

ALL WON'T BE WELL

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Happy birthday! Rosh ha-Shana is considered the birthday of the world. So, once services conclude, treat yourself to a slice of honey cake. Light a candle if you choose, although I doubt anyone has 5,782 of them handy.

Birthdays are frequently a time of public commemoration and celebration. They are a staple of social media, which regularly bombards us with birthday announcements. I received one such announcement in July. This was from Blue Water Highway, an obscure band based in San Marcos, Texas, whose work I enjoy and support. The band posted on Instagram that its bassist, Kyle James Smith, was celebrating his 35th birthday.

That was on Sunday. On Tuesday there was a follow-up: Dr. Smith — he has a Ph.D. in physics — had strained his back and was suffering disabling muscle spasms. A few days later, another update: Dr. Smith's condition had not improved. The band's weekend concerts — which were its first appearances requiring an overnight trip since the pandemic began — were postponed.

As this episode demonstrates, birthday wishes are often unfulfilled. Reality provides unplanned difficulties, unscheduled obstacles.

So it was for Abraham in today's Torah portion. Adonai made an assignment that Abraham may not have contemplated when he accepted Adonai's initial community-building charge: "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering."

We all know this story's happy ending: Isaac survived. But what should Abraham have done? What should anyone do when given an unsavory assignment?

The simplest response is to act in an ethical manner: Don't do evil. That provides little practical assistance to Abraham. Presumably, anything Adonai instructs can't be improper.

A response some would take when given troubling instructions from a more fallible authority would be to modulate their own actions. Such people would refrain from doing anything improper or distasteful. They exert self-control. But they would not seek to control others on the premise that this offers little prospect for success.

Others would choose a divergent approach. It is not enough for them to avoid personal culpability. They want a better world. In reality, however, widespread change is likely to cause burdens. Those who are burdened are not necessarily wrong-headed, or malicious profiteers. They may be ordinary workers. For example, if people are to reduce use of fossil fuels — an objective I support — adverse changes are going to be faced by a broader group than oil company executives or stockholders. Those who work on oil rigs and refineries, or who mine or haul coal, will have to find new lines of work, adapt, or face an unpromising future. By the same token, if the objective is to reduce meat consumption, cattle ranchers, workers in meat processing facilities, and butchers are unlikely to benefit.

Those engaged in disfavored activities won't be the only ones likely to bear burdens. Anyone initiating change may face difficulties as well. Seeking individual prominence or initiating major changes imposes costs. Don't expect "work-life balance." In one of those videos I watch when I should instead focus on writing, a local young man attempting to achieve prominence in his field explains how he is trying to gain visibility by working six separate part-time jobs. He doesn't have much time for a social life. And we're all familiar with stories of strivers who, even if they don't go to extreme step of offering their child for sacrifice, can't spend sufficient time with their families.

These risks probably didn't deter Abraham. Adonai told him four chapters earlier that "I will make you exceedingly fertile and make nations of you and kings shall come forth from you . . . I assign the land you sojourn in to you and your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan." Surely some — this residing in Canaan come to mind — would need to be displaced in fulfilling this charge. Perhaps Isaac also needed the heave-ho. After all, Adonai promised plenty of offspring to come.

Not everyone would be as compliant as Abraham. Our new *machzor* contains a *midrash* that attempts to tell this story from Sarah's point of view. In the *midrash* Sarah takes an opposite approach from the one her husband pursues in the Torah. She pushes back at Adonai's instruction, declaring that "So either this sacrifice is sham or else it is a sin."

Sarah's concerns are understandable. One can rationally conclude that securing a place in history is insufficient reason for turning a life upside down. Our evening liturgy for both Shabbat and the High Holy Days contains the *Hashkiveinu* prayer, asking for the peace of mind to be able to fall asleep each night. Some may not want to disrupt that by proposing actions that could harm others. Some may not want the torrent of nasty emails and online abuse that confront so many these days who express views beyond the anodyne.

"Let us ask hard questions, for now is the time for truth," begins a prayer in the *machzor* for the Yom Kippur confessional service. Today's Torah portion raises a genuinely hard question. Which is the better approach: Sarah's focus on self-preservation or Abraham's assent to offering sacrifices now to achieve a greater objective?

A short time ago, we recited the *Untaneh Tokef*, a prayer containing an unforgettable passage listing things that could go wrong in the forthcoming year — natural disaster, hunger, poverty, and disease. On Yom Kippur we will read A to Z listings of disapproved conduct, and confess to no fewer than 26 different types of sin. All this can make one think that perhaps the way to "penitence,

prayer, and righteousness” is a minimalist or risk-averse approach. Try to avoid creating problems.

But each of the approaches to my hard question poses problems. Attempting too little in a quest for personal equanimity may impair the community. Attempting too much may hurt people — including ourselves and loved ones — and runs a risk of failing to achieve its objective.

Identifying problems is easy. High Holy Day sermons do it all the time. Finding solutions is difficult, and identifying ideal solutions is frequently impossible. Don’t believe the glib formulations of TV and op-edit pundits, 30-second political ads, or the Twitter universe. Any change will bring problems, expected and unexpected. Any system devised by humans is prone to human error.

So I won’t advocate Sarah’s approach. Nor will I defend Abraham’s, which arguably reflects the title of a single Blue Water Highway released in 2020 during the height of lockdowns: “All Will Be Well.”

While things are now better for the band, which has resumed touring, the life experiences of many of us suggest serendipity alone will not solve our problems. And notwithstanding today’s Torah portion, our religion does not make a virtue of being passive. But inability to devise the ideal action should not deter us. Try your best, most likely you will be back next year refining your approach. As part of our High Holy Day contemplation, let us each consider how to frame our personal quest to achieve *tikkun olam* — repair of the world — in a way to avoid harming others, or ourselves. *Shana Tova*.