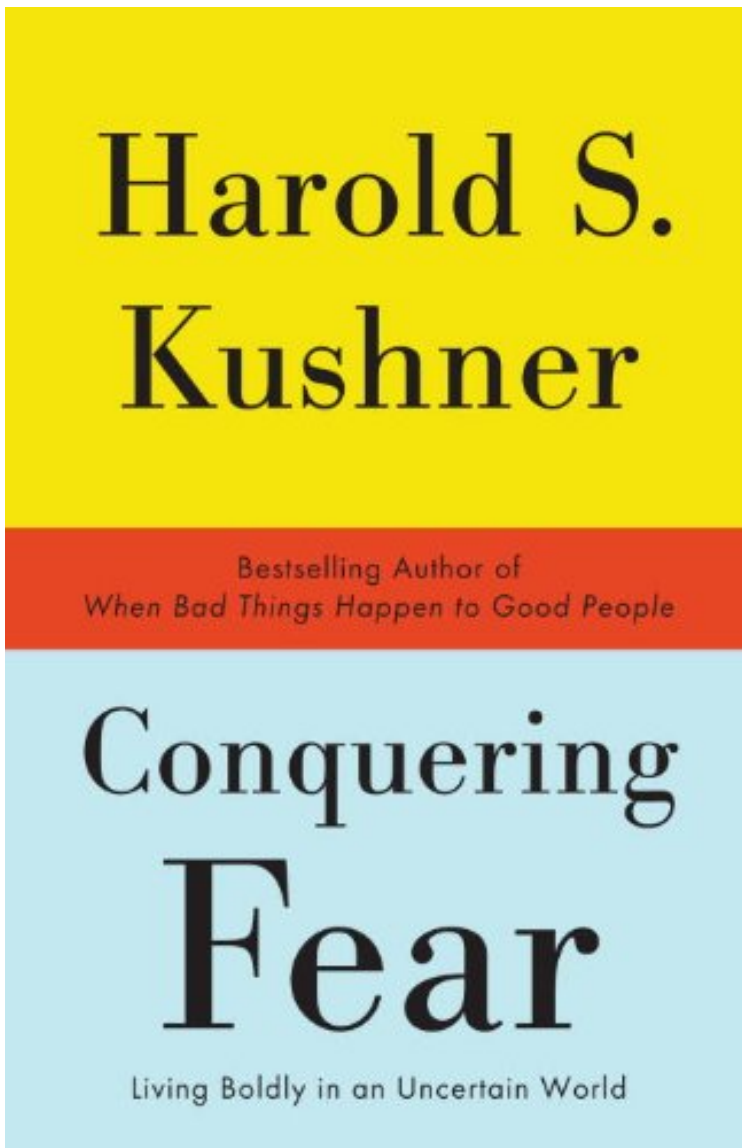


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Conquering Fear



Par Harold S. Kushner
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurFrom the best-selling author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, an illuminating book about fearand what we can do to overcome it.An inescapable component of our lives, fear comes in many guises. In uncertain times, coping with these fears can be especially challenging, but in this indispensable book, Harold S. Kushner teaches us to confront, master, and even embrace fear for a more fulfilling life. Drawing on the teachings of religious and secular literature and on the true stories of people who have faced their fears, we are again inspired by Kushners wisdom, at once deeply spiritual and eminently practical.From the Trade Paperback edition.ExtraitThe Eleventh CommandmentDON'T BE AFRAIDThey shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree and none shall make them

afraid. MICAH 4:4 Before I could write a book about what people today are afraid of and how they might deal with their fears, I had to write first about what frightens me. Only then would I be able to understand the fears of others. Fears can range from mild concern (Did I remember to turn off the oven?) to serious worry (She was due home at ten; it's midnight and she's not home yet!) to sheer panic (My brakes aren't working! The man has a knife!). I find myself worrying more about something happening to people I love than about something happening to me. I worry that they are vulnerable to serious illness, accidents, crime, natural disaster. To love someone is to make yourself a hostage to fortune, aware of all the terrible things that can happen to him or her. Whenever I read of a violent crime against a woman or child, a fatal automobile accident, a young person drowning, the rational side of my brain reassures me that it makes the news only because it is so rare, but my emotional side keeps saying, What if it had been someone close to me? (Even as parents fear for the well-being of their children, children's primal fear is that something will happen to one of their parents. I was once preparing a thirteen-year-old boy for his bar mitzvah ceremony, and I asked him if there was anything he was scared of. I was thinking of his performance at the synagogue service, but he spoke instead of his fear that one of his parents would die while he still needed him or her.) It startles me to realize that my grandson is only a few years away from being eligible for military service and might have to risk his life in a war. I worry about my grandchildren having to cope with the dangers and challenges of adolescence in a much more complicated world than either I or their mother grew up in. I worry about another attack on an American city, like the one on September 11, 2001, with heavy loss of life. I worry in the knowledge that I and the people around me can do everything right and still experience misfortune. We can be careful about what we eat and how much we exercise and still fall victim to a genetic time bomb hidden in our DNA. We can drive carefully and still be in the path of a careless driver. We can work hard at our jobs and save for our retirement, only to have events beyond our control force our employer to terminate our job or market events erode our savings. On those infrequent occasions when I have a bad dream, it is always the same one. I am trying to get somewhere where people are expecting me, and I can't get there. The dream speaks to my sense of helplessness in the face of forces I can't control and my fear of disappointing people who are counting on me. I worry about losing those things that give meaning and pleasure to my life, the ability to read and to write, to give birth to another book or craft a meaningful sermon, the ability to follow the news and crack a joke about contemporary politics, the ability to recognize people I care about and remember where I know them from. In my rabbinic experience, I have seen too many people who were so sharp and insightful when I met them, only to have those qualities taken from them. I worry about our planet becoming less livable, about our running out of places to live, water to drink, and even clean air to breathe. Sometimes I worry that I will live so long that I will come to see terrible things happening and be powerless to do anything about them, a war more terrible than anything we have ever seen or an economic collapse that will wipe out people's savings, and sometimes I worry that I won't live long enough to see some things I look forward to. And most of all, I worry that all this worrying makes my life less enjoyable than it ought to be. Columnist Liat Collins has written in *The Jerusalem Post*, "Perhaps deep down my greatest fear is that if I was to live in fear, I would never get anything done. You don't paint an apartment if you constantly worry about the imminence of earthquakes. You don't stay close to friends if you worry that they are about to be wiped out by war or disease. . . . If you acted on all the fears concerning children, you'd have to spend so much energy trying to protect them that you wouldn't have time to raise them." How do I cope with all of these fears? Sometimes I do it by putting them in perspective as very unlikely to happen. Sometimes I find some small area over which I do have control watching my diet, conserving energy, recycling more. Sometimes I simply do what most people do: I just stop thinking about unpleasant outcomes; sometimes I stubbornly believe as an act of faith that God has made a world in which tragedy is real but happy endings heavily outnumber tragic ones. I resolve not to let my fears of what might happen prevent me from anticipating with pleasure what I hope will happen. Some years ago, a movie was made called *Defending Your Life* with Albert Brooks and Meryl Streep. The movie imagines people who die going to heaven, where they are put on trial to evaluate how they lived their lives. Every second of every person's life has been recorded on videotape, and in a heavenly tribunal, a prosecutor and a defense attorney summon up key moments of each person's life from childhood to his or her last days. The novel thesis of the movie is that the purpose of the trial is not to determine if one was virtuous or wicked but whether one had learned to conquer fear. That is seen as the goal of life. If in the course of a person's years, he or she never got over being afraid, then that person is sent back to earth to be reincarnated and given another chance to get it right. If people succeeded in overcoming the tendency to be fearful, they "graduate" to a more refined,

and presumably more challenging, level of existence. If overcoming fear is the first goal of life, the achievement that makes other achievements possible, we don't seem to be doing a very good job of it. People today are deeply frightened. Our lives are clouded over by real fears, exaggerated fears, and imaginary fears. At one level, of course, fear is a good thing. Our ancestors at the dawn of the human species could not have survived had they not been sensitive to danger. Whereas animals are born intuitively knowing what to be afraid of a baby chick that has never seen a hawk will run for cover if a hawk-shaped shadow passes over it human beings had to learn to know the difference between animals that could be approached and animals that had to be avoided, between the fire that would cook their meat and the fire that would burn down their shelters. But as the world changed and grew more complex, it became more difficult to know what to be afraid of. It became harder to distinguish between realistic and unrealistic fears. Were we being prudent or paranoid if we didn't let our children play outdoors when we could not watch them? Should we stop going to movie theaters for fear of a flu epidemic, a terrorist bomb, or the prospect of being mugged in the parking lot? Is that foreign-looking man at the airport a dangerous alien or just someone on vacation? To make matters worse, local television news broadcasts eager to attract viewers and twenty-four-hour cable news channels desperate to fill their empty hours on days when nothing else is happening recycle every fire, every political scandal, every case of child abduction or food poisoning, to the point where people believe these occurrences are a lot more frequent than they really are. In the words of Dr. Marc Siegel, author of *False Alarm: The Truth About the Epidemic of Fear*, "Our infectious fears spread faster than any bacteria and ignite a sense of [imminent danger] that far eclipses the reality." Dr. Siegel goes on to say, "Anthrax is not contagious; fear of anthrax is." Marketers and politicians have learned how much easier it is to manipulate people, to get them to do what you want them to, when they are frightened. In the next electoral campaign, take note of how much of what a candidate says is a promise of the good things he would do and how much is a warning of the terrible things that will happen if his opponent is elected. Professor Margaret Miles, who taught theology at Harvard Divinity School, has written, "Human beings have always had much to fear. . . . But humans have not always lived in societies in which fear was actively cultivated. . . . Isolated incidents are characterized as trends, and anecdotes are substituted for facts." She goes on to write, "Fear is hard on bodies. Anxiety is the number one health problem in the country, leading to epidemic depression, alcoholism, eating disorders, and prescription drug addiction. . . . American society is violent because it is so fearful." It would seem that we need to add unrealistic fears to the list of things we realistically need to be afraid of. A recent article in the Science section of *The New York Times* reported that "worrying about terrorism could be taking a toll on the hearts of millions of Americans. . . . Researchers found that the people who were acutely stressed after the 9/11 attacks and continued to worry about terrorism about 6 percent of the population were at least three times more likely . . . [to develop] new heart problems." That represents more than ten million people nationally. If even a tiny fraction of 1 percent of those ten million were to suffer a fatal heart attack due to that stress, it would mean that more people will have died of fear than died on 9/11. But how do we learn to overcome fear and live bravely in an admittedly dangerous world? Professor Miles suggests that we learn to "live with our uncertainties rather than cater to them." We need to rely on the ultimate livability of a world in which bad things can and do happen, but not nearly as often as we might think they do, and we need to know that, when we face our fears, we will not be facing them alone. Dr. Gregory Berns wrote in *The New York Times*: "Workers' fear has generalized to their workplace and everything associated with work and money. We are caught in a spiral in which we are so scared of losing our jobs, or our savings, that fear overtakes our brains. . . . It makes it impossible to concentrate on anything but saving our skin. . . . Just when we need new ideas most, everyone is seized up in fear." What can we do about it? Dr. Berns goes on to suggest that "the first order of business . . . is to neutralize that system. This means not being a fearmonger . . . avoiding people who are overly pessimistic . . . tuning out media that fan emotional flames." From the Hardcover edition. *Revue de presse* Harold Kushner once again arms his readers to battle life's difficult moments by showing the strengths they already have inside them: this time courage is the quality, the courage to change, to accept, to fight, and to follow virtue. An inspiring book for our times. Mitch Albom, author of *Tuesdays with Morrie* [Kushner] present[s] ideas that . . . provide a different and satisfying way of looking at some of these problems. *Washington Jewish Week* A helpful guide to navigating all kinds of fear. *Austin American-Statesman* Rich with Harold Kushner's honest, practical eloquence, *Conquering Fear* is the right book at the right time. It will ease the heart and strengthen the mind of everyone who reads it! *Forrest Church*, author of *Love Death* Harold Kushner speaks to the real questions that are on the minds and hearts of people. . . . Rabbi Kushner's answers in this book are not glib. . . . He

takes up these fears one by one, and gives us cogent advice on how to live with them. . . . A carefully reasoned effort to calm our spirits so that we do not yield to the many frightening terrors that can crush our spirits and spoil our will to live wisely and well. Palm Beach Jewish Journal Filled with a great deal of wisdom. . . . Kushners message is inspirational and transcends all religious creeds and spiritualities. Library Journal The inspirational authors latest is likely to strike a chord with a wide range of readers. Booklist