

Where does fear come from and what happens when you are afraid? How does fear affect your behavior and in particular how you treat the people around you? Is fear based on real danger, or is it at least partially in our your head? And, are there ways to feel safe, even in frightening situations?



① HAVING POWER AND FEELING POWERFUL

From Biblical to contemporary times, examples of people exerting control or power over others are featured in some of our most absorbing tales. These characters, in stories ancient and modern, share one overarching similarity: the feeling of fear, insecurity and powerlessness. A person who is consumed by fear often needs to control those around them and instill fear in others in so that they themselves can *feel* more in control. It is a theme that is as common in the Bible as it is in modern day life.

From Biblical tradition, one of the most clear and extreme examples of deep fear manifesting itself as control over others is in the Purim story. Haman, the archetypal villain, masterminds the potential end of the Jewish people in order to retain his own power and feel in control. His plan is spurred by Mordechai's refusal to bow down to him. Haman's fear of the power of the Jewish people is subconscious, and results in his need to control them.

The lesson Hanan's parents teach him about his boss could be also be applied to Haman:

MOMMY

Just because he's conscious of what he's doing, doesn't mean he is conscious of WHY he's doing it...Ask yourself: why would he need to make everyone around him afraid?

DADDY

To have control over them. Ssssss!

MOMMY

But he already has control. He's your boss. He can fire you. ... but just because someone is in power, doesn't necessarily mean that they feel powerful. Deep deep down, inside, he *feels* out of control.

HANAN

Are you saying he's afraid?

MOMMY

Not just afraid. He's terrified. He's consumed by his fear.

Hanan's boss *needs* to feel in control, much like the Biblical Haman who feels weak and powerless, despite his position of power. At no point, however, does Haman explicitly acknowledge a fear of the Jews or of Mordechai. His fear instead manifests itself by manipulating King Achashverosh, who plays a part in his scheme, and by bullying the Jews themselves.

1. Although it is an ancient story, what feels realistic about this Biblical narrative?
2. What are examples of times in your own life when your fears or insecurities affected how you treated other people? Did you ultimately feel any consequences or realize the source of your actions?
3. What are examples of times when others' fears and insecurities affected how they treated you?
4. What is the difference between *feeling* powerful and actually having power?
5. Hanan's mother explains that the loss of control comes directly from a deep fear which has become his boss's reality. What makes you most afraid and how do you think you respond to it? Do you think you are aware of the fear?

② WHAT WE THINK WE KNOW

One of the key ideas in this animation is that reality is in large part based on how we *understand* reality. If there is a mistake in our knowledge, what we think we know, we build an entire reality based on a faulty premise.

This is illustrated in Hanan Harchol's reading of God's question to Adam and Eve "Who told you that you were naked?". Through his learning, Hanan created a new *midrash* around this question.

A midrash is an interpretation of a text that might at first seem to have a simple meaning, but that asks for a deeper explanation. Midrash is often created from *chevruta* learning (from the root for the word friend in Hebrew), studying Jewish texts in a pair – with a friend or study partner. The concept is that as you study together you will each be able to bring in your knowledge of that textual source and your human experience and from there the text will begin to blossom.

The original Genesis text is:

They heard the sound of Adonai the Eternal moving about in the garden at the breezy time of the day; and the man and his wife hid from Adonai the Eternal among the trees of the garden. Adonai the Eternal called out to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" He replied "I heard the sound of You in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid." Then God asked, "Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat from the tree from which I had forbidden you eat?"

Genesis 3: 8-11

In Hanan's *midrash* he uses the character of his mother, to interpret God's question to Adam and Eve "Who told you that you were naked?" Here is how Hanan's mother explains her point:

MOMMY

...before eating from the *Tree of Knowledge*, Adam and Eve were naked

and they felt no shame, and there's no mention of fear. Now, **after** eating from the *Tree of Knowledge*, their eyes are "opened" and they "realized" they are naked, and they are afraid. But the fear is only a result of this knowledge; this new understanding of nakedness as separation. And God asks "Who told you that you are naked?"... What if God is actually questioning their knowledge - their understanding itself?

DADDY

Tzzz, but Irit, they are naked! It says so! That's why they need the bikinis!

MOMMY

Depends on how you see it. Instead of hearing God asking: "Who told you that you are naked?" as in "Tell Me who gave away the secret?" God might be saying "Who told you that you are naked?" as in: How do you know? According to whom? How do you know that you are separate from Me? Maybe your knowledge, your new way of understanding nakedness, is perhaps an illusion?"

Hanan's mother suggests that instead of the common interpretation that God is asking Adam and Eve who gave them the knowledge that they are naked, God might actually be questioning their knowledge, their new understanding of nakedness itself. What made them believe they were naked? What *made* them think they were any different than they were before?

Using this *midrash*, Hanan's mother teaches him to recognize that fear comes in part from knowledge, and that what you "know" often comes down to how you understand what is going on around you. But if the understanding is faulty, then the fear may be unwarranted, because it is based on a faulty understanding of reality.

1. Have there been times when you believed you were teaching truths, that in hindsight you now see differently?
2. Are there times in your life when you were convinced you were "naked"? How did you know? Could it have just been your perception?
3. How were those experiences affected by other people, and how did you respond to others based on what you believed?

③ A VERY NARROW BRIDGE

Ultimately Hanan's mother teaches him that fear is often determined by how you see your reality, or more specifically, what you choose to focus on. If you focus on the dangers surrounding you, instead of focusing on the "bridge" of positive possibilities and outcomes, the fears can grow into a "reality of fears" in which the fears can consume you. In her example with the alligators, the abyss, and the cliff, Hanan's mother references a famous quote from Rabbi Nachman of Brazzavil:

All of the world is a very narrow bridge, but the most important thing is to never be afraid.

To illustrate Rabbi Nachman's teaching, Hanan's mother creates a scenario of walking across a room without stepping off of a wide row of floor tiles. The task seems simple at first. But when she adds the detail of a cliff on either side of the tiles with alligators and an abyss, one quickly forgets about the simplicity of the task and focuses instead on the danger, creating a reality that is entirely fearful. Hanan's mother shows him that sometimes what you focus on in your life affects one's reality itself. By focusing on the fears instead of the "bridge" one can quickly become consumed by fear which leads to feelings of powerlessness as described in Section 1.

1. Do you find that you are able to think along the lines of what Hanan's mother says? Do you agree that feeling fearful comes from what you focus on?
2. Are you the kind of person who is more apt to focus on "the bridge" or the dangers which might also exist?
3. When have you allowed fear to affect how you see reality?
4. Hanan's mother points out that Hanan has "adopted" his boss's reality of fears. When have you allowed others' fear to affect or influence your own reality?