

Rosh Hashanah 5775 “A Community of Learners” Rabbi Marc Israel

A young woman brings home her fiancé to meet her parents. After dinner, her mother tells her father to find out about the young man. The father invites the fiancé to his study for a drink.

"So what are your plans?" the father asks the young man. "I am a Torah scholar," he replies.

"A Torah scholar. Hmm," the father says. "Admirable, but what will you do to provide a nice house for my daughter to live in, as she's accustomed to?"

"I will study," the young man replies, "and God will provide for us."

"And how will you buy her a beautiful engagement ring, such as she deserves?" asks the father. "I will concentrate on my studies," the young man replies, "and God will provide for us."

"And children?" asks the father. "How will you support children?"

"Don't worry, sir. God will provide," replies the fiancé.

The conversation proceeds like this and each time the father questions him, the young idealist insists that God will provide.

Later, the mother asks, "How did it go, Honey?" The father answers, "He has no job and no plans, but the good news is ... he thinks I'm God."

Yes, a funny story. And yes, a story that may hit close to home in our current economic times, where many adult children find themselves still dependent on their parents to help them live in the lifestyle in which they were raised.

But the chorus of the story, “God will provide,” also has a special resonance with us on Rosh Hashanah, in relationship to the Torah reading that we heard this morning.

The story of the binding of Isaac is one of the great stories of the Torah. The medieval commentator Abravanel states that it is “so special that it has more depth than any other section of the Torah.” (Nechama Leibovitch) The great modern Orthodox rabbi, Joseph Soloveitchik (*z”l*) taught that the Akeidah is “of central significance” because it is “paradigmatic” and “foreshadowed Jewish martyrdom through the ages.” (Abraham’s Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch).

But this morning I am not going to examine the entire meaning and theology of the Akeida, but rather one single moment within the story. It is that moment when we will discover if, indeed, God will provide, as Abraham promised Isaac:

Imagine the scene:

Having risen early in the morning, Abraham and Isaac have been traveling through the hot desert for several hours on camel with Abraham's trusty servant Eliezer. Isaac is somewhat bewildered by the day – he knew that his father Abraham would often act rather strangely, but this seemed unusual, even for him. But, Isaac had long ago learned not to question his father, and so he went along, not saying a word.

Finally, they come to the base of a mountain and they stop. In reality, it was more of a large hill than a mountain, but none-the-less, Abraham descends from his camel and orders Isaac to do likewise. Abraham, without saying a word, takes the wood off the camel's back and gives it to Isaac to carry. Next, he grabs his slaughtering knife. Finally, he instructs Eliezer to stay back at the base with the camels. Without speaking, Abraham and Isaac continue their journey, now climbing the mountain by foot, walking silently, father and son, wood and knife.

About half-way up the mountain, Isaac can no longer resist – and calls out “Father?” You can almost hear the trembling in his voice – fear for having broken the silence, fear for what the answer might be, fear that there might not be an answer. Abraham responds simply, “I am here for you, son.” Bolstered by his dad's response, Isaac gets up the courage to ask his real question, “We have the wood, the fire, and the knife, but where is the animal to be sacrificed.” Abraham, perhaps pausing, considers his words carefully and replies, “**God will provide** the ram.” And, together, they continue, not knowing that these are the final words that they will ever speak to one another.

Now they reach the top of the mountain and Abraham prepares the sacrificial altar, just as he has done previously, when he arrived in Shechem after leaving his father's house, just as he had done when he first arrived at Beit El and on his return trip there from Egypt. Just as he had done when he first arrived in Hebron. Whenever he reached a destination, it appears, he would build an altar and make the sacrifice. This time seemed no different from the others.

Except that this time, it was not an animal, but his son, his beloved one, his legacy – Isaac – who he would tie upon the altar to offer up to God. We can now imagine the drama between father and son, between Abraham and Isaac. Neither one of them saying a word – perhaps fearful of what might come out of their mouths. Each one hoping against hope that somehow, someday, a reprieve will come. But there is no reprieve and so Abraham prepares to do what he always does – follow God's command. He raises his knife, perhaps closing his eyes, and is about to bring the knife down on his son Isaac when suddenly he hears a cry “Abraham, Abraham,” and...FREEZE.

This is the moment. This is the moment when we find out if, indeed “God will provide.” Will there be a ram, as Abraham promised Isaac? This is the moment that determines the relationship between father and son. This is the moment that determines our understanding of what God truly wants from us. This is the moment that determines the future of the not-yet-written Jewish history. This is the moment.

And, of course, we know what happens in that moment in the biblical account – Abraham hears the call and he responds “*Hineini* – I am here for you.” And, as a reward for hearing the call, Abraham is told to put down the knife and to sacrifice the ram in place of Isaac.

And in that moment, the future of Jewish history is determined.

We can imagine, of course, the other outcomes had the angel not called out or if Abraham had not heard the call in that moment. In fact, there are many traditions about what happened in that exact moment, and the ramifications of the different outcomes that occurred. Rabbinic tradition includes multiple versions of this moment, some of which contradict the text of the Torah itself, suggesting that the call came too late or that Abraham did not hear the call and that Isaac was indeed sacrificed, but later brought back to life by God. Other versions suggest that Isaac was maimed, but not killed, and that this was the cause of the blindness that beset him later in life. While these versions are generally considered to be rabbinic folklore, they clearly indicate that the outcome of that moment was not predetermined. Abraham had to listen to hear the call and Abraham had to decide how to respond to it.

I suspect, of course, that none of us have ever found ourselves in the exact same situation that is described in this scene. But I equally expect that each of us can point to moments like this, moments in our lives where everything hung in the balance. A moment where we had to listen to the voices calling out to us and to make a decision about the direction of our lives. A moment in which we had to decide what was most important to us. A moment where we had to decide the right course of action in order to get us to where we wanted to go.

This past year, I had a moment like that. I was sitting in my doctor’s office, for what I thought was going to be a routine check-up. However, when the doctor came in, he quickly reviewed the routine information, and then he pulled up a chair and sat and talked to me. He told me in very plain terms that I am lucky. I am still a relatively young man without any significant limitations on my life due to my health. However, he noted, I was significantly overweight, had poor sleep habits, high blood pressure, borderline cholesterol and a family history that raised certain risk factors. Staring me in my eyes, he told me that I was at a point where I had to make a choice – either I was going to take significant actions now to make fundamental changes in my lifestyle to improve my health, or I was going to continue down the current path and risk having significant health issues within the next decade.

None of that information was new – most of these issues had been ongoing concerns throughout my life. Every doctor I have seen has told me that I need to lose weight and sleep more. Yet, there was something about that particular moment and the way he explained the situation to me, that I finally woke up and said “*Hineini* – I am here. I am paying attention. I am ready to do whatever is necessary.”

Of course, deciding to make significant changes and actually making those changes are not the same. Knowing my history of failed diets and exercise plans, he suggested that I go to the Beck Institute, the Center for Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. The unique aspect of their approach is that before you start reducing calories, it focuses on why you want to lose weight and eliminating behaviors that hinder this effort. The first step is to focus on the positive outcomes you hope to achieve by losing weight – understanding why it is important. Second, you look at the way in which you eat and try to eliminate some of the worst habits, like eating while standing in front of the refrigerator, or, in my case, while in the car. Next you work to develop a mindfulness about your eating. Only at this point, once you have set yourself up for success, do you actually start focusing on your calories. By setting in place your goals and shifting your behaviors first, it makes the calorie reduction much easier. I started with the Center in March and began counting calories this summer. I am pleased that over the last 3 months, I have been able to lose 15 pounds, losing a little bit each week. I have now added exercise and am improving my sleep habits. And the great thing about it is that the more I stick with the plan, the more committed I am and the easier it is to stay on it. While I still have a long way to go, for the first time in nearly 20 years, I truly believe that I can be successful in my weight loss goals.

I would attribute my success so far as a direct result of the process: identifying the desired outcome and why it is important; removing the blocks that make it harder to reach that outcome; and then taking steps, small at first, and then larger, to help me reach my goal. And there is one other component – the plan requires regular communication with a coach – someone who can help identify the blind spots and, more importantly, be a cheerleader for the successes.

Each one of us has faced moments in our lives that are similar to the moment I had in my doctor’s office. I was fortunate – mine came prior to having a major health event; others are not so fortunate and it may be a heart attack or other event that serves as a wake-up call. But such a call is not limited to our personal health. Some of you can point to a moment in your professional lives when you realized that you needed to make a career change. Others have been in a relationship and had a moment in which they understood that the dynamics of the relationship were not working. People who have battled addiction in one form or another often can identify a particular moment where they fully understood the impact of their addiction on their life. But all of us can think of a moment in our lives where that metaphorical knife was frozen above our head and we heard a voice calling out to us to alter our course. The question is: how did we respond and what choices did we

make in that moment. Did we keep going along the path that leading towards destruction, or did we take heed of the voice and make the necessary changes?

At the core of these *Yamim Noraim*, these High Holy Days, is the belief that each of us has the ability to make changes in our lives. The blast of the shofar awakens us from our proverbial slumber, to recall that moment when Abraham stood over Isaac and to dare us to have the courage to hear the voice that is crying out to us to make changes. The essence of *teshuvah*, repentance, is embedded in this belief that such change is possible. We are reminded that we do not need to be prisoners to our past but can be shapers of our future.

While the focus of our prayers is on our individual repentance, we recite our prayers in the context of a community. On Yom Kippur we do not say “For the sin that I committed...” but, rather, “For the sin that *we* committed...”

And just like individuals have their moments of realization, there are those moments when the community awakens to the realization that fundamental change is needed. This past year, we as a Jewish community had such a moment, when, shortly after the New Year began, the Pew Research Center issued its report, “A Portrait Jewish Americans.” Rabbi Cooper discussed this yesterday and throughout the year, so I won’t go into the details. We may view its findings as a threat, as a proverbial knife being held over our communal throat, or as a shofar awakening us from our slumber to the great opportunities that lie in front of us, but it demands our reaction.

For me, the most profound finding of the report was the fact that while 94 percent of all respondents report that they are “proud” of being Jewish, there was a significant lack of depth to what “being Jewish” means. We are a community in which 58 percent have a college degree (compared to 19 percent of all Americans), yet nearly half don’t know the Alef bet, and less than 25 percent know what the meaning of more than just a few words. Even more disturbing to me is the fact that more people identified “having a good sense of humor” as essential to their Jewish identity than being “part of the Jewish community.”

This lack of depth of meaning to our Jewish identity is what I hear calling out to us, demanding that we change course. I believe it is born out of a lack of education – not just Hebrew, but of a meaningful adult education to understand what it means to be a Jew in the modern world and why does it matter. If we do not understand why Judaism is personally important in our own lives and what it is that makes us unique, I fear that all of our efforts to transmit Judaism to our children and future generations will fail. This lack of depth to our Jewish identity is largely born out of our own lack of education. It is not new, but the Pew report was like the voice calling out to us from the heavens, demanding that we change our course.

A year ago I stood before you on Rosh Hashanah and spoke of the need for us to come together in more and significant ways as a community that supports one another and provides for our internal and external needs. All of us were amazed to

see how many people in this room stood up to indicate the numerous ways that they have been involved in supporting this community and its members. I challenged us to build on these efforts and I am proud of the work that we have done together to build on this network of community over the past year. Just a few examples:

- A team of parents from our religious school and our day school parents organized grade-wide Shabbat dinners for each grade in K-7. These dinners gave children and their parents opportunities to meet and interact with one another in new ways.
- We created our new Shirat Shabbat service, adding a social component prior to services, which helped build a greater sense of community to welcome in Shabbat.
- During the difficult winter storms, we opened our building so it could become a true *Sukkat shalom* – a sheltering place, when so many of our members were without power.
- Women of our Sisterhood have recently started preparing a full home-made Shabbat lunch each time that the Sisterhood sponsors the Kiddush, ensuring that we can stay and enjoy each other's company every week.
- Our Chesed Network has worked to reach out to even more individuals during their time of need.
- Our membership committee has renewed its efforts to find new and creative ways to maintain the members who are here and to attract new members. The recently announced partnership with the Kaiserman JCC is just one great example of this committee's work.

All of these efforts have happened because members of this congregation have stepped forward to make them happen. And we are seeing the dividends of these efforts, not only in the great atmosphere that is palpable when we walk into this building, but also in the higher enrollment in our ECC and our religious school, each of which grew this year. Our youth groups are more active, and last year we sent more people to USY regional programs than any other chapter on the Main Line and raised more money for the Social Action Tikkun Olam fund than any chapter in our region. Oh, and yes, we have also seen modest growth in our membership numbers!

Coming together as a community is a first and necessary step, but it is not the end goal. For we are not just any type of community – we are a Jewish community. As Rabbi Cooper said yesterday, being Jewish means lots of different things to each of us individually. But I want to challenge each of us today to take our sense of community and go one step further. It is not enough that we are a community, but if we are going to truly hear the voice of this moment that was revealed in the Pew report, then we must significantly increase our efforts to become a community of learners.

What does this mean? I know that there are many people in this community – far higher than most that I have seen – who have a very strong Jewish education. We have an unusually high number of rabbis, Jewish educators, day school and yeshiva

graduates, etc. But how many of us are involved in furthering our own Jewish education on a regular basis? It was interesting to me that while Pew asked about the Jewish educational *background* of the respondents, asked about whether or not their *children* or *grandchildren* were getting a Jewish education, it did not ask a single question about whether the respondents themselves are taking a class, part of a book group, or studying text. The idea of Adult Jewish education wasn't even on the radar screen of the questionnaire.

And I don't think it is for lack of interest. I have talked to numerous members of the congregation over the past year who have expressed a desire to learn to read basic Hebrew or who are interested in studying the weekly Torah portion. We have members of this congregation who never celebrated a bar or bat mitzvah, and have asked us to form an adult b'nai mitzvah class, which we intend to kick-off in January. Parents in the ECC and religious school have expressed a desire to "learn what their kids are learning," things that either never had a chance to learn or weren't ready to learn when it was being taught to them. I know the desire is there.

When Batya Warshowsky and the Sisterhood recently asked me to lead a *Pirkei Avot* discussion group on Monday mornings, I think we both would have been pleased if there were 5-10 people attending. We were shocked the first morning when we had to move out of the conference room because there are 20 women who have been regularly attending for the past 3 weeks. We have had incredible, wide-ranging discussions on important topics in Jewish life – so much so that we have barely made it to through the introduction and the first Mishnah over these past 3 weeks. Yet we have talked about concepts such as Jewish views on the afterlife, influences from Judaism on Christianity and vice versa, and what are the origins of Torah. This part was not surprising to me, for as soon as we open up the text, and open up ourselves, we find that each of us has a deep yearning for meaning in our lives and we find that our Jewish tradition has important lessons and questions that can help guide us on that path.

Therefore, this morning I would like to call on each of you to consider your own response to the heavenly voice calling out to the American Jewish community. Like Isaac's question to Abraham, I believe it is asking us, "Here are the most secularly educated generation of Jews in the history of humanity; here is a community in which there is great pride in their Jewish identity; where are they doing serious Jewish learning?" Each of us needs to consider how we will respond – what changes are you prepared to make in your life to help you deepen your own understanding of what Judaism means to you and why is it important?

I would suggest that each of us develop a Personal Jewish Learning Plan. Developing such a plan will not be easy, for we all have such great demands on our time. If we are going to be successful, I would suggest that we consider the cognitive behavioral model that I referenced before.

- 1) Identify – in writing - the positive outcomes of what you would expect to gain by setting aside some time for our own personal Jewish learning, along with the negative consequences if you fail to do so.
- 2) Eliminate as many of the hurdles that you must overcome as you can. Some will be practical, such as time, location, etc.; some may be more psychological, based on a previous negative experience. Some will be things that you can do on an individual level; some will be things we need to do as a community. But identifying them and removing the hurdles will be an important step to help ensure that your plan will succeed.
- 3) Begin to take steps, small at first, maybe larger as you go on, to help you reach your actual goal of a more meaningful understanding of our Jewish identity. Find the amount of time and the space that will work best for you.

The great thing about such a plan is that it doesn't matter where we are on the scale of Jewish learning. All of us can go deeper and push ourselves to do a little bit more.

And, importantly, remember that you are not alone in this. You have a community of people who are ready to support you and to help guide you and be your coaches and cheer you on to success!

As we look to make changes in our Adult education offerings, we are prepared to work with you to ensure that your Personal Learning Plan is a success. Specifically,

- We can offer more classes, varying both the times of day and days of the week to allow more people to participate.
- We can offer different levels of classes, from introductory to more advanced.
- We can offer short courses on a wide variety of topics, based on the interests of our members
- We can better publicize opportunities that exist throughout the community and partner with other organizations that already provide Jewish learning.
- We can explore online learning that allows people to access the information and interact with one another virtually from their own home and at a time that is most convenient.
- We can take advantage of times when we are together – at committee meetings and parent gatherings – to make sure that whenever we gather we have a chance to do some learning.

There is an endless list of possibilities. In addition to Rabbi Cooper, myself and Cantor Rosner, we have the numerous Jewish educators and rabbis who are a part of this community, many of whom have already indicated a willingness to teach a 2-3 session course on a specific topic of interest. And beyond this group of professional Jewish educators, we have a tremendous wealth of educated lay people who I suspect would be happy to teach as well.

What we need from you is to identify the areas that you are interested in learning, or for those who are able, in teaching. Take seriously this charge to write out a Personal Learning Plan – look for a form on our website being posted shortly – and think about what you want to study, and when you think you can do it. We will gather a team of people to collect these forms and to sort through them and help put together the types of classes, discussion groups and learning opportunities to meet your needs. Just like with my own weight loss, it will not all happen immediately. There will be some ideas, like the adult b’nai mitzvah class, that we will be able to implement right away. There will be others that will take some time.

My hope and my goal is that every member of this community will find ways in the coming year to increase their level of Jewish learning, in big ways or small, and create a “habit” of Jewish learning. It is a lofty goal. But I believe it is essential if we are going to maintain our sense of being a Jewish community into the future. It is not enough for us to tell our children or our grandchildren that it is important that they have a Jewish education. We must demonstrate for them, and more importantly, for ourselves, how much our Judaism matters to us and how Jewish learning is central to Jewish living.

I often hear people say that if they are living an ethical life and working to improve the world, then why is it necessary to study Jewish text that teach these ideas. To this, I would respond with the teaching of my friend and mentor, the recently departed great social activist Leonard Fein, may his memory be for a blessing: Being a good person and engaging in the work of *tikkun olam* is the goal of Jewish study, but it does not lead to Jewish grandchildren. He would further express his doubt that the future generations would maintain even those values unless they understood that the basis for these values are found in our text and our traditions.

This is a defining moment in American Jewish life. It calls out to us like the angels from the heaven called out to Abraham to stop what we are doing, to find a different way. It awakens us to realize that if we don’t change our own actions, we will be, wittingly or unwittingly, sacrificing the next generation. It demands that we make changes. And changes are hard. But changes are possible, especially when we identify from the outset the positive outcomes and the negative consequences that our actions will have. So I call on us to walk this path together, to discover new ways to engage in deepening our understanding of our Jewish identity, for which we rightfully have such great pride.

In doing so, I hope that each of us will find that the year ahead will be one that may be full of challenges, but one in which we grow stronger as individuals and as a community.

L’shanah tovah tikateivu v’tchateimu May you be written and sealed for a healthy and happy new year.