

8 October 2011

In one of Kafka's last stories, called "A Little Fable," we read about a mouse with a cat about to catch him from one side and a trap immediately to the other. He has no options, no future. And at the last second, he lifts his head and whispers: "Alas the world is growing narrower every day."

There are ominous claws casting shadows over us too. No we're not quaking mice in a dusty corner but sometimes we're pretty close. Indeed, there is one thing we all share. On some level we are all afraid.

For some the claw is your health or your parent's health; maybe it's your child's health. For some the trap is your job or maybe your lack of a job. For some the trap is the house or maybe the marriage. For some the claw is the fear of being alone. Those are fears. Not the fears of fables but real fears that you feel in your fast beating heart each day.

But this is not a sermon about mice or about cats or about Kafka, a life in fact shrouded in fear.

This is a sermon about three other people, three people you may not know, but who each know something about fear, three people who can help us in this outrageous world that we live in, to commit on this Yom Kippur to a year when we will not be bound up by fear but will live as we Jews are meant to live, as these three people did.

For one the antidote to fear was hope, for another it was perspective, and for the last it was faith.

Their names are Edison, George, and Solomon.

It was the starting line of the New York City Marathon and of the forty five thousand people who ran it this past year, there was one person we all wanted to meet. Edison Pena. He is known for many things. His dedication to his family. His spot-on Elvis impersonation.

He is best known, however, for the fact that he was trapped, along with thirty-two others, seven hundred feet beneath the earth's surface for three months. Confronted with the things we fear most, never seeing our loved ones again, being lost, no air, no light, no food, confronted with every possible demon, he chose to live.

In the words of this morning's Torah portion, he chose life.

While others moped in the corner, Edison would run, up to six miles a day, way down underground. It was a simple act that allowed him to feel the blood flowing in his veins again. He could imagine himself squinting into the sun as he turned the corner for home. And with this act he was reminded each day that to live paralyzed by fear is not really to live at all.

To live paralyzed by fear is to give over to those dark caves of skepticism, become a hardened defeatist, and practically will to reality the worst possible outcome.

We are not those Chilean miners but their time down there might inform our time up here. They could have curled up, like the mouse, sensing hopelessness everywhere, as we could. And some did. Some said later that they had abandoned all hope.

Maybe there are some of you sitting here now who have given up hope. You cannot see beyond the shadows that have fallen over you or your future or your family's future or this country or its future.

Everywhere you look you see only the darkest of caves and they terrify you. Sometimes, I will admit, they terrify me too.

Edison Pena, he managed to see light when everything seemed so dark. Like generations of survivors before him, he willed himself to see light. Maybe that's why the saga resonates with so many of us. Because as our very spine shudders from *his epic saga* we Jews cannot help but recall other faraway stories of fortitude. We hear echoes of others who would emerge from darkness to again see a shining sun overhead, those who would not abandon their hope no matter what.

They are echoes that remind us: We are a people of hope. We are hope.

It was an attitude of hope that brought Edison from the depths of the mine to a screaming mass of marathoners so moved and inspired by someone who was afraid, yes, and unsure, yes, but never lost sight of the fact that no matter what comes today, the sun will rise again tomorrow.

He never lost sight of the fact that just as there is a glow above, there is also a glow within, a glow every single human being has burning deep within them. Call it spirit. Call it holiness. Call it hope. It is a glow that is real and is God-given and cannot go out.

As Rabbi Harold Kushner writes: "I keep reminding myself that hope and courage are the will of God... Be not afraid of life," he says.

“Believe that life is worth living and your belief will help create the fact.”

I never met George Worthylake but I imagine he was quite a fellow, living in Boston in the early part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. I imagine he was a rather likable guy. I mean, he wasn't a Red Sox fan. That's a good start. Of course there were no Red Sox fans yet. He was quiet and humble and never expected his name to become etched in the shrine of history. Neither did Edison Pena I suppose.

George saw that people were without direction. He saw that people were lost. He saw that because *they could not see* they lived in the most extreme grips of terror.

And so what did he do? In 1716 he became the first keeper of the first lighthouse in what would become the United States, the Boston Lighthouse.

And in an instant, for those sailors out in the harbor who for so long could not find their way, who feared the night, who needed to return to the water once and again to feed their family, everything changed. Because he knew that if we can just illuminate the path, see where we are going, then imagine how much better we would all feel.

And it's true. Imagine if we could shine a light on the coming year. What if we could actually see in great detail every day between now and next Yom Kippur?

Imagine that. Imagine if Apple invented an app that allowed us to see it all. Click on the day, any random day, October 25<sup>th</sup>, March 4<sup>th</sup>, maybe April 8<sup>th</sup>, and right there you'd see a video of yourself on that day.

Every possible encounter, every success, hardship, every single conversation, every single development, all the news from an entire year.

We'd know in an instant everything from who would win the World Series to how much snow we'll get this winter. We'd see if there will be any natural disasters and if so, where. Will the power go out? We would see if there will be another grandchild in the family, what college your high school senior will go to, whether there will be a wedding in the coming months. We'd see how our beloved Israel will fare, what will be in Egypt, Libya, and Syria.

Will there be a diagnosis? Will there be healing? Will there be heartbreak? How will that marathon go? What will you read? Maybe something by Kafka. Which movies will you love? What's going to happen at work, at home, and everywhere in between?

Will you be happy?

We would see, to echo our prayer book, who shall be secure and who shall be driven. Who shall be humbled and who exalted. We would see it all and we'd know exactly what's coming.

But, alas, there is no such thing. There is no app (at least not yet), no crystal ball, no lighthouse shining out into the harbor that is our future.

To stay with the aquatic theme and quote none other than Finding Nemo: The dad asks, while swimming across this massive, unpredictable ocean, he asks: How can we know that everything will be OK? The simple answer he receives: We can't.

So what do we do? We learn to live amidst those waves of uncertainty. Like the early Israelites in an unforgiving and unknowable wilderness, we keep going. And we teach our children to do exactly the same.

As Dr Gordon Livingston writes: “The primary goal of parenting, beyond keeping our children safe and loved, is to convey to them a sense that it is possible to be happy in an uncertain world.”

We also have to hold onto the idea that there is actually a kind of lighthouse we have and that is this building, this place right here. Maybe the light is our eternal light up there.

Because I cannot foresee who will get into what school or how much snow we’ll get, but I do know that Temple Sinai will remain a bastion of community and acceptance, a place to find comfort and direction no matter what’s going on out there, a lighthouse shining rays of reassurance on us all.

Especially when you feel lost at sea. Especially when everything is a storm and the waves of life roll high over your head one after another as I know they can do.

We need to know that our harbor, our sanctuary, is here for us. It’s here for you. The story of George Worthylake, yes it teaches us about perspective and perseverance, but his story also teaches us the desperate importance of true shelter, of just knowing there is a shore nearby, when the waters are smooth and when they rage without mercy.

Maybe Solomon Ibn Gabriol would agree with that message. The name may not ring a bell, but the song for which he is best known might.

One thousand years ago he wrote *Adon Olam*, the song with which we end services nearly every Friday night. It's a short song. I won't sing it now. You're welcome. In the English some of those classic verses go as follows:

You are our Eternal God, who has reigned since the beginning of time.

You have been, are still, and will always reign in glory.

You are my God, my Rock in times of distress.

Into Your hands I entrust my spirit, when I sleep and when I wake, for You O God are with me and I shall not fear.

It's a song of faith. He would want us to have faith. *Adon Olam* urges us to have faith. It reminds us to have faith even when the world can be a very dark place, as Edison knew, even when we feel lost, as George knew.

Faith that there is a compassionate God above us and that the story will end well. Faith that although there may be challenges in the coming year, it will be a year of blessing. Faith. Not the faith of fanatics, but the faith that picks up where science and politics leave off. The faith that picks up at the end of a long day. The faith that picks you up when you are at the end of your rope. The faith that is restored when you see your grandchildren. That faith that you feel at your seat, in your heart, during a quiet moment, on Yom Kippur.

The faith of the Israelites. The faith of everyone from Abraham to Ann Frank. Faith. The faith that is strength. Faith. The faith that countless Jews have known. The faith that has helped us survive. The faith that has helped you survive.

The faith that has helped us overcome again and again and again. The faith that has built the Household of Israel brick by brick, hand by hand, miracle by astounding miracle, one sacred soul after another.

Faith will not take away fear, neither will hope nor perseverance take away fear, but I believe that faith lessens fear. Faith has a way of quieting fear.

As for the “Little Fable” there are really two endings to the story. One ending goes like this: Immobilized by fear, a thousand memories of insecurity and could-haves flooding his mind, the mouse just about brings the inevitable down on his very own head. And lo and behold he’s caught by the cat.

That’s the ending Kafka wrote actually. In some ways he was the mouse. Plagued by self doubt, he published nearly nothing in his lifetime. His last request to his dear friend Max Brod: burn everything.

The ending I prefer goes as follows: In a flash of inspiration the mouse realizes that there are more than just those two dire options. It’s not just be caught by the cat or be caught by the trap. It’s not doom or gloom.

Maybe there’s another way out. Maybe now’s the time to realize that the only thing holding me back is not someone else or something else, not a proverbial claw, maybe it’s me. In a moment of rather heroic bravery he leaps over the trap, the cat lunges at him, is scared off by the trap now snapping shut, and off the mouse dashes to safety.

To freedom.

He runs off with pride and with confidence. Pride in what he has done. Confident in what he will be able to do going forward.

Maybe future generations of mice, his children and grandchildren, will tell this tale and strive for this fearlessness. It will remind them, once and again, that they inherit a legacy of astounding bravery.

So may it be for us as well. Amen.