

*The Courage to Cross the Bridge:  
Reflections on Fear, Faith, and Love  
Rabbi Claudia Kreiman  
Second Day of Rosh Hashanah 5783*

We are about to sing together the Piyyt וכל מאמינים *V'chol Ma'aminim*. One of the most beloved piyyutim of the High Holidays. This liturgical poem is attributed by some to Yannai, one of the earliest poets of the Synagogue, others attribute it to Rabbi Yohanan Hakohen of the ninth century.<sup>1</sup>

The refrain *V'chol Ma'aminim*, and all believe, echoes the great theme of the poem which is faith in God's wondrous powers.

The word *Ma'amin*, *Emunah* means faith or belief or trust. It speaks to our faith and belief in God, in the Divine, which holds us, and cares for us and nurtures us.

As we begin the new year, we put our faith in God to bless us with a new year, a year of peace and health, a year of goodness.

I know that at times it is hard to have *emunah*, especially in times of suffering, injustice, darkness, and fear, especially fear of the unknown. It is not always easy to stay optimistic, to believe and be hopeful, and we lose *emunah*.

Especially when struggling and experiencing fear, is when many of us lose the capacity to stay faithful and trust that there is good on the other side, that God is there with us.

Often, I think that the opposite of *emunah* – the opposite of faith – is fear or more specifically, a life guided by fear.

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<sup>1</sup> The High Holidays, by Hayyim Herman Kieval, page 145

Many of us are familiar with the song:

כָּל הָעוֹלָם כְּלוֹ גִּישָׁר צָר מְאֹד  
וְהַעֲיָקָר וְהַעֲיָקָר לֹא לְפַחַד כָּלֵל

*The whole world is a very narrow bridge  
and the main thing is to have no fear at all*

This song is often sung at Jewish summer camps and other gatherings, with passion and strength reminding us to cross a bridge without fear. But truthfully, this message feels hard to follow. Fear is real and it is part of the human experience; it is a response we naturally have in times of danger.

The original text that this song is based on is slightly different. Reb Nachman of Breslav wrote:

יָדַע, שְׁהָאָדָם צָרִיךְ לְעֵבֵר עַל גִּישָׁר צָר מְאֹד  
וְהַכָּלֵל וְהַעֲיָקָר – שֶׁלֹּא יִתְפַּחַד כָּלֵל

Know that a person needs to cross a very very narrow bridge,  
and what is essential is not to be overcome by fear.<sup>2</sup>

The word in the song לְפַחַד *lefached*, to be afraid, is actually יִתְפַּחַד *itpached*, in the original text, the verb in its reflexive form, hard to translate to English but perhaps it is best translated: not letting fear guide you or overtake you.

When we let fear guide us and take over our actions, we build walls that separate us rather than the bridges that bring us together.

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<sup>2</sup> *Likutei Moharan, Part II 48:2*

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In fear, we worry about what will be lost for us.  
 In fear, we close the doors of our houses of worship instead of opening them.  
 In fear, we contribute to the dehumanization of “the other.”  
 In fear, we stop seeing the humanity in our neighbor.  
 In fear, we respond with anger, and hatred.  
 In fear, we disconnect.  
 In fear, we hurt.  
 In fear, we lose hope.

Rabbi Natan of Breslav (R' Nachman's disciple) explained his teacher's words:

הַעֲקָר בְּעִבּוּדַת ה' אֵלֵּיָא יִתְפַחַד הָאָדָם כָּלְל, וּכְמוֹ שְׂאֵמֶר רַבֵּנוּ, זְכַרוֹנוֹ לְבִרְכָה, אֲשֶׁר עוֹלָם הִנֵּה הָאָדָם צָרִיךְ  
 לְעֵבֶר עַל גִּישָׁר צָר מְאֹד, וְהַעֲקָר הוּא אֵלֵּיָא יִתְפַחַד הָאָדָם כָּלְל, וְעֲקָר הַהִתְחַזְקוֹת לְעֵבֶר עַל הַגִּישָׁר צָר  
 בְּשִׁלּוּם בְּלִי פִחַד הוּא הָאֱמוּנָה הַקְּדוּשָׁה כַּנִּ"ל.

*The core idea in the service of God is that a person should have no fear, as our rabbi (z.l.) taught us that in this world a person needs to walk on a very narrow bridge, and the most important thing is that this person should have no fear.*

*The most important thing as a person is strengthening herself to walk across this narrow bridge in peace and without fear is the holy faith.<sup>3</sup>*

R' Natan adds to R' Nachman's teaching that the *emunah kedosha*, **holy faith**, is what helps us walk across the narrow bridges of our lives.

*Emunah* - as the opposite of a life guided by fear - is a life of openness.

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<sup>3</sup> *Likutei Halakhot, Yoreh Deah, Laws of Shaving 3:9:1*

*Eemunah* is also about acceptance. It is about holding what exists – holding what *is* – with love and integrity. But *Eemunah* is also about believing that what is can be something else, something better. It is about letting go of control and at the same time knowing what we can change and what we cannot.

*Eemunah* is a manifestation of love, *Ahava*. It is the capacity to love, no matter what. It is to love the world, humanity and God, no matter how hard it is, no matter how disappointed or angry we are. It is to love even when it is hard.

In a time where hatred, violence, dehumanization, hate speech and division are so central in our world and our society, the call is a call of Love and faith.

We are loved and We are capable of loving.

I think of something I heard Ruth Messinger- former president and CEO of American Jewish World Service said: **Despair is not a strategy.**

Emunah, faith, and trust are the antidotes to despair. They are the forces we need to keep going, to show up, to live our lives with purpose.

**As we stand up — with emunah, with faith, and trust — I invite you to take a moment to reflect on the following questions:**

- 1. In the coming year, how can you anchor yourself in love and faith when you feel overpowered by fear?**
- 2. What do you need to cultivate more trust in yourself, in others, and in your community?**

*Shanah Tovah!*

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