



Jewish and Fearless

Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov all received similar encouragement from G-d - "Do not fear..." Yet the assuring words seem to come at strange times. Why was that so, and what does it teach us about dealing with our own fears?

Have No Fear

A young Chabad rabbi once told me, "You know what's worse than having no people show up to an event? Having only one person show up. If no one comes, no one will know about your embarrassment, and you can tell all your friends that you had a successful program; many people came, etc. But if only one person shows up, you have a problem..."

This week, our Torah portion tells us about Yitzchak, the second of our three Patriarchs. Yitzchak, of course, was the son of Avraham, about whom we read in the past Torah portions.

In this week's Parshah, we find that G-d tells Yitzchak, "Do not fear, for I am with you." It is no less than a promise from G-d that there is nothing to be afraid of.

Avraham had also received a similar promise from G-d once in his own lifetime. "Do not fear, Avram—I am a shield to you," G-d told Avraham—words similar to those spoken to Yitzchak.

And even Yaakov, the foremost Patriarch, was promised by G-d, "Do not fear from going down to Egypt," The expression "*al tira*, do not

fear,” appears exactly three times throughout the entire Book of Bereishis: the first time with Avraham, the second time with Yitzchak and the final time with Yaakov.

But when we look into the context of these verses, we notice something strange: the promise always seems to come one moment too late.

A Moment Too Late

Let’s start with Avraham.

Our Patriarch Avraham had challenges to no end. He had been thrown into the fiery furnace and emerged alive only by a miracle. His wife Sarah was taken prisoner by the Egyptian Pharaoh. He had gone to war against four kings. There had been a famine in the land. But throughout this entire period, we don’t hear the words “Do not fear.”

When do we finally hear them?

“Achar hadvarim ha’eileh—After these events.” When everything calmed down. When the whole world finally recognized the greatness of Avraham. When there was nothing to be afraid of anymore. Then, G-d tells him, “Do not fear.”

Why?

The same question applies to Yitzchak. Yitzchak also suffered from persecution. He lived first in the south of the Holy Land, where it was dry and hot. There were constant problems with water, so he had to dig wells. But as soon as he would succeed in finding water, the locals would come along and argue that the territory—and the wells on them—belonged to them. They finally kicked him out of the area. And all through that time, Yitzchak did not once hear G-d say to him, “Do not fear.”

Only after everything wound down did G-d assure him, “Do not fear.” But “do not fear” what?

Finally, we can ask the same question about Yaakov. When G-d told him “Do not fear,” Yaakov was already 110 years old. He had already seen and heard it all. His own brother Eisav had wanted to murder him. His uncle Lavan cheated him again and again for over 20 years. Later, his own daughter Dinah was seduced and violated—and, worst of all, his favorite son Yosef vanished for 22 years as if the very earth had swallowed him up and no one even knew what had happened to him.

Throughout these terrible years, Yaakov certainly could have used a few words of encouragement. But did he hear “Do not fear?” Not even once. And when did he finally hear those words? When they finally found that Yosef was alive and the ruler of Egypt, the world superpower of the day, and when he was about to begin the 17 best years of his life. Then, G-d tells him,

“Do not fear.”

What’s going on here?

The True Fear

In recent years, there have been several studies on fear. They have discovered that the greatest fear people have is to speak in front of crowds— people are simply terrified to get up in front of a group of people and talk. For many people, this fear is actually greater than fear of death—according to these studies, these people would rather be the person in the casket at a funeral than the person giving the eulogy.

Obviously, this seems very strange. The same people who are not afraid to climb mountains, join the military and go to war, or fight to keep their businesses alive are still terrified to appear in public, even if

the crowd consists of people who love them and will not criticize them if they don't speak well—still, they're afraid. Why?

There is the fear that the crowd will not like what he has to say, or the fear that someone will make a face at him or laugh at him. In short? The fear of rejection.

The Patriarchs' Mission

Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov each had their mission in life. They were supposed to spread the belief in the One True G-d to the entire universe. They lived in the era when all of civilization worshipped idols and false gods, and they were supposed to stand against everyone and convince people that there is a Creator of the universe that you can't see with physical eyes and can't hear with physical ears and can't feel and can't smell but is still there.

So whenever they moved to a new location, G-d told them, "Do not fear." Yitzchak heard it when he moved to Be'er Sheva—then G-d told him "Do not fear." When Yaakov was about to go down to Egypt, to move to a new place, then he needed the assurance, "Do not fear."

And I can tell you as a Chabad rabbi, from my own experience moving here and from the experiences of so many other Chabad rabbis moving out to who knows where, coming to a new place can be the hardest time in one's life.

I know of many Chabad rabbis who got cold receptions when they showed up. People told them that they were in the wrong neighborhood, or that the religious people lived in the other neighborhood. The real estate broker gave them wrong information about where to rent an apartment. "This is not the place for people like you," they were told, "you have the wrong address."

And when you hear that from one person, and then another, and then ten and twenty people over the course of long months, you need to

be made of steel to stand strong, and to not give up and not leave.

And on top of that, even other religious people rub salt on your wounds and tell you, “There’s no chance a Chabad center will make it in this area.”

And so, it is specifically then that the promise from G-d, “Do not fear,” is needed. That’s why when Yitzchak moved to Be’er Sheva, to a new place where he didn’t know how they’d take what he had to say, specifically there did G-d tell him, “Do not fear.”

The same thing goes for Yaakov. It was specifically when he moved down to Egypt, to the *“ervas ha’aretz,”* which literally means “the nakedness of the land,” meaning the most modern and permissive place of that era, where he was supposed to open a yeshivah and a community, then he was afraid of what people might say.

It is not that he was intimidated by them. His mission was not to shout and scream, “There is a G-d!”—it was to convince everyone that there is a G-d. And that’s why he was scared. He didn’t know if it would work.

Don’t Fear the Naysayers

My friends, the truth is that this challenge, this fear, isn’t only for rabbis, but for everyone.

If someone wants to start keeping a mitzvah that they never kept before, for example, like sitting down to the Shabbos meal at home on Friday night instead of going out and partying with friends... they may be afraid. They may feel fear. What are my friends going to say? “What’s this? You suddenly became religious?!” And what will my mother-in-law say?

This fear can silence a person and keep him or her from taking the next step in Judaism.

This, my friends, is why we sing the traditional song Al Tira Avdi Yaakov, “Don’t Fear, My Servant Jacob,” each Saturday night after Shabbos—to tell the Jew, “Hey, don’t be afraid! G-d is with you just like he was with our father Yaakov in Egypt. And if Yaakov succeeded in keeping his Jewish identity in Egypt, anyone can do it—anywhere and anytime.”