

Oh God said to Abraham, "Kill me a son"
Abe says, "Man, you must be putting me on"
God say, "No". Abe say, "What?"
God say, "You can do what you want Abe, but
The next time you see me comin' you better run"
Well Abe says, "Where do you want this killing done?"
God says, "Out on Highway 61".

We've all been out on Highway 61. Maybe not exactly the way Bob Dylan describes it, but we've all been there. And that is why we're here today. To make sense of it all.

On Rosh Hashanah we greet the New Year with a little anxiety and a little hope. **Anxiety** about the disparity between **who we've been and who we would rather be**. **Hope** in the possibility of doing *t'shuvah/repentance*, and (re)turn toward our higher potential.

But first, we need to pass through Highway 61.

We read in the Torah yesterday of the challenge Abraham had in casting away Hagar and his first-born son Ishmael. This was devastating for Abraham, but at least he had a son with his beloved wife, and the prospect of a fruitful future seemed secured.

And then, we come to our reading today. In a parallel structure to that transformative moment when God sent Abram on his archetypal spiritual journey, God says to him, "Take your son, your singular son, the one you love, Isaac, and *lech-lecha*, and get up and go to the land of Moriah and **offer him there as a burnt offering** on one of the heights I will point out to you.

Early the next morning, Abraham saddled his donkey..." and off they went.

This, the *akedat Yitzchak*, the *binding of Isaac* story, remains one of the most troubling and rich episodes in the Torah. **What kind of God asks this of a devoted servant? What kind of father does this to his son? How does a person recover when they're on the**

receiving end of someone else's messed-up drama? Welcome to Highway 61.

And why is *this* our reading at Rosh Hashanah? OK, yes, at the end of the story, a ram is sacrificed instead of Isaac, and that's where we get the Shofar from. But really, the story must have some essential relevance for us today.

This story is a stinging metaphor for the ways in which we grow, break apart, and then find renewal with the broken pieces. This is the project of Rosh Hashanah: We all visit Highway 61 at some point. The task is learning to leave it behind.

Abraham is all of us. He is a classical "hero." The "hero's journey" is a rich archetype for the stages of meaningful adult-human development. If we want to grow into **wisdom**, we leave home, take risks, and spend time growing up in a place where our choices and inner perspectives can be given voice and explored freely. Usually that comes with bouts of anxiety, dark nights, suffering brokenness, and then, over time, wisdom emerges. No one makes it through the journey of life completely whole.

When our story happens, Abraham is living among the Canaanite nations. The Canaanites, at that time, practiced child sacrifice. From a meta-perspective, this story is a polemic against the practice of child sacrifice, arguing for the replacement of humans with animals. In essence, Abraham is struggling to radically change the paradigm of killing children to gratify the desires of a god.

Abraham is an adventurous boundary-crosser. This story is a window into the very personal struggle he had while processing the change within himself.

And haven't we all struggled with the process of social change? Many of us here today have living memory of racism and sexism overtly codified in law. Think back to the 1960's, '70's, and '80's, when conversations about equal rights, civil rights, Gay Rights were uncomfortable. Today, it's nearly inconceivable that women were not allowed to have *their own credit card* until 1971! A lot can

change, but at the time the change is happening norms can feel unmovable. It is difficult breaking free of social norms, even when we know they are toxic to ourselves and those around us. And Abraham nearly failed.

There he was, Isaac bound to the pyre, his hand extended, brandishing the slaughtering knife, wholehearted in his determination to fulfill the will of God when he heard the Angel call to him, “Abraham, Abraham! Do not raise your hand against the boy or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear/have reverence for God since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me.”

This sounds like a nightmare. So much so, psychotherapist Naomi Rosenblatt writes in her book, “Wrestling with Angels” that the *Akedah* was, in fact, an **anxiety dream**. Isaac was everything to Abraham. In this dream he confronts the horror of seeing his promise, his love, his future, his potency ruined by his own hands. Like so many of us, Abraham suffered the inevitable crisis of fearing the risk of utter failure and ruin.

But he made it. He woke up. He resisted the impulse and survived the “test.” He walked away from Highway 61 and went on to live a rich and full life. He started out like a swashbuckling Indiana Jones, and ultimately dies “*Zaken v'Save'ah / old and fulfilled*,” indeed the ultimate goal for any life.

And then there's Isaac.

“So, there I was, minding my own business wondering who I was going to play with now that my older brother Ishmael moved away, when all of a sudden Dad says we're going on a camping trip...” What?!? G'valt! This is a horror. What is a child to make of this?

As Biblical characters go, Isaac is quite **unremarkable**. Perhaps he was deeply traumatized by this episode that happened so early in life. He doesn't speak to or interact with his father ever again. After the *Akedah*, there isn't a whole lot left of Isaac for the rest of the Torah.

He has an arranged marriage to his cousin Rebecca and is “comforted for the loss of his mother.” When the Philistines repeatedly fill in his wells, he doesn’t go to war—even when it may have been reasonable to do so. He absorbs the insults that are so abhorrent to honor cultures. He seems **irrationally patient**. Then he shows favor to his first born of the twin boys, Esav, because he enjoys eating the meat Esav brings home from the hunt.

Isaac is not much of a hero in the classical sense. He better fits the profile of a victim who gets pushed around but has enough wealth to keep him going. He doesn’t appear to be directing his life, rather life happens **to** him. His neighbors taunt him, and his wife and younger son conspire and deceive him. How did he make it into the top tier of our spiritual ancestry? What can we possibly learn from Isaac?

The great Torah teacher Dr. Aviva Zornberg points out Isaac as an extremely sensuous being and despite appearances is anything but passive.

Isaac is contemplative. He’s internal. He balances the extroversion and boundary crossing of his father with groundedness, with “staying-putness,” and with an ability for being present we don’t see in any other character.

He meets his beloved wife Rebecca when he was meditating in the field. When the text tells us he was “comforted for the loss of his mother” we see how deeply aware he is of his own psychology and needs. If Abraham is Indiana Jones, Isaac is the Dalai Lama.

What, then, can we learn from **our** Dalai Lama?

About 15 years ago I heard today’s actual Dalai Lama speak at the Hollywood Bowl. It was incredible how this gentle, unimposing man with a squeaky voice so thoroughly commanded the full house of 18,000 people. He described the pressures of his responsibilities for taking care of the spiritual and even physical needs of the multitude of his fellow exiles. And then he hit us with, “But I don’t let any of

that interrupt my sleep!” We all erupted with laughter. He went on to say that if he did not sleep well, he would not be able to fulfill his duties very effectively for very long. In other words, to be the Dalai Lama you have to be deeply disciplined to move forward. And this is our Isaac.

In the Kabbalah, our mystical tradition, Isaac is the representative of the characteristic of God’s *Gevura, judgement/fortitude*. It is the immediate counterbalance to Abraham, who represents *rachamaim*, mercy and compassion. To be Isaac requires the **strength** to be disciplined, the **courage** to see things as they are, and have the **fortitude** to stay the course. Isaac successfully lived to be the conduit of blessing to Jacob that leads to the creation of our people.

Discipline, courage, and fortitude are no small achievements. It’s what creates sustained change. Think of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, and Martin Luther King. Each remained courageously disciplined and committed to their mission despite tremendous resistance and opposition. As a result, they succeeded in moving the needle on establishing and advancing independence, democracy, and civil rights. These qualities are what so many of us need today to continue our slog through the pandemic.

Isaac is, as it were, the paragon of **spiritual stamina**. His ability to live peacefully despite trauma in a dangerous and chaotic world is an inspiration for each of us to find our own inner **emotional resilience**. We are blessed to have many examples of Isaacs in our community.

We are blessed to have people like Louis Sneh. Louis is a Holocaust survivor who, like so many survivors, experienced a very personal *Akeyda*. Holocaust survivors continued on, endured the pain of reinvention, the guilt of survival, the challenges of starting over in foreign countries with few if any family remaining alive. We have precious few left, and we honor them with hearts full of compassion, love, and wonder. They are Isaac. How did they make it?

I'm not sure everyone did. In a documentary about the survivors of the partisans living in the forests of Poland during WWII, made famous by the movie "Defiance," we witness the dramatic choices individuals made. When the war had turned and the Germans were on the run, there were occasions when German soldiers unwittingly fled right into the camps of partisans. Some partisans interviewed admitted to meting out justice on these soldiers with the only tools they had. One described how he went about seeking to kill as many German soldiers as he could in revenge for everything that had happened, everything so many had lost. But, in the end, he never found the peace he'd imagined revenge would bring. Survival is not always successful. But it is possible.

One morning in the mid 1990's I happened to sit next to an older gentleman at a Jewish bakery. We started chatting and he asked me if he could tell me his story. It pains me that I no longer remember his name, but what he told me changed my life. I will call him Shalom.

Shalom was arrested as a young man and sent to Auschwitz at the very beginning of the war. He worked the "Infirmary" the entire time until liberation came in 1945. It was a long and captivating story of narrow escapes from death, and an endless attempt to subvert the evil of Dr. Mengele and the Nazis. But what stunned me was his story of liberation.

The Soviets liberated the Auschwitz January 27, 1945. They found only devastation and death. The Nazi officers and guards who'd remained were lined up, hands bound, and the survivors, starved and all near death themselves, were given an opportunity to express their rage and unimaginable pain directly against their tormentors, against their murderers.

There stood Shalom in front of the commander who'd overseen unspeakable atrocities. He stared into this man's eyes, clenched his fist and raised it. He was shaking with the intensity of everything he'd suffered and everything he'd lost. But, as if hearing an Angel's voice repeat his name, he told me he realized, if he unleashed his

pain in this way, if he struck this Nazi, **he would become like him**. And in that moment, he exhaled, lowered his fist, and walked away.

It was at that moment that I realized I was sitting next to an Angel of Isaac. Shalom had a glowing smile, and a presence that calmed me. I knew as well as anyone in my generation of the atrocities he'd suffered, and yet, he embodied a life lesson I'd not imagined before. The path to enlightenment, to **wholeness**, is in learning to **let go in order to hold on**. And it takes guts.

Letting go of resentments, of offense and blame, of unnecessary guilt and shame **liberates us**, and allows us to **hold on** to what we most want to preserve and become: Dignity, integrity, **wholeness**, and a desire to **recover and heal**. This is what Isaac teaches us.

I can't pretend this is a simple algorithm for each of our enlightenment and spiritual growth, but I know it's at least part of it.

Shalom was Isaac. Louis is Isaac. Each of us, in our own way, have been, will be, and are called upon today to be Isaac. Learning to have the *gevurah*, the fortitude to hold on to **what is true** and sit with that for as long as it takes is what will help us get to resilience, to healing, and ultimately to flourishing. I don't see how we advance through this pandemic otherwise.

I close with words from a James Taylor song my brother James played in the car as we drove away from my father's funeral. The song penetrated my soul in that moment and gave me strength to be like Isaac and endure through my own grief. He sings: "Oh, it's **enough to be on your way**. It's **enough just to cover ground**. It's **enough to be moving on**. Home, build it behind your eyes, carry it in your heart, safe among your own..."

Indeed. Sometimes, it is enough just to take one step. Just to cover a little ground.

We may not make it through this life in one piece. But maybe we can make it in "one-pieces." Let us collect the broken shards from

the person we would leave behind and use the pieces to carry on, step by step, breath by breath, and construct a healed heart. May we all have the strength and determination of Isaac to co-inscribe ourselves in the Book of Life for a sweeter, healthier, and more courageously lovingly year. Shannah Tovah.