

Rosh Hashanah 5777
Day 2
Temple Israel - Berger Hall

Shana tova.

Our children are constant reminders that our past is never far behind us; our present is precious; and our future is rushing toward us seemingly at light speed. It is through them that we repeat the patterns that we recognize from our own childhood, even as we strive to become the best versions of ourselves. We neurotically fret that they won't inherit our neuroses. And we do everything in our power to ensure their safety - in the process, sometimes even turning into someone we don't recognize.

When my daughter Anna and I arrived at her daycare the other day, another kid - bigger and older - pushed her to the floor, for no apparent reason. She fell, I reacted, and she immediately began to cry - although I'm not sure whether the tears came from the shock of being pushed, the impact of the fall, or the fact that I instinctively raised my voice at the child who pushed her. Who yells at a 2-year-old? A mama bear protecting her cub, that's who. I'm not proud of my reaction, but I'm also not surprised -

in just under two years as a parent, I've learned that most of us are immediately rewired to do everything in our power to protect our children.

Which makes both today and yesterday's Torah readings so surprising. Scholars often note that the two stories are quite similar - both involve Abraham ostensibly trying to kill one of his sons. This would be a true anomaly by normal parenting standards - but it is strikingly odd in light of how long Abraham and Sarah prayed for children. I'm betting there isn't a person in this room who would deliberately harm their child, whether the directive came from their spouse or from the mouth of God.

This morning, we read the story of the binding of Isaac, when God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son ---- and Abraham nearly complied, only to be stopped at the last moment. The *Akedah* is every parent's worst fear, given voice: that not only would our child come to harm, but that it would be by our own hand. This puts at risk the parental prime directive - protect at all costs - while taking us on a roller coaster ride that ends with the worst

possible “best-case” outcome - the child survives the encounter, but the relationship does not.

From rabbis and scholars to authors and artists, many incredibly talented people have devoted decades of their lives to exploring this story; the Akedah captures our hearts and imaginations in a vast variety of haunting ways. For instance, the motif of child sacrifice plays a starring role in many of Samuel Bak’s paintings, hinting at the impact of the artist’s time spent in concentration camps during his youth. A.B. Yehoshua, the Israeli novelist and playwright, repeatedly returns to the theme of a bereaved father and his dead son. And Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, spent much of his life fascinated and challenged by the story, and urged readers to struggle along with him¹.

There are three general readings of the story’s outcome:

1. It was test of Abraham’s moral sensibilities - and he failed.
2. It was a test of Abraham’s devotion to God - and he passed with flying colors; or
3. It wasn’t about Abraham at all, but rather about Isaac.

¹ <http://www.solargeneral.org/wp-content/uploads/library/fear-and-trembling-johannes-de-silentio.pdf>

The traditional view is that Abraham passed the test. There are 9 other times in Genesis where God tests Abraham. Tradition tells us that over the course of those 9 tests, God and Abraham are coming to understand each other. For example, in the incident of Sodom and Gomorrah, God learns that Abraham will fight for innocent lives and Abraham learns that God can be persuaded to change God's mind when justice is at stake.

Given what each has learned about the other, the 10th test, the Akedah, plays out like a game of chess - each player makes a move, their opponent counters, and so on. Like two grandmasters, both are able to see the next few moves ahead of time - and in this case, they both understand what the final outcome will be.

In this view, Abraham *had* to agree to sacrifice his son - and he did so with a full heart, completely confident that God would not let him go through with the plan. After all, if he did kill Isaac, how would God fulfill His promise to make Abraham's descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. Having already learned that God keeps God's promises, Abraham

might not have known *how* God would prevent him from killing Isaac - just that Isaac would make the return trip down the mountain with him.

Conversely, many modern interpretations suggest that Abraham *failed* God's test. We already know that Abraham will stand up for innocent lives, so we have every reason to believe that Abraham would argue with God to spare his own son. In this view, the appearance of angel who stopped Abraham is a desperate last measure to ensure that Isaac doesn't die. Logically, this interpretation assumes that Isaac leaves the entire incident furious, and that Sarah dies of heartbreak - not only because she thought she was going to lose her only child, but because her husband has turned into somebody she no longer recognizes.

The third view - the most complex interpretation - is that the story is actually about Isaac, complicated family dynamics, and unresolved hurt. Kierkegaard asks readers to notice the three days that it takes the father-son duo to travel up the mountain. We know that *Abraham* was eager to start the journey, but we know little about *Isaac's* frame of mind beyond his compliance with his father's directions. Similarly, we know

nothing about the trip *down* the mountain, although certainly we can imagine raging arguments or icy silence. More importantly, we know little about the aftermath of this traumatic episode, except two things: that Sarah dies almost immediately (perhaps even while they're gone on the trip); and that we see no further interactions between Abraham and Isaac in the Torah. The next time the text tells us that they are together is when Isaac returns to bury his father.

Of course, these three views of the text aren't mutually exclusive.

Regardless of whether we think Abraham passed or failed the test, we can still understand one of the themes of the story to be familial relationships; namely, Isaac's complicated connection with his father, his extremely close bond with his mother, and his unresolved pain after the incident was over.

It is this last piece that I want to focus on. We read this story twice every year - now on Rosh Hashanah, and again in a few weeks during the regular cycle of the Torah reading. The story brings up questions of faith and action; trust and reliability; and interpersonal relations.

The Sephardic tradition does a better job than our Ashkenazi one of acknowledging Isaac's anger and resentment. Midrash Tanchuma envisions Isaac warning Abraham that when he inevitably goes back to tell Sarah that he killed their son, he should be careful not to tell her when she is standing on the roof or the edge of the pit, or else she might jump off and die - and then, Isaac warns, you will have killed us both! There is a Sephardic piyut for Rosh Hashanah (called "*Et Sha'arei Ratzon Le'Hipate'ah*") that includes 2 full stanzas written from Isaac's perspective, expressing his anger towards his father. Finally, *Ner Haskalim*, a Yemenite midrashic collection, has Isaac sarcastically telling his father that he needs to tighten the knot on the altar, lest I "kick you and diminish your honor" - as if the entire point of the day's events is *Abraham's* honor.

It is hard not to sympathize with Isaac's emotions; after all, haven't we all been hurt to one degree or another by someone we loved?

Rabbi Jeffrey M. Cohen writes:

“Isaac is saved in the nick of time, but at what expense to his mental equilibrium? He turns inward. He cannot subsequently give of himself to others. He can no longer build relationships. Certainly the bond with his father had been snapped.”

The silence in the aftermath of the Akedah leaves us plenty of room to imagine the scene. Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk once put this question to his students: “What was the hardest part of the Akedah for Abraham? Was it the initial call, the long walk to Moriah, or the binding?” His answer: the hardest part was coming down the mountain.

What must it have been like, coming down that mountain? They literally descended it, but in a sense they were also “coming down” from the intense adrenaline rush of encountering God, as well as a brush with death. Did they walk down together in stony silence, or did one of them run eagerly to get away while the other meandered downward, frightened of what came

next? Did either have a clue that Sarah would be dead when they reached the bottom?

And we can only imagine what happened in the years that followed. We know Abraham married again - Midrash even tells us that his bride was actually Hagar, the mother of his first-born son - but we know nothing of his relationship with Isaac. Did Abraham believe he was in the right, up until his dying day? Or did he perhaps fall asleep each night lamenting his losses: not just his sons, but weddings, grandchildren, and the opportunity to nurture another generation.

It must not have been easy growing up with a father like Abraham. After all, he's the man who heard the voice of God calling him to leave his home and gather followers; who put himself and his wife in dangerous situations, trusting that his faith would carry him through; and who was willing to kill his son to prove his faith to God. Looking at Isaac's childhood through this lens, a near-death experience may have just been par for the course in what was already a textbook study of living with a difficult parent.

We are also curious whether Isaac was ever able to overcome the trauma of almost being killed by his own father. Even if you've never been the victim of a near-sacrifice, many of you have experienced traumatic events, and can sympathize Isaac. Studies on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder show that the traumatic experience can become embedded in people's memory structure causing avoidance of interpersonal relationships. This plays out in a variety of ways, including detrimental impacts on self-awareness, intimacy, and communication².

So where does that leave Isaac and Abraham? Well, we know that the Torah contains no further direct interactions between the two while Abraham is still alive. On the other hand, Midrash Rabah says that it is actually *Isaac* who reunites Abraham and Hagar - so perhaps there is some reconciliation between father and son. The lesson implicit in this Midrash is truly apropos for these Days of Awe: if Isaac can overcome the *akedah*, then surely we can work through the issues we have with our own loved ones and rebuild our relationships.

² <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14681990124457?journalCode=csmt20>

There's a beautiful teaching in the Talmud that I want to share with you: Rav Yosef tells us that the broken tablets, the ones that Moshe threw down out of anger, were placed in the holy Ark alongside the second, intact set that he got when he went back up Mount Sinai a second time³. So when the Israelites moved around the desert, they took with them both sets - the whole and the broken. The lesson here is that we carry our brokenness with us each and every day. You can either let it be baggage, weighing you down wherever you go - or you can let it serve as a reminder to be better. But we only become better when we allow ourselves to see those trials, those mistakes, as learning opportunities - and carry them with us as cautionary tales.

The shofar blasts provide a model for how we can continue to strive to be who we want to be, even while accepting our less-than-whole past. Rabbi Art Green wrote:

³ Bava Batra 14b

The shofar sound represents prayer beyond words, an intensity of longing that can be articulated only in a wordless interpretation. But the order of the sounds, according to one old interpretation, contains the message in quite explicit terms.

Each series of shofar blasts begins with *teki'ah*, a whole sound. It is followed by *shevarim*, a tripartite broken sound whose very name means “breakings.” “I started off whole,” the shofar speech says, “and I became broken.” Then follows *teru'ah*, a staccato series of blast fragments, saying: “I was entirely smashed to pieces.”

But each series has to end with a new *teki'ah*, promising wholeness once more. The shofar cries out a hundred times on Rosh Hashanah: “I was whole, I was broken, even smashed to bits, but I shall be whole again!”⁴

Rosh Hashanah is heavy with circular symbolism - we have reached the end of a year, simultaneous to the beginning of another. As Rabbi Green notes, we hear the shofar over and over - not just 100 notes on *this* Rosh Hashanah, but 100 notes on *every* Rosh Hashanah - because life continues to break us and each time, miraculously, we heal ourselves. Sometimes it is

⁴ Wholeness and Brokenness, Arthur Green, Seek My Face, 169

easier, other times it feels nearly impossible - but in the end, we heal. When the final shofar note sounds, will you see your scars and remember only pain - or will you see them as a call of inspiration?

It's easy to talk about the lofty ideals of self-improvement from the vantage of hindsight. The more critical question is what we do - what we say - what we think - when we're in the depths of pain. When we're down a hole so far that we're not sure we can see light at the top - when we're not even sure which direction to look for it - how do we encounter God and other people? This is the true mark of who we are as human beings.

At our worst, we are judgmental and quick to anger, and experience every action as an intended slight. We do not mean to be this way - but we are hurting, and cannot see clearly. But we can turn this on its head - with great effort and no small amount of practice, we may condition ourselves to act with generosity of spirit, to listen to one another, and to accept that although our burdens are unique to us, we need not bear them alone.

Abraham prayed for decades for a child - and when he was finally blessed with one, he sent him off into the wilderness to die. After such a traumatic ordeal, what was his emotional state? Was he really in any condition to interface with and listen to God?

Rabbi Dianne Cohler-Esses asks:

Could Abraham have misheard God's command? Midrash tells us that God didn't say "go slaughter him" but rather "take him up." If Abraham misheard God's command, what was in the way of his listening accurately? We often misunderstand the voices of those we are most intimate with, hearing echoes of a harsher voice from the past, voices that drown out the present.

Midrash Tanchuma notes that the entirety of Abraham's actions hinge on one word: "*Olah*." In the parashah, God says to Abraham, וְהֵעֲלִיחֵוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה - "*v'haaleihu sham l'olah*," "bring up Isaac as an *olah*." The Hebrew word *olah* comes from the root *Ayin-Lamed-Hey*, meaning, "to rise up" - in this case, interpreted as "sacrifice," as in the smoke of the sacrifice.

But Rabbi Paul Kipnes asks:

Might [the word *olah*] be connected rather to a more familiar word - *aliyah*, also from the Hebrew root Ayin-Lamed-Hey, meaning “spiritual uplift?” In this reading, God only said, “raise up your son with an appreciation of your devotion to Me.”⁵

Abraham was listening to God - but perhaps he wasn't truly *hearing* what God wanted, as deep in his own anguish as he was. When we are not at our best - when we are in pain, or unhappy, or simply haggard and stressed - can we take a moment to center ourselves, so that we are sure that words that are spoken and the words that we hear are one and the same.

A story is told about a monk and his student. One day, while walking in silence, they happened upon a particularly rough stream. Sitting beside it was a young woman, crying. The monk asked her, “what is wrong, my child?” And she answered, “my beloved is on the other side of the stream and I have no way to get to him.” Without another word, the monk lifted

⁵ <http://patch.com/california/calabasas/abraham-failed-gods-test-but-god-loved-him-anyway>

the woman onto his shoulders and carried her across the stream. Once on the other side, the monk placed the woman gently on the ground and continued walking with his student.

The student was confused, but said nothing. Finally, after they had walked for a while longer, the student could hold it in no more. “Master,” he asked, “forgive me for questioning your actions, but I need to understand what you did. You know that a holy man like yourself is not supposed to touch a woman! How could you just pick her up like that?” The monk looked at him and said, “Are you still carrying her? I put her down a long time ago.”

Most likely, we have more in common with the student than with the monk; we each walk along our own path, trying to make sense of what we observe and experience. Sometimes, we hold onto things longer than we ought to.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said that “hate is too heavy a burden to carry” - and whether we are encumbered with hate, anger, fear, or resentment, the simple act of carrying negativity with us every day is exhausting.

We find ourselves today near the outset of the *Aseret Yemei Tshuva* - the ten days of repentance that run from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur.

Tradition tells us that our prayers on the Day of Atonement - Yom Kippur - can only repair our sins against God; that which we have committed against our fellow human beings must be atoned for ahead of time, in person. As the clock counts down toward that judgment day, now is the time to ask the questions: what burdens am I carrying that I can set down? And even if I feel that I am “in the right” - with whom do I need to rectify an imbalance?

The first question is the easier of the two: from whom must I seek forgiveness? Most often, we know whom we have wronged; from common misdeeds to major misconduct, a few minutes' thought should reveal at least a few people to whom we should apologize. Even if we are unable to identify every instance of our wrongdoing - say, for example, we know that we have committed countless microaggressions, but cannot pinpoint every victim - we may still seek to atone for our thoughtlessness and endeavor to be more sensitive in the future.

We teach that Yom Kippur is a rehearsal for death. As we approach that dress rehearsal, we need to ask ourselves: have I wrapped up loose ends neatly; have I said what I need to say; and have I made amends for the mistakes that I've made? If not, now is the time.

Rabbi Sharon Braus writes:

The greatest spiritual challenge of the High Holy Days is to recognize the fragility of life, the brevity and capriciousness of human existence - but not in some distant, theoretical way. The challenge of the High Holy Days is to confront the radically unpredictable trajectory of our lives and live as if every single day truly might be our last.⁶

The second question, of course, is much more challenging to answer: who has wronged me, in such a deep way, that *I* need to forgive *them* in order to move on to the new year in a healthy state of mind?

Ideally, both parties know that reconciliation needs to happen; in some cases, the perpetrator may not even be aware that something has happened.

⁶ Who By Fire, page 142-143

But in some of the most hurtful instances, the offender might not be ready or able to give the victim what he or she needs - or we, the victim, might not be prepared to accept it. In those situations, we must heal ourselves - even if we can not heal the relationship. It is our responsibility to “get right,” even if we cannot yet “become whole.”

Identifying loss and allowing ourselves space to grieve are the first steps to healing. Acknowledging that we’ve lost something that was once precious to us - stability, a meaningful relationship, expectations about an imagined future - gives us permission to begin the grieving process. As with other types of loss, such as death, there is no time frame or expected pattern for healing. Gradually, we can begin to let compassion replace resentment, ultimately leading to forgiveness.

Change, you may have heard, is hard - it takes a lot to be open to existing outside your comfort zone, to encounter and process and accept new things every day. And rebuilding broken or lost relationships - or moving on from

them - is perhaps our most difficult task. The burden is made lighter by naming it and inviting others to share its weight.

My home contains a tangible reminder of this need to share my struggles with a support system. Visitors to our house tend to notice a somewhat imperfect, not-quite-our-style painting of a *chamsa* on our kitchen wall. Despite appearances, it is not the work of a 5-year-old - yet, aside from our *ketubah*, it is the most important piece of art in our home.

To say that 5774 was a terrible year for my family would be an understatement. In the first six months after Rosh Hashana, we experienced a miscarriage, a job loss, a flood in our home, a destroyed back porch, and a cancer diagnosis in my immediate family. At first, the physical issues with our brand-new home felt frustrating but tolerable. But with each additional source of *tsuris*, we felt more overwhelmed by the present and less certain about the future.

So I did what any other “normal” person would do, assuming that person is a rabbi: I researched luck-changing rituals in Judaism! Googling and reading came up empty, so I sheepishly reached out to a group of smart, thoughtful rabbis and asked for ideas. As you might expect, I received a variety of responses; these ranged from amulets and prayers to the suggestion that we change our names.

One idea, though, captivated me. Rabbi Ute Steyer, a classmate at JTS, told me about her 97-year-old Sephardic grandmother, who is known in her community as a mystic. Where she lives, if you have a problem, you go to Ute’s grandmother - and she has a ritual for solving it.

Here’s what I learned: our tradition tells us that demons live in new homes. In fact, rich people used to hire people to move into their new home before they did, to rid the house of the demons. Not all of them are dangerous, but they are believed to cause all kinds of trouble and mischief.

According to Ute’s grandmother, rituals are worthless if performed alone; rather, they need a community to be effective. If someone needs to exorcise

a demon, Ute's grandmother will only come and help if the entire community is invited. It is not enough to say the blessings, make the amulet, or burn the incense - any actions must be taken with the community's involvement. After all, your troubles are everyone's troubles, as your solution is everyone's solution. Asking for help makes you vulnerable, and forces you to publicly confront that which you might otherwise hide from view; at its core, the ritual's power lies not in the ritual itself, but in sharing the experience.

This really resonated with me... so I told my family and friends that what I wanted for my birthday was a "House Exorcism." They very reluctantly humored me; everyone was skeptical, and my husband called me crazy for weeks, even as he smiled and helped me plan.

Some day, when we know each other a bit better, I'll tell you about the ritual itself. It was kind of ridiculous, and entirely hilarious and in hindsight, slightly embarrassing; but our friends and family filled our living room and participated with all the grace and good humor that I'd hoped for.

Collectively, we painted an imperfect *chamsa* to hang on our wall - and in doing so, we scared those demons right out of our house!

Do I really believe that the ritual changed our luck? Probably not - but if I'm being honest with myself, I would say that our luck actually did change: before the calendar year ended, we had a healthy baby, a great new job, and a clean prognosis. More importantly, I learned that sharing our struggles with our community made us feel far less alone, and empowered us to handle what life threw at us next. That said, we aren't stupid enough to tempt fate; when we moved to Sharon, we immediately put up the *chamsa*!

Although it required me to swallow my pride - and to give Josh permission to mock me until today - this experience taught me a few things. First, I learned that my husband is secretly superstitious - he's the one who insisted the *chamsa* receive prominent placement in our new home! Second, I confirmed that people will share my burdens - even if they raise an eyebrow at the methodology. And most importantly, I discovered that by naming our problems, by opening up about them to our community, we

were able to create a space to grieve - and asking those we love to help, brought us the closure and healing that we were desperately seeking.

As I mentioned earlier, the Torah doesn't tell us what happened to Isaac and Abraham in the aftermath of the Akedah. The silence implies a great deal, but we're left to fill in the blanks ourselves. All we know is that the Torah text does not record any further interactions between the two - and in truth, tells us very little about Isaac's adult life.

We don't know whether Isaac gave himself permission to grieve for the many things he lost - for his mother, for his father, for his innocence. We do know that some time in the future, he met and married Rebecca - and we have the midrash that he helped facilitate Abraham's second marriage. Taken together, these indicate that he was able to move forward in his life, and able to build a productive relationship with his wife - and rebuild one with his father. In this way, he was like the Israelites keeping the broken

tablets in the ark - carrying his loss with him, but not allowing it to weigh him down.

And that is the goal for us all: to learn to incorporate our losses - large and small - into who we are today. In doing so, we become more human; by sharing our vulnerability - our pain - our grief - we can truly learn from our experiences, and allow ourselves to move forward to a place of strength.

Each of us begins life whole - like the tekiyah. Over time, life will break us and sometimes even shatter us - but we CAN become whole again.

Resilience and hope are the essence of humanity - resilience is what lets us put the pieces of ourselves back together, and hope is what allows us to move forward and try again.

The next eight days present an opportunity for reflection - a time to think about who you have wronged, and also about how you can overcome the stumbling blocks set in your own mind. As you ponder how you can become whole again, remember that you do not have to shoulder the burden alone;

your friends and family can help. My wish for all of us this Rosh Hashana is that we find the strength to ask.

May our new year be happy, healthy, sweet, and filled with resilience and hope.

Shana Tova.