

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 Dvar Torah

by Lou Loomis



Happy New Year, everyone and welcome to 5777. **I'd like to start off by telling you the story of an old friend of mine,**

I'll just call Daniel. One day, Daniel was taking a short hike in Malibu, near the beach. As he walked along the path with a sheer cliff on one side, he accidentally slipped and fell down the cliff. He told me that he desperately tried to reach for something to hold on to and just managed to catch himself on a hanging branch.

Looking down at the long fall below him, Daniel turned his eyes toward the heavens and said, 'G-d, I'm sorry that I never really believed in you, but if there's anybody up there, please help me.'

A still small voice came down from heaven and said, 'Do not worry my son. Now have faith in me. All you need to do is let go, and I will save you from the fall.'

Daniel looked down again at the jagged rocks below him and up to heaven and said, 'Is there anybody else up there?'

And by the way, did you hear that thieves broke into the synagogue offices? They got away with over 2 thousand dollars in pledges.

One of my favorite TV shows is *The Walking Dead*.

If you've never watched it before, you might think it's just another monster movie about the end of the world, the zombie apocalypse, a science fiction thriller, or maybe just another gory horror story. And of course, it is all that. Except, it's a lot more than that. It's also a complex story of human survival where there is no law, no government, no moral code other than fight or be killed. Men and women are equal since zombies will get the slow movers of either sex. On top of that, since there is no government or law enforcement, you are targeted by predator gangs of living people, who will try and take whatever possessions you have in order to survive. How the living, able-bodied people form alliances, come together for a common good, protect each other, is really more how this wonderful TV show has evolved into a parallel narrative of our own human history. It's also an eye-opener for those who think human nature is basically good.

And that brings us to our Torah reading for this Rosh Hashanah, about Abraham, the founder of Judaism, who lived over 4 millennia ago. Life 4,000 years ago was very tough. Much like the show *The Walking Dead*, life expectancy was very low, and there was either anarchy or slavery.

There was no cure for most diseases, and even a broken bone, an infection, a common cold, could lead to death. Starvation and hunger was the norm. It was a tough time for humanity. And remember, the moral code of the time was certainly kill or be killed, never trust anyone from a neighboring village, since they were as likely to steal from you or kill your family as not. And this story, remember, takes place 4000 years before the zombie apocalypse. A remarkable thing happened to Abraham: G-d spoke to him and gave him a moral code to live by, and a mission to spread this code, this way of life, to his family and neighbors, which eventually became the Jewish people. Early on, Abraham is just a cult leader, but his ideas spread and became popular. Eventually we know that the ideas spread by Abraham became the kernels which sprouted into the highest ideals of western civilization, of democracy, of what we today define as good.

God starts off by telling Abraham to leave his native country and go elsewhere, to "a land that I will show thee." And then G-d goes on to say: "And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and be thou a blessing. And I will bless them that bless thee, and him that curseth thee will I curse; and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed."

By the way, in case you haven't noticed, back then, God often spoke in Elizabethan English.

Abraham's life was a mess. He may have been the leader of a growing and prosperous family, but he was often targeted for death by those around him, including kings, and for most of his life. His children fought amongst themselves, and he even had to disown and exile his oldest son. The torah tells how Abraham is encouraged by Angels, but still troubled, Abraham tries to sacrifice his heir, his beloved son Isaac, thinking G-d would be appeased. He is stopped by G-d, and reassured that G-d doesn't want human sacrifices, but the difficulties he faces never abates. Still, he perseveres to spread the message of compassion and human dignity to his descendents, to his people. To us.

What I find interesting and relevant to these holidays, is that the very hard life of Abraham is reflected in the very hard history of Israel, the difficulties faced by the Jewish people, and in ourselves, as we consider our own lives. Ultimately Abraham is successful, but I doubt any of us would want to go through the problems, the *tsuris* that he faced. He fought to overcome himself, his surroundings, and as we now know today, his battle became ours.

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Abraham was very human. He was very curious, and while he admired and adopted some of the better customs of his original homeland, he tried primarily to only follow G-d's commands. Just like us, he makes many mistakes along the way. And while those mistakes were never critical to his ultimate outcome, his mission in life, he suffered greatly in order to pass down the values we cherish today.

The tough times Abraham experienced, and how he overcame those troubles, can easily be seen as parallels to the tough history of the Jewish people, the anti-semitism and the very difficult reclaiming and rebuilding of Israel today. I want to address that, but first, I want to point out that never has anti-Judaism, anti-semitism, ever disappeared. I have been told many times, by many people, that being Jewish is really hard. Here in America it's supposedly easier than elsewhere, but being Jewish means we stand for something special, different, something that makes us stand out. It's what distinguished Abraham from everyone else, it's what distinguishes Israel from all other nations, and it's what we are doing today, right here, right now, this week, this High Holiday season.

Abraham's faith and wisdom came from above, from G-d. Why is this important? Because it means that his values were not just his opinion, or based on consensus, but came from a higher source. In his time, for example, child sacrifice was common. The G-d of Abraham would not allow it and told Abraham to stop, that Abraham's son Isaac was not to be sacrificed, that children were not to be sacrificed. From this we reaffirm that human life is sacred, that individuals may never be sacrificed for the mass.

Abraham taught that rich and poor, great and small, are equal before G-d. Shabbat, for example, is to be celebrated by all, not just a selected special few. The joy of paradise, of messianic times, is to be experienced by all. Even the poorest, even the most illiterate.

Abraham taught us to believe that human morality shapes events, not the other way around. It was those ideals that Abraham taught that inspired the founders to create America. And it was this faith that enabled Abraham's children to claw their way out of the Nazi ovens and reclaim Israel as their indigenous homeland; to reclaim Jerusalem as our holy city.

Abraham inspires us to never give up our commitment to rescue the poor or seek justice for the oppressed, or free the enslaved.

It's a part of our psyche, our DNA, it's a mitzvah, and as Jews we can do no less.

We value education as a sacred task, giving individuals dignity and depth.

We cherish human dignity, and our own humanity. We've never lost our humor or faith, even in the worst of times.

Human history is a journey.

Because of Abraham, we are courageous in pursuing peace. We are named Israel. In every age we have wrestled with G-d and the idols of civilization. We have prevailed. We have never stopped wrestling with G-d, and he with us.

We admire the best of all civilizations. Jews have been in all the great civilizations and have brought with them the best to America, and now to Israel. This is a duty we've fulfilled, from generation to generation. As it was with Abraham, we have that duty to hand these values down to the next generation.

We've challenged the world's moral imagination.

We are an eternal people.

I wish everyone a happy, healthy, prosperous shana tova...happy new year!!!

Rosh Hashanah Day 2 Dvar Torah

by Stephen Schuster

Editor's note: These are Stephen's notes that he spoke from.

Stan Schroeder



Someone we all know had a book written for him detailing his ways of doing Business know who I'm thinking of? Wrong.

Author of the one I mean goes by many names: Elohim, Adonai, King of kings, etc. the book also has many names: Torah, Old Testament, Beraisheet ++

This real book of deals.

Called Covenants = Deals that have something sacred about them.

Eg. Author itself or contains some highly regarded values. Like our Constitution.
or 2 people getting married before God.

Soon hear: how God makes deals – establishes Covenants with mankind.

Covenant says if you do X, I will do Y. Break a covenant = consequences.

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E.G.:

C # 1 = the Adamic covenant

God creates mankind; endows everyone with free will.

Creates Eden – paradise.

Sets cov. With Adam and Eve.

Tells them:

This paradise yours to **frolic** in and have a good time:

Be fruitful and multiply.. Enjoy the Mediteranian Diet:

Fruits, grains, berries, nuts, etc.

Will make your cardiologist proud.

No work. Just enjoy.

Only caveat is for Ad+E NOT to eat the fruit that hangs on the branches of only 1 tree.

So Eve gives in to her curiosity – eats fruit – convinces Adam to eat.

Break the Covenant and God expels them from garden. work for a living.

Cov. #2 = a 1 way covenant to Noah.

Cov 3 – detailed in today's Parsha

God to make Abraham father of a great nation **IF** he agrees to abide by God's wishes. Patriarch

And for almost 100 biblical yrs., works for both.
1 day – God repeats the Cov. And then – Abe asked to sacrifice his son.

Abe on horns of a dilemma.... True moral/ethical dilemma. = 2 choices, neither of which is palatable.
1= kill his son or 2= lose his patriarchy.

BELIEVE I NOW UNDERSTAND THE REAL MEANING OF THE COV AND WHY IT'S READ TODAY AT THE START OF EVERY YEAR.

Abe must know of the other cov.s and how they worked out. Lot's wife disobey God; seen what happened to Sodom and Gomorra

So Abe sucks it up – sets out to kill his son in order to preserve his place in the Patriarchy.

1 puzzle I've always had = Why this parsha is called the Akeda. Akeda means "binding" – not sacrifice.

→ My theory is that it is the "binding" essential. Isaac may also know this – doesn't protest being bound -= NOT an act of passivity but instead an act of incredible BRAVERY proving to God that he too accepts the cov..

When God sees this = now sees that Isaac willing and able to take his place in the Patriarchy. This is all he wanted to see.

Now – I want to ask something of YOU. I would seriously recommend we should take some time during week of Introspection and Reflection and think about all the covenants you have fallen heir to- or voluntarily undertaken.

Cov of our country's constitution: given to all citizen are protections. And guarantees: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. There are Obligations WE have in order to maintain that covenant. THINK OF them as you contemplate the Vote you are obligated to make.

Yom Kippur Dvar Torah

by Stan Schroeder



Good morning, Shana tova.

Many of you know me, if not by name, then by reputation. You may have received congregational community emails from me, read my column on our website, read my biographies and other articles in our award-winning *Shir Notes* monthly newsletter, or heard me speak at our Shabbat services or in this same timeslot for the last six years, or on Rosh Hashanah before that. We are all more known and remembered by what we do than our names. I'll talk more about that later.

Mrs. Friedman, the third grade Hebrew teacher, needed some supplies from a supply cabinet that was seldom used and was secured by a lock. She didn't know the combination, and called Rabbi Weinstein to give it a try.

Rabbi Weinstein placed his fingers on the lock's dials and raised his eyes heavenward for a moment. Then he confidently spun the dial and opened the lock.

Seeing how impressed Mrs. Friedman was with this demonstration of faith, he smiled and confided, "The numbers are written on the ceiling."

I'll also talk more later about where we receive our instructions for life.

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Like **Rabbi Vorspan**, I believe we learn more from stories than from rhetoric. And stories about real people we can identify with resonate best. That is why, for the past six years I have told stories from the lives of local Jewish people who have demonstrated values important to us, especially on Yom Kippur. The first four, starting in 2010, are UCLA graduates. Last year and year before I included a CSUN and USC graduate to show my “impartiality”.

My first person in 2010 was **Alan/Aba Claman** who had a successful business career in aircraft parts and now runs a charitable organization in Israel, Thank Israeli Soldiers. In 1965 Alan was a starting tackle on the UCLA football team and informed his coach that he couldn't play on Yom Kippur. The coach said he would lose his position. That didn't happen and Alan became a star of the team that defeated No. 1 Michigan State in the Rose Bowl at the end of the season. Recalling this story is comforting to me, considering the problems the team is having this year.

My 2012 local example of our Jewish values grew up in the Fairfax district of Los Angeles. His family had moved from Minnesota to southern California in 1947 so that his father, a rabbi, could take over the rabbinate at Temple B'nai Israel of Pasadena. The move was at the request of **Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan**, his father Max's teacher and mentor at the Jewish Theological Seminary. **Rabbi Max Vorspan** worked with the local Jewish community to change B'nai Israel into the Pasadena Jewish Temple and Center, both a religious and social services community. Both Conservative and Orthodox Jewish services were held and educational and Jewish programs were provided. It became a model of Rabbi Kaplan's vision of Reconstructionist Judaism.

In 1952 Max Vorspan helped Mordecai Kaplan create the University of Judaism and spent the rest of his long career at this institution, now American Jewish University. Meanwhile his son **David** graduated from John Burroughs Junior High, Fairfax High School, and UCLA. At UCLA he studied Political Science, played trumpet in the Bruin concert band, and met his future wife **Bonnie**. He decided to become a rabbi, was ordained at Hebrew Union College, and the rest is his story (or history).

The Torah portion we are about to read from Leviticus chapter 16 describes God's instructions to **Moses** to be given to his brother **Aaron**, who was the high priest, and performed the most sacred functions of the community. At the time the Israelites were camped in the desert and Aaron's two oldest sons had recently been struck dead when they made an unauthorized

incense offering in the Tent of Meeting. So these instructions for Aaron to carry out in order to atone for the sins of the community were definitely important, and could even be a matter of life and death.

The instructions covered what clothes Aaron must wear and the details of the sacrifices to be performed, including the process for selecting two goats: one for an atonement offering and one sent into the wilderness with all the Israelite's sins (the scapegoat). The selection of which goat is to be sacrificed is made by lots (in a random fashion). This reminds us of how much in each of our lives is due to chance. We didn't choose our parents.

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan was a Conservative Rabbi in the early 1900s when he formulated a modern interpretation of God, the Torah, and the Jewish people. This theology was later known as Reconstructionism. Rabbi Kaplan tried to get his ideas incorporated into the Conservative liturgy, with limited success. He founded his own Synagogue called The Society for the Advancement of Judaism in New York City on the Upper West Side in 1922. It had many of the elements of today's Jewish Community Center. The Reconstructionist Movement exists today as a small, but vital, independent movement with its own rabbinical college in Philadelphia.

Rabbi Kaplan also became a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Conservative rabbinic college in New York City. Among his disciples there were future Rabbis **Max Vorspan** and **Harold Schulweis**.

Kaplan wrote several books about his theology and ideas of Judaism, starting with *Judaism as a Civilization* in 1934. One of his later books is entitled *Not So Random Thoughts* published in 1966. It is a compilation of his quotations, somewhat similar to the Book of Proverbs. In it he comments on our Torah portion, as follows.

“Like so many other things in the Bible, the scapegoat is not at all what people think it is. They apply the term “scapegoat” to any person or group that is falsely charged with being the cause of the evils that befall them. No one ever thought of holding the goat responsible for the sins it carried to Azazel. The meaning of that ritual was that you had to get rid of evil before you tried to do good.”

We can learn from Kaplan that our task is to reflect within ourselves which are the evils in our own behavior. We do that today with the repeated recitation of the various sins. Then we must find a way to eliminate that behavior, in order to prepare to perform *mitzvot* and create a better world with our unique God-given capabilities.

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Among Kaplan's other quotations about Torah are:

"The foremost problem in Jewish religion is how to get Jews to take the Bible seriously without taking it literally."

Our *mahzor*, in its reflections upon the Rosh Hashanah Amidah, states:

Every person born into this world represents something new, something that never existed before, something original and unique. ... Every person's foremost task is the actualization of his/her unique, unprecedented, and never recurring potentialities, and not the repetition of something another, and be it even the greatest, has already achieved.

Rabbi Susya (a great Hassidic 18th century rebbe) said, a short while before his death: In the world to come I shall not be asked: "Why were you not Moses?" I shall be asked: "Why were you not Susya?"

On Yom Kippur we also have a time when we remember our loved ones in the Yizkor service. On page 684 of our mahzor you'll find the words from Ecclesiastes 3 (*Kohelet* in Hebrew):

*There is a time for everything;
there is a time for all things under the sun:
a time to be born and a time to die*

Here at Shir Ami we are painfully aware of this as we recently lost two outstanding members. **Shirley Esko**, who edited our Book of Remembrance for many years, died the end of September. You will see that this year's Book you received today is dedicated to her memory. Shirley was always ready to help our community in any way. She was one of the stalwart "kitchen ladies" in our Kol Tikvah days. **Barbara Tober**, who started our Social Action committee when we were at Kol Tikvah, died the beginning of October. Barbara was also known for her love of animals and arranged events in the outside area for "blessing the animals". Both women exemplify the Jewish "Woman of Valor" attributes.

I said at the beginning that we are remembered for what we do in life. Shirley and Barbara are remembered for the many things they have done for our Congregation. May they be an inspiration for us to continue in making Shir Ami a place of extended Jewish family and a force for improving lives in our community.

I also said I would recommend where we might receive instructions for life. When we pray the *yizkor* prayers for our departed loved ones, let us also contemplate how their memories can inspire us to greater compassion for the less fortunate and deeds that contribute to well being for our family, our community, and our people. When we pray for the souls of the martyrs of our people, let us realize that their sacrifices made possible our comfortable lives today. This personal introspection may not be pleasant, but then not all learning is.

And where is God in this picture? Whatever our personal conception of God, our personal knowledge of God's presence is based on our observations from our place on Earth. We see the majesty of nature from the vastness of the stars in the skies to the microscopic wonders of the cells in our bodies. We see oceans, mountains, canyons, and glaciers. And we see the amazing plethora of plants and animals, knowing that many others once roamed our planet.

We see the accomplishments of mankind, from skyscrapers to the electronic wonders of modern technology. And we ask ourselves, could all of this be the result of random events over billions of years? Our universe of galaxies, stars, and planets, orbiting in a space beyond our ability to measure, obeys physical laws creating order, rather than chaos. To me, this is the God I conceive through my powers of reason.

I think our Torah and other writings provide a lens through which we can each see a direction for our lives. Congregation Shir Ami provides both ritual and learning opportunities for us to use in this task.

On this Yom Kippur as we chant the same liturgy as our fellow Jews throughout the world, recite the same sins as our fellow Jews enumerated throughout our history, and reflect upon our loved ones as our fellow Jews have in observing this holy day in many lands and in many times, let us realize we are one people. Some are more knowledgeable, some less; some are more observant, some less; some partake more of our culture and some less. But we all make up the Jewish people and we are each responsible for using our unique God-given abilities to make the world better for all God's ultimate creation: our fellow human beings.

Shana tova