

Parshat Bo
Living with Hard Hearts
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How many of you travelled through an airport over the winter vacation? Did you have to go through one of those fancy new millimeter wave scanners? Did you get patted down where they now touch you practically everywhere and anywhere? One little old lady was quoted as saying: "I am 84 years old! Why are they hassling me? They should strip search every 18-28 year old Muslim and leave the rest of us alone!"

Do you think that sounds like a good plan?

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 not to take candy from strangers. 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 but 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 schools but in the process we have made our building less accessible and a bit more remote - school, since Sandy Hook 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 over the last number of years, the default posture for most of us has changed from one of trust to one of fear.

A much talked about article was featured on the cover of the recent Atlantic Magazine – it was titled "Surviving Anxiety" and was a coming out piece written by the very successful and accomplished editor of The Atlantic, Scott Stoessel.

In this remarkable article he admits to a life filled with fear. While not stopping him from becoming extremely successful, he admits to a severe fear of public speaking and goes on to list the following phobias and fears that dominate his life: In addition to his fear of public speaking, he has a fear of: enclosed spaces (claustrophobia); heights (acrophobia); fainting (asthenophobia); being trapped far from home (a species of agoraphobia); germs (bacillophobia); cheese (turophobia); flying (aerophobia); vomiting (emetophobia); and,

naturally, vomiting while flying (aeronausiphobia). He has tried most therapies and medications available to deal with his fears – and here is what has worked for him: nothing. Scott Stoessel lives in a world filled with fear.

This week's torah portion, *Parshat Bo* describes the dangers of living in a fearful world, in a world where things have changed from trust to fear. In our weekly journey through the torah, 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 one of the mightiest tyrants in history – Moses a powerless nobody; Pharaoh who 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 hard-hearted, stubborn, fearful megalomaniac and look where it gets him. 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. In the Egypt of Joseph's day, 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 – he 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 open, tolerant, a trusting kind of place. And if this was not proof enough – look what happens when Pharaoh has his dream problems. Pharaoh is having these 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.” Not only is this Pharaoh open to the possibility that a stranger, a foreigner might be able to help – but he comes to embrace him and trust 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 from a place of trust – to a place of fear – and it had catastrophic ramifications 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.

Can Chechen rebels stop the mighty Russian government and disrupt the Olympic Games that are about to begin in Sochi? No. But can they terrorize people and cause them to be so fearful that some may not come – absolutely. Fear is a very powerful weapon.

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 won't 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 2.

It is interesting to see how Joseph and Moses reacted. When Pharaoh 1 created an open, and welcoming society – Joseph said – we can live here, we can contribute here – we can make a life for our people here.

When Pharaoh 2 changes the rules and created a fearful, oppressive and tyrannical society, 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 2. Pharaoh was the first in what would be a long line of paranoid rulers throughout history who fear 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, un-seeable God would protect them in the face of the mightiest most feared 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?” 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!?”

Pharaoh had the might of the entire Egyptian empire behind him. Moses – had Aaron – an old man, - and his faith in God – that was it.

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.

But is there not what to be frightened about in 2014? 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 2014 – that is how it needs to be – but we cannot, we must not

allow fear to become our default way of approaching the world. Fear is something that in 2014 we can not avoid – but we can conquer our fears and not let them dominate our lives.

Here is Scott Stossel's conclusion of how he has come to deal with his fears: My anxiety can be intolerable. But it is also, maybe, a gift—or at least the other side of a coin I ought to think twice about before trading in...In his 1941 essay "The Wound and the Bow," the literary critic Edmund Wilson writes of the Sophoclean hero Philoctetes, whose... never-healing snakebite wound on his foot is linked to a gift for unerring accuracy with his bow and arrow—his "malodorous disease" is inseparable from his "superhuman art" for marksmanship.

That is the way Scott Stossel came to see his fear – as long as he did not let his fears dominate him – he could harness his anxiety as a creative dynamic in his life. I suspect Moses would understand completely.

Standing in the palace of Pharaoh his too must have been a life filled with fear and anxiety – but he too learned how to cope, he too refused to be defeated by his fears, dominated by them and controlled by them. And as a result he liberated a people and began a journey that continues in our lives thousands of year later and half a world away.

Ours is and has always been the way of Moses and not Pharaoh, the way of trust and not fear. Are there things you are afraid of? Welcome to 2014. The question is what are you going to do about your fears?

Yisrael B'tach B'adonai – We are Jews – we trust in the Lord – or as we will conclude our Service today with the singing of *Adon Olom* – which concludes: *adonai li v'lo ira* – *God is with me; I have no fear.*