

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 Dvar Torah

by Lou Loomis

HAPPY NEW YEAR, EVERYONE!



Four novice nuns were about to take their vows. Dressed in their white gowns, they came into the chapel with the Mother Superior, and were about to undergo the ceremony to marry them to Jesus, making them "Brides of Christ."

Just as the ceremony was about to begin, four Hasidic Jews with yarmulkes, long sideburns, and long beards came in and sat in the front row.

The Mother Superior said to them, "I am honored that you would want to share this experience with us, but do you mind if I ask you why you came?"

One of the Jews replied, "We're from the groom's family."

So here we are again, another Rosh Hashannah. 5778. Another year we ask G-d for strength to overcome our fears, overcome our base impulses, the evil inclination, that force that tricks us into making unwise decisions. It's also another year we remember the troubles, the disappointments, the losses and, if we can, the small victories we had. We all have them. Gains and losses. Problems faced, problems overcome, and problems still to be resolved. We're going to ask for the strength, wisdom, and energy to do the right thing this year. If we really think things through, we will regret our wrongs and vow not to repeat them. Ever.

This week we read from the Torah about the life of Abraham, the founder of Judaism, his difficulties, his mission to spread knowledge of the one God, a revolutionary concept, which enables us, empowers us, to fight the biggest battles of all-time, the battles of ourselves.

The entire of Western Civilization is based on the simple Jewish concept, so revolutionary in Abraham's time, that the human is free to determine their own destiny.

Before Abraham, the idea of one God, who gives us the freedom to decide how we want to live, how we want to improve ourselves, the conventional wisdom was that we humans had no real power to overcome the forces of nature, the forces of the environment, and whatever the stronger ones told us, we had no choice but to do. Murder, theft, marriage....those things were defined by the state, those stronger than us, and we had to answer to them. Abraham introduced the God who said the value of the human life is higher than the state, and we humans have a

soul that is divine, a part of God. We have to respect life, respect each other, and learn self-respect.

So this year, we'll ask for forgiveness. Not just from God, who is both judging and loving, our God, who we are told is quick to forgive. But also we ask for forgiveness for the wrongs we did to others. The wrongs we did accidentally and the wrongs we did on purpose; in the ways we have strayed from the path God wants us on. We can go directly to the source. We ask God to forgive us.

In the ways we have wronged others, hurt others, we have to do something much more difficult. We have to ask forgiveness, face to face, of those we have wronged. Now, that's tough. Personally, I'd like to just send out a general note to everyone on my e-mail list and say "hey, if I wronged you, sorry!!" Or, "hey, I know I wronged you, but toughen up, buttercup!" Yeah. That's what I want to say.

But those pesky Rabbis tell us, nope, we can't do that. It has to be real. It has to be heart to heart. It has to be personal. I'm pretty sure I can be personal in an e-mail. Maybe not.

Rabbis and psychologists both say we need to also forgive ourselves. Instead of saying we blew it, we need to admit our weakness and then recommit and resolve to keep trying.

We can also build up our determination to overcome ourselves by keeping in mind the prayer we make so often in our Rosh Hashannah prayer books: *Avinu Malkenu*. God is *Malkenu*, our king and from this we learn that our laws, or morals, ethics, come from God, not just the whim and opinions of others, or our own. And God is *Avinu*, our father. And from this we learn something truly amazing: God is so very close to us. God is right here, our family, us. We can ask God anytime we want for help, for strength, for wisdom and courage. Rosh Hashanna, and Yom Kippur are special times we do repentance and ask for strength courage and wisdom, yes, but what about the rest of the year? Do we only do this at this time of year? If we consider the words, "*avinu malkenu*" then we realize, no, this is year around, always. God is always available for strength, wisdom, courage. Always available to help pick us up. This is part of the revolution that Abraham helped spread. God is *Avinu Malkenu*. Don't be afraid.

So, yes, here we are again. Reminded that we're not through in the battle of making a better world. Making ourselves better. Another year. Congratulations. I applaud each of you for not giving up.

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 Dvar Torah

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I'm reminded of the story about Little Hannah, who asked her mother, 'How did the human race appear?' Her mother answered, 'God made Adam and Eve and they had children and so was all mankind made.'

Two days later Hannah asked her father the same question. Her father answered, 'Many years ago there were apes from which the human race evolved.'

Hannah, confused, returned to her mother and said, Mom how is it possible that you told me the human race was created by God, and Dad said they developed from apes? The mother answered, 'Well, dear, it is very simple. I told you about my side of the family and your father told you about his.'

It's possible I may be related to this father's family. A Russian Astronomer once said: Either there is a god or there isn't, Both possibilites are frightful, because if there is a god then we better find out who he is, and find out what he wants and do what he says. If there is no god then we are in trouble, because we are hurdling into space at 66,000 miles an hour and nobody is in charge.

We're lucky, because Jews know that God is in charge.

So here we are. 5778. Still fighting the same battles that Abraham fought.

The Torah tells us Abraham faced 10 horrific trials in his life, trying to fulfill his mission:

1. He is thrown into a fiery furnace.
2. God tells him to leave his homeland to be a stranger in the land of Canaan.
3. Right after his arrival in the Promised Land, he encounters a famine.
4. The Egyptians seize his beloved wife, Sarah, and bring her to Pharaoh.
5. He faces incredible odds in the battle of the four and five kings.
6. He is told by God that his children will be strangers in a strange land.
7. God tells him to circumcise himself at 99 years of age. 99? To himself!
8. The king of Gerar kidnaps Sarah, intending to take her for himself.
9. God tells him to send away Hagar and her son, Ishmael.
10. Abraham is told by God to sacrifice his dear son Isaac upon an altar.

Our trials and battles may not be as dramatic as Abraham's, but they're still tough.

As Jews, we know it's a hostile world. If nature doesn't kill us, our hostile neighbors will try to finish the job.

But Jews are a tough people. I was recently told by someone who had converted out of Judaism that we are lucky we are Jewish, that we've stayed Jewish. . One reason comes immediately to mind: It's not easy being Jewish. With all this hostility aimed at us, we have to try harder. We have to adapt to the more difficult conditions.

Look, why would Jews, who have been persecuted for so many hundreds of years, even thousands of years, chose to return to our ancestral homeland in the middle east, a land surrounded by so many hostile neighbors who really want to kill us? Of course, throughout the history of the Jewish people, we have lived in lands where the majority population also tried to kill us. Or, convert us. Or both.

We are a people of hope. We're always trying to survive, to make ourselves better, to heal rifts with our families, friends, other Jews.

Ever notice how one group of Jews will criticize another group of Jews.? Still, when the chips are down, we come together as one people. All may not be forgiven, but we Jews have managed to survive our differences. Rabbi Yitz Greenberg once said: I don't care what kind of Jew you are, what denomination you belong to, as long as you're ashamed of it. We may carry some guilt, but we are people of great hope. And humor.

Okay? For example, and I'm sure you've heard this already:

A horse walks into a bar. The bartender looks up and says, "Hey, why the long face?"

Or this: A rabbi, a priest, and a Lutheran minister walk into a bar. The bartender looks up and says, "What is this? Some kind of a joke?"

So, I wish everyone a happy new year, a year of love, light, success and prosperity, and wonderful new beginnings. A year of overcomings. And may we be so successful that we have to make all new vows next year.

Oh. And if I've wronged anyone this past year, please wait for my apology e-mail, which I'll send out just before Yom Kippur.

L'Shanah Tovah.

Rosh Hashanah Day 2 Dvar Torah

by Lonny Scharf

One would like to think that with the beginning of the new year, we should start at the beginning of the torah with Bereshes. Why we don't , I don't know. Instead, we start with the binding of Isaac. The rabbi said that he would address this later.

On Rosh Hashana the torah reading is about the binding of Isaac. It's a brief short narrative and doesn't tell you much about Abraham the man or his son. In this drash, I have decided to take a different approach to the subject.

A conversation between God and Abraham

God: Abraham

Abraham: Here I am.

God. I know that I told you before that you would be the father of many nations, but I want to be sure. I have a little test for you and Isaac.

Abraham: What do you want me to do?

God: Take your one son.

Abraham: I have two sons.

God: the one that you love.

Abraham: I love them both.

God. Isaac. I want you to go to a place that I will show you and I want you to offer your son, Isaac as a sacrifice.

God didn't say a burnt offering, but in Abraham's mind, a sacrifice always meant a burnt offering. I will come back to this point later. So Abraham got up early in the morning, took Isaac, two of his servants, some wood , which he made Isaac carry, and the firestone, and left on his journey.

There is a question as to why Abraham felt that he had to leave early in the morning. Normally, if you are going on a long journey, you eat, then prepare for the up coming trip. Not in this case, and the answer is simple. He didn't want his wife Sarah to know what he was about to do. He was afraid that if she found out, she would have probably tried to stop him, and in so doing, Isaac would have been torn between the conflicting wishes of his parents, his mother wanting him to stay and his father's need to obey God's request.

At this point, Isaac never questioned his father's reasons for going, although I think that he mixed feelings about going. In a way, it was very important for Isaac to leave. He was a home body. If he was to be the father of great nations he had to leave his father's house.

Abraham, Isaac, and Abrahams' two servants set off on their journey. It took them three days to get to

where God told them to go. Why did they have to travel three days? They could have gone one day and made a sacrifice. But in those days it gave Abraham a chance to think, to question and reflect on what he has been asked to do. Abraham thought "If I kill Isaac, God would be reneging on His promise that His seed would be many nations.. If I don't I don't know."

I need God to tell me clearly what He wants me to do. Is God so erratic that he can't make up his mind? Why does He want me to offer up Isaac?

For three days it was a constant internal struggle. In the end, Abraham did what his was asked to do.

There is a question about Abraham's blind obedience to God in this situation. Why did he not bargain with God as he did with Sodom and Gemorah. This was his son, I mean his favorite son, from whom was supposed to come great nations. Why was he willing to bargain with God about strangers but not about his own son? Does God want blind obedience? Man was given a mind with which to think and reason and to question. If Abraham was being tested, he both passed and failed. Why did he pass? He obeyed God's request. He failed because he did not bargain with God like he did with Sodom and Gemorah.

I want to go back to the idea of sacrifice. Abraham did not believe in human sacrifice which made this task very morally and ethically difficult. How to obey God and still be an ethical person. We all have to deal with sacrifices in our lives, some are easy, some not so easy. Some examples are volunteering time, serving in the military, a parent working two jobs so that his child can go to college. I am sure that you can think of many more. In the end, Abraham did sacrifice his son. Isaac left not to return years later with his wife.

This whole scenario was also a test for Isaac as well. Isaac was not a child at this time. Some commentaries say that he was in his thirties. To think that he did not know what was happening would be a mistake. During those three days of traveling , it gave him a chance to ponder and question his father about God and obeying God's requests. His test was whether he would be willing to go along with the scenario and trust Gods words, at the risk of his own life?

An angel, not God, called out Abraham's name, twice. Why an angel and not God? It was God in the first place who started the whole scenario.I don't know. Why twice? It was to startle him. I believe that until he was stopped he was still arguing with himself about what he was going to do since he did not believe in human sacrifice. It was to get his attention quickly and to stop his actions.

Rosh Hashanah Day 2 Dvar Torah

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We know what the angel said. The angel said "because you were willing to sacrifice your son, knowing that it would contradict what I promised you earlier, your seed shall be many nations. And Isaac, your willingness to obey your father and have faith in God, you shall be the father of many nations."

After the angel stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac, and after the offering up of the ram, Abraham returned to his servants alone. Isaac went away and did not return until after his mother's death. It has been said that Sarah died of a broken heart because of the loss of Isaac's leaving.

Between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we too have time to reflect on our past thoughts and actions just like Abraham. The prayers that we say are designed to move us to thinking about mistakes that we made during the year, and how we can do better this coming year.

May the New Year be filled with peace and good health.

Shana Tova

Yom Kippur Dvar Torah

by Stan Schroeder

Boker tov, Good morning.

We are gathered here today on our holiest day of the year. This year it is doubly holy, Yom Kippur and Shabbat. And we are doubly blessed to be holding our services in the auditorium of de Toledo High School. You don't have to look too far around you to notice that our congregation is largely senior. That means that we have had the opportunity to gather wisdom from our tradition and our life experiences. During the next few minutes I plan to share some of that wisdom. This auditorium also serves as the meeting place for the students of this school who represent our future. Under the leadership of **Dr. Bruce Powell**, head-of-school, and **Rabbi David Vorspan** who is de Toledo Rabbi-in-residence, the next generation of Jews is preparing to carry on a 3500 year old tradition of beliefs and values going back to Abraham of Ur.

I have been privileged to deliver our Yom Kippur Torah commentary the preceding seven years. Seven is a sacred number. Years and months are determined by the cycles of the sun and the moon. But seven days in a week, concluding with Shabbat, the day of rest, is a Torah based definition, going back to the story of Creation.

And Gregorian years ending in seven are significant in the history of the Jewish State of Israel:

1897 – the first Zionist Congress

1917 – the Balfour declaration declaring favor for a homeland for the Jewish People

1947 – the United Nations resolution dividing Palestine between the Jews and the Arabs

and leading to the declaration of the State

1967 – the Six Day War reunifying Jerusalem

Our Torah portion this morning enumerates the duties of the High Priest on this holiest day.

The Talmud in tractate *Yoma* (Aramaic "the day") elaborates:

On that day, the *kohen gadol* immersed (in a *mikvah*) five times, and washed his hands and feet from the *kiyor* (basin) that stood before the Sanctuary ten times: each time he changed his clothes, he was required to immerse once and wash twice (once before removing the first set of clothes, and again after dressing in the second set).

Yom Kippur Dvar Torah

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For there were five sets of services performed by him on that day:

- 1) The regular morning services, performed in the "golden garments" (worn by the *kohen gadol* throughout the year).
- 2) The special services of the day (reciting the confession over the Yom Kippur offerings, casting the lots, entering the Holy of Holies to offer the *ketoret* (incense consisting of a special blend of eleven herbs and balms whose precise ingredients and manner of preparation were commanded by God to Moses) and to sprinkle the blood of the Yom Kippur offerings, performed in the linen garments).
- 3) The two rams brought as "ascending offerings" and the day's *musaf* offerings, in the golden garments.
- 4) Returning to the Holy of Holies to remove the pan of burning incense, in linen garments.
- 5) The regular afternoon services, in the golden garments.

Chassidic teaching explains that the animal sacrifices offered in the Holy Temple represent the person's offering of his own animal soul to God, the subjugation of one's natural instincts and desires to the divine will. This is the deeper significance of the foul odor emitted by the sacrifices, which the *ketoret* came to dispel: the animal soul of man—which is the basic drive, common to every living creature, for self-preservation and self-enhancement—possesses many positive traits which can be directed toward gainful and holy ends; but it is also the source of many negative and destructive traits.

When a person brings his animal self to the Temple of God and offers what is best and finest in it upon the altar, there is still the foul odor—the selfishness, the brutality and the materiality of the animal in man—that accompanies the process. Hence the burning of the *ketoret*, which possessed the unique capability to sublimate the evil odor of the animal soul within its heavenly fragrance.

Basically we are taught the importance of the need to be aware we have instincts that drive us to act in a way that may be hurtful to others. And we need to have a way to recognize situations in our lives and act in accordance with Jewish values and *mitzvoth*. This is certainly not an easy task. But I will tell you it is as simple as ABC.

A is for Appreciation; usually understood to mean the recognition and enjoyment of the good qualities of someone or something. However it has a second meaning of "to increase in value." At Shir Ami contemporary Shabbat services we share the things in our lives we are thankful for prior to the Amidah prayer.

Being thankful is an expression of appreciation or gratitude. I suggest we recognize the individuals and acts for which we are thankful and make them even more valuable by emulating the qualities that they demonstrate.

B is for Blessing; usually understood as God's favor and protection. Basically a blessing is a gift we didn't in some way earn. Many of us have a problem talking in "God language" because we relate God to the supernatural and that goes against our concept of the world. Yet most of us would agree the world around us is not the result of a set of random events. It is well ordered from the microscopic to the cosmic. Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan defined that order (as opposed to randomness or chaos) as God. And we, as human beings, are the embodiment of that order in its most advanced manifestation. We can and should use this ultimate blessing to achieve *tikkun olam*, the Jewish concept defined by acts of kindness performed to perfect or repair the world.

C is for Community, a feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals. I have spoken often about how strongly I feel about community as an important value we share at Congregation Shir Ami. And how we are part of increasingly larger communities:

Other Conservative congregations, especially in the Valley

All other Jewish congregations, local, national, and worldwide

The Jewish people

All people

Today I want to analyze the unity aspect of community. To what extent do we look for unity of opinion among our community? I'm especially concerned about politics and religious observance and values. A short time ago we recited the *ashamnu* prayer, and will again later in the service. *Ashamnu* (meaning "we have trespassed" or "we are guilty"), is the opening word and hence the name of a formula of confession of sins which forms part of the Day of Atonement and of other penitential services.

Rabbi Donniel Hartman, the President of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem where I attended an 8-day seminar in June, wrote his suggestion for this prayer on this Yom Kippur.

Yom Kippur Dvar Torah

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Ashamnu. We have sinned. Much is not well, not as it should or can be. Our communities are filled with anger, fear, hatred, pain, and acrimony. Yom Kippur is not merely a day of prayer in search for Divine forgiveness, but a day of taking responsibility for the world that we have created. This year, I will begin with the sin of certainty. The certainty that I have the truth and others do not. The certainty that I am right and others wrong. The certainty that I am good and others bad. The certainty that I love my country and others do not. Truth, knowledge, and enlightenment will only grow when I expose my certainty to the critique of others.

I believe we are inspired to become more of our higher selves by hearing about people who demonstrate exemplary behavior. That is why in previous years I have talked about Jewish people in our community we can emulate, one way or another. The first four I talked about were UCLA graduates, three athletes and one rabbi. I return to this theme with a woman who graduated from UCLA with a BA in English in 1971. She went on to earn a MA in Early Childhood Education from the University of Cincinnati while her husband was attending Hebrew Union College in the city to become a rabbi (not by coincidence the rabbi I featured four years ago.)

Rebbetzin Bonnie Vorspan will be honored by our Congregation at a Tribute Luncheon two weeks from tomorrow. Many of us know of our unique ritual items Bonnie created with meticulous needlework that enhance our Shabbat and High Holy Day services. Her delightful Torah reading is another welcome part of our service. We also know what a kind and generous woman is behind her beaming smile. When it comes to family, Bonnie describes herself as “loving wife of Rabbi David Vorspan, loving mother of Alisha Sela, Ben Vorspan and Shaina Vorspan Brenner, loving mother-in-law of Rabbi Ahud Sela, Elana Vorspan and Aaron Brenner, loving Bubbie of Yael, Gavi and Eitan Sela and Evan and Judah Vorspan”. She also adds “proud Rebbetzin of Congregation Shir Ami”. And we are proud to have her as our Woman of Valor.

I conclude with a short poem for this Yom Kippur.

Let us remember as we enumerate our sins,
It's within ourselves that change begins.
And as we remember those we held dear,
Their lives have meaning through what we do here.

I appreciate what others have done for me,
And I am blessed to be in the land of the free.
I have a caring community of my fellow Jews
And they're entitled to their sincerely held views.

Ketiva ve-chatima tovah May you be written and sealed for a good year.