

**“What will help you overcome your fears?” –Sermon  
Kol Nidre/Yom Kippur evening – October 8, 2008 – Rabbi Larry Karol**

Two hundred years ago in Poland, an acrobat came to the shtetl of Krasny and announced that he would present the residents of the town with a great spectacle. He would cross the river that ran right through the middle of the shtetl on a thin rope stretched from bank to bank. The spiritual leader of Krasny, Rabbi Chayim, attended the performance. His friends noticed him watching intently and apparently in deep thought. They said to him, "Rabbi, what do you see that is so fascinating?"

The rabbi answered, "I am thinking of the acrobat's readiness to submit his life to danger. You may say that he goes out on that slender cord for the money which an admiring crowd will shower upon him. But this is certainly not true. For if he thought about this, he would surely fall. His entire thinking must be concentrated upon one idea only, namely to maintain his balance, to prevent his body from inclining a hair's breadth to one side or the other. In this fashion we must cross over the narrow cord of life."

An acrobat or tightrope artist strives to have complete control over his or her body movements to maintain balance, but he or she doesn't always know if the rope might move even a fraction of an inch one way or the other. The trick and the goal is to move along with the rope and, at the same time, to keep going forward.

Sometimes we feel alone when the “cord of life” seems narrow and treacherous, yet we are still required to go forward in order to maintain our balance. For example, these days, there may be unexpected expenses from the downturn in the economy, as we saw recently, that make it difficult for some people to make ends meet. There may be changes in relationships with friends, family members or co-workers that take away necessary and valuable sources of support. There may be new realities at work that require us to

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**drastically alter our approach to tasks on the job in ways that may not come easy. Our health may take a sudden turn that requires medication, surgery or treatment that will significantly affect our lifestyle, our energy level, our diet, and our ability to be a part of a community outside of our home. And with the upcoming election certain to have an effect on finances, health care, education, our rights as citizens, acceptance and consideration for people from various backgrounds living in our country, and a struggle for more peace in the world, life in general may seem like a narrow cord. We may feel like we are walking on a tightrope, one by one, unable to help each other, but trying to stay in control of our attitudes and emotions in order to preserve the delicate balance that is our lives.**

**Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, who, like Rabbi Chayim of Krasny, was part of the Hasidic movement, gave us this important piece of wisdom about the challenging nature of our existence: “KOL HAOLAM KULO GESHER TZAR M’OD – V’HA-IKAR LO L’FACHEID K’LAL – The whole world is a narrow bridge. The important thing is not to be afraid.”**

**When we think of life as a bridge, we are not required to move forward in single file, one by one, alone, as if we are on a tightrope. There is room for some companionship, for mutual support that can help us overcome any hesitation we would have of making a difficult crossing over raging rivers or deep valleys below. What might make us feel hopelessly immobile, unable to move in any direction, is fear and a narrow vision that robs us of the sight and insight that can enable us to make our way forward.**

**Debbie Perlman, in her book, FLAMES TO HEAVEN, shared a series of original, modern Psalms, many of them written out of her own struggle**

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**against cancer. She created this particular Psalm about moving forward in life for a friend who was about to begin cancer treatment:**

**I stand at this corner of my life,  
Looking east and west,  
Peering north and south,  
Seeking the path we will find together.  
For I must walk in some direction;  
You call me forward as I hesitate  
And glance about me at the passing scene,  
Passing hours moving by.  
And again You beckon, gently prodding,  
To turn this way or that.  
I must turn and move forward, I must turn and choose.  
East and west, the path leads Home,  
The obstacles vary only in my heart;  
South and north, the path leads Home,  
Winding back on itself for a block or two.  
You will not abandon me as I walk on,  
For I trust in Your sound directions;  
You will light street lamps  
When the darkness looms around me.  
You follow me in unfamiliar boulevards,  
Noisy paths and lonely ones,  
That the strangeness might ease,  
And my steps again be secure.  
Around the corner and on, I will walk with the Eternal;  
Moving on past trepidation,  
Moving forward for Your Name's sake.**

**Sometimes we may feel that we are unable to move forward because we think we are alone. Debbie Perlman believed that we are not alone: that not only do we have each other, but that in our prayer, we reach out for the companionship and love that we can find in the interconnections between people and within creation and within the reservoir of strength that many people in the world call God. In his new book, WHY FAITH MATTERS, Rabbi David Wolpe noted**

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how seeing a movie on the Holocaust when he was 12 years old drove him away from religion and towards philosophy. Eventually, he came to realize that philosophy enthusiastically dealt with some questions while totally rejecting others. What he found in Judaism that brought him back was the possibility to ask any question and to struggle to find an answer. What also brought him back, he said, was the feeling that he was not alone. He was not alone because he was part of a community engaged in that struggle to find meaning and purpose. He was also not alone because he sensed the presence of God in his life at times of joy and success and in moments of sorrow, disappointment and fear.

What is the greatest source of our fear? In his book, **THE SCIENCE OF FEAR**, Daniel Gardner declared that this is a time in history when it's great to be alive, but that companies, political parties, and organizations still try use fear as a marketing tool that can make us hesitant to take a step forward either on a narrow cord or a narrow bridge. We can train ourselves, he said, to think hard about whether or not to be concerned about the barrage of statistics and warning signs that we see and hear in news reports and advertisements that urge us to buy, or not to buy, one item or another, or to support one candidate over another. Even when we don't have control of everything, Gardner says that we do have control over our own beliefs and actions. When our gut feelings move us in a particular direction out of a sense of uncertainty and trepidation, our minds can help us put our feelings in perspective to restore our sense of hope and trust.

There was a scene in the summer blockbuster, **THE DARK KNIGHT**, which demonstrated how we can overcome fear. The villain of the film, the Joker, portrayed so incredibly well by the late Heath Ledger, had wired two boats in the Gotham city harbor with explosives. On one boat were the inmates of Gotham prison, and on the other, ordinary citizens. The Joker had given each boat a

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**detonator, and told the passengers, over a loudspeaker, that they had 30 minutes in which to destroy the other boat or he would detonate the bombs on both boats so that all would die. He totally expected that the fear of the inmates among the ordinary citizens on one boat would make them activate their detonator first. And he thought that the inmates would seek to preserve their lives simply because they had been released from prison. Now, the question is, do I tell you what happened? Let me just say that the inmates made the first move that ended up saving everyone. The passengers of both boats overcame their fear by recognizing the possibility of goodness within the hearts and minds of their fellow human beings. Trust and a deeply held faith in human decency prevailed and preserved their lives.**

**There are times, however, when we don't know if we can trust other people with our well-being or if we can be sure, if we try to make a connection with someone or to fix a broken relationship, that our efforts will succeed. In such times, we might feel like we are walking on a narrow cord that leaves us alone, rather than on a bridge where someone can stand by us to give us encouragement. Often, those partners in our lives who might try to move us beyond our own trepidation are right there with us or enter our lives at just the right time. That is one of the lessons that I believe is taught by the movie THE BUCKET LIST, which starred Jack Nicholson as billionaire Edward Cole and Morgan Freeman as auto mechanic and Jeopardy expert Carter Chambers. Both men had regrets in life - Cole had one child in four failed marriages, a daughter with whom he had no contact. Chambers had wanted to be a professor but, instead, chose a job that would enable him to support his family. Cole and Chambers met as roommates in a hospital, both dealing with diagnoses of cancer. One day before they were released, Cole found Chamber's discarded piece of**

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paper on which he had written his “bucket list”: all the things he wanted to do before he died. The two men agreed, with the time they were told they had left, to go racecar driving, to sky-dive and to travel the world. They relentlessly moved through the items on their list, leaving any fears they had behind. At the end of their journey, Chambers arranged for the two men to be taken from the airport to the home of Cole’s daughter so that he could finally reconcile with her. That attempt failed miserably, as Cole refused to enter the home and left the scene in anger. It was only after Chambers died that Cole went back to see his daughter so that he could finally overcome his greatest fear in the world – the rejection he might face when trying to reestablish this relationship.

The prayers for the high holy days are here to help us overcome such fears and to move across the narrow cords and the narrow bridges of life. The prayer we read on the morning of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur called “UN’TANEH TOKEF” speaks of the narrowness of life in stark terms – On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed – who shall live and who shall die, who shall be secure and who shall be driven, who shall be tranquil and who shall be troubled, who shall be poor and who shall be rich, who shall be humbled and who shall be exalted.” We can choose to take this prayer literally or we can see it as a poetic way of declaring that there is much in life over which we have no control – like the narrow cord or the narrow bridge, both of which span over depths that could lead us to darkness. Then the prayer declares, “**BUT REPENTANCE – T’SHUVAH, PRAYER-T’FILAH, AND CHARITY – TZ’DAKAH, TEMPER JUDGMENT’S SEVERE DECREE.**” Rabbi Jonathan Sacks noted, citing a teaching of Hasidism, that T’SHUVAH is not repentance but RETURN – returning to our true selves and to who we need to be. T’FILAH is not prayer, making a request, but extending our reach towards the

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**divine in each other and in the world so that we can renew our strength and see in the eyes and hearts of others, and in creation, that God is with us.**

**TZ'DAKAH is not simply charity – care and kindness or the giving of a gift to someone without a sense of obligation. TZ'DAKAH means righteousness or justice – we give because it is our duty. Judaism teaches that everything ultimately belongs to God, so that sharing what we have with those in need acknowledges our role as partners with God and as caretakers of the entire human family. For this reason, the Torah speaks of redistributing wealth as a possibility and righteous giving as an obligation, which we fulfill through the donations, time and energy we offer to worthy causes. Returning to ourselves, reaching for the divine in the world and in all people, and extending a hand towards those who need our help enable us to move forward along the narrow cord or the narrow bridge that is life. Rabbi David Wolpe suggested that we adopt a literal understanding of a verse from Psalm 118: “MIN HAMEITZAR KARATI YAH ANANI B'MERCHAV YAH” - this is often translated as “From out of the depths I called to God. God answered me by setting me free.” Wolpe explained that this would mean, literally, “from my narrowness I called to God and I was answered, Eternal One, by breadth,” by a wider vision. In applying this verse to his own bout with cancer, Wolpe said, “My world grew through pain and the increasing recognition of the ways in which it both opened my heart and helped me draw closer to others in pain. A single verse offered a world and a way of seeing that gave me strength and the breadth promised by the verse itself. My spirit opened to an infinitely larger Spirit.”**

**When we walk side by side, as companions, giving one another support, wisdom and hope, we make the narrow cords and bridges of life into wide paths upon which we can fulfill Rabbi Nachman’s suggestion that we need not be**

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**afraid. Sharing our pain, our challenges, and our trials within our families, among friends and in our community can enable us to move forward so that life will feel like an enriching journey rather than a precarious tightrope or a narrow bridge.**

**During my visit to Israel last year, my stay in Tel Aviv put me some 30 to 40 miles north of S’derot, the town that has been subjected to a barrage of rocket attacks by Hamas operatives in Gaza. S’derot residents demonstrated at government offices while I was there, calling for definitive action to reduce or eliminate the rockets that, when fired, could only be detected in a way that gave them 15 seconds to find shelter. Israelis from many cities and towns and people from all over the world have visited S’derot to show their solidarity with these citizens who refuse to move away, who are determined to overcome fear and live their daily lives as normally as possible. It was also during that week that I dislocated a finger on my right hand after slipping on the wet ramp just outside the entrance of my hotel. After returning to my hotel from the hospital, I was determined not to have more than the three hours at the hospital and some minutes afterwards taken away from my brief visit to Tel Aviv which offered me a chance to get to know that city better. I went right back outside that afternoon, in the wind and the rain, walked to Rabin Square and to the Tel Aviv beach, even running, at one point, to pick up a cap that a man walking near me had almost lost in the wind. That night, before I met Rhonda’s cousin Stacey and Stacey’s husband Walter for dinner, a meeting which I was very grateful to keep, I sat in my hotel room with my borrowed guitar for the week and worked on a song based on Psalm 17, which declares, “I call on You, Eternal One: You will answer me – turn your ear to me, hear what I say....Guard me like the apple of Your eye; hide me in the shadow of Your wings.” In my own gratitude, I felt that**

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**protection, and I also thought of the people of S'derot, all those in the Middle East and around the world seeking peace, and all of us who hope to move across the narrow cords and bridges of life to reach the other side in triumph and joy.**

**Among the words I wrote were these:**

**Hold me in Your hand when I'm overcome with fear.**

**Take me under Your wing when I sense that danger's near.**

**I cry out for justice even as You test my heart.**

**When I call upon You, answer Me.”**

**The answer might come to us through an inspiration or an insight, through the help that we receive and appreciate from someone who has reached out to us, or through our own return to who we are and a realization of what precious gifts we have to share with each other. May the bridges and cords that we cross in the year to come be wide and strong through the caring, support and love we provide for each other in friendship and as members of a holy community. So may it be and let us say amen.**