

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 Dvar Torah

by Lou Loomis

Welcome to Rosh Hashanah
5785. Happy New Year.

It's been quite a year, hasn't it?

But, before I get started, I'd like to toss out a few info tidbits, just for those of you who are new to this holiday.

Let's start with this: Rosh Hashanah is not the celebration of the creation of the world. According to the Bible, the big bang event of world creation happened six days before Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah celebrates the creation of humankind.

The Jewish sages talk about how God created light, the sky, the earth, vegetation, the sun and moon, the sea and sky animals, land animals, and finally humans. Sometime before the creation of humans, God creates the angels. God consults the angels about humankind, and the angels try to persuade God not to make humans. They think God might be creating monsters who will destroy God's creations. But God goes ahead anyway, despite doubts, and makes humans. Was this a good idea? It's one of the major themes we mull over during the high holidays, the Days of Awe. creates humans anyway. The creation story shows that humans weren't such a good idea after all, that maybe the angels were right all along. So, God destroys the world in a huge flood only to try again with someone God trusts to do good: Noah and his family. A few generations of human bungling later, God must've been very frustrated, and we are introduced to Abraham who God tells to leave the corrupt city of his birth and settle with his family in Canaan.

God blesses Abraham and instructs him to bring morality and ethics into the world with God as the only King, the sole ultimate source of law and morality. He promises Abraham that if he follows God, he will make Abraham and his family a mighty nation.

Abraham's life is filled with strife and problems which he must overcome, and to make matters worse, he and his wife Sarah are childless. Abraham fears that he will never

have children and won't be able to fulfill his oath to serve God. Eventually, God blesses Abraham with a son, Ishmael; but God is not satisfied with Ishmael and sends Ishmael away.

(I know this sounds like a biblical shaggy dog story, but stay with me here. Things will begin to take a turn.)

Abraham doesn't give up; he will not turn away from God. And even though Abraham and Sarah are getting on in years, God blesses the couple with another son, Isaac. God is happy with Isaac, yet for reasons that aren't revealed until later, God tells Abraham to kill his son as a sacrifice on the altar. (Now, honestly, if you were Abraham, what would you do?) Abraham doesn't turn away from God. Abraham stays faithful and we know he is rewarded by God sparing Isaac's life. Later Abraham is blessed with many offspring.

And to alleviate any fears, and due to this incident known as the Binding of Isaac, Judaism prohibits human sacrifice and particularly child sacrifice.

Now I want to introduce yet another twist to this story which I think will help in better understanding Rosh Hashanah. The twist is with another important character: The Satan.

In Judaism, Satan is not the devil as Christians and Muslims portray. Satan is one of the angels created before God made mankind, and is God's *prosecuting council* on Yom Kippur.

And during our next holiday following Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, we find out more regarding our trial before God. The days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, known as the 10 days of repentance, is a time of intense introspection. A time of struggling with ourselves and with God. Are we deserving of the life given to mankind during the time of creation? Can we find the resolve to make ourselves better? Some of our sages even believe that our lives *hang in the balance*, during this ten-day period. (Personally, I don't believe it's so, or at least I hope it isn't.)

Abraham's mission was to serve god, and with that to help mankind become deserving of creation. God creates humans with freedom of choice, to do good or evil, and by good that is to follow god's laws.



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Plants and Animals weren't created to be able to violate god's laws. Only mankind has that ability, which includes the ability to both create or destroy the earth.

During Yom Kippur we confess our sins, our failures to overcome our faults, which we highlight during our services. You may recognize yourself, and I certainly do, when our weaknesses are mentioned.

Part of this process is to confess our shortcomings, or sins, not just once, but at least twice. Our sages tell us that our confessions, despite our sorrows, confuses the Satan. Why? Because in our humility and shame, we blame ourselves. The Yom Kippur service gives us several opportunities to confess with broken hearts. **And our sages tell us** that to confess this way, the Satan, God's prosecuting attorney, tells God we are *acting* with contrition. But we may not really be sincere. So, the sages say, after one session of confession, Satan leaves us and goes home. The jury is still out, so to speak. Later that same day, we confession again. The Only this time, **we confess directly to God**, we present our case directly to God without going through Satan, without going through an intermediary, the prosecuting attorney! It's just us and God. And now it's up to us to show our sincerity.

Another part of this process, another reading is a book not in the torah but in a later book of the Bible which gets us to an even deeper understanding of what is happening. We read the story of Job, who was a righteous man and blessed by God with prosperity and a happy life. He is very devoted to God. But, Satan (here he is again), the prosecuting attorney, taunts God by pointing out that Job **should fear** God because he owes all he has to God, who could take it all away in a heartbeat. Satan goes on to say that if God took away all of Job's wealth and blessings, Job would then curse God. God tells Satan that is not so because Job is loyal and righteous. And just to prove it, God takes away Job's happiness with mishaps, poverty and bad health. However, Job does not once blame God for his misery and remains loyal, again confounding Satan.

So, who is on trial in this story of Job? Not Job.

Who then?

Just like Noah and Abraham, God restores to Job all he took away. He lets the Satan know that he, God, has been vindicated in creating the human being in these three individuals, Noah, Abraham and Job.

Everyone knows Job is innocent. And here, Job symbolizes all of the human creation. God did not give up on man. Even while Satan declares man is evil, God says Job is good, as are Noah and Abraham. And now something else begins to come into focus. ***Jewish history parallels the lives of these three individuals.***

Jews have had numerous difficulties and trials, from the Egyptian enslavement, Roman destruction of the Temple, the diasporas, persecutions and numerous shoahs. And today, most recently with the horrific terror on Israel and the spread of world-wide anti-semitism. Jews have remained loyal.

Like Noah, Job and Abraham, we Jews have repeatedly lost everything throughout history. We've seen tough times....

Rosh Hashanah Day 2 Dvar Torah

by Gladys Sturman



We consider Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to be the High Holidays. The most important days of the Jewish year. But in Biblical times that was not the case. In the bible Rosh Hashanah is not mentioned, and Yom Kippur only peripherally. In the bible Rosh Hashanah is referred to as the 1st day of the 7th month and Yom Kippur as the 10th day. In this ten-day period, we were to cleanse the Holy Temple of all the sins that had accumulated during the year when people made their sin offerings. On the 10th day Lifted his arms and declared that all was in order for the celebration of the MAJOR holiday for which all of this was a preparation – Succot. One did not break the fast until one had pounded the first nail for the construction of the Succah.

Rosh Hashanah Day 2 Dvar Torah

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When the temple was destroyed, the custom was translated to looking inward, to cleansing our souls of the sins within ourselves that had accumulated all year. What does it mean to cleanse ourselves of our sins?

To start the New Year with a clean spirit one has to be forgiven for his sins. In Judaism it is not God who forgives you, nor the Cohanim. The people who must forgive you are your spouse, parents, children, friends, co-workers and others with whom you may have had ordinary contact during the year. How do you get their forgiveness? You ask them for it. There is a Halachic formula for this: For the sin that I have committed against you wittingly or unwittingly during the year, please forgive me.

It is not easy to say this. For some it is impossible. For those who are fortunate enough not to be encased in rigid inhibitions, it will be an enormous emotional and spiritual moment if, even one time or one person, you can ask a loved one or an acquaintance to forgive you.

In today's world many of us see the end of Yom Kippur as the end of the year – not the beginning as it was meant to be. We did Yom Kippur and now we can go back to our normal lives.

We are missing the message of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. They are not the end-all. They are the preparation for living a Jewish life.

Now we are to drive the first nail. In the past Rabbi Vorspan has on these occasions encouraged us to add at least one observance, one more commitment to our Judaism. Drive in the nail. I would like to add one more exhortation – read a book – a book about Jewish history, about the development of the religion, read one of the great Jewish philosophers, read about the story of American Jewry, subscribe to Western States Jewish History Journal, read about Zionism or the Holocaust – expand your observance and also expand your understanding.

And observe the Sabbath and the Jewish holidays.

We cannot ignore the seasons of the year. He who does not respond to the flowering of spring or the chill of winter is emotionally cut off from the life support system of the earth. Likewise, he who removes himself from the annual cycle of the Jewish holidays has disconnected himself from the Jewish blood supply line.

Please go on to have a happy and productive Jewish year and a Jewish life and an easy fast.

Yom Kippur Dvar Torah

by Stan Schroeder



Boker tov, Good morning.

We are gathered here today on our holiest day of the year. 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. Thanks to the efforts of **Dr. Bruce Powell**, founding head-of-school, and **Rabbi David Vorspan**, founding Rabbi-in-residence, and both retired, 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.

You may know that at our Shabbat services, I have the opportunity to speak at the end of our communal period of sharing what we are thankful for. I have been sharing about people, past and present, that have contributed to the world I am blessed to live in. And I get to speak at this Yom Kippur service. I am going to combine the two by being thankful for **David Suissa**, editor of the *Jewish Journal*.

Yom Kippur Dvar Torah (continued)

You may also know I am a long-time UCLA sports fan, having played in the football and basketball band 1948-52. This week's issue highlights the one-year anniversary of last year's October 7 Hamas horrific attack into southern Israel.

The week of Yom Kippur last year the *Journal* had an article by **Morton Schapiro** about **Sandy Koufax**, whom he once met. It is well known Koufax refused to pitch in the World Series on Yom Kippur in 1965. Less well known is that a young Jewish UCLA football player also refused to play that day. **Alan Claman**, now **Aba Claman**, founder and President of Thank Israeli Soldiers. I first spoke about Claman here in 2010, and was a guest in his magnificent home in Jerusalem's Old City during my trip to Israel in May last year. More about him later.

As our Ritual Vice President I coordinate the assignment of honors awarded for our High Holy Day services. I understand the honor of speaking from the bimah on this holiest day of our year, and I take the responsibility seriously. But that doesn't mean that I can't start with a bit of humor, as I do at our monthly Shabbat Torah study sessions. This one was sent to me by our member **Judy Eisikowitz**.

Sullivan, Cabot, Kelly and Mendlebaum was one of the most successful law firms in New York.

Of all the partners, Mendlebaum brought in the most business.

Lunching with him one day, a curious friend asked, "Why is your name listed last?"

O'Sullivan spends his time in the south of France. Cabot is at his club's bar every afternoon, and Kelly is at the race track all the time.

Since you bring in all the business, your name should be first."

To which Mendlebaum replied, "All my clients read from right to left."

Speaking of taking something seriously, Rabbi **Mordecai Kaplan**, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, believed one of the foremost challenges of Judaism in his time (he died in 1983 at the age of 102) was convincing Jews to take Torah seriously without taking it literally. This is no less true today. I believe the Shir Ami tradition of our members delivering the High Holy Days dvar Torahs is a way of encouraging this. And the monthly Shabbat Torah study sessions that I conduct put this belief into practice for our congregation.

This Yom Kippur is especially holy, occurring on Shabbat. The morning Torah reading has an additional reading (Aliyah). You will notice in our mahzor the aliyot are prefaced differently to account for this addition. We read about Aaron's, as the High Priest's, duties as he makes the sacrifice for the sins of the community. He starts with two goats, sending one into the wilderness and sacrificing the other. From this we've developed the idea of a scapegoat. How often do we see this in action in our society and in our own lives? We conclude our readings today with the Haftarah this afternoon with the story of Jonah in the Prophets. It is the well-known story of Jonah, swallowed by a large fish when he tries to escape God's command to go to Nineveh, a city in the Assyrian Empire (now in Mosul, Iraq). It is a story of repentance, both non-Jewish Nineveh and Jonah, himself.

I look at the two readings as demonstrating our responsibilities, both as individuals and as a community. Shir Ami is both a Congregation and a Community. In both we pray, we learn, and we have projects to better the greater community. These services give us the opportunity to pray and learn. *Around the Rabbi's Tisch* gives us the opportunity to learn from Rabbi Vorspan and each other. At our monthly Shabbat Torah study sessions, I conduct we learn from rabbis such as **Jonathan Sacks**, **Ed Feinstein**, and **Meir Soloveichik** and each other.

The other community endeavor I have undertaken since 2009 is to write articles, edit, and publish our monthly bulletin, *Shir Notes*. **Rabbi Vorspan** and our President **Jordan Pistol** both write a monthly article. For several years **Lou Loomis** has written articles about the Jewish world as he sees it. Others have written articles about their experiences.

Yom Kippur Dvar Torah (continued)

I write articles about Judaism, Israel, and our holidays and community. I also include Judaic poems I have written, a longtime hobby. For many years I wrote short biographies of Jewish people that have given our world the blessings we often take for granted.

Years ago, United Synagogue gave annual awards to their congregations in various categories. In 2011 we won a gold medal for monthly bulletins in the “small congregation” grouping. The annual meeting that year was in San Diego and I was able to go there to receive it. **Alan Burman** encourages me describe our bulletin as the award-winning *Shir Notes*. I include this today because it demonstrates my effort at enlarging community. When we won the award, I asked what other small congregations also won a gold medal. One was Agudath Israel in Saskatoon, Canada. I contacted their editor and offered to send them my bios for their then bimonthly bulletin (now quarterly). I have sent him and his successor editors a bio for their last 50 issues, going back to 2012.

I invite everyone to submit articles for our *Shir Notes*. I have about 150 email subscribers. Our current issue is also available via our website.

Rabbi Vorspan has been discussing how we struggle with a concept of God in today’s modern world. He told us how Rabbi **Harold Schulweis**, a student of Kaplan at Jewish Theological Seminary (the Conservative movement rabbinical school in New York City), integrated Kaplan’s theology by ending his prayers with the two words “through me.”

Schulweis’ 1994 book *For Those Who Can’t Believe* explains his theology in an easy-to-read format. Kaplan, the son of a renowned Orthodox rabbi in Lithuania, developed a theology consistent with the physical world of the early 20th century. He saw that we live in a universe of physical laws operating from the microscopic to the cosmic spheres.

This order was the opposite of random connectivity. And he called the force that created this orderly universe God. Jews and, of course, other religious groups, formed in biblical times and before. Judaism is the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people. Kaplan wrote the book *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* in 1934.

Back to Aba Claman and Israel today. Born in Swift Currents, Saskatchewan, to one of the few Jewish families in the Canadian town of 7,000 people, Alan/Aba Claman heard stories about Israel as a child. “My dad used to tell us that the roofs of Israel are made of chocolate, and the roads of candy,” he jokes. The family made aliyah shortly before Claman’s bar mitzvah, which he had in Israel. But after nine months, they returned to North America, this time settling in Los Angeles.

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Claman was a supreme athlete, playing football first string as a sophomore at UCLA, when the team was ranked number one in the United States and played in the Rose Bowl. When Claman was 19, his father passed away, and he was left to take care of his nine siblings – a task for which he felt responsible as the oldest child. From there, he went to Harvard Law School and ultimately excelled in business in the aerospace industry.

As he was achieving so much success, he found himself missing something – he wasn’t feeling fulfilled. “I was very disconnected from my Judaism at the time. One day, I read the book *Roots* by **Alex Haley** about the slave trade, and I felt jealous that they had roots but I didn’t,” he recounts.

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From there, a friend brought him to Jewish classes, where he started uncovering his roots. “At Harvard, they taught us that law came from England, but I later learned that it came from the Torah,” Claman says.

Yom Kippur Dvar Torah (continued)

As he continued studying, he came to understand that he had a religious responsibility to “try to be the best you can be.” With that in mind, he found someone else on that same path to self-perfection, his now-wife, Pamela, who was living in Israel at the time. Together they started a life in the Old City, leading him to where he is today.

Aba and Pamela founded Thank Israel Soldiers, bringing IDF soldiers to their beautiful home overlooking the Kotel every Shabbat. Claman remembers walking back from the Western Wall on a cold night during the Second Intifada . It was Rosh Hashanah, and it was also his birthday. He saw a soldier standing outside in the cold without a jacket or anywhere to go for a holiday meal. He returned home and told his wife about this sad state of affairs: “We can’t be having a meal while they are guarding us.” That was the start of Thank Israeli Soldiers.

They later founded Momentum. From the Golan Heights to Eilat, Momentum staff travel and conduct their sessions with units. A final crucial feature is that all programming takes place while they are still in service, not after. “Once they are out of service, we have lost them,” Claman says.

The sessions began over three days, but as the army got more involved, it grew to the current five-day program. These five-day programs are different from the base visits, as the soldiers travel all over the country with their unit to reflect and plan for the future.

This army initiative, aptly named Back to the Future, which started in 2019, is run by Momentum and aims to connect the soldiers’ past with their future.

They are also taught skills such as making a CV, job hunting and interviewing.

The root of Claman’s story and giving comes from the Torah. He points to a dialogue God has with himself about Abraham, rejoicing in the fact that Abraham will teach his offspring kindness and righteousness.

“Kindness is being there for someone exactly when they need it most.” That is what Claman is doing – serving soldiers in the most unfathomable ways. He adds to this that at the center of it all is unity. “We are all a part of this nation, one big family.”

Let us reflect on how Israel came into being and where we and Israel are now.

Zionist Congress 1897 to British mandate 1920
British mandate to UN Resolution 1947
UN Resolution to end of War of Independence 1949
War of Independence to Six Day War 1967
Six Day War to October 7, 2023
And now: Post October 7

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 the ones 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.

After the High Holy Days last year, we laid to rest **Harvey Cohen**, our founding President, and longtime Shir Ami valuable leader. See my poem at the end of your Book of Remembrance remembering **Harvey**.

Shana tova, G’mar chatima tova