The world is a scary place and it's only getting scarier. There are those amongst us though who seem to thrive on fear, utilizing excitement and heart beat inducing stimuli to feel truly immersed in the world. Some of my friends drive up to Cedar Point and ride the tallest and fastest roller coasters, pushing their bodies to the limits of physics. Others I know thrive on the shocking surprises and thrilling twists of movies that capture latest reimaginings of horror and violence. I don’t like to join my friends at the theme park or the cinema, partially because driving through construction on Rt 71 is enough of a roller coaster and horror show, but actually because I find there is enough to scare me just by watching the news.

The first time I truly felt fear, I was leading a canoe trip through Southern Wisconsin. I was put in charge of a dozen boats and almost 30 people relying on my guidance as we traversed down the River. What was at first a sunny day and smooth waters slowly shifted throughout the afternoon. Ominous clouds rolled across the skies, the wind picked up, and crests of water beneath us got rough. We noticed fewer and fewer birds watching us from the treetops. Blowing my whistle, I led the group onto a sandbar and hurriedly directed the group to make camp but without any natural cover on the sandbar we were exposed to the elements - the first drops of rain began to fall. With no time to set up our tents we merely squeezed tarps overhead and I tried my best to keep a positive spirit singing songs while hiding the fact that I was just trying to count bodies make sure everyone had made it safely.

My fear in this episode was not because of rain or lightning. It’s not that I've never had a difficult canoe ride or had to make a quick change of plans. I've had plenty of experience with those things. I think I was afraid because of all the people relying on me to keep them safe. I don't have kids yet, but I imagine the spirit I felt as a camp counselor is the beginnings of what parents must feel, praying that no harm to come to their small loved ones. My fear was not for myself and yet it was somehow greater; I could not console each canoer at the same time.

Fear felt on behalf of others arrives because of powerlessness. If I could have stopped the rain and calmed the wind, to render the waters smooth, I would have had no reason to fear. Of course, this is impossible; there are innumerable aspects of life beyond our control from the weather in my story to the reckless actions of those who seek us harm. Realizing this lack of control is itself a source of fear. In another chapter of my life more recently I was teaching religious school and faced with the task of preparing my students for a drill in case of a violent intruder. It was not so long ago that I was myself a student at religious school, but this was not a task for which I ever prepared in my youth - this is a new form of practice, one that is increasingly necessary. The students for their part were not afraid during our active shooter drill; they are used to such drills – they do them frequently and without argument.

Although I am glad for the development of emergency preparedness measures in schools, I do not want the next generation to be so familiar with possible gun violence that the prospect of preparing for an attack should be met without fear. If we teach our children lessons from our lives, they may go on to tackle bigger fears than we faced. But surely, we cannot let their inheritance be the fears we could not conquer before them.

The intergenerational inheritance of woe was established long ago. It is evident in the story of the Binding of Isaac that we will read tomorrow. Abraham is tasked with facing his greatest fear, giving up the one thing he's wanted most of all: his son. And yet the story as it unfolds with father and son trekking up a mountain is frought with fear. Isaac inquires of his father “where is the animal that will be sacrificed?” Abraham replies with tongue in cheek that “God will see to the sacrifice my son”. There are no commas in the Torah so we wonder if he's speaking what he thinks to be the truth. Is his son to be the sacrifice? By the end of the story God sees that Abraham is truly pious, a word which here means God-fearing and so stays his hand, and prevents him from committing the grievous act. Father and son live to see another day but we know that the next day would not have been the same after they had experienced this traumatic event. Isaac can never look at his Father the same way - Abraham can never forget the look of true terror on Isaac’s face. There was no going back - so from that day forward they both knew fear.

Fear can have both positive and negative effects on us – when we let fears control us, we are restricted from living. But when we embrace fear, we learn about ourselves and have the opportunity to experience new frontiers. It was President Franklin Delano Roosevelt who famously quipped that “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Such words are profound, and they cast fear as a negative feeling – something to avoid. His wife, Eleanor Roosevelt also had an opinion about dealing with fear. She said, “Do one thing everyday that scares you.” By so doing, one can overcome fear through action and shift the realm of what is truly scary.

Overcoming fear is emphasized at another point in our tradition. Nachman of Bratzlav summarized the frightening human experience when he wrote

כל העולם כולו גשר צר מאוד, והעיקר - לא לפחד כלל

Kol ha'olam kulo gesher tzar me'od, veha'ikar lo le'fached klal.

All the world is a very narrow bridge, and the most important thing is not to be overwhelmed by fear.

This refrain, which you may recognize from song, reflects the folk wisdom still frequently espoused today; fear is common, but should be avoided at all costs. There is no escaping the fact that the world is a scary place, and it is inevitable that we may from time to time experience fright. That said, even though we may physically or emotionally be traversing great heights, we don’t have to look down.

Returning to my tragic canoe trip, the truth is that that rain soon passed, and we were able to set a more permanent camp site. We built a fire, dried off and had a peaceful evening. The rest of the journey was without incident, snf recently some of those campers reached out to me to say that canoe trip was the highlight of their summer. I wonder if fear brought us together; did this fear-inducing incident open us up to truly experience the river? Can fear put what is most important into perspective for us?

My challenge for all of us is to recognize our fears. The only thing we have to fear is the stigma associated with fear. By working with our fears instead of avoiding them, we can amplify the blessings of our bodies, practice self-care, and build communities of resilience against the things in our world that are truly frightening. The whole world may be a narrow bridge, and getting smaller each day. Instead of focusing on our fear, let’s help each other get across.