

These are scary days indeed -

With families being torn apart at the border,

Gunshots echoing in the hallways of our schools,

Wildfires blazing along the west coast,

And white supremacists demonstrating their hate.

It feels like our country is on fire, yet so many souls still seek shelter here.

They still want to believe in this place, this land of possibility.

And executive orders slam the door and lock the gate.

These are scary days indeed.

Some days it all feels like a dream; others a nightmare.

Some days it's like we're sleepwalking in broad daylight.

Most days, I dream of being a civil rights lawyer like my brother.

Working in the Attorney General's office in Massachusetts, he files lawsuits in the name of justice. He has an outlet for his outrage, while so many of us struggle with what we can do.

On this eve/day of Rosh Hashanah, we as a Jewish community enter the *Yamim Noraim* –
The Days of Awe. The Days of Fear.

The Hebrew term *Nora* conveys both emotions.

Most years we try to soften and contain the element of fear.

But this High Holy Day season we'd be wise to embrace it.

We'd be wise to explore our own fears.

That's how we begin to manage and even challenge them.

That's how we begin to understand how fear fuels anger,

How fear of others fuels hate.

How fear of change fuels violence.

We all know what it means to fear the unknown.
It's a human instinct that protects us and can unravel us.
Fear fuels our Jewish story – the tragedies and also some victories.
This cycle began so long ago.

Consider our Patriarch Jacob.
He's the twin with the hairy brother Esau,
He's the son of Isaac and Rebekah, grandson of Abraham and Sarah.
He's got good lineage, but his future is still unknown.
There's been a family feud involving birthrights and blessings.
Jacob's not completely innocent, but neither is his favoring father or strong-willed mother.
They're human after all.
Out of jealousy and frustration, Esau threatens to kill Jacob.
Out of love and fear, Isaac sends Jacob away.

This is when our scene begins.
Jacob is running.
His heart is pounding.
Night is falling.
He feels a little out of control, vulnerable, and nervous.
But he knows he needs to stop and rest.
Placing his head on a stone, he closes his eyes and tries to quiet his mind.
His body may be still, but his thoughts are racing.
And then he has the most unusual dream.
Hinei – there's a ladder.
Hinei – there are angels.
Hinei – God is standing beside him, speaking words of promise and protection.
And then Jacob wakes up.

Amazed, he exclaims: “Wow! What just happened?

Was God here this whole time and I, I did not know it?!”ⁱ

Beginning to feel shame and self-reproach, he wonders: How did I let that happen?

Rubbing his eyes and lifting his head, he becomes more scared as he becomes more conscious.

With beautiful precision, biblical scholar J.P. Fokkelman writes:

“In this fear his eye is sharpened for a deeper insight into the situation.”ⁱⁱ

Now Jacob utters aloud so his heart can hear: “Whoa – something is going on here.

Mah nora ha-makom ha-zeh - How frightful is this place!”ⁱⁱⁱ

Our patriarch, our teacher, Jacob begins incredulous, becomes afraid, and then models a crucial and courageous next phase in waking up: He rises. He breaks through the fear, or at least he works with it. Getting up and getting busy, he takes the stone that he had put under his head and sets it up as a pillar.^{iv} He is ready to engage and commit.

For the past two years, America has been waking up.

For many of us, waking up on November 9th felt like waking up from an unsettling dream.

We were incredulous: *Did that really happen? How did we let that happen?*

We became afraid: *How can the country be this divided, and I, we had no idea. How terrifying!*

We picked ourselves up and have been trying to turn our pillows into pillars.

Buses flooded DC for the Women’s March.

Donations flooded the ACLU in response to the Travel Ban.

Phone calls flooded the offices of our Senators and Representatives.

Mothers flooded the streets canvassing for candidates in special elections.

Students flooded social media to say: NO More Gun Violence!

We woke up and realized that democracy isn’t a sporting event to watch from the sidelines.

But our political muscles had atrophied, and we’re now getting back into shape.

Here’s the thing: we often imagine waking up not as a process but an instantaneous shift.

Something startles us: an alarm clock, a crying baby, a ping on the phone. There’s a flip of the switch, and in that moment, we open our eyes amazed that it’s already morning.

But then what? We often close back our eyes and return to the warm comfort of our pillow. We appreciate the reminder, but we're just not ready. We're not ready to get up, to make a change, to leave what's comfortable. Waking up begins with a moment, but can also end after a moment. The real question is: What keeps us awake?

What keeps us awake may be fear.

There's the good kind of fear, like the fear of what would happen if we slept through life.

There's the fear of missing out, of missing precious moments, of missing an opportunity to make a difference.

There are, of course, the more unsettling fears – images that we cannot shake after we first encounter them on the news, in our lives, or within the churning of our own minds.

All of these fears are real and relevant, and we cannot simply run from them. That's why we must explore them. That's why in the world of community organizing, there's one question that anchors a multitude of important conversations: What keeps you up at night? What concern or commitment has woken you up and won't let you go back to sleep?

The foundational idea of community organizing is that if we hear each other's stories and build authentic relationships, we can change the world. We will change the world. Because when we ask each other questions that uncover our core values, motivating fears, and deepest yearnings, we learn that there is so much that we share. Once we're united in a collective story and actively writing the next chapter, we become so much more powerful than a pool of individual voters. I first experienced congregation-based community organizing in Boston. When I arrived at Temple Israel, everyone was still glowing from their recent victory. The congregation played a pivotal role in bringing health care to all in Massachusetts – making history in the state and becoming a model for the country. The campaign began as a series of one-to-one conversations and house meetings within the congregation, and of the various themes that rose to the surface, one was the cost of health insurance and access to health services. This was a major concern for a broad group of people.

What's crucial to understand is that series of conversations did not just happen within one synagogue. Christian communities, communities of color, and communities across Greater Boston were also having conversations about their lives, what was keeping them up at night, and what good they wanted to bring into the world. Health care was a great unifying cause, not just a concern for Jews or minorities. It affected young people and old people, and people across the economic spectrum. It bridged lines of difference. It was a moral issue, and a matter of public policy. As a result, a broad interfaith coalition was able to work together, wield serious political power, and apply strategic pressure on decisionmakers who could bring real change and justice to Massachusetts.

That campaign woke me up to what was possible.

That campaign also woke up Rabbi Jonah Pesner. At the time he ran the synagogue's social justice work. He now runs the Reform Movement's Religious Action Center [the RAC].

That's the beauty of being a movement; one or two communities can wake up the rest, and together we all play a role in a much bigger dream.

In the RAC's own words, here is that dream:

On Nov 13, 1961, the recently founded Religious Action Center is saluted in a special tribute at the White House Rose Garden. President John F. Kennedy is presented with a historic Torah by the Isaac Mayer Wise Temple in Cincinnati, Ohio, symbolizing the lasting contribution of Jews to the moral fabric of American society. President Kennedy notes at the ceremony, "I think this symbolizes the happy relations which exist between all religious groups and must continue to exist in this country if we are to be worthy of our heritage."

A year later the RAC's building is officially dedicated at 2027 Mass Ave.

Next the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act are drafted in the RAC's conference room by Jewish, African-American, and other civil rights leaders.

In 1968 the UAHC and CCAR [associations representing Reform congregations and Reform rabbis] become the first national Jewish organizations to oppose the war in Vietnam. The RAC becomes a hub for Vietnam War protesters and the RAC staff leads strategy sessions to strengthen Jewish involvement in the anti-war efforts.^v

And the dream keeps growing...

For nearly six decades, the RAC has been the hub of Jewish social justice work...We represent the values of the largest and most diverse Jewish Movement in North America. The RAC mobilizes around federal, state, and local legislation; supports and develops congregational leaders; and organizes communities to create a world overflowing with justice, compassion, and peace. As part of a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, our work is completely nonpartisan.^{vi}

The RAC is a force for justice, and yet many people don't know about this source of pride and inspiration in our movement. Sometimes we're asleep to what's right in front of us, and we need someone else to take our hand and lead the way.

In wake of the presidential election, a group of us gathered in the living room of long-time member and social justice warrior Lynn Reichgott. She wisely suggested that we attend together the RAC's biennial gathering called the Consultation on Conscience. In December, planning to attend a conference in May didn't feel quite ambitious or satisfying enough, at least to me. We were awake, incredulous, and a little scared. We wanted to take action. But when like Lynn you've waited 20 years for your congregation to wake up to its political voice, you know that waiting five more months is no big deal. And she was right.

We arrived in DC as a delegation of 13 women from Larchmont Temple. We had woken up and shown up. We weren't the only ones. For the first time ever, the Consultation sold out at 800 people. For three days, Reform Jewish clergy, professionals and lay leaders gathered to hear from policy experts, passionate politicians, and moral champions in our movement, to attend

workshops on issues like immigration, climate change, and criminal justice reform, and to spend a day on Capitol Hill meeting with our own representatives. That day on the Hill began not in a federal building but in the sanctuary of Sixth & I Synagogue. Sitting in the balcony of a packed house, we heard from members of Congress: Jackie Rosen who launched her 'political career' as the president of her congregation in Nevada charged us to be "bold and audacious." Sherrod Brown from Ohio encouraged us to "make good, necessary trouble." Joe Kennedy from Massachusetts reminded us that, "Politics is always about people. It's about asking more of one another, of our government, and of ourselves." Their words of hope, faith and conviction were unfiltered, and given their position on the frontlines, they were unexpectedly optimistic. They made our task crystal clear: keep showing up, speaking up, and sharing our Jewish voice with the world. It matters.

Waking up is a process. Our dreamscape here in America is still unfolding, and we have no idea what lies ahead. We do not know where all of this will lead. But what we do know is that we can't abdicate our seat at the table while others claim moral authority; that gathering together for a few days can energize us for months; and that climbing down from the sanctuary balcony that Tuesday morning, I was transformed – we were transformed. We didn't have all the answers, but we were beginning to understand what we needed to do together.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, teaching in the name of ancient rabbinic sage Shmuel bar Nachmani, imagines an extended dialogue between God and Jacob during his dream:

God encourages Jacob to actually ascend the ladder, but he's too scared.

God critiques his fear, warning, "Fear must never be an excuse. You can be weak, you can be confused...but you cannot be afraid."

Disappointed in himself, Jacob asks if he'll get another chance to climb the ladder.

"Probably," explains God. "There most likely will be hundreds of ladders. But they don't come with signs saying, 'I am a ladder, don't be afraid, climb me now.' If they did, we would all be heroes, bravely seizing each historic moment..."

Jacob is now a bit defensive, saying: “But I didn’t realize that *this* moment was history. I thought it was just another ordinary moment. I didn’t realize that One other than me was also watching, waiting, hoping, peering through the lattice. I didn’t think that I could have any impact, that what I did or did not do mattered.”

“Well realize it now,” commands God. “What people do matters...if everything is connected to everything else, then sooner or later everything matters; everything is potentially historic. We are already *of* history. That is what you can learn from what Abraham and Isaac did on Mount Moriah. They did not simply do what they heard God say. They trusted where God had put them and in what God put before them. They chose to step forward into their destiny.”^{vii}

Waking up is stepping up, and stepping forward into our destiny.

Waking up doesn’t happen overnight.

It happens in stages and cycles, in dialogues and relationships.

Since we arrived home from DC, a small but strong group of congregants has been working to formalize our relationship with the RAC and to formalize our process for engaging as a congregation in social justice advocacy.

There have been a lot of meetings – one-on-one, with the Board, and as a Task Force.

We’ve explored concerns that political advocacy could be perceived as partisan. We’ve heard fears that pursuing issues could be more divisive than unifying. We’ve learned how congregations embrace all of these realities and join their voices with coalitions for change – summoning the Governor of NY to Raise the Age [of criminal responsibility], and persuading the Governor of CA to pass the Trust Act [to limit deportations]. We’ve grown determined to not run away from our fears but embrace them. The stakes are too high...

And timing is on our side. The RAC has recently developed an exciting strategy for state-level change. In states like CA, OH and IL and now Texas, Florida and New York, Jews and reform

congregations represent a sizable and powerful population. When we work together on state legislation, our voice, connections and influence are considerable. And when you think about making change in the lives of Americans, the state level is a sweet spot, balancing scale of impact and probability of success.

As we've been readying ourselves internally to bring our moral voice to the public square, I've also been working with a team of rabbis in New York to form a network of reform congregations interested in pursuing justice together. It turns out that there are more Reform Jews in NY than anywhere else in the world, so we should wake up to that reality, capitalize on that power, and use it for good. At the beginning of the summer, I met with rabbis from 20 different congregations across state to build relationships and build a strategy. We met with a long-time professional in New York state politics who briefed us on the way legislation gets passed in Albany and what bills will likely get attention after the elections.

The goal is to find that sacred area of overlap between deeply felt Jewish values, widely cared about issues, and upcoming policy campaigns that we could influence in a real way. To better understand what issues are on your minds, our newly formed Social Justice Leadership Group is organizing a series of house meetings next month to gather members of LT together and share stories, fears and concerns. These house meetings are not the place to debate politics, dispute facts, or critique elected officials. Rather, we need to come together to wake up to our shared hopes, collective power, and next chapter to be written. Other congregations throughout the state will be engaging in the same process. Some have been doing this for years already, and take on issues and campaigns as opportunities present themselves. Some congregations are just beginning and even learning from our own process and leadership here at LT.

So if you are awake and ready to engage, please sign up for a house meeting [on LT's website]. Meet for coffee with a member of the leadership group [raise your hands]. Grab the hand of a friend who might need a little help getting up and getting there. We may be powerful individuals, but together we will change our world.

When life pulls us in so many different directions, we prioritize our relationships.

We listen to the people who know us best.

Our sons and brothers inspire us.

Our daughters and sisters mobilize us.

We teach each other. We reach one another.

These are scary days indeed – *Yamim Noraim*.

It's overwhelming to determine where best to direct our attention and energy.

It's terrifying to imagine the consequences of inaction.

It's challenging to move our congregation to engage in advocacy.

It's uncomfortable, because it's new.

We've never quite done this before. We don't know what exactly it will look like.

I've sat in the front row watching congregations leverage their political power. I've guided congregations to organize internally. But I've never been on a statewide leadership team, representing my congregation and mobilizing for larger campaigns.

It's scary, and that's why it's amazing and awesome!

It's scary, and that's why we must join together!

It's scary, because it actually matters!

It's scary, because it might transform us!

A few weeks ago, I was lying with my daughter Addy at bedtime, helping her relax into sleep.

She couldn't understand why I wouldn't agree to wake her up the next morning before I woke up her brother. "I don't wake up, Elijah," I explained. "He wakes me up. He's my alarm clock."

She thought that was hilarious, repeating back with a giggle: "He's your alarm clock?!"

Remember she's 4. She has no idea how many people will wake her up – to love, to change, to victory – over the course of what I dream will be a long, rich life.

Addy does have insight, though, into the power of fear. She spent her summer at a new day camp in New Rochelle. She had instructional swim each morning in a gorgeous pool built

specifically for little people like her to learn how to swim. She adored her swim counselor and team of three campers who explored together the world of water. Emboldened by those relationships and the comfort and trust they provided, Addy could face her fear. They spent weeks not on strokes or kicking, but on submerging first their faces and then their whole selves into the water, into the unknown. Once they embraced what scared them, they could learn how to float and even fly through the water. And they did.

As we rise up from our slumber and find our country engulfed in flames of hate and inequality, we're also waking up to the reality that so many of us have access to water.

If we join together and pool our resources, that water will make waves.

If we work through the fears that hold us back, and rally around the fears that mobilize us, The water will rush and rise. And then we'll open our eyes to a new day and see that the prophet Amos's words have become reality: "Justice will be rolling down like water, righteousness like an unfailing stream."^{viii}

And only then will we truly be able to say about this land of dreams and promises in which we dwell, "*Mah nora ha-makom ha-zeh* – How awesome is this place! This is none other than the House of God – the Gateway to Heaven!"^{ix} Through the labor of our hearts and hands, may that day come, and may it be soon. Amen.

ⁱ Genesis 28:10-16

ⁱⁱ Fokkelman, J.P., *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis*, 2nd Edition, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004, 64.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gen. 28:17

^{iv} Gen. 28:18

^v <https://rac.org/history-rac-timeline>

^{vi} <https://rac.org/about-rac>

^{vii} Kushner, Lawrence, *God was in this Place & I, i did not know; Finding Self, Spirituality and Ultimate Meaning*, Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2016, 111-113.

^{viii} Amos 5:24

^{ix} Gen. 28:17