

## What's Distinctly Un-Jewish about Security?

The comic strip *Peanuts* turned four years old in 1954. On June 1st of that year, Charles M. Schulz introduced a rumpled blanket into his 4-panelled strip, and according to a dictionary of neologisms – a dictionary of new words and phrases – Schulz probably coined the phrase ‘security blanket’ that very day. Later, ‘security blanket’ was subsumed under the term ‘transitional object’.

On that day in 1954, in the first of the cartoon’s four panels, we notice in the foreground Linus Van Pelt – as most of you remember, Lucy’s younger brother and Rerun Van Pelt’s older brother. In fact we see Linus sitting contentedly with said security blanket against his cheek. Lucy and Charlie Brown are standing in the background. In that first panel, Charlie asks Lucy, *Why does Linus hold his blanket like that?*

In the second panel, Charlie and Lucy are standing together, without Linus. Lucy answers, *I’m not sure – I think maybe it gives him a feeling of security.*

In the third panel, we see Charlie walking away, while over Lucy’s head there’s a cartoon bubble with no words in it, only a large question mark. In that sparse style of Schultz’s, the question mark over Lucy’s head could mean simply, *Where are you going, Charlie Brown?* Or maybe, *Why are you walking toward my stupid brother and his silly blanket?*

In the fourth and final panel, we see Charlie Brown sitting on the floor covered in Linus’ blanket up to his chin. Charlie’s face is colored an intense shade of gray while all around Charlie’s head Schultz has drawn squiggles of anger or maybe embarrassment. As it happens, Charlie gets the last word in this particular strip by complaining *It doesn’t work – I feel like an idiot!*

Our theme for this year’s High Holidays is “Security, and Jewish Alternatives to Security.”

Everything, actually, that I want to share with you about security during these High Holidays can be summed up by that very *Peanuts* cartoon drawn over 57 years ago. First the idea that security isn’t a *thing* but rather a feeling, or a felt experience. Remember that Lucy tells Charlie Brown *I think maybe the blanket gives him a feeling of security.* Second, I want to explore with you the reasons that we tend to feel like idiots when we first encounter one particular kind of security blanket. Remember that Charlie Brown concludes, *It doesn’t work – I feel like an idiot.*

So here’s the overall plan: tonight I want to highlight the current American pre-occupation with security and why security as a concept is actually *foreign* to the Jewish tradition. Tomorrow morning I’d like to share a few Jewish alternatives to the notion of security, with special attention paid to *one* distinctly Jewish version of a **security blanket**. Ten days from now on *Kol Nidrei*, the-evening-before-Yom-Kippur-morning, I’d like to examine why we tend to feel like idiots when offered *another* kind of security blanket and how we might get over feeling like idiots when we are offered that blanket.

If you’d like a simpler way of keeping track of this trajectory, just think of Panels Two and Four from that first-ever cartoon to feature a transitional object as its subject. Remember Panel Two, where Lucy observes: *I think maybe the blanket gives him a feeling of security.* And Panel Four, where Charlie Brown concludes: *It doesn’t work – I feel like an idiot.*

We all know the joke about the typical telegram a Jewish mother sends her grown children: *Worry now; details to follow*. Doesn't it sometimes feel as if, during the past ten years, all Americans have been receiving Jewish-mother telegrams? *Worry now. Details to follow*. We're all anxious; we *expect* to be asked to worry before being told anything specific to worry about. For instance on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9-11 a few weeks ago, headlines screamed *Nation on Alert for 9/11; Security is Tight in New York City and DC*. |

No, *chaverim v're-im* - no, my friends. 'Security' isn't tight. Vigilance is tight. Let us say what we mean. Security isn't something that can be tightened or loosened. It's a feeling. A feeling of safety, protection, trust, and confidence in the future. Police and TSA agents can't create the feeling of security. Metal detectors and full-body scans can't create that feeling. Of course we hope that metal detectors and full-body scans do their job. We hope that police and TSA agents are vigilant; we hope they do protect us from those who mean to harm us. We hope they will not rely on the most egregious stereotypes in order to keep track of us. We hope and pray that those in positions of authority will use their power with restraint and with skill. But they cannot make us *feel secure*. Despite its being commodified, packaged and marketed over the past decade, security is not a commodity, it's not a thing. It's a feeling.

I know I risk stating the obvious, but I want to call attention, briefly, to the many ways we currently use - with perfectly straight faces - the word *security* despite the easy appeal we could make to irony: Social Security, for one. Derivatives, i.e., securities whose prices are derived from assets whose **very value** comes from **fluctuations** in those assets. As you probably know, there are even derivatives - *securities* - based on regional weather data such as amount of rainfall or number of sunny days. And then there are home security systems, or rather, home vigilance systems if we really called them what they are. Because the funny thing is, the kind of security that involves outsmarting the bad guys tends to make us worry more and more that we haven't covered all bases. So-called security systems don't usually help us achieve a feeling of safety; they tend to make us think about more breaches and gaps that we've neglected to address.

And then there's the Department of Homeland Security. Ever looked at their website? I did, in preparation for our theme this year. I hate to be a spoiler, but I gotta tell you, there's definitely a twilight zone kind of feel to it. For instance, under the tab "Preparedness, Response, Recovery" there's a link to something called "Ready Kids" with sections including "Fun and Games." Scroll down far enough past the many fun games you can play while getting ready for disaster and you'll get to the "National Preparedness Month Song" written by children from an Oklahoma City elementary school; it's sung to the tune of "She'll be Comin' Round the Mountain." Please indulge me:

*Oh September is the month to get prepared, for emergencies at home or anywhere,  
so now get your act together be prepared for stormy weather, oh September is the month to get prepared.*

Another of its many stanzas goes:

*You need tools and food and water for three days, also radio/flashlight batteries for your stay,  
grab your first aid kit and some clothes to wear. Don't forget your underwear,  
oh September is the month to get prepared.*

If you browse the DHS website like I did, I suspect you might end up agreeing with Princeton professor Cornel West's recent op-ed in the *New York Times* about how disappointed Martin Luther King would surely be now. Professor West wrote:

*King was not an American [Edward] Gibbon, chronicling the decline and fall of the American empire, but a courageous and*

visionary Christian blues man fighting with style and love in the face of four catastrophes he identified. [The first], militarism, is an imperial catastrophe that has produced a military-industrial complex and **national security state** and warped the country's priorities and stature....

And then there's the almost-oxymoron, job security. Not to mention *securing* a livelihood in the face of grave economic uncertainty and the rapidly changing nature of work itself. And thanks to the apparently ineradicable nature of the data collected by the internet and social media, there's even irony in trying to *secure* a reputation for oneself. There's also something new from the fairly new Federal agency called ICE - Immigration and Customs Enforcement. ICE has developed a program called Secure Communities, a program that shares data like minor traffic violations in ways that some state and local governments believe will undermine relatively stable communities, especially those with undocumented residents.

Is the word 'security' being over-used? Is it really such a good catch-all term for our time? We should try to name things properly; naming things properly is a very Jewish task. Indeed, at a recent family wedding I met the distinguished political scientist, Sanford Lakoff, who later shared with me a paper he wrote about one example of the added difficulties we incur when we don't name things properly. In this case, Sandy was concerned with the obverse side of security's coin, namely terror. *Terror*, Sandy Lakoff says, *is a tactic, not an enemy. And insofar as we are waging war against it, the War on Terror is like no ordinary war.* Lakoff further notes, quoting British political essayist Timothy Garton Ash, *You can't declare victory in a worldwide, open-ended war over an abstract noun.*

Before we move on, however, to some Jewish alternatives to 'security', a term that seems to be as equally problematic an abstract noun as 'terror', I feel obliged to mention Israel and its security. Despite this precarious time in which the ultimate character of our people's homeland hangs in the balance, I want to do so with just a drop of humor, courtesy of Stephen Colbert from last Thursday night's show. As you remember, last Thursday was the day before the UN General Assembly voted on Palestinian statehood. Here's a sound bite from Colbert's interview with Jeremy Ben Ami, the founder and president of J Street.

**Colbert:** *You know, Obama hasn't visited Israel since he's been President.*

**Jeremy Ben-Ami:** *I would love for the President to go to Israel but true friendship for Israel at this point is helping it to make peace and helping it end this conflict...*

**Colbert,** interrupting Ben-Ami: *I'm not so sure, I'm not so sure and I'll tell you why...it's that constant existential crisis is kind of the Jews' thing.*

**Ben-Ami:** *I think there's more than enough for Jews to worry about if we can get this conflict behind us. There's an entire neighborhood of problems that you can worry about once you get beyond the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I think it's absolutely essential to Israel's survival if it's going to be Jewish and democratic. It has to have a State of Palestine living side by side in peace and security.*

**Colbert:** *Thank you. So I will see you if not again on this show, then I'll see you at the Judgment Day.*

Which brings us to tonight's question: why **isn't** security an inherently Jewish idea? Because security comes from the Latin words *se* and *cura*, meaning 'the state of being apart-from-care'. *Se* is the Latin prefix meaning 'apart' - as in se-parate, se-cede, and se-duce. *Cura* is a Latin noun meaning 'care' - as in curate, sinecure, and yes, manicure and pedicure. 'Security' means literally freedom-from-care, which seems to be an idea unknown to us Jews. I think in large part it has to do with what Stephen Colbert observed last week: that *constant existential crisis* is the Jews' thing.

But why is this so? I think an answer for this question goes back to that most basic of Jewish ideas, *brit*, the legal name for partnership. Our **foundational stories** depict us as active, ongoing

partners with the Holy One in perfecting the world. We can't be free from care any more than *haKadosh Barukh Hu*, the Holy One of Blessing, can be free from care. Our tradition takes the point of view that neither we nor *ha'Borei et ha'kol*, the Creator of Everything, ever get to slack off. We're partners in the ongoing creation of this thing we call the world. Surely, upholding our end of the deal is a reasonable cause for constant existential crisis.

So maybe we should just say: *Game over; there's no such thing as security for the Jewish people since we don't understand the concept of being free-from-care. Being free-from-care just isn't our thing.* We could do that, but as many of you know, I'm a serial sermon writer at the High Holidays. I'd rather come back tomorrow and explore some Jewish alternatives to security with you. I hope you'll be here, too.

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***Rosh haShana Yom Rishon***  
*1 Tishrei 5772* - September 29, 2011

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### What's Hiding Right Under Our Feet?

Let's begin this morning with a Jewish folktale. This version is based on that of the gifted author-illustrator, Uri Shulevitz, in his children's book called *The Treasure*:

There once was a man named Isaac whose hunger never left him. And why was he hungry day and night? Yes, your guess is correct.

One night Isaac had a dream. In his dream a voice claimed that he, Isaac, must go to Warsaw to look for a pile of gold coins buried under the bridge leading to the palace. Naturally, when Isaac woke up, he forgot all about what he had dreamed.

But soon he dreamed the same dream again. And again. So he decided to travel to Warsaw, although he had only his two feet, a hard crust of bread, some molding cheese, and a walking stick for his travels.

It wasn't difficult to find the palace; its gleaming white stones shone from far away and its many towers seemed to tickle the sky. But the bridge....to his dismay, it was guarded constantly by the king's own soldiers. Isaac didn't dare to start digging for gold coins in the sight of these armed men. So instead he walked back and forth across the bridge – and under it – for many days until his constant presence caught the attention of the captain of the guards. The captain asked Isaac for an explanation and all he got from the poor man was the notion that a dream had brought him to Warsaw.

Then the captain laughed hard and said to Isaac, "If I had believed a dream I once had, I would have taken myself to your own town and looked for a pile of coins under the stove of a man named Isaac."

As soon as the captain finished explaining about his strange dream, Isaac returned home immediately. He quickly borrowed a shovel and began to dig – right under his own stove, of course. And there, right under his stove, was an enormous pile of gold coins.

With deep thanksgiving, he set aside many, many coins to feed anyone who was as hungry as he had been, he started a school to teach the town's young people both old and new trades, and he arranged to have a new aron kodesh, a holy ark for the Torah, built for the town shul.

- adapted from *The Treasure* by Uri Shulevitz

Indeed, as this charming story reminds us, real treasure can lie hidden right under our feet. Sometimes, somebody else has to tell us it's there. The particular treasure I want to focus on this morning is... a particular kind of security blanket, a particular kind of comfort. Please let me explain. As many of you heard last night, I'm a confessed serial sermon-writer when it comes to the High Holidays. I like to pick a theme – this year, it's Security and Jewish Alternatives to Security – and stick with it straight through Yom Kippur. Last night I shared the first-ever use of the phrase 'security blanket.' As you might have guessed, it's found in a Peanuts cartoon. And in this particular cartoon from 1954, Charlie Brown asks Lucy why her brother Linus is sitting with a blanket pressed to his

cheek. Lucy answers, *I think it gives him a **feeling** of security.* Then last night I also offered some examples of the many careless ways in which we use the term ‘security’ today, especially when what we really mean is vigilance. Then I explained that security’s basic meaning, which is freedom-from-care, is utterly foreign to the Jewish tradition. *Se* and *cura* are two Latin words; put together, they mean the state of being apart from, free from care.

I then invoked Stephen Colbert from a show last week in which he interviews J Street president Jeremy Ben-Ami. Colbert interrupts Ben-Ami, who’s in the middle of explaining *how* America needs to help Israel end this protracted conflict with the Palestinians. Colbert says, *I’m not so sure about that...and I’ll tell you why: it’s that ‘constant existential conflict’ is kind of the Jews’ **thing**.*

So security, i.e., freedom-from-care – it’s just not our thing, not a Jewish thing. And I suggested that there’s a reason why being carefree isn’t our thing, while on the other hand, being locked in constant existential crisis *is* our thing. I think it goes back to our most foundational idea, the idea of *brit*, as in *B’nei Brith* and *bris* [ritual circumcision]. *Brit* is the legal word for partnership. Jewish tradition holds that we’re equal partners with *haKadosh Barukh Hu*, the Holy One of Blessing, in the work of creation and even in the improvement of the world. And who has time to feel carefree with that kind of responsibility for life?

What, then, are some Jewish alternatives to the idea of security, since the very idea of being free-from-care, seems to be foreign to the Jewish mindset? First and foremost there is the concept of *bitachon*, whose basic meaning is ‘trust’. In ancient Hebrew, the root of *bitachon* meant ‘to lean or rest on someone or something.’ In modern Hebrew, however, *bitachon* has taken on the same burdensome roles that the English word ‘security’ has.

In fact, notes Rabbi Julian Sinclair, *the core of the secular Zionist revolution was to shift the Jewish consciousness of what we should be relying on and trusting in from God to ourselves.* *Bitachon now means, among other things, the exhaustive series of security checks one passes through before boarding an El Al flight abroad or in Israel, and in Israel itself, the security checks one passes through before entering a shopping mall, café, or post office.* *Misrad ha’Bitachon is the Ministry of Defense, not the Ministry of Trust.* *Bitachon is also the term used for the warranty on an electrical appliance; [a closely-related word], bituach, is an insurance policy for your home or car and bituach le’umi is Social Security.*

But still, the basic meaning of *bitachon* is ‘trust.’

As I see it, pre-modern Hebrew was more precise in its use of the word *bitachon*. *Bitachon* used to weave the **social construct** that is *trust* into the idea of ‘security’. Security in its literal meaning – the state of being free from care – does **not** depend on human interaction, even less on human-divine interaction. But not so *bitachon*. Thus, you can have a ‘security fence’ but are not likely to find a ‘trust fence.’ A security fence might make you relatively care-free. But trust requires people.

To be sure, Hebrew, like English, has other words for slightly-different-but-related notions. Caution and safety can be conveyed with the Hebrew word *z’hirut*. Protection can be conveyed with the word *sh’mira*. Confidence can be conveyed with the word *eimun*; more about *that* on Yom Kippur. But security *per se* – to be free from care – such an idea was unknown to biblical Hebrew. To help us explore these alternative ideas *related to* security but *not exactly substitutes* for security, I’ve created a little typology. To my way of thinking, caution and safety address **physical** needs; protection addresses an **emotional** need; confidence in the future addresses **spiritual** needs; and trust, as I just mentioned, addresses **social** needs.

Today, I want to focus on social needs. That is, the concept of *bitachon* and a specific place where *bitachon*, trust, can be nurtured in order to meet important needs of ours as **social** creatures. I'm referring to the small *shul*, the small synagogue community. But I don't do this without some serious reservations, because quite frankly, this topic becomes very personal very fast. My own job is insecure, and I don't want this sermon to appear self-serving.

After much thought, I've decided to say it straight out: I'm, in the middle of a one-year contract this year because String of Pearls hasn't been growing at the rate it must grow in order to meet its financial obligations to a rabbi beyond next June. And this, despite String of Pearls' commendable efforts to be frugal and smart and resourceful. To be sure, String of Pearls is engaged at the moment in all sorts of creative ways to fundraise, but we also need more members, more donations, perhaps even new business models. But mostly more members, plain and simple.

I'll admit I'm getting worn out trying to do this wonderful work while also juggling the complicated schedules of three other institutions where I work part-time as a chaplain in the Philadelphia area. But at least I *have* three other part-time jobs.

I know there are people in this room today whose employment situation is far, far worse than mine. Too many of you are suffering from under-employment or un-employment or even 'over-employment' - but only in the sense that you're working long, long hours in the hope that you won't get cut when your firm downsizes or moves much of its workforce overseas. And then there are those of you who are trapped in difficult work and/or life situations because you need to keep food on the table. This is a grim reality, this is *insecurity*. In fact, for perhaps the first time in the history of this synagogue, I want to acknowledge those among us who are constrained or demoralized or fearful because of the lack of work \_ or the right kind of or amount of work - by pausing for a moment of silence. [pause]

I hope our respectful silence has made you feel a little less lonely in your pain and uncertainty about the future. We also acknowledge your situation with prayer when we arrive at *Avinu Malkeinu* on page 96 in our *mahzorim*. You see, in the fourth verse, every year, in good years and bad, in economic downturns and comebacks, we Jews come right out and ask for *parnassa v'khalkala* - livelihood and sustenance. *Avinu malkeinu kot'veinu b'sefer parnasa v'khalkala*, our Father our King, inscribe us in the book of *parnasa*, a decent living, and *khalkala*, economic well-being.

But now I'd like to return to why I think the idea of a synagogue community is crucial in a world where there's so little security, so little freedom from care. You see, if we do it right, I think a *shul*, even in this century, can be the *greatest of all security blankets* for Jews, or more accurately, can offer us something that's more enduring than security. And that something is trust, *bitachon*. As I pointed out last night, there's no such *thing* as security. Security is a feeling, it's ephemeral. But trust, on the other hand, is really something, it's a thing. It can last - and also outlast - every temporary feeling of safety and protection. As the columnist Maureen Dowd reminded us yesterday morning when she quoted Albert Einstein, *Everything that can be counted doesn't necessarily count, and everything that counts can't necessarily be counted*. Trust is one of those things that counts but that cannot be counted. Trust depends on commitment over time.

I predict that synagogues, especially the smaller ones, will outlast every new Jewish venture, no matter how appealing, how well-funded, how convenient, or how popular they are at any given time. It's the nature of a synagogue to be *the* Jewish address for building trust; it's **a place for reaping**

**the rewards of commitment.** Not for a moment do I intend this to be a back-handed critique of new models for *enlivening* Jewish life. I believe strongly that these new models are crucial to the health of the Jewish tradition. Some of our congregants see them as our competition. But I personally welcome them and the richness they add to Jewish life. Still, I have no illusions about their chances for longevity. I think that sooner or later their innovations will be absorbed by synagogue communities. It were ever thus in Jewish life.

Before I close, I want to touch briefly on the kind of commitments a synagogue should be about. Handily enough, the next-to-last verse in the last *aliya* of today's Torah reading does it for us. Remember I asked you to take note of it? It's the verse about Abraham planting a tamarisk tree in Be'er Sheva. There's a *midrash* on this phrase. (*Midrash* refers to a literary genre like no other; ostensibly its task is to resolve seeming contradictions or seeming redundancies or seeming superfluities in the Bible. But in fact, it always has its own agenda and often subverts what the Bible actually seems to be saying or it takes whatever the Bible's trying to say in a straightforward way and goes off in a wild new direction.) A *midrash* on our verse about Abraham planting a tamarisk tree (a kind of oak tree, we think), does just this. The *midrash* writer asks, rhetorically: why is it so important that we learn what kind of tree Abraham decides to plant, or for that matter, why does the Torah even mention that he plants one? Big deal! This is surely a superfluous detail.

Not so, comes the answer. For the Hebrew word for tamarisk tree, *eishel*, is actually an acronym says the *midrash* writer: an acronym for the words *akhila*, food; *sh'tia*, drink; and *l'vaya*, escort, which begin respectively with the letters *alef, shin, lamed - eishel*. And this is what our founding father Abraham stands for - food, drink, and escort. *So what?* you still might be wondering right about now. But when you think a little more about it, we *hunger* for **action**, as in hungering for adventure. On the other hand, we *thirst* for **knowledge**. And we all need escort, that's to say, accompaniment through life's challenges and moments of transition.

In a synagogue community, people who are hungry for action *commit* to taking action in order to right some of the world's wrongs, to doing acts of justice. In a synagogue community, people who are thirsty for a kind of knowledge that endures the test of time *commit* to study together. In a synagogue community, we all accompany one another through life's highs and lows. And these intensely shared experiences build trust. Time doesn't allow me to share the exciting and very concrete things we're acting on and studying together. But please, if you're new or checking us out, stay for lunch today and ask me about them. I can also tell you how this particular community has escorted me and many others in difficult times and in happy times.

I hope I've made a case for *building trust* through ongoing commitment to one another as an alternative to *craving security*, which is, after all, always transient, fleeting, ephemeral. Because nothing in life is permanently 'secure' and certain, as all adults know. Except death, as Yom Kippur will remind us in ten days from now.

At that time, the question to be considered will be something like: *beyond an ongoing, committed Jewish community, where can we find lasting substitutes for security, things like confidence and faith in the future?* I hope you'll join us for that exploration and for all that the ancient and wise rituals of Yom Kippur have to offer us. And I hope you'll join us, period.