

You're Not Safe—You're Living!

A few weeks after we moved in together, I awoke one night to my fiancée's terrifying scream: "Get away from here—I'm calling the cops!"

He had been startled awake by a noise, and he screamed at the top of his lungs when he saw a shadowy figure at the window of our ground floor apartment. His shout was loud enough *both* to scare away whatever he had seen, and to wake me up in the process. We called the police. They came and took our statement. Eventually we made our way back to sleep, but the damage had been done.

In a matter of moments, our feeling of safety in our home had evaporated. The next day we called ADT to install a security system. With the help of the alarm system and some time, we've mostly recovered. I know that I feel safe again in my own home, and usually Danny does too. But the incident got me thinking about safety in all sorts of new ways.

Safe spaces. To some extent we rely on them every day—the chair you curl up in to read; or the person you call to catch up with while you're stuck in traffic. Whether we find that space in our homes, with our families, here at Kol Ami, or anywhere else—we depend on being able to let our guard down, at least every once in a while. We don't like to linger in places or situations that make us feel unsafe—that threaten our physical wellbeing. This drive to keep ourselves safe from physical harm is one of the most basic instincts of our nature.

Recently though, I've noticed a trend in public discourses throughout our society. We have begun to extend our notion of safety *beyond* the physical. There exists, for example, an ongoing debate in colleges and universities on whether instructors should give "trigger warnings" before they discuss sensitive materials.

Advocates argue that such warnings help students brace themselves for topics which may *trigger* them due to their graphic or traumatic nature, or which may *trigger* them due to other sensitivities. The professors who provide these warnings do so in order to make the classroom feel emotionally and psychologically safe. Those who oppose such warnings

worry that all they really accomplish is the “coddling” of the mind, shielding students from ideas that might be different from their own.¹

The existence of “safe spaces” on campuses during controversial debates or speakers, and the drive to create “safe spaces” in other parts of society, has been pulled into this debate as well. Writing about this a little over a year ago, the president of Northwestern University, Morton Schapiro, noted the following:

Students don’t fully embrace **uncomfortable** learning unless they are themselves **comfortable**. Safe spaces provide that comfort. The irony, it seems, is that the best hope we have of creating an inclusive community is to first create spaces where members of each group feel safe.²

But critics like Judith Shulevitz, a columnist in the New York Times, argue that while possibly “innocuous” and well meaning, safe spaces actually represent:

an expression of the conviction, increasingly prevalent among college students, that their schools should keep them from being “bombarded” by discomfiting or distressing viewpoints.³

It seems curious to me that on both sides of this debate, prominent Jews are speaking out. So I wonder, what are we to make of this debate? Are “safe spaces” like “alarm systems”—are they a *necessary* measure to protect us from emotional harm? Or do they foster a homogeneity of opinion and thought—a sameness of belief—that actually might *cause* us harm by shielding us from ideas that challenge us?

Do “safe spaces” create the groundwork for growth by allowing us to feel comfortable, or do they inhibit our growth by preventing discomfort and engagement with different ideas?

As with many good Jewish questions, the answer is a bit of both. You see this debate hints at one of the basic paradoxes of human life:

¹ Several articles on this phenomena [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

² Link [here](#).

³ Shulevitz article [here](#)

We *instinctually strive* to feel safe, even though *complete* safety lies beyond our reach. We have the persistence of will to seek it out, even though we know we will never achieve it.

Whether we seek it out by installing an alarm system, or evacuating before a deadly hurricane, we make choices every day that aim to safeguard our lives, and the lives of those we love. And we are certainly not so naive that we could deny that such a desire for safety should extend to our emotional, psychological, and spiritual selves.

Yet in trying to feel safe, we sometimes forget that we are never *actually* “safe”—we’re living.

Very little about life can actually be called “safe.” Whether it’s a car accident or road rage; a chronic illness or a sudden injury; natural disasters or political catastrophes; the world is full of reminders that our lives are precious and fragile—certainly not safe. When you think about it, we’re actually quite lucky that we *ever* achieve a sense of “safety.” If at every moment, we were precisely aware of how *fragile* our lives are, I think we all would have quite a difficult time falling asleep at night.

But because we so easily forget that we are not safe, Yom Kippur comes to remind us. “Life,” the day cries out to us, “does not guarantee you *safety*—in fact, friends, it guarantees just the opposite.” We rehearse our *death* on Yom Kippur—we fast if we’re able, and we abstain from the pleasures of this world to force ourselves to remember that **we are not safe—but we’re living.**

True safety, the day announces, awaits us only in the grave. “Who by fire, and who by water?” the liturgy croaks at us. Some of us who were here last year are not here any more. “Who before their time, and who in their time?” When will my time, be? Can I do anything about it? And how can I feel safe, and carry on with my day-to-day, as I stare into an abyss of uncertainty?

The mere fact of our lives does not entitle us to “safe spaces” and “trigger warnings”—instead we have to figure out how to harness our fears, turning them into productive actions, whether they are fears for our physical safety, or any other sort.

Luckily for us, this day of dread has something to teach about how we do channel that fear into something productive. Our Torah portion reminds us that in the face of uncertainty and danger; in the shadow of our fear and our lack of safety, God has given us the miraculous gift of *choice*.

Every day, we have the ability to choose life, even in the face of fear and even despite our lack of safety. In the very same Torah portion that we will hear this morning, God calls out: “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse, *that you might choose life.*”

Hard as it may be, we **can choose** how to react in the face of fear—and we **must choose** how to live and work for a safer world, even though we know we will never complete the task.

Because ultimately fear and danger are *useful* feelings. *Not feeling safe should* spur us to action. With physical safety, these actions are so common that we take them for granted. We install that alarm system. We put on our seat belts when we drive. We keep water, flashlights, and other supplies in the closet in case of an earthquake.

But when it comes to emotional, psychological, or spiritual danger, the choice is not always so clear. There are no flashlights for emotional emergencies; we have no spiritual seatbelt that will provide us with a space safe from cruelty of hateful words or ideologies. So this morning I want to challenge us to consider how we can react in the face of speech, images or ideologies that threaten our *emotional* safety.

How do we “**choose life**” in the face of all the *non-physical* threats we may encounter? In a time where nazis march proudly in the streets, and where “alternative” facts masquerade as truth, we cannot ignore this question.

We saw one response this summer at the Chicago Dyke March. In the midst of LGBT pride celebrations around the world, several Jewish women were asked to leave a rally, because the presence of the flags they were holding made other members of the collective feel “unsafe.” You see, the women held rainbow flags emblazoned with a blue Star of David in the center.

And out of commitment to its anti-zionist platform, the organizers determined that this flag violated the *safety* of their space. They asked the women to leave because their flag was an ideological threat, and the march organizers's words, their action reflected "their priority... to ensure a safer space for those who are most marginalized."⁴

In the face of a symbol that they perceived as a threat, the organizers of the march separated from it. That was their strategic choice—perhaps even their way of "choosing life." They determined that the flags, or perhaps the ideology of the women who held them, represented *such* a psychological threat to members of their collective that the best course of action was to rid their space of that symbol. They retreated to a "safe space" by asking others to leave it.

Now let me be clear: I don't think those march organizers know all that much about the zionism they insist on rejecting. I oppose their reasoning, and I object to their misperception of that flag. But I cannot dismiss their choice to separate from what they perceived as a psychological threat. To do so would be careless.

Our ability to retreat to "safe spaces" in the face of emotional threats represents a viable and, occasionally necessary option. Sometimes the best thing we can do in the face of threatening words, images, or ideas *is* to remove them from us or remove us from them. Sometimes our best choice *is* to separate; to step back into the safety of a community which shares some of our core beliefs without challenge.

But on that day in June, the Dyke March organizers had another choice, and it's a shame they neglected it. And each and every time *we* face emotional threats—perceived or real—we have that choice too. We can choose to reject the safety we find in the arms of single-mindedness. We can choose instead to embrace the hard and painful work of engaging across ideological lines—the work of listening, and maybe even learning from those whose core values differ fundamentally from our own.

This morning I suggest to you that the spirit of this day calls us to make *that* choice as often as we can. "Choose life" we are told—you're not dead yet. **Don't you dare** let fear destabilize you, or let it force you to shut out the world around you. Fear should lead you to

⁴ Statement [here](#).

action, to growth, maybe even to *teshuvah*—to a return to your truest self. Our sense that we are “unsafe” in a given situation can spur us to listen carefully, engage, and maybe even learn if we let it. Certainly our emotional and psychological safety are intimately connected to the physical, but they are **not one and the same**. In the face of hateful speech, **we** choose our response. It may make us uncomfortable. It may even frighten us to our bones. But if we are brave enough, I believe we can choose to learn even from people whose ideologies and core beliefs differ radically from our own.

The choice between retreat and engagement remains deeply personal. I cannot tell you in what circumstances you should retreat to your “safe space” and in what circumstances you should lean into your discomfort for the sake of growth. The boundary between the fear that we must remove ourselves from, and the differences that we can learn from, changes all the time. My boundary between those choices differs from yours. It even changes even within myself as I grow, and keep choosing life in the face of uncertainty and fear.

Sometimes, we might even choose a middle ground between these options, and it’s best illustrated with a story. But since I began this sermon with one of my experiences, I want to close by reminding you of one of yours.

Twenty-six years ago, it was not always safe for LGBT folks to participate openly in Jewish life. While this occasionally appeared by way of *physical* danger, it was really out of seeking emotional and psychological safety that you founded Congregation Kol Ami as a sort of “safe space” amidst the broader Jewish community. A fusion of allies and LGBT folks, Kol Ami was a breath of fresh air. You didn’t need to be an exclusively LGBT congregation to live your values, but at the same time, you trusted that no woman would be given a strange look at Temple for mentioning “**her wife**,” The mail would reach “**Mr. Cohen**” and wish **him** a Shanah Tovah if those were **his** pronouns.

So for the LGBT folks who were part of this community from the start, there is no doubt in my mind that it represented a safe space. It was a space for everybody—LGBT or not—where the core components of your very being would not be challenged.

But this community did not retreat from public life. You did not take your safety for granted, or rely on this community as a place of hiding from the world around you. You took the strength you found amongst like-minded people, and turned outward to the world

from your little corner of West Hollywood. You engaged. You learned. You led a communal conversation that may have never felt “safe,” and it may not have even occurred to you that you were seeking safety. But you lived in a way that challenged yourself and others to grow through their discomfort. And by doing so you paved a way for a Jewish society that was a little “safer” for LGBT folks and allies everywhere.

This community took *both* paths. It took the road of safety amidst like-minded people, *and* it took the path of pushing forward into the uncertainty and the fear to come out stronger on the other side.

On this holiest day of the year, we are called to remember that we are not safe—we’re living. We are called to choose life, and to choose our reaction in the face of fear. Sometimes we might need the safety of retreat. But may we never forget the growth that comes from standing tall, standing proud, and leaning into our discomfort. Amen.