



**Parsha Bo**  
**Jeremiah 46:13-28**  
**January 3, 2014 / 2 Shevat 5774**

"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Who does not know these words from the first inaugural address of Franklin Delano Roosevelt? And yet what do they mean? Surely the nation in 1933, at the depths of the Great Depression, had many things to fear, many threats to overcome. Roosevelt outlines them in his speech, and exhorts the nation to embrace an ambitious agenda to combat them.

So what does it mean that fear is all we need fear? The president explained that the fear of which he spoke was the "nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance."

Fear is the enemy because it makes us unreasonable. Fear is the enemy because it paralyzes us. Fear is the enemy because it blinds us to dealing successfully with the real threats that confront us.

In the Haftarah for Parashat Bo, taken from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, the Israelite remnant in Judea is facing certain national calamity - defeat at the hands of the Nebuchadnezzar, and exile to Babylon. Some think Egypt will provide rescue and relief. But the prophet warns that Egypt will also fall to the same enemy. The future is dire. Hopeless. Terrifying.

And yet at the end of the Haftarah, Jeremiah twice counsels the despondent Judeans, speaking in God's name, "Do not fear, my servant Jacob, for I am with you." The only thing you have to fear, is fear itself! Do not fear the exile and captivity. Fear only the despair and hopelessness that will prevent you from turning defeat into ultimate triumph.

In recent months, since the publication of the latest statistics on the Jewish community in America, there has been a lot of fear-inspired hand wringing. Faced with the high rate of intermarriage among Jews identified with the liberal movements in Judaism, and the high proportion of American Jews who self-identify as "non-religious," many look to the future with varying degrees of despair, resignation, and denial.

But there are voices of common-sense change that recognize that we must craft a response that is true to the changing way American Jews identify and express their Jewishness.

FJMC Executive Director Rabbi Charles Simon and Rabbi Kerry Olitzky of the Jewish Outreach Institute have had the courage to present a sixteen point vision of what Conservative synagogue life might look like if we "respond positively to [the] demographic change implied by intermarriage." Breaking with the unquestioned dogmas of the past, they urge Conservative rabbis to find a way to "participate in some capacity in the interfaith weddings of congregants and their children," and propose that "patrilineal children be welcomed in the synagogue and undergo a 'completion ceremony' (rather than a conversion ceremony)."

This manifesto is a forward-thinking way of meeting the fear engendered by the Pew Report with concrete steps that are virtually self-evident, but to which many of us are blinded by the ineffective policies of the past. The fear of change has paralyzed us for too long. We are unable to serve our own constituents because of the limits we rabbis have placed on ourselves. We have made ourselves irrelevant to them at the very moment they need us most to embrace their children and grandchildren and keep them close.

When we say "No" to participating in the marriage ceremony of an interfaith couple on Saturday night, do we really think they will be ready to set aside our rejection and feel welcome in our congregation on Sunday morning?

And when we reject as Jewish the children of Jewish fathers, irrespective of how identified they are as Jews, but accept as Jewish the children of Jewish mothers, irrespective of how estranged they may be from Judaism, does this enhance Jewish community? Does it make sense? Don't we bless our sons on Friday night that they be like Ephraim and Menashe, whose father Joseph was Jewish, but whose mother Osnat was the daughter of an Egyptian priest!

The response to the challenges of the moment should not be a paralyzing fear that leads us to double down on failed ideas, ideals, and strategies, but a creative, open, vigorous, Movement-wide debate on both rabbinic participation in an intermarriage ceremony, and patrilineal descent. Such a discussion is long overdue. The Simon and Olitzky agenda points us in a direction we must go.

"Do not fear, my servant Jacob." The ancient words resonate now more than ever.

*From the Editors: Join the discussion of this commentary in Mentschen, the FJMC's online forum.*

*This week's Haftarah commentary was written by Rabbi Seymour Rosenbloom. Rabbi Rosenbloom has been the spiritual leader of Congregation Adath Jeshurun since September of 1978, and will complete 36 years of service and retire in July 1, 2014. He was ordained from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in 1972. He was the recipient of the Federation of Jewish Women's Organizations Prize which is awarded to the outstanding graduating student in the Rabbinical School. In 1997 he received an honorary doctorate from JTS. He is a past president of the Philadelphia and Michigan-Ohio branches of the Rabbinical Assembly, and was a member of the Joint Retirement Board and Committee on Jewish Law and Standards.*

*Among his many activities, in April of 1992, Rabbi Rosenbloom was honored by the Middle Atlantic Region of the FJMC with the award of the Golden Yarmalka Youth Campaign "for his continued support of youth and Camp Ramah."*

*Rabbi Rosenbloom has a special interest in Jewish men's issues, and has lectured and taught on the subject using Jewish Biblical materials and the modern texts of Robert Bly among others.*

*Rabbi Rosenbloom has been the featured speaker at programs on men's issues at the FJMC conventions in 1993, 1997, and 1999. For many years he wrote a column called "Anshay Emet" for the Torchlight, and his articles on men's issues have appeared in various periodicals. He wrote the Preface of the recently published FJMC "Jewish Men at the Cross Roads " authored by FJMC Executive Director Rabbi Charles Simon.*