

Shabbat Shalom. As a member of a large reform Jewish congregation growing up, I was among a few hardy students who went beyond confirmation and graduated from 12th grade in the religious school. Although we didn't learn traditional texts, we were introduced to a wonderful curriculum involving social justice, and a couple that taught one of my classes impacted me greatly. As part of the class, I and some other classmates, met weekly with a young woman with intellectual disability, who lived in an institutional environment, doing simple Judaica lessons with her. Her parents wanted her to know something about her heritage. This exposure to a person so vulnerable tugged at my heart and made me want to go further in helping those who were limited to help themselves. Beyond working with this young woman, the role modeling of this couple made a large impression on me. The husband was blind, and the wife sighted. I will never forget the story of how they met- she was reading textbooks to him during college as a job, and they ended up falling in love. We watched them live what seemed like a normal life that did not revolve around his disability.

In this Shabbat's Torah portion, we see another experience with blindness.

However, unlike the blindness of my teacher, which was physical, the blindness of

Isaac was emotional. The portion, Toldot is focused on Isaac's later years and tells the story of the birth and maturity into early adulthood of one set of famous biblical twins, Jacob and Esau. It includes Esau's selling of his birthright for a bowl of porridge. Later we read about Jacob colluding with his mother Rebecca, into tricking Isaac into giving him the blessing of the firstborn, Esau, by dressing in his brother's clothes, putting sheepskin on his bare skin to appear and smell like Esau. The portion ends with Jacob's departure to Rebecca's brother's house to find a wife and to escape from Esau. This trickery and manipulation was only possible, our text tells us because Isaac's eyes had darkened in his old age.

I would like to spend some time discussing the narrative and in particular Isaac's blindness. We humans have a need to make sense of our lives, and narrative is the way we do it. Narratives found in the book of Genesis are replete with opportunities to understand the impact of trauma, how it can be transmitted to subsequent generations and how it can be healed.

Two weeks ago, we read about the Akedah, the binding of Isaac. Abraham brings Isaac to the top of Mount Moriah with the tools to perform animal sacrifice but

without the animal itself. He prepares to sacrifice his son, but at the last minute sees a ram caught in the bushes that he sacrifices instead. Through the lens of the 21st century, it is hard to relate to this particular passage. We cannot imagine what Isaac must have experienced, thinking that his father was about to sacrifice him. I suspect that Isaac felt invisible- not seen for who he was- but rather as a sacrifice, an object. From this moment forward in the narrative, it is clear that the relationship between Abraham and Isaac has been irreparably altered. They do not go down the mountain together, and there is no further indication in the Torah that the two directly interact again. Abraham uses a servant to find Isaac a wife from among his people, fulfilling the wishes of his now deceased wife, Sarah, to assure her conviction that it is through Isaac that the Divine promise to them will be actualized. As last week's text tells us explicitly, Isaac and Rebecca fell in love and it was her entry into Isaac's life that permitted healing from the death of his mother. This loss, according to the tradition, happened simultaneously with the binding of Isaac, a double trauma. However, the healing of the rift with his father is not mentioned. This illustrates two themes commonly experienced by trauma survivors.

The first is avoidance of things that remind one of the traumatic exposure. In the case of Isaac, he is depicted as someone who avoids conflict or confrontation

throughout the rest of the narrative. At one point he is traveling through the land of Gerar, ruled by King Abimelech, with whom his father challenged and negotiated to gain access to water wells. Isaac had almost the same itinerary as his father did. Instead of confronting the King and well owners as his father did, Isaac retreated to a different place as soon as the local people would harass him or prevent him access to his wells.

The numbing of emotions and progressive constriction of one's life is also a common theme among people who have experienced severe tragedy. Isaac is the only patriarch who had only one female partner. His father and sons all had multiple wives and procreated with multiple partners. The lack of trust of others, particularly in settings of intimacy can be particularly painful for trauma survivors.

Isaac became so inward, and avoidant that his life was greatly narrowed. Isaac, as a blind elder, could not or chose not to recognize his son Jacob disguised as Esau to give the father's blessing to the firstborn. It is hard to imagine that a parent would ever confuse one child for another. In fact, he asks Jacob twice about his identity because he knew something was not quite right. However, he avoided

confronting his son and thus gave Jacob the blessing of the first born, rightfully belonging to Esau.

The narrative that continues suggests that unprocessed trauma continues to play out in younger generations. Some say that Jacob and Esau are metaphors for the internal duality that Isaac passed to the second generation- the aggressive hunter vs. the non-violent farmer. Or, they are brothers who are unable to get the full attention of father due to his progressive dimming and withdrawal. Children are greatly impacted by their parents' state of wellbeing and when there is unprocessed trauma, it often gets transmitted to future generations.

The arc of the trauma continued in Jacob's children, with perpetration of more violence between family members. As we will read in upcoming weeks, Jacob's older sons were angry at their younger brother Joseph and threw him into a pit, preparing to sell him to slavery. They lied to Jacob about his death, tricking Jacob with an article of clothing, Joseph's coat. Ironically, it was Jacob who had tricked his own father with an article of clothing. It is as if Jacob relived the trauma of his father Isaac- but in this instance, believing that his son was indeed dead-

harkening to Abraham's close call with sacrificing Isaac. Joseph, third generation from the trauma of the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, finally is able to heal the original injury. It was almost as if he needed to live the Akedah- his prior identity and person being killed and then reborn with another identity. In the end, what healed this trauma was Joseph's ability to shed tears, his brothers' ability to admit their guilt and ask forgiveness and then the reunion with his entire family. His father, grandfather and great-grandfather were not able to heal their wounds.

Generational traumatic stress reactions are not only found in the Torah, but are alive among us today. I am sure there are many in this congregation today who have first-hand experience of this. Throughout human history the complex emotional baggage that parents pass onto their children has been the grist of sorrows, and in some cases, triumphs. We are only a few years removed from the immense and still incomprehensible destruction of a third of our people in the Shoah.

We know from numerous studies that children of Holocaust survivors born in the two decades following the end of the war that this generation carried a burden of the scars of the war. Like Isaac, their parents may have been only partially available to them, and may have silently carried the burden of trauma. Many

children absorbed the lack of trust and developed heightened sensitivity to trauma. Yet we also know empirically that children of survivor's are disproportionately engaged in service professions, that most have gone on to overcome their traumatic legacy, that many have exhibited their creativity in so many realms both here and in Israel.

Through my work as a primary care physician and an addiction and trauma researcher, I have had the privilege to witness trauma narratives play out in many ways.

There is no solution to trauma, per se. However, we can lessen its impact on survivors through meaningful engagement and connections. The problem with trauma is that it often leads to withdrawal and avoidance, exactly the opposite of what is needed to heal. While deep exploration into the trauma itself may or may not be helpful, it is clear that positive connections, and involvement in spiritual and communal activities are part of the solution. For me, connecting to my patients itself is stronger than any medication that I could prescribe. Cultivating mindfulness to stay in the present moment to prevent getting overwhelmed by traumatic memories is also a mainstay of treatment for trauma survivors. Making

meaning out of our trauma narratives is a Jewish tradition stretching back to the original matriarchs and patriarchs, as we have heard today.

Thank you and Shabbat Shalom.