

RH I – 5778
“Three Days To Impossible”
September 21, 2017

They were on a journey to the unthinkable, the unbearable. It was impossible. Yet it was about to happen. What Isaac wanted to know was, why?

He had been working with father Abraham’s flocks when he got word from his mother: Dad wanted him to go on a trip, no questions asked. She said just get your things together and leave tomorrow morning. But Isaac was upset. He demanded to know more about this sudden, mysterious journey:

“Are you going?” he asked?

“No,” she said curtly.

“Why not? I don’t want to go!”

“Because that’s the way your father wants it.”

“Where are we going?”

“Ask him.”

“What are we going to do when we get there?”

“Ask him.”

“Why do we have to go now?”

“Ask him.”

“Why are you so angry, Mom?”

“Ask him.”

“Ask him what?”

His Mom exploded. “Ask him anything you want. I don’t want any part of this.” It reminds me of conversations with my parents when I was a kid, although I was never in danger of being sacrificed. Well, maybe once...

Isaac did ask his dad, to no avail. Abraham just kept on packing.

And so it began. Next day they set out, Father and Son, one donkey and two servants. The Torah says they traveled for three days: *Bayom Ha-Shlishi v’yar et ha-Maqom mei-ra-chok*: On the third day Abraham saw the place from afar. Three days to impossible.

It was a spiritual trek as well as a physical one. Abraham was offering up his legacy, his lineage, his very life. If he succeeded, all his other labors for God would be in vain. It is a journey to kill not only his son, but himself. This is a journey to impossible.

Three days. Just how long is that?

Three days is the waiting time in many states to buy a firearm. It is the time some states require before allowing an abortion. It is the time you usually have to back out of buying a house or a car.

In Jewish tradition, three days is the time our people spent at Mt. Sinai preparing to receive the Torah. Queen Esther fasted for three days before risking her life before King Ahashuerus. Jonah spent three days in the belly of a fish, as we'll see dramatized by Attack Theater on Yom Kippur afternoon.

Traditional sources say that Abraham's journey took three days because the Torah didn't want us to think that Abraham just ran without thinking. This idea makes the story both more compelling but even more impossible to accept. Abraham had plenty of time to reconsider, but he didn't.

During those days was Abraham scared, doubtful or distressed, thoughtful or resigned? We don't know. All we know is that for three days, Abraham journeyed to the impossible; impossible to believe, imagine, or accept.

And yet, you and I know what a three-day journey to impossible feels like. We have experienced it ourselves more than once this last month.

In August, we watched in horror as in three days, Houston, a city of more than 4 million people was paralyzed with 40 inches of rain. Twenty-seven trillion gallons of water dumped on southeastern Texas. Someone estimated that this is 2/3 of the water in the Dead Sea. The scenes we witnessed on television were agonizing to watch.

Over three days Hurricane Irma did the same to Florida. We have called everyone of our congregants and former members who live in Houston or Florida. All are safe, thank God. All have had minimum disruptions of their lives.

But Irma inflicted catastrophe on the islands of the Caribbean. The US Virgin Islands suffered a direct hit. My dear friend and colleague, Rabbi Michael Feshbach, had just moved this year to St. Thomas with his family. He bought a house. Before closing on it, it was destroyed. He reports about the shortages of basics on the island, including food and fuel.

But he writes of resilience as well. He writes of selfless acts, of personal courage of islanders, of the resolve to make their island paradise once more. Beyond the impossible, there is life and there is even hope.

Listen to his postings from St. Thomas over the two weeks:

Friday, 9/8/17:

“Wrote detailed post yesterday which does not seem to have appeared. Normally (well) would not post on Shabbat but a) we are physically okay, and b) we did service at the synagogue last night, preserving an unbroken chain of several centuries. But house badly damaged, generator worked then failed, conditions on ground very challenging, no cell except in isolated spots and no power or running water means no showers or clean clothes.

Power may take months and we need to move out of rental soon... Time will tell. But neighbors have been great, people generally caring (except some armed angry folks seen this morning), and tremendous amount of mutual aid and love going on. Resilience, grit, and spirit here.”

Monday, 9/11/17:

“God bless kindness and hospitality. Relocated last night to a place which has a working generator in the evenings, so showers and running water (and recharging) available for a few hours as long as that lasts. Reached the synagogue and went further inside the building for the first time: no major damage! Many people hurting. Sadness all around: radio stations with people calling and asking if anyone has seen so and so... or begging for propane.

Stores charging over \$20 for water...Some recovery efforts visible. Still saying no power for months. Trying to reach people to check in: hearing about some folks but not other. Wondering how to do High Holy Days. Certainly, no written sermons this year!

Thursday, 9/14/17:

Handwritten sign seen on the island:

The 2 for 1 sale on hurricanes has now ended. This week’s special: Free Hugs! (No Limit)

Yesterday 9/19/17

Due to Hurricane Maria, we rescheduling High Holy Day Services...

Barbara and I are personally supporting effort by both the Jewish Federation of Pittsburgh and the Union for Reform Judaism to gather funds to aid those affected by the hurricanes. But I am promising this day to dig even deeper in my pocket to restore the lives of St. Thomas residents and to help rebuild their historic synagogue. They are extraordinarily resilient. But they need all the help they can get to meet their physical and spiritual needs.

If you would like to join this effort, do NOT try to donate through their synagogue website, which has crashed due to the traffic on it. Please make a check out to Temple Sinai and put in the note corner of the check "St. Thomas Hebrew Congregation." I promise you that we will collect your donations and get them out to St. Thomas as quickly as possible!

Last month, we witnessed another three-day journey to impossible. In Charlottesville, Virginia, a bucolic college town known for elegance and tradition, a hurricane of hate broke upon the town like a storm.

For three days, we Americans watched a journey to impossible unfold. From the torch-lit march on Friday night of Nazi wannabes to the aftermath on Monday morning of our President declaring both sides equally at fault, it was impossible to imagine, much less accept.

It is impossible to believe that these people carried swastikas less than three generations since more than 400,000 American soldiers died battling Nazis.

It is impossible that white supremacists and neo-Nazis chanted "Jews Will Not Replace Us," and "Blut und Bonder," the blood-chilling Nazi cry of "Blood and Soil."

The synagogue in Charlottesville, located across the street from this march, held services in abject fear, as if it was 1938 all over again. Listen to the President of our sister synagogue, Congregation Beth Israel, recount those hours:

"Several times, parades of Nazis passed our building, shouting "There's the synagogue!" followed by chants of "Sieg Heil" and other anti-Semitic language. Some carried flags with swastikas and other Nazi symbols. A guy in a white polo shirt walked by the synagogue a few times, arousing suspicion. Was he casing the building, or trying to build up courage to commit a crime? We didn't know. Later I noticed that the man accused in the automobile terror

attack wore the same polo shirt as the man who kept walking by our synagogue; apparently, it's the uniform of a white supremacist group. Even now, that gives me a chill."

In the face of this hurricane of hatred, what must we do? How must we respond? We must not give in to shock or resignation. We must resolve and respond in truth, in word and deed.

Today I add my voice to those of my rabbinic colleagues all over North America. Hundreds of us are sharing the same words with you today in a sign of solidarity and resolve. We will not be moved from the path of moral clarity and civic courage. We declare this day:

"The Talmud teaches, "If you see wrongdoing by a member of your household and you do not protest – you are held accountable. And so it is in relation to the members of your city. And so it is in relation to the world..."

Today I and my colleagues speak words of protest...in fulfillment of our sacred obligation. We will not be silent. We will, without hesitation, decry the moral abdication of the President who fuels hatred and division in our beloved country. This is not a political statement. We...draw from the deepest wisdom of our tradition to deliver a stern warning against complacency and an impassioned call for action.

We call on all of us to rise up and say in thousands of ways, every day, as proud Jews and proud Americans: 'You cannot dehumanize, degrade, and stigmatize whole categories of people in this nation. Every Jew, every Muslim, every gay, transgender, disabled, black, brown, white, woman, man and child is beloved of God and precious in the Holy One's sight. We the people, all the people, are created b'tzelem elohim, in the image of the Divine. All the people are worthy of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.'

Rosh Hashanah is Yom Teruah, the Day of sounding the Shofar, whose piercing tones sound an alarm, express our fears and especially in these times compel us to respond with a resounding call for justice.

The shofar blasts: Tekiah [single shofar blast] The Sound of Certainty:

As rabbis we are, from sea to shining sea, speaking to our congregations in every accent of America to declare in unison: acts of hatred, intimidation, and divisiveness will not be tolerated in these United States...

We call on our political leaders; progressives and conservatives alike, to rigorously uphold the values brilliantly articulated in the founding documents of our country, the “immortal declaration” that all of us are created equal.

We call on every elected leader to responsibly represent our country’s history and advance its noble visions of tolerance. On this first day of the New Year WE are “Proclaiming liberty throughout all the land” [Lev 25:10].

The shofar blasts: Shvarim [3 shofar blasts] The Sound of Brokenness:

Something crumbled inside us when we watched the televised images of Charlottesville’s beautiful streets filled with hate-spewing marchers.

How much more vandalism, how many clashes, which other cities? We must not accept or become inured to some warped version of “normal,” of racist and anti-Semitic acts or rallies popping in and out of breaking news cycles. We must never grow numb to the brokenness, but let our pain fuel our vows to respond – with peaceful protests, and with public calls for healing, by building alliances and by speaking in unison with other minorities and faith communities.

Neither silence nor complacency nor waiting anxiously and fearfully for the next wounding event are options. Not for us. Elie Wiesel, of blessed memory, possessed a rare understanding of unfathomable brokenness. His memorable words sound a warning to us today, “We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere.”

May we never be neutral, never silent in the face of threats or of discrimination toward any. Let us interfere as [rofei li-shvu-rei lev] healers of the broken-hearted, and [u’m-cha-beish l’atz-vo-tahm], binders of their wounds.

The shofar blasts: Truah [9 short blasts] The Sound of Urgency:

The events of these simmering weeks are a wake-up call to our Jewish community. Racism is wrong whether it seeps into explicit anti-Semitism or not. The Talmud teaches that God created us all from the first Adam so that no human being could ever say, “my lineage is greater than yours...”

No! Those fiery torches of Charlottesville illuminated another truth, one we learn and forget only to learn again this day: if one minority group's rights are threatened, we are all threatened...

The shofar blasts: Tekiah G'dolah [lengthy single blast] The Endless Pursuit of Justice:

Tzedek, tzedek, tirdof, the Torah admonishes: "Justice, justice you shall pursue, so that you may live and inherit the land which I, God, give to you." Our sacred text reminds us that for a community truly to inherit its place in the world, thoughtful leaders at every level must be dedicated to equality and to unity...Let us be relentless, tireless builders of that society in our city and in our country — in this New Year."

Despite Abraham's, Isaac's, and Sarah's journey to impossible, they endured, they believed, they went on to bequeath their covenant of holy humanity to us.

Despite our journey to impossible this year, we must do the same: We must endure, believe, and uphold the covenant. We must act and raise our voices. Others of us will create alliances of across all lines of faith and color and still others publicly demonstrate to meet hate without violence wherever it raises its ugly head.

Today, on Rosh Hashana, we declare that this is not impossible, there is a path forward. We know there is a way forward from our history:

After three days journeying to Mt. Moriah, Abraham and Isaac go forward to live out our sacred covenant with God.

After three days at Sinai, our people receive Torah, the light for our people's lives and the bedrock of our values.

After three days, Esther, speaking risks her life to stand before King Ahashuerus, demanding justice.

And in our own day: After three days of Hurricane Harvey, people from 500 miles away were purchasing boats to rush to Houston and start saving any and everyone they could find. We must show the same resolve to help after Irma, Jose, and Maria as well.

After three days of hate in Charlottesville, political leaders on both sides of the aisle rose up together to decry racism, anti-Semitism, Nazism, and the weak response of our President in the face of them. And you don't believe in miracles?

Today, this day, it is our sacred task to face the impossible and not cower in fear.

Today, this day, it is our sacred task to look at ourselves in the mirror and see the image of God.

Today, this day, it is our sacred task to look at the face of others, especially those who look nothing like us, and see that same Divine image.

May this year be one of joy and love for you and yours, sweetness beyond measure, blessings overflowing. May we be blessed with courage, with hope, with purpose, and with commitment to our highest, best selves.

This last month, over three days, my family came together to dedicate my father's grave. There was laughter, there were tears, there were tender embraces. There were sayings recalled and stories remembered. The impossible had happened, and we had taken the best of my father's life and let it permeate our own.

And when I watched my mother hold my granddaughter, Noa, when I watched the delight in each of their eyes, I knew we would survive our impossible journey.

I hope and pray beyond all hope and prayer that this year, you do so as well. Sweetness and love, joy and hope, justice and compassion. For you! For me! For us all! For us all!