Allow me to begin with a question this morning. What was Abraham thinking when he heard the call to leave his home and family and travel alone to an unknown province that was barely inhabited? What was he thinking when he heard the call again that he would be the father of a great nation and that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars in the heaven and the sands in the sea? What was he thinking when he heard the call again to sacrifice Isaac on the top of the mountain?

Some of our sages tell us that the Abraham narratives are fundamentally about obedience. Religion is essentially, about doing the will of God. But that has never been our overarching theme. Islam means surrender to the will of God. The Catholic Church has always demanded obedience to the church. We are a people, on the other hand, who have always been God wrestlers. We are descendants of Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, who wrestled with the angel and struggled with what it meant to be a Jew.

Others rabbis teach, that it’s about hearing the divine call to service and doing what is fundamentally different from everyone around them. That would work. Jews have always had the courage to say, “no” when everyone
else said yes. Abraham was not called an Israelite. He was never identified as a Jew. Those names did not exist yet. He was called in the Torah, an “Ivri,” which means one who crossed over from the other side of the river, in this case, the Euphrates. But the Midrash, our commentary on the Torah, goes further. It says, "Why was he called, 'Ha ivri?' "Because all the world was on one side, and he was willing to take his stand on the other.” We are the children of the first great non-conformist, and we have carried that title ever since.

I would suggest a third possible interpretation. The Abraham narratives are all about Abraham making tough choices and remembering one’s responsibilities to a higher calling. The religion of Abraham is not about making us feel good or affirming where we are, but rather about placing obligations upon us that would make us wiser, holier and better human beings.

Abraham’s new religion placed difficult demands on him. He was told to leave the comforts of home and travel to a new land. He was commanded to sacrifice his son, Isaac. He banished his other son, Ishmael because he was outside of the religion, and chose a different course. He circumcised himself and his children when they were adults.
Our stories about Abraham teach us that to be a Jew is to make sacrifices. It is to uphold the covenant even when it is difficult. Our task is not to take the easy way, but the right way.

This message runs contrary to our societal values today. We live in a world that continually reminds us of our rights, our privileges, and our rewards. We are told in advertising to do what’s easy, convenient and within reach. Just this past week, I saw a Manyunk billboard for car insurance, which read, “Do the minimum, I did.” Is this really our new standard? Our government places little demands on us besides our taxes. Even when we were attacked on 9/11, our leaders told us not to sacrifice and save gas, thereby cutting off funding to our enemies. They told us to spend, fly and vacation. During WWII, our parents and grandparents were told that they had to sacrifice. There was no rubber, little fuel and that they were to buy War Bonds. During our wars, we had our taxes cut and were told to go out and drive, buy and consume. No one wants to be told to sacrifice.

My message today is ask you to take your religion seriously and to see your Judaism and your synagogue as John F. Kennedy saw our country. “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.” How many of us see Beth Or as a holy community, which we can serve, rather than the other way around? Membership must not only be about
receiving service but about being of service. Yes, Beth Or must be there for you, but our congregation is more than the professionals who work here. The community is you.

I’m reminded of a story of a Jewish man who moves from the East coast to a small town in Kentucky. Determined to find at least one Jewish landsman, he combs the internet for a recognizable Jewish sounding name. Whala! He finds the name of Seymour Cohen, who lives just up the street. With great daring and high hopes he dials the number and this is what transpired.

Hello, is this Mr. Cohen?

Yes, who is calling?

My name is Schwartz. I’ve just moved from back East and was wondering if you could tell me about Jewish life in this part of Kentucky.

Jewish? Exclaims Cohen! My dear sir you are sorely mistaken. I'm not Jewish, my wife is not Jewish, my children are not Jewish, and even my father Alav Ha-shalom, wasn't Jewish either!

We flee from Jewish responsibility at our own peril. We have met the enemy and he is us. Consider these statistics. Two thousand years ago, 25 people of every 1,000 on earth were Jewish. One hundred and twenty years ago ten people out of every 1,000 on earth were Jewish. Seventy years ago,
five out of every 1,000 on earth were Jewish, and 80 years into the future, based on current trends, just a little more than one person out of every 1,000 on earth will be Jewish. From one quarter of a percent of the world's population to just above one tenth of a percentage in 2,000 years --what a precipitous decline. The number of people who identify Jewishly in this country has dropped from six million 20 years ago to just 5.2 million today.

Still hoping to affirm our traditions in some way, to find some connection, too many of us turn to what I’ll call “Judaism Lite.” By this I mean symbolic Judaism that centers around food, nationalism, culture and social justice. All of these are good, but not as substitutes for serious religious living and the sacrifice it demands.

Matzo ball soup and pastrami sandwiches are delicious but they place no obligation on us. It’s easy to be Jewish if your place for Jewish identity is Pumpernicks or In the Bag.

Too many of are nationalistic Jews, and think that this is enough. As much as I love Israel, Zionism is not enough to keep our people Jewish. You know I will always stand with the people and the state of Israel. Israel is my homeland. It is the rock of my existence, but it is not the center of my Jewish identity. It is my nationalistic aspiration, but not the core of my faith. Jews have for millennium yearned to return to Zion, “Next year in
Jerusalem,” but those statements were piously recited during worship experiences, not political rallies.

Yes, I know Monty Python’s Spamalot boasts, “You won’t succeed on Broadway if you don’t have any Jews.” That may well be true. We have left our mark on the magnificence of Broadway but has Broadway left on a mark on Judaism? I think not. The theatre is entertainment. Again, it places little or no demand on us, except high-ticket prices.

This past summer, I read in the New York Times about a movement towards spirituality in symphonic settings. Fabulous, you might think. All across Europe, symphony halls played Easter concerts, Mozart and Verdi Requiems and Jewish concerts including Shoenberg’s “Kol Nidre.” Salzburg, Austria just finished hosting a ten-day spirituality orchestral series. Noted the director, Gerard Mortier, “people who rarely go to church will line up to hear Handel’s Messiah in a concert setting.”

While I love a good Jewish concert, it cannot be a replacement for Jewish living. Taken by itself, such an evening of uplifting music is spirituality without the price tag of a spiritual life. Listening to Kol Nidre in a concert hall may be symphonically richer, than what we can offer here at Beth Or, but it is impoverished. Give me Cantor Green over Placido every
time, and I love Placido. A Jewish concert is fine, don’t get me wrong, but not as a substitute for services.

What about social action, “Tikkun Olam, repairing the world?” Those words have become a mantra for many Jews. Jews who know nothing about Shabbat or kashrut speak about their commitment to tikkun olam – repairing the world and make this the center of their Jewish identity. It is important – it’s very important. But there is a danger when it becomes the totality of one’s Jewish commitment and identity.

As you know I meet with all of our B’nai Mitzvah students in preparation for their Bar/Bat Mitzvah. We talk about the significance of the day and of the importance and honor of reading the torah. As part of our agenda, we talk about the meaning of the word, Mitzvah. When I ask them to give me an example, they will talk about the project to “save the whales,” “Save the abandoned animals,” or “Save the polar ice caps.” All of these are laudable goals, but when I ask, “Can you think of any other mitzvoth?” I get a blank stare. Well, lighting Shabbat candles is a mitzvah, as is keeping kosher for Passover. Coming to services is a mitzvah, as is fasting on Yom Kippur. Building a sukkah and eating a meal under the scach is a mitzvah. If the essence of becoming a bar mitzvah is only about tikkun olam, “saving or repairing” something, then we have lost the essence of the milestone and
of its efficacy. The foundation of the Bar/Bar Mitzvah, is carrying on the traditions, upholding a 4,000 year old covenant.

Eli Wiesel pointed out a few years ago a critical lesson about our role as Jews. Unlike other faiths, which have numerous symbols and images of God, we Jews, when we live a Jewish life of goodness and faith become God’s symbol to the world. Our task is to bear witness to the existence of God and of the covenant that God established with us. Says Wiesel, “To be Jewish is to recognize that every person is created in the image of God and that our purpose in living is to be a reminder of God.”

According to Jewish tradition, Rosh Hashanah commemorates the birth of Adam, the first human in the world and the ancestor of all humanity. But there is little reference to him in the Machzor. Adam is the universal man, who he did almost nothing and so he is almost completely ignored. Abraham, on the other hand, the one who covenanted with God and made the tough choices, who gave of himself to his own detriment, his name is found throughout the liturgy and the torah reading. The message is clear. Being a Jew is not just expecting Beth Or to be of service to you, but for you to be of service to our community and its pursuit of the greater good.

Our kids need chores, was a book that came out, years ago, telling us that kids yearn for structure. Well we do too. It’s time to start expecting of
our kids and of ourselves Jewish responsibility. If we are serious about the survival of Judaism and the Jewish people, then we must be serious about our Covenant with God and passionate about living our lives Jewishly and being a reminder of God’s presence in the world.

Stephen Spielberg once said at a lecture, given at the United States Holocaust Memorial in Washington, for the dedication of Shindler’s List. “Why did I make Indiana Jones? I made it for my children. I wanted to be their pal, so I made an adventure story for them. Why did I make Schindler’s List? Because I came to understand that they already have enough pals, without me. They need me to be their father, not their pal. And so I made Schindler’s List for them, so that they would know who I am and what I want to mean to them.”

Those words move me. Not because of what they mean about the Holocaust but because Spielberg understood that for an observant Jew it can’t be all fun and games. There are responsibilities to be lived up to. There are stories to be told and a heritage to be preserved.

Let me tell you a secret about one particular member of Beth Or. Every Friday morning, she comes with her small children and bakes cookies for our oneg with her small children. She speaks about Shabbat. She reminds them of the importance of community. And she wants to give back
and make life a little sweeter. It’s a small act in the grand scheme of things, but it’s also a huge. It teaches her children about their heritage. She sets an example about volunteering and strengthens us all by giving us some fantastic cookies.

So yes, tikkun olam is important, so is a good Jewish concert, so is going to the deli, so is reading a good Jewish book, so is Zionism, but these things alone will not keep Jews Jewish.

We can all be good people. We can all save the whales, but only a Jew can keep Shabbat. Anyone can cut down on food consumption for a day, but only a Jew can fulfill the duty bound fast on Yom Kippur. Christians can support Israel, and many in fact, thankfully do, but only Jews can uphold the covenant between God and Abraham that links us to the land of Israel.

A number of years ago, I learned of a quip from Rabbi Arnold Wolf, of blessed memory. Rabbi Wolf was the rabbi of a suburban synagogue called Temple Isaiah in Northern Chicago. He once said, “The most offbeat and innovative thing that you can do in suburbia is the tradition—because most have never heard of it.” We have moved too far off course. It’s time to realign ourselves and start taking our tradition more seriously.
Bring back the traditions. See Judaism, as a faith that demands, not only rewards. See your membership here at Beth Or as an opportunity to give back. It may or may not be fun, but that candidly is not the goal. It’s needed. You are needed.

As a small step, Rabbi Gerber, over the summer, has put up all of the worship blessings on YouTube. Learn them, teach them, and live them. Follow the examples of your lay leaders who give of themselves, come to services, attend our life long learning classes and send their children to religious school and academy.

I conclude with the words of Winston Churchill, that were said when he was Secretary for Colonial Affairs of Great Britain in 1921. He arrived for a visit in the land of Israel accompanied by Thomas Lawrence (or Lawrence of Arabia). Before his visit to Tel Aviv some of the town’s workers went and cut a few trees from a nearby wooded areas in order to decorate the sandy route to Mayor Dizzengoff’s home. The town workers stuck the rootless trees in the sand. But . . . exactly when the British dignitaries arrived, one of the trees fell over and Churchill understood at once that these green trees in the sand were not real trees but were stuck there for decoration only. In a typical British dry tone Churchill said: "Mr.
Dizzengoff, without roots it will not work." Without roots, deep and strong, it will not work.

Abraham began something precious so many years ago. It has been entrusted to us. Our ancestors suffered because they bore witness to that truth. It elevated those in times of despair and brought meaning to those in search of purpose. We dare not, we must not uproot it, for without roots it will not work.