

Radical Solidarity: Turning Dread and Fear Toward Meaning, Hope, and Renewal

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In 1973, singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen was stranded on the Greek island of Hydra, drowning in a deep existential crisis. Profoundly depressed and creatively empty, he believed he had nothing left to say to a fractured world. Cohen would sit staring at his typewriter for hours, completely unable to write, telling his partner that his creative voice was entirely gone, and he had nothing left to say. He felt like a ghost, paralyzed by internal darkness and isolated from humanity.

Today, many individuals find themselves trapped in a similar sense of paralysis, navigating an era marked by existential anxiety, worry, and fear. For Jews—and Jewish university students, in particular—this anxiety is amplified by an alarming surge in global antisemitism. This escalating hostility leaves many feeling isolated, targeted, and deeply fearful within the very spaces and institutions meant to foster safety, belonging, and personal growth.

Jewish tradition during the High Holidays reframes fear (*yirah*) not as an affliction to be cured, but as a sacred instrument for spiritual awakening.

In clinical psychology, this type of anxiety and fear is often treated as a pathology, an emotional dysregulation to be managed and minimized to restore personal autonomy. In stark contrast, Jewish tradition during the High Holidays reframes fear (*yirah*) not as an affliction to be cured, but as a sacred instrument for spiritual awakening. During Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the Days of Awe, fear is deliberately cultivated as a complex emotion—one that holds together the visceral terror of our own fragility with a profound sense of awe before the Divine. The liturgy prompts the community to face mortality together, aiming

to remove earthly illusions, foster deep responsibility, and ultimately turn intense fear into a powerful force for personal and communal transformation (*teshuvah*).

A similar terror occurred in October 1973 when Israel suffered a massive surprise attack on Yom Kippur by multiple Arab armies. The nation faced the raw, immediate threat of being completely overrun, which sent shockwaves of existential concern and dread through the global Jewish community. It was in the depths of this geopolitical and spiritual nightmare that Cohen felt an irrepressible impulse. He left his self-imposed isolation on Hydra and flew directly into the dust-choked desert sands of the Sinai, drawn by an immense desire to connect with and comfort his people.

Upon arrival, Cohen chose proximity over detachment. Travelling from one chaotic army outpost to another, he refused special treatment, ate basic army rations, and slept on the desert sands alongside the troops. Looking into the eyes of young tank crews facing imminent death, Cohen spoke to the Israeli soldiers, reminding them, “We are brothers.”

Through singing, caring, and connecting with the soldiers, Cohen emerged from his personal crisis. His immersion in the collective vulnerability of war resurrected his shattered creativity, serving as the birthplace of his masterpiece “Who by Fire.” The song directly channels both the soldier’s battlefield fears and the High Holiday liturgy of the *Unetaneh Tokef*, which explicitly asks who will live and who will die in the coming year:

Who by fire, who by water,
Who in the sunshine, who in the night,
Who by high ordeal, who by common trial,
And who shall I say is calling?

Cohen showed that facing uncertainty and fear can strengthen rather than break us. His experience together with the soldiers in the desert sands revealed that meaning and renewal come from helping others rather than dwelling on personal concerns.

Ultimately, we must arrive at the conclusion that turning inward and isolating—as Cohen initially did on Hydra—only serves to increase our despair and amplify our anxiety. When hatred and division loom large, the temptation is to pull away; but like Cohen found in 1973, it is precisely when we feel the most anguish and fear that we must come together. Reconnecting with our Jewish roots, strengthening our community, and deepening our caring offers a pathway through the dark. It is this radical solidarity that turns us from dread toward meaning, hope, and renewal.

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*Scan this QR code or visit www.jtsa.edu/radical-solidarity to see Ayala Gottlieb Alter’s (CS ’29) performance at the Great Synagogue of Stockholm. In this special version, Israeli musician Aya Korem fuses the verses of the original prayer, *Unetaneh Tokef*, with Leonard Cohen’s timeless lyrics.*

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