Resisting Tyrants since Pharaoh
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Kol Nidre 5786

Many people have asked me about my experience growing up under dictatorship in Chile. I was only a child. The dictatorship lasted from 1973 to 1990, so I was sixteen when I first experienced democracy. My personal memories of that period are tied to two emotions: fear and silence.

Fear was in the air. I was not personally afraid for my life, but I knew fear was part of daily existence. For me, it meant that when I saw a police officer on the street, I would cross the street—or at the very least, walk quietly. It meant being careful about what you said and how loudly you said it. Fear also came with the curfew, the *toque de queda*, when everyone had to be home at a certain time. No one could be outside.

And with fear came silence and censorship. The silence of knowing you could not freely express what you thought. The silence of being careful about what was spoken at home, whom you knew, or what you believed.

I carry two vivid memories. As a young child, during curfew, we would bang pots and pans in protest from our backyard, scared but thrilled to hear neighbors joining in. Later, in fifth grade, protests near our school led to tear gas; I remember the suffocating burn in my throat and needing to evacuate the school, fast and scared.

But what stands out most from those years is the work of my father and his Catholic colleagues. During the early years of the dictatorship, my father, Rabbi Ángel Kreiman-Brill, joined with Christian clergy to form the Comité de Cooperación para la Paz en Chile (Committee of Cooperation for Peace in Chile) —later known as the Confraternidad Judeo-Cristiana/Vicaría de la Solidaridad —working to save lives, help people escape, and support families of the disappeared. Guided by Jewish and Christian values, they stood firmly against oppression. That memory—of his voice joined with other people of faith in courageous resistance—remains one of the most enduring and foundational pillars of my rabbinate.

In 1984, toward the end of the dictatorship, journalist Patricia Politzer—a family friend—published *Fear in Chile* (*Miedo en Chile*). In it, she interviewed fourteen people

from different backgrounds, socioeconomic situations, and political perspectives. What united them all was a common experience: fear. Politzer writes:

> "When I began this book—in August of 1983—I intuited that the dictatorship is much more than brutal repression or the lack of political expression. It is something that is there day after day and year after year, permeating everything until it invades the most intimate corners of human existence. Its victims are not only those who directly suffer its cruelty or its censorship, but also the indifferent, and even those who support and justify it; for they too are entangled in the webs of a system that determines what we do and do not do, what we think and what we create, what we dream, and what we keep silent."[1]

Fear is real, and for many of us, it has already become part of daily life in this country. It is not just a passing emotion—it is a political tool wielded by those in power to control. Fear pushes people to accept, or even do, things they would never otherwise choose. It freezes us. It numbs us. And unless we recognize how it operates and learn to resist it, fear will silence us.

Many people in our country today fear for their lives—fear that the next time they leave their homes or workplaces, they could be deported back to a country where their lives are in danger. We read about this every day. Earlier this summer, I had the opportunity to witness this up close. Jen Klein, TBZ's past president and an immigration lawyer, invited me to volunteer with her to offer "Know Your Rights" information to immigrants waiting in federal courtrooms. I was there to translate, while Jen brought her legal expertise. We were both there to make sure people did not feel alone or afraid in this difficult moment.

In the courthouse, we spoke with people in waiting rooms, explained their rights, and collected contact information in case someone was arrested. We reminded them they were not alone. It was heartbreaking to see the fear in their eyes—families with young children, young adults, elders—people seeking safety and a better future.

We were able to accompany some people out of the courthouse, but we also witnessed ICE agents arresting people in handcuffs. After the arrests, I called the families whose numbers had been given to us to explain what had happened. It was

[1]Patricia Politzer: Miedo en Chile, page 9

painful to make these calls. I could hear the fear in their voices, even through the phone. But it meant that someone would know that their loved one had not simply vanished. And the family would have the information they needed to follow up.

The danger is not limited to one group. Across the country, queer people—especially trans youth—see their rights stripped away through attacks on healthcare, safety, and freedoms. Other marginalized communities face similar threats. As a parent, I fear for my daughters' safety, autonomy, and future in the society we are shaping for the next generation.

At times, fear feels distant. Many of us—including myself—still feel that our fears are "for the other." We tell ourselves we are safe, protected by privilege. But the truth is, fear is creeping closer. When public figures are fired for speaking their minds, we wonder: Should I be careful what I say at work or online? When health care premiums rise, we ask: Will my job cover it? Can I afford it? When grants for scientific research disappear, we worry: Who would I need to lay off? Would I lose my job next?

We are also experiencing a frightening rise in antisemitism, here in the U.S. and around the world. It is deeply unsettling, it shakes our sense of safety and cannot be ignored. We must not only stand against it, but also name it clearly whenever it appears. At the same time, we see it weaponized—to justify attacks on immigrants, due process, higher education, and free speech. This distorts our values and ultimately makes Jews less safe. Any erosion of democracy increases our vulnerability, and using Jews as a political tool fuels scapegoating and division.

Some of us have even gone so far as to get another passport—just in case. We say it with a smile, but behind it is fear. Who would have imagined needing a backup passport while holding an American one? Wasn't this the passport that was supposed to keep us safe?

Fear makes us hesitate, unsure if our words will be heard—or if speaking up will provoke ridicule or hostility. Social media and public forums often amplify mistakes and erase nuance. Silence can be as dangerous as fear: it allows injustice to spread unchecked. To live fully as people of conscience, we must cultivate the courage to speak thoughtfully, listen deeply, and share our truths even when it is hard.

In a recent New York Times Opinion video, four immigrants from Russia, Singapore, Nicaragua, and Hungary shared how they overlooked the early signs of tyranny in their own countries. Their insight is a crucial warning: the erosion of the rule of law and the collapse of checks and balances do not happen suddenly. Tyranny takes root slowly, often long before most of us realize it.[2]

Psychologists have a term for this creeping normalization of danger. Elizabeth Svoboda, writing in the Boston Globe[3], compares it to the "boiling frog." A frog in slowly heated water doesn't notice until it's too late. In the same way, when rights are eroded and norms attacked bit by bit, we can grow numb. Life goes on—school drop-offs, work meetings, daily routines—even as fear quietly freezes us.

So tonight I want to invite us to reflect on: How do we resist fear? How do we keep it from guiding or paralyzing us? How do we ensure our fear isn't weaponized? What does it mean to stay true to our values? How do we not succumb to silence? What is possible for us to do, right now?

Svoboda reminds us that the first step is noticing the water's temperature—seeing clearly what is happening and how it touches real lives. Then we act: volunteering, speaking up, supporting those under threat. Even small, focused acts matter. They remind us we are not powerless, they connect us to others, and they inspire courage. Along the way, we must remember: joy, rest, and practicing wonder are not luxuries—they sustain resilience for the long road ahead.

Many of you have seen my t-shirt and the sign I carry to protests—it says, "Resisting tyrants since Pharaoh." (*Oh, wait, I think I have it here with me…).* This comes from T'ruah[4], the Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, on whose board I serve. Whenever I wear the shirt or hold the sign, people stop me. They love it; it speaks to them. Perhaps it resonates because our core story as Jews is a story of resistance—against Pharaoh.

The Torah describes Pharaoh's strategy with chilling precision. First, he rewrites history:

[2] https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/22/opinion/trump-government-oppression-power-tyranny.html
[3] https://www.bostonglobe.com/2025/06/08/opinion/coping-with-chaos-trump/?event=event12
[4] truah.org

> "A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph."[5]

Next, he manufactures fear:

> "The Israelites are too many and too strong for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them."[6]

He casts a vulnerable minority as a threat. Finally, he institutionalizes cruelty: forced labor, bitter oppression, and eventually state-sponsored violence against children. Pharaoh builds his rule on three pillars: lies, fear, and violence—upheld by the silence of those who do not resist.

Even amidst oppression, there were those who refused to be silent. There were those who acted with courage, justice, and compassion. The *midrash* teaches that more than Moses or Aaron, it was the heroism of women that merited the Exodus[7]: Shifra and Puah (the midwives), Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter. Each of them resisted tyranny, protected life, and created conditions for freedom.

Another story of resistance, in our modern times, comes from Argentina: the Madres and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo. During the dictatorship of 1976–1983, up to 30,000 people "disappeared"—including nearly 500 babies who were taken from their parents, placed in other families, and stripped of their true identities. The Madres gathered in the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, week after week, demanding to know the fate of their children. The Abuelas and Madres continue this work to this day, searching for those children—now adults—to restore their true identities and reunite families.

Like Shifra and Puah, who refused Pharaoh's decree, these women defied a regime that sought to erase life itself. Their courage reminds us that even in the face of terror, resistance can keep memory alive and open a path toward justice.

One more story of resistance: The story of Esther, which we read on Purim. Living under King Ahasuerus in the Persian Empire, Esther faced the threat of annihilation for her people. She chose moral action over safety:

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[5] Exodus 1:8
[6] Exodus 1:9–10
[7] Babylonian Talmud, Tractate of Sotah 11b

וּבְכֵן אָבוֹא אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר לֹא־כַדָּת וְכַאֲשֶׁר אָבָדְתִּי אָבָדְתִּי

> Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law; and if I am to perish, I shall perish!"[8]

Mordechai reminds her:

וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם־לְעֵת כָּזֹאת הִגַּעַתְּ לַמַּלְכוּת

> "And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a time as this."[9]

Courage is never separate from responsibility. We are called to step forward when the opportunity arises, even if unexpected, even if frightening, even if we don't think we are in positions of leadership.

On Rosh Hashanah, we celebrate God as sovereign, and throughout the High Holidays, we call to God as parent and ruler—Avinu Malkeinu. In our daily prayers and in the soulful singing of Shabbat, we affirm:

אֱמֶת אַתָּה הוּא רִאשׁוֹן וְאַתָּה הוּא אַחֲרוֹן,
וּמִבַּלְעָדֶיךָ אֵין לָנוּ מֶלֶךְ
גּוֹאֵל וּמוֹשִׁיעַ

.

> "You are the first, You are the last, and besides You, we have no king or redeemer."

These words remind us that even when human authority feels overwhelming or fear seems to dominate, there is a higher presence that grounds us. In times of danger or uncertainty—when tyranny, injustice, and silence threaten to define our lives—God's awareness and guidance are ever-present. It is in this consciousness, this recognition of the Divine as first and last, that we find the clarity and courage to act.

[8] Esther 4:16
[9] Esther 4:14

The 18th-century Hasidic master, the *Degel Machaneh Ephraim*[10], teaches on these verses:

> אֱמֶת אַתָּה הוּא רִאשׁוֹן – God is first: When my life is guided by God's consciousness and awareness, I am attuned to do good, to perform mitzvot, and to show up in the world with intention.
> וְאַתָּה הוּא אַחֲרוֹן – God is last: At times, I miss the mark and God feels distant. I am not fully guided by my values, and God's awareness seems far from me—yet even then, God is present, even if I do not notice.
> וּמִבַּלְעָדֶיךָ אֵין לָנוּ מֶלֶךְ – God is the only sovereign: God alone rules—ever-present, unshakable, and eternal—whether or not I feel that presence in my life.

I understand this teaching to mean that our work is to bring awareness of God from *acharon* to *rishon*—from the back to the front—not only in our personal consciousness and spiritual practice, but in the life of our community and society. In times of injustice, fear, and tyranny, God's presence can feel hidden, and we may doubt our power to act. Yet it is precisely in these moments of hiddenness that our responsibility becomes clear: to reveal what is concealed, to act as instruments of God's awareness, and to bring courage and clarity where fear and silence would otherwise prevail.

When we do this—when we bring God to the forefront of our consciousness and into the world—we are strengthened to resist oppression, name injustice, and stand for others. This orientation transforms fear into action, silence into voice, and anxiety into courage. It is the daily practice of hope, resistance, and joy.

As people of faith, it is our religious responsibility to speak up. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel reminded us that "silence in the face of evil is itself evil." And Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. taught that "our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." In a time when fundamentalist voices are co-opting religion to sow fear and justify oppression, we must reclaim it for what Torah and the prophets truly meant: justice, compassion, and the sacredness of every human life. This is not politics—it is the very heart of our religious call. For me, it is the heart of my rabbinate: insisting that our faith demands courage, truth, and resistance in the face of tyranny.

[10] Degel Mahane Efraim, *Parashat Emor* (as I understand it; not necessarily the *pshat*/ literal meaning of the text)

These times are frightening, yet we are called to meet them again and again, recommitting to stand against tyranny—just as Shifra, Puah, and Esther did. Silence is not an option.

Yom Kippur can also be understood as Yom Ke-Purim—a day like Purim—when we are called to step into the role of Esther, who is reminded:

וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם־לְעֵת כָּזֹאת הִגַּעַתְּ לַמַּלְכוּת

> "And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a time as this."

Perhaps we too have been called to act for just such a time as this. Esther's courage reminds us that even in moments of fear and uncertainty, we are called to act—to speak truth to power, even when it is unpopular or risky, even when the world whispers that silence is safer. This is the work demanded of us today: naming injustice, acting with compassion, and bringing God's presence into the messy, fearful, and difficult spaces of our lives.

Psalm 27, which inspires our prayers during Elul and the High Holidays, reminds us that courage is not just a feeling, but a practice: "Do not hand me over to the narrowness of those who besiege me; my heart said of You, Seek My Face; place your hope in Adonai, be strong, and let your heart take courage." Today, that courage looks like speaking truth to power, protecting the vulnerable, resisting injustice, and building communities of care—both personal and collective.

As we move through Yom Kippur, let us notice where fear and silence have taken hold, and choose courage instead. Just as Shifra and Puah, and Esther acted decisively, we too are called to step forward. Let us recommit: to name fear, resist its power, and act with justice, compassion, and humility. Let us bring awareness of God from *acharon* to *rishon*—through our words, deeds, and commitments—reclaiming courage, embodying hope, and resisting tyranny as our people have since the days of Pharaoh