

One of the things I hated as child was being held down against my will, unable to move or escape. I've thought a lot about being constrained in recent months through too many restless nights and nightmares of trying to get ... somewhere, but there always being another obstacle.

So many of you have shared your anxieties and frustrations with me in recent months. It's as if there is a shared, palpable feeling that this year, more than any other in our lives, we are all tied to circumstances beyond our control. This pandemic we are living (and far too many suffering and dying) through has reminded us that we human beings, *all* of us, are inextricably bound together. We have seen that what I do – or choose not to do – here is intimately connected to what happens to you there.

To be bound and constrained is, of course, a central theme of Rosh Hashanah. The *u'nitaneh tokef* speaks to the fundamental terror that most of the time, we hold at bay. But not now. Not this year. Our life hangs by a thread. We *are* like sheep, manipulated by forces beyond us. "Who shall live and who shall die." This year the truth crouches at the door. Our family and friends, those closest to us, who are supposed be our protection can become the bearer of heartache. "Who by fire and who by water." The cord binds tight. "Who by famine and who by drought." Every choice – going out to eat, sending kids to school, seeing a friend – is like a mighty rope, as we figure what option is wotth the risk. "Who by plague?!" This year, the unimaginable became real. "Who (indeed!) by plague." No wonder Rosh Hashanah is referred to in this prayer as *nora v'ayom* – "awesome" and "awful."

Underscoring this message of constraint is the Torah portion we read today – the *Akeidah*, often translated as the "binding of Isaac." This story is actually quite a strange choice for a new year's message. What does that have to with the new year?

I think the rabbis of old were right in choosing it, however. It is perfect story for the beginning of the year, for we are all – always, but most especially this year – limited by circumstances beyond our control. Abraham is bound by his sense of God, putting faith above basic human values - family, morality, affirmation of life. Isaac, literally tied down, is a metaphor for each of us, so often held back by forces that are inscrutable and affect us profoundly, existentially, yet seem deeply indifferent to us. The lads that are with them see ... nothing, and so – they are like the ass they are with, bound to living an empty life, focused only on what is tangible. Even the knife (in Hebrew, that which “consumes”) and rope can do nothing more do what they do. They are like the one who says, “I am just doing my job”, the excuse of every apathetic person who excuses wrongdoing as not – really – their doing, but without whose acquiescence or apathy allows evil to be done.

Only one actor in the story acts out of character – the ram. According to one *midrash* the ram actually took hold of Abraham's *tallit* – tugging on the strings until he took note to offer it instead of Isaac.¹ Only the ram acts, taking the risk of showing compassion for another and seeking to get Abraham to open his eyes to the wrong he is about to do. To me, it is the ram who is the truest hero of the *Akeidah* – and it is why it is the ram's horn that is the preeminent symbol of this holiday. The ram says, “I choose my fate. I decide my destiny. I determine my legacy.” More than that, the ram says to Abraham, “Pay attention. Consider what you are doing. Can you not hear the angel that calls you to turn from death and evil?”

We read this story on Rosh Hashanah because we need to be reminded that the ram is not just a character in a story. We ... are (and must be) ... the ram. And that is why it is the horn of the ram, the *shofar*, that is the central ritual item on our new year. The *shofar* is the echo of that ram. The *shofar* reminds us who we are.

¹ *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 31

Like the ram, you and I have – despite what fate has in store for us – the capacity to decide the trajectory of our legacy. Every day. Every single moment.

When we hear an unkind word, we can hold back or be the ram that stands up for those against those who bully or belittle. If we see a racist or antisemitic post, we can hear the clarion call of the *shofar* that reminds us as Jews that because we have been unjustly vilified, hate deserves no place in our social media. We know Black Americans are treated differently, but to blame them and excuse our society's systemic racism is to forget that we Jews were the sacrifice – too often in the past – for the larger ills in many a nation. If leaders choose to divide us – claiming some are not patriots or are traitors – we must not turn aside, but to be the *shofar* whose sound warns that hateful words left unchecked inevitably lead to bloodshed.

The ram grabs a single thread and changes the course of history, turning Abraham to a model of not only faith in one God, but an *ethical* monotheism. For the Jew – as the ram makes clear – God is necessary, but insufficient. This story reminds us that religion cannot – and must not be – grounded in faith alone. Too often religion is sullied and corrupted when it is aligned with power (especially political power). That is why Abraham is only partly right about God, and why we need the ram, for the ram is the morality that tempers fanatic faith. The ram makes clear that imposing sacrifice is an immoral choice, while willingly *choosing* to support others is the essence of holiness.

We have the opportunity – blessed because we live in this country – to cast our vote this November. Let us take hold of that thread. Unlike so many generations before us; unlike so many still in our world – we can choose to determine our fate. To ignore that gift is to turn a deaf ear to the sound of the *shofar*. We must – now and always – be the ram.

During these sacred days let us find the courage, moral stamina, responsibility and capability to break the fetters of ignorance, the chains of lies and corruption,

the bindings of fear. We are powerful. We are the agents who can choose to see, elect to hear and decide how to act. We have moral capacity.

This year ... don't just listen to the *shofar*. Become the ram. Be the *shofar*.