

At last, after a long journey, a rocket's landing module sets down safely on Mars. Within minutes, Gerry and John, the two astronauts on board, take their first steps on the planet. Their mission is very important to the future of mankind – they must check whether there is oxygen on the planet. Gerry says, "OK, John, pass me the box of matches and I'll try to light one. It will either burn, in which case there's oxygen, or nothing will happen."

Gerry takes the box from John, removes a match and is just about to strike it when a Martian suddenly appears in front of him waving his arms frantically. The Martian looks absolutely terrified. He turns on his universal translator and shouts "No, no, don't do that, don't light that match!"

Gerry and John are puzzled. Could there be an unknown explosive gas on Mars that their module hadn't detected? Gerry didn't think so, so he continues with his plan to strike the match. But now there's a whole group of Martians around him, all of them looking very serious and waving their arms. "No, no," they shout, "Please don't do that!"

"What are they afraid of?" John asks Gerry.

"I don't know," replies Gerry, "but we're here for the benefit of the Earth and all humanity and we've a job to do. We can't let these Martians scare us."

So Gerry strikes the match. It instantly flares up, burns slowly down and then goes out. Nothing else happens. So Gerry turns round to the Martian leader and asks, "Why didn't you want me to strike the match? Why were you so frightened?"

The Martian leader replies, "Because it's Shabbes!"

I have to admit that I told that joke on the High Holidays in 5768, ten years ago. But I looked the issue up in the Gemara, and I'm allowed to repeat a joke once a decade, so I'm fine.

A joke about a bunch of frightened Martians leads me into my message for today, which is that Americans have a fear problem.

Mind you, fear itself is not necessarily a bad thing. If you find a bear or a mountain lion on your property, fear is a good operating principle. The problem is that we are possessed by the wrong kind of fear. Fear is like cholesterol, there's a good kind and a bad kind.

So today, I'm going to explain to you the bad kind of fear is and how Rosh Hashanah can teach us what the good kind is.

The first bad kind of fear I'd like to describe is the fear of some kind of impending global disaster that we really can't do anything about. It seems that someone is always telling us that the end is near.

For instance, there is an immense supervolcano that lies underneath northwestern Wyoming called the Yellowstone Caldera. This enormous powderkeg is called a supervolcano because it is far larger than a typical volcano.

A normal volcano, such as Mt. St. Helens in Washington, is about six miles wide. Mt. Vesuvius, which buried the Roman town of Pompeii just nine years after our Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, is about 15 miles wide.

In comparison, the Yellowstone Caldera is 45 miles wide and it has been simmering for 640 thousand years. Some geologists say that this thing is going to blow in our lifetime. Most, however, say it won't erupt for a long time and some

say it won't ever explode, that it will go dormant. But there is a risk of a terrible catastrophe the likes of which we have never seen.

If the caldera erupts, it's the end of life as we know it on Earth. It may be an extinction event for our species. It will instantly kill a hundred thousand people and cover two thirds of the country in many feet of burning hot ash, making it unlivable.

Its clouds of smoke and ash will spread a curtain of darkness over the Earth and bring on a global cooling that will kill millions if not billions. The absence of America will cripple the global economy, and to quote the Bible, in the morning the survivors will say "I wish it were evening," and in the evening, they will say, "I wish it were morning."

But I have to stress - don't be afraid of the caldera! It's a waste of time. Being afraid of the caldera is the bad kind of fear because there is absolutely nothing we can do about it. The forces at play are so far beyond the human scale of ability that all we can do is just hope that it doesn't happen on our watch.

Maybe one day we'll have the technology to let the pressure out of a volcano gradually. Maybe one day we'll have the technology to steer a hurricane out to sea. But as my magic 8 ball says, "Don't count on it."

The eruption of the caldera is in the category of "Smoke 'em if you got 'em." There's no point in worrying about it, but that doesn't stop some people from doing just that.

One rabbi on my listserv said he was going to wait to write his High Holiday sermons until the last minute in case the caldera erupts. He was probably kidding, but it's kind of hard to tell in writing.

I mean, if the caldera erupts, I doubt we're getting a minyan even at Yizkor. Sorry, no refunds on the tickets.

The same principle applies to any global disaster that may take place. Generally speaking, we should reserve our fear and worry for things that we can actually change.

A second example of the bad kind of fear is the fear of disease. I have met many people who are or who have been paralyzed by the fear of getting sick. I meet one of them in the mirror every morning.

My fear of getting sick began at the local supermarket in Indiana where I grew up. The store had this cardboard sign with slots for quarters that you could insert to join the fight against childhood leukemia. Each sign had a list of the symptoms of leukemia.

Those symptoms include bruising and fevers. That sign ruined me for years because I didn't know that *my* bruises and fevers were all totally normal. And even when I got over my fear of leukemia, the seeds for irrational fear were planted and ready to blossom for any number of other diseases.

And by the way, worrying about cancer my whole life did not protect me from actually getting cancer ten years ago. Only then did I realize that all my worrying and fear was a massive waste of time and energy down the spiritual toilet.

My advice to you is instead of fearing disease, love life instead. If you really love your life, you'll do the things that make disease less likely, such as eating sensibly and getting some regular, moderate exercise. Apart from that, let the cards fall where they may.

Some studies suggest that being in a constant state of fear and anxiety about your health can actually make you sick, so it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

A third kind of bad fear is our growing fear of being offended. A whole generation of kids is being taught the noxious idea that offensive words are equivalent to physical violence.

A nationwide survey of one thousand college students found that 77% of them believe that political speech can be a form of violence that should be banned. Whatever happened to sticks and stones may break my bones but names can never hurt me?

Whatever happened to Voltaire's famous quote, "I may despise what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it?"

We are raising a generation of kids who are so afraid of being angered or offended that they even have new words for the phenomenon. One of them is being "triggered." Whereas we used to find offensive language merely annoying or impolite, the new generation feels triggered, as if hearing offensive ideas could cause them permanent harm and that law enforcement should stop it.

The other word is micro-aggression. A micro-aggression occurs when someone accidentally says something that the so-called victim finds to be offensive, such as when we ask a person with a foreign accent where he's from. We are told that these micro-aggressions are also a frightful form of violence that must be stopped.

At campuses across the nation, there are riots against those who dare to speak out against the orthodoxy of the day. Rather than using the police to protect the right of Americans to voice unpopular opinions, university presidents are

protecting the snowflake students and canceling the lectures. They also provide counseling and safe spaces to those who are so afraid of offensive words that they cannot move on.

Just last week, a Jewish political commentator named Ben Shapiro, the editor of the Daily Wire website, gave a speech at Berkeley. He's not a racist or a homophobe or anything like that, just a standard conservative. You can agree with his arguments or disagree, that's what America is all about.

But at Berkeley, the administration had to spend more than half a million dollars to protect Ben from the anti-free speech rioters who have attacked at other campuses. He was shielded as if he were radioactive, and in the political sense, I guess he is.

He posted on his website a video of the protestors outside. They were chanting, "Speech is violent, we won't be silent." What narushkeit! What malarkey! Political speech is not violence. What are these kids afraid of?

I hope we never have to depend on drafted soldiers to protect our country, but if we ever do, we're in a lot of trouble, because we've become so fragile and sensitive to every imagined slight that I can't imagine these kids storming the enemy coastline.

Everyone, young and old, right and left, needs to stop being afraid of being offended. There is no right to not be offended. Besides, being offended can be a good thing, as it forces us to defend our opinions with facts instead of just emotional whining.

A fourth kind of bad fear is the fear of failure. Today's young people too often tend to be afraid of failure or losing. It is common these days to see the entire

roster of both teams in Little League get a participation trophy just for showing up. Giving out trophies for, um, winning is apparently so twentieth century.

Some schools are getting rid of National Honor Societies because these ceremonies by definition exclude those who don't measure up. Both of these trends are a dark portent for the future. Winning should be encouraged, and the only way we win is by looking failure in the face and saying, "I am not afraid of you."

When I was in high school, I ran cross country. I was allowed to be on the team because the team was awful and my poor performance wouldn't harm the school's record. They would be terrible with or without me.

And boy was I ever terrible. I got a third place ribbon once. There were three people in the race. Once I was huffing and puffing up a hill after all the real athletes and passed me, and one of the referees said to me, "That's okay, keep going, it's better than eating potato chips on the couch." By the way, he was wrong, eating potato chips on the couch is a whole lot more enjoyable.

I did get a trophy at the end of the season, but it was the trophy for "Most Improved Player," which is a polite way of saying, "Eli, you're the worst runner to ever put on a pair of shoes, but we like you anyway."

Fast forward thirty years. I still run because I learned how to in high school. I run at the gym instead of cross country races, but I gained the benefit of failure and I'm training for a 10K.

A person who is afraid to fail is a person who is afraid to live. There is nothing wrong with recognizing those who succeed in life. We're all winners sometimes and we're all failures sometimes, and we must not fear the risk of failure. A winner is just a loser who keeps trying.

Sure, I've heard the old saying, "If at first you don't succeed, skydiving is not for you." But generally speaking, we must not let the fear of failure stand in our way.

Why talk about fear on Rosh Hashanah? Well, that's actually an easy question to answer. What we call the High Holidays are known in Hebrew as the Yamim Noraim, the Fearful Days.

These are the days when we are called to fear God, and it is the fear of God that is the good kind of fear. The fear of God is the awe of God. It is on days such as today that we are to stand in awe before God and realize just how small we are in comparison.

It is the fear of God that leads to other good fears, such as the fear of sin, or the fear of hurting someone unnecessarily. We should recoil from the idea of hurting another person just as we shudder at the thought of a large spider.

One of the shofar blasts on Rosh Hashanah is dedicated to fear. The teruah, that's the one with at least nine short staccato blasts, was originally intended to warn our biblical ancestors of an approaching enemy.

But on the New Year, the teruah reminds us to hold on to the good fear, the fear of God. Only the fear of God is worth your time, only the fear of God is worth your energy.

Dozens of the time, the Bible tells us that we must fear God, and dozens of times the very same Bible says that we must not be afraid. There is no contradiction, for we are talking about two different kinds of fear, the good kind and the bad kind.

The Mishnah rhetorically asks, "Who is mighty?" The answer is that mighty people are those who conquer their impulses. Fear is part of our yetzer-hara, our

selfish impulse. Sometimes, fear can protect us from real danger. But more often than not, we allow our fears to freeze us in place.

May the sweetness of the New Year sweeten your life, and we all come to realize that there is no reason to be afraid. Shanah tovah.