

Snakes on a Plane. Bad title. Bad movie. And yet, most of us heard about this summer movie phenomenon ... a b-movie horror flick about an airborne plane filled with passengers that just happens to be overflowing with venomous snakes. Why? Fear. We are used to being frightened and being scared. Fear is something that we as human beings are wired to look for and react to. Fear is one of the most effective ways to motivate and even manipulate people. Even though our fears, well scare us, there is something intriguing and even compelling about being scared about getting close enough to those snakes without touching them. The snakes of the movie are as good as symbol for those things that frighten us.

Well, the good news or bad news depending on how one looks at it, is that we do not have to screen a movie to see those snakes, those things that scare us. The synagogue today is filled with snakes - snakes as venomous and as compelling as those in the movie. We cannot see them with our eyes, but they are there ... lurking and waiting to strike. The mere hint of their presence affects us ... even if we never see their beady eyes, slippery skin or flickering tongues. There are snakes in the sanctuary. We have a great deal of which to be frightened.

There are snakes in the sanctuary! There are enemies out to get us. In the wake of the anniversary of September 11<sup>th</sup>, it seems very clear that we have much to fear. The leadership of our nation spent an entire week and half preceding the commemoration of that day's five year anniversary, reminding us of the people out to get us and the sacrifices we must make to be secure and safe. We have much to fear ... and so we must sacrifice some of our own freedoms to help our government protect us. We must sacrifice some of our diversity of opinion so that these enemies do not think us weak and without resolve. We must sacrifice some of our humanity to in treating others inhumanely if they hold information that is valuable to us.

There are snakes in the sanctuary! There are enemies not only out to get us Americans, but there are plenty of enemies out to get us Jews, too. Hizbollah & Hamas ... seek to destroy the Jewish homeland one civilian at a time. The President of Iran, if he had his druthers, would work more efficiently and use nuclear weapons to realize that end. CNN and NPR never seem to get things just and fair. And just when The Passion finally went to DVD and we thought we were done with him, Mel Gibson rears his ugly, antisemitic head once again. As Jews we must perpetually focus our energies to develop and implement our anti-snake repellants ... there is much to fear

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and of which to be wary. And if we sometime lose sight of the joy and promise of our tradition, well so be it, we must be on guard for these snakes that skulk in the shadows.

There are snakes in the sanctuary! There are those in our lives who might not like us or love us. These snakes are not ones that we can read about in the papers on the web ... these snakes often get forgotten in ebb and flow of other, more global and concrete fears ... these snakes are the slipperiest and sneakiest of them all. There are snakes that peer into the dynamic of many of our relationships and interactions; we fear speaking the truth for whom it might offend or how we may be perceived; we fear doing or accepting something different for how it may change what is familiar and comfortable; we fear the risk of being vulnerable and expressing our fear, our pain or even our love. And while there may be much to gain from overcoming such fears, it seems, quite clearly, that there is a much greater amount to lose

Snakes on a Plane?! We don't need any Snakes on a Plane, there are plenty of Snakes right here, right now in our sanctuary this morning. And then, there is the biggest snake of all? It is the snake that hovers, like an elephant in the room, that we know is there but do not always know how to address or acknowledge. Ah, but our liturgy from this morning's service does not allow it ... it points a big, fat arrow right at this snake and dares us to look into its beady eyes.

We shall ascribe holiness to this day.  
For it is awesome and terrible ...  
The great shofar is sounded,  
A still small voice is heard.  
The angels are dismayed,  
They are seized by fear and trembling  
As they proclaim: Behold the Day of Judgment!  
For all the hosts of heaven are brought for judgment.  
They shall not be guiltless in Your eyes  
And all creatures shall parade before You as a troop.  
As a shepherd herds the flock,  
Causing the sheep to pass beneath the staff,  
So do You cause to pass, count, and record,  
Visiting the souls of all living,  
Decreeing the length of their days,  
Inscribing their judgment.  
On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed,  
And on Yom Kippur it is sealed.

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How many shall pass away and how many shall be born,  
Who shall live and who shall die,  
Who shall reach the end of his days and who shall not,  
Who shall perish by water and who by fire,  
Who by sword and who by wild beast,  
Who by famine and who by thirst,  
Who by earthquake and who by plague,  
Who by strangulation and who by stoning,  
Who shall have rest and who shall wander,  
Who shall be at peace and who shall be pursued,  
Who shall be at rest and who shall be tormented,  
Who shall be exalted and who shall be brought low,  
Who shall become rich and who shall be impoverished.  
But repentance, prayer and righteousness avert the severe  
decree.

We had better be scared, for depending on God's will, we may live or we may die. Someone we love may thrive or they may suffer. More snakes, more anxiety, more fear.

I don't know about you, but I am feeling a bit overwhelmed by it all. I understand the stupid movie's strange appeal ... it feels like there are snakes everywhere and there is no where to go, but down. After all, we did have people fly planes into highly populated skyscrapers. After all, our people's history does include a significant amount of hatred and tragedy. After all, is there anything more frightening or more difficult to do than to admit how flawed and vulnerable we are to another human being. And there is no way around the truth that our liturgy points out to us, our lives are precarious and we will die.

No. I will not do it. I cannot do it. I will not and cannot allow fear and anxiety to paralyze and inhibit me so. I will not tolerate the manipulation and use of fear by the leadership of our nation, by Jewish tradition and some who interpret it or even by my own mind and insecurities to maneuver me or to conceal me away from seeking truth, growth or wholeness.

In one of the most important moments in our collective history, our ancestors stood at the shores of the sea and were paralyzed with fear. Before them stood the waters of the Sea of Reeds, as intimidating as the greatest of seas for a slave people for whom the skill of swimming was not a luxury. Behind them charged the mightiest army in the known world, intent on squashing them and

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their nascent freedom. As you may imagine, they were scared out of their wits. Moses, the great, wise sagacious Moses turns to them and offers these insightful words, 'Al ti-ra-oo - Don't be afraid.' Are you waiting for more? That is it, that is the best Moses could do in that moment, masterfully state the obvious. He would not have made the cut into the movie. "Hey, you people on the plane with all of the snakes. Those large, slithering snakes, the ones with the venom dripping off of their fangs ... nu, don't be afraid of them."

Perhaps, Moses is saying more than I am giving him credit for saying with this simple counsel. Maybe there is fear, then there is fear. Rabbi Rami Shapiro offers the idea that there are actually two different kinds of fear that the Israelites face in that moment. He teaches us:

"There are two kinds of fear: fear that liberates and fear that freezes. The fear that freezes is the fear that rests upon our own projections. ...The fear that liberates is a fear better rendered as awe. It arises when we see the terrifying Reality of YHWH. We are in awe of the wondrously stark and deadly power of a hurricane. We are in awe of the dangerously beautiful power of a tiger. We are in awe of glorious colours of death that transform the green trees of summer into the multi-hued forests of fall. We are in awe of a baby's first moments of life, and an elder's last. From moment to moment Life is awesome, gorgeous, deadly and loving. It is the wild wealth of infinite possibility that awes us ... and ... opens our hearts to compassion. This is a good "fear" for it pre-empts any status quo and forces us to move on even as life moves on."

Rabbi Shapiro does not suggest to us that Moses is telling the Israelites to disregard the emotion and reality of fear. It is not only impossible, but it is unnatural to rationalize away or ignore fear and anxiety. He suggests that Moses is speaking to a certain kind of fear ... the kind of fear that possesses the potential to take over and overwhelm those who face it. It is the fear that that can immobilize, the fear can prevent the seeing of all the endless possibilities in life, the fear that obstructs risk-taking, growth and progress.

Our Torah, our ancestors and Moses all teach us how important fear can be in our lives. It can give us a sense of urgency that allows

us be bold and creative; it can liberate us from being stuck in the past; it can bring us closer to divinity. Moses says to the Israelites, and to us, 'Al Ti-ra-oo - Lose the fear that paralyzes and immobilizes. Do not lose the fear, the awe that results from you seeing all of life's fullness, the fear that pushes you outside your comfort zone, and the awe that allows you to know the divine presence. Embrace that fear, take that first step into the sea and the rest will take care of itself.'

There are snakes in the sanctuary. They are all around us. Yes, they make us afraid ... but we cannot be paralyzed or immobilized by them. We cannot let these fears impede our march toward truth, growth and wholeness. We must stand at the shores of our sea ... and look ahead and behind us ... at those in our leadership who present enemies to destroy ... at a perception of our world that seems to hate us ... at the part of ourselves that anticipates pain and humiliation and not be afraid.

We must even look into the eyes of the snake that is the elephant in the room and not be afraid. This terrible prayer that we read about this terrible day seems to push toward the fear that immobilized and paralyzes, but perhaps that is all we can see in the cloud of fear and anxiety that surrounds our fate, our end, our death. Perhaps this prayer seeks to shock us into embracing the liberating fear that we know as awe. It says to us, without tenderness or grace, you will die. Your time, your life is fleeting ... what will you do with that truth? The fear of death could carry with it the precision of a surgeon's scalpel - efficiently cutting through to the very heart of what is important to each of us ... and in turn empowering and freeing us to act on that incisive insight. The fear of death also has the pervasive impact of the anesthesiologist's syringe - utterly numbing us to the real world and disabling us from doing anything productive and life affirming. This fear is part of the fabric of life, it is the progenitor of all others, and we must choose the way it will inform or impede our quest for life.

An eight-year-old boy had a younger sister who was dying of leukemia, and he was told that without a blood transfusion she would die. His parents explained to him that his blood was probably compatible with hers, and if so, he could be the blood donor. They asked him if they could test his blood. He said sure. So they did and it was a good match. Then they asked if he would give his sister

a pint of blood, that it could be her only chance of living. He said he would have to think about it overnight.

The next day he went to his parents and said he was willing to donate the blood. So they took him to the hospital where he was put on a gurney beside his six-year-old sister. Both of them were hooked up to IVs. A nurse withdrew a pint of blood from the boy, which was then put in the girl's IV. The boy lay on his gurney in silence while the blood dripped into his sister, until the doctor came over to see how he was doing. Then the boy opened his eyes and asked, "How soon until I start to die?"

It took only a moment for the doctor to realize the young boy had thought that giving blood to his sister would kill him. But he chose life, even as he looked death in the eye.

Fear is a constant. There will always be things to be afraid in our world. We will always be wired to feel the emotion. We must choose how to react when we see the snake, when we feel caught between the Egyptian army and the Sea of Reeds, when we face the prospect of our own death. Whether the voices come from the United States government, from the Jewish community or even from within ourselves, we must choose life, too.

As these words, our snakes, on this holy day seem to us like the Sea of Reeds and the Egyptian army appeared to our ancestors, the sound of the Shofar is the same call of Moses' to his people. As we hear its piercing and clarion call, may we hear Moses' charge to our ancestors – 'Al Ti-rah-oo – Do not be afraid ... Lose the fear that paralyzes and immobilizes. Embrace, the awe that results from you seeing all of life's fullness, the fear that pushes you outside your comfort zone, and the awe that allows you to know the divine presence. Embrace that fear, take that first step into the sea and the rest will take care of itself.' May we hear that call, take those steps into 5767 and not be afraid.

AMEN.