so let us set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor – “and the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.” Egypt changes form a place of trust – to a place of fear – and it had catastrophic implications for the Jews and for the Egyptians.

Pharaoh #1 trusted Joseph, he welcomed that which was different, and the result was an era of health and wealth and progress for all of Egypt. Pharaoh # 2 feared Joseph's children, he sought to suppress all that was different and the result was disastrous for everyone – a time of poverty and plagues and oppression and suffering.

The whole point of terror is to terrorize. It is the weapon of choice of the weak. They know they cannot defeat us. They know that we are stronger and more powerful than they are. So they seek to terrorize us. The fear is out of proportion to the threat. What is the likelihood that there is a bomb on your plane – not very high. But if everyone is worried about the possibility, if everyone is frightened sufficiently that they are afraid of a 17 year old kid putting on *tefillen* – they win, mission accomplished – we have been officially terrorized.

I know someone who has a fear of crossing bridges. They know that some bridges have collapsed in the past, they cannot be sure that the one they are about to cross wont collapse while they are on it – so they are paralyzed by their fear. There is a name for this condition. It is called gephyrophobia (JEFF-ri-o-FO-bia). It is not normal to have such fears. Is there a chance that in fact the bridge may collapse – yes of course there is – but most of us do not allow the myriad of possible but unlikely things that could happen to us – keep us from going about our daily routines. When fear rules – everyday life becomes impossible and society disintegrates – see Pharaoh II.

To which Moses quite simply said: let my people go. Or as this might be translated in today's vernacular: we are so out of here.

Moses is the antithesis of Pharaoh. Pharaoh was the classic paranoid ruler who feared everyone and everything. Moses was a man of trust. He trusted an unknown God, who could not be seen who refused to even give him his name – he led his people on a journey to an unknown place all based on the trust that this unknown, unseeable God would protect them in the face of the mightiest most fearful despot in history.

What do you think Moses was feeling when he stood before Pharaoh in today's *parasha* and demanded – “Let my people go!”? There he stood in the great palaces of Egypt – have you been to Luxor? Have you been to Abu Simbal? Can you imagine what it must have been like for this powerless, unarmed shepherd to stand there in the presence of the most powerful man in the world, in the most awesome palace that had every been built – surrounded by the most powerful army that had ever been assembled and defiantly demand: “Let my people go!?” Was he afraid? I imagine he was terrified. But he did not let his fear dominate, he did not let his fear override his trust - in God, in all that is good, in all that is noble and hopeful and right. And neither must we. To those who preach fear – we must say stop, enough. To the Glen Becks and the Rush Limbaugh's and the Lou Dobbs and the Dick Cheney's – we must say enough. Isn't it interesting that those who preach fear always see themselves as the only salvation from the things that frighten us?

And this is also a problem in Israel. There to, fear has replaced trust as the default way to relate – and nobody has benefitted. There are now many Israelis who say there is no peace process because there is no one to make peace with – none of the Palestinians are trustworthy – they are all to be feared. And similarly there are many Palestinians who argue that it is a waste of time to speak to Israel - -there is no one to be trusted. And when fear replaces trust –peace is not possible.

“But rabbi,” you say, “there is what to be frightened of in 2010.”

Yes, there is – and we have locked our doors and put cameras over our entrances, we take off our shoes and submit to all kinds of scans at our airports – and in 2010 – that is how it needs to be – but we cannot, we must not allow fear to become our default way of approaching the world. Ours is and has always been the way of Moses and not Pharaoh, the way of trust and not fear.

When fear rules, everyone loses. And when a 17-year-old boy is considered a terrorist because he puts on his *tefillen* – we should all be concerned.