

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 Dvar Torah

by Lou Loomis

Good morning.

First of all, I want to say this:



If I have offended anyone, either on purpose or not on purpose, I want to apologize.

Next! I want to quote that famous Jewish philosopher, **Woody Allen**, who said

"If only God would give me some clear sign! Like making a large deposit in my name at a Swiss Bank."

He also said: *"I don't want to achieve immortality through my work ... I want to achieve immortality through not dying."*

The Torah portion for Rosh Hashannah is the story of **Abraham**.

The more we read about Abraham, the more we begin to see a man who did not have it easy. His life was filled with many tragedies and near tragedies, many difficulties, for example:

Below is a list of the 10 trials of Abraham, according to Rashi:

- 1) Abraham hid underground for thirteen years from King Nimrod, who wanted to kill him.
- 2) Nimrod flung Abraham into a burning furnace. [What a name, Nimrod. He wasn't so dumb, yet he's still called "Nimrod."]
- 3) Abraham was commanded to leave his family and homeland.
- 4) Almost as soon as he arrived in Canaan, he was forced to leave to escape a famine.
- 5) In Egypt, **Sarah** was kidnapped by Pharaoh's officials.
- 6) The kings captured Abraham's nephew Lot, and Abraham was forced to go to war to rescue him.
- 7) God told Abraham that his offspring would suffer under four monarchies.
- 8) *At an advanced age, around 99, he was commanded to circumcise himself and his son.
- 9) He was commanded to drive away Ishmael and Hagar.
- 10) He was commanded to sacrifice **Isaac**.

So here is a man, the first monotheist, the founder of the Jewish religion, who was trying his level best to do what God commanded him, who was knocked down, got back up, and was knocked down again. And what did he do? He got back up.

An old joke, I'm sure everyone knows it, is that if you want to know the long and short of Jewish holidays, all you need to know is that "they tried to kill us, they failed, let's eat!"

Well, it looks like it started with Abraham.

A lot has been written about Abraham, *and* I think there's still a lot more to say. Abraham's story is also the story of the Jewish people, both in general, and I suspect, in particular. Many of us go through this time and time again.

Abraham was seen as a threat to many of his neighbors, and when he wouldn't bend, wouldn't give up, they tried to kill him. Obviously, they didn't kill him. He survived. His line continued.

His son Isaac was also perceived as a threat and several attempts were made on his life, most famously by his own father.

Jacob, Abraham's grandson, too, was threatened many times.

What's happening here? Why are our ancestors' lives so much at stake? And what keeps them going? What is it that is so different about our ancestors?

It just keeps happening. Throughout the generations of Jews, from Abraham to Joseph, to Moses, Joshua, David, the defeat of Israel's kingdoms, and exile, diaspora, pogroms, holocaust, and to today. Israel has been threatened every day of its existence, from 1948 to this very day.

There is something really different about this people. Unique. Yes, they're still trying to kill us. Yes, there have been many deaths. Tragically, many innocent Jews have been put to death over the centuries. But, somehow, we still keep coming. We excel. We are unique. And we keep celebrating, as well. Despite it all. What is different? What keeps us going? Keeps us surviving? Is there something in our DNA? This determination to survive, to continue, despite logic?

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 Dvar Torah

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Rabbi Stephen Lerner of Teaneck, New Jersey, is the founder and director of the Center for Conversion to Judaism of the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Conservative Movement's mother ship. Rabbi Lerner says "There seems to be a Jewish spark, a *Pintele Yid*. Lerner then says, "I don't usually have a very spiritual leaning, but I do think that the whole story of Jewish survival clearly has spiritual overtones. I do think that there is a *Pintele Yid*."

The Kabbalists refer to it as the Jewish Spark.

In Hebrew it's called *Nitzotz HaYehudi*

In Yiddish it's the *Pintele Yid*. The Jewish soul.

Jewish converts seem to have it; it can't be explained by some kind of inherited trait. In fact some Jews don't seem to have it. They convert out, or just stop being interested in anything Jewish. No *pintele yid*. Go figure.

But most of us have this thing, this spark, that can't be denied. It makes us somehow different. It brings us back to shul. Or to the deli. Or, when we hear Jewish music, we know. And when we hear about Israel.

Look at Abraham. He defied them all. He was alone. He stood, one man surrounded by hostile nations all turning on him, at one time or another. They feared him. They sensed his power. They wanted him dead, gone, forgotten.

How many of us have felt like Abraham? Knocked down. Somehow we rise up. Maybe get pushed down again and again, only to struggle once more to our feet. Again.

And, it doesn't stop there. Look at modern Israel. How many times has it had to do something that the entire world condemned, but we knew was right? Like bombing the Iraqi nuclear facility. The entire world condemned it at the time, but 10 years later, during the first Gulf War. I'm sure coalition troops were happy Israel did that. And more recently, the security fence, unilateral withdrawals, the list goes on and on. Until even today.

Last week, the Palestinians tried to apply for recognition for a Palestinian state, to the UN, which, by the way, still refuses to recognize the validity of a Jewish State. Israel, as you know, is being condemned by many countries, and many of its so-called friends. "Why don't the Jews just give up?" They say. You know Israel can't survive. So give up, already. Israel is the reason for so many wars around the world. It's the Jews' fault." Of course, it's always the Jews' fault. That's the old blood libel at work. But then, **Prime Minister Netanyahu** made a remarkable statement: ***Better a bad press than a good eulogy***. Honestly, since Abraham's time, Jews have faced annihilation time and time again, so often, in nearly every generation.

Last week, the President of Iran also announced to the world: **Anybody who recognizes Israel will burn in the fire of the Islamic nation's fury!**

It's not so different from Abraham's time.

I believe we need to encourage each other.

Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur are difficult times.

We also need to congratulate each other.

Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur are wonderful times.

You see, we've made it to another year. Happy 5772. Let's eat!

Rosh Hashanah Day 2 Dvar Torah

by Stephen Schuster

How did I get so lucky to have the ***Akeda*** as my *drash* topic? For years now I've been trying to find a new tack to report on about this story. It is not easy -- and part of it is because it's so much a **Not-nice** story. I've had friends -- some of you are sitting out there -- who tell me it's an abominable story and they won't even read it much less study it. Rather than a story full of awe, it's perceived as an awful story.

That is not an uncommon thought. The idea of God asking **Abraham** to do such a thing is as unthinkable as Abraham actually even considering it and as Isaac going along willingly. It is abominable in the sense that our God actually "tests" our foremost patriarch by asking him to sacrifice his son -- the one God acknowledges is his son, his only son, the son he loves so much -- three times mentioned as if Abraham did not know who God meant.

Rosh Hashanah Day 2 Dvar Torah

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Of course God isn't going to let Abraham know it's just a test. Instead He actually makes Abraham, and Isaac, go to the 99.9th point before sending an underling to stop it. Everyone here knows that the whole thing seems excessively cruel. So why do it? God can't actually be unsure of Abraham's commitment – after all He's asked Abraham, as an adult mind you, to circumcise himself. And Abraham complies. He accepts this request and does it. Now if that isn't proof of commitment, I don't know what is.

But here, in the story we're about to hear, the God who emphatically instructs us many times to "choose life", commands a death. Of an innocent. The God we all pray to this week and next to – quote - "save us for thine own name's sake" seems to value, and in fact orders death.

In past talks I have been able to find some way of either explaining the story or of finding an important message in it. I think if you can find a message, you can find a reason for both why God acted as He did and why it remains a central part of our faith.

So this year, I decided to try and find another reason why the story is an important one for yet another year's *drash*.

There have been critical moments in our history where our people had to make a difficult choice concerning whether to follow God or not. For example, there is the actual exodus from Egypt. Think how a generation raised in slavery must have felt when told to suddenly leave Egypt and flee while the Pharaoh's mighty army was poised to pursue them.

Think how they felt at the shores of the Red Sea, seeing the waters parted making a valley of dry land between towering and raging waters suspended above them on both sides. Towering and raging waters that would soon engulf all of the Pharaoh's charioteers.

Perhaps with the story of the *akeda* in their minds, they risked life willingly and followed Moses.

But there is still one thing that continues to bother me about the *akeda* and how many interpret it. And that is the idea that God is telling us that if we only do what he asks, all will come out OK. Isaac does not die. But, today, we know it does not always come out OK. We know that bad, terrible things do happen to good pious people. On Yom Kippur we read the martyrology which details the tortures inflicted upon innocent sages.

The holocaust itself happened and six million of our people perished. So the truth is that God does not and will not always send an angel to stay the hand of those who put a sword to our throats. If not God, who will?

And that brings me to the central issue. Throughout history, Jews have been subject to the cruelty of others. They suffered and died because they were Jews. And once again, today, they – WE – are being tested.

Two weeks after the **State of Israel** was established in 1948, **President Chaim Weizman** declared quote - "**The state will not be given to the Jewish People on a silver platter.**" -- Indicating that sacrifice will become a way of life and not an exception. The poet, **Nathan Alterman** wrote a prophetic poem that is taught to all Israeli children. In it he describes at one point:

"a youth and a lass slowly march toward the nation dressed in battle gear, dirty, shoes heavy with grime...bone weary from days and nights in the field. And when the Nation asks Who are you? They answer: We are the silver platter on which the Jewish State was given."

Every Israeli son and daughter who enters the Army realizes that he and she are to be tested. As Isaac was. They are to be laid on the altar of statehood – literally - asked to sacrifice their lives if need be to keep the dream and the nation alive.

For us here in this country, in this room, we are not asked to make this level of sacrifice. We are not so much exposed to the direct violence of war, or of missiles being fired from across a field suddenly bursting into our living rooms or school yards. But if we do believe in the very necessity of a Jewish State, we too must take actions. We too must make a sacrifice or at least an offering, – of prayer, of study, of funding, of Zionist advocacy, of action while our children, the children of Israel - sacrifice life. We can and must be the Angel of God who stays the sword placed at our children's throats.

There are good reasons to sacrifice. The survival of the State of Israel shall not be given free on a silver platter.

Yom Kippur Dvar Torah

by Stan Schroeder



It is my privilege to again fill this Yom Kippur time slot with my thoughts on this most solemn day of the Jewish year.

First, I must follow the example of Lou Loomis and Steve Schuster who preceded their Rosh Hashanah talks with a public apology to anyone they may have offended during the last year. I, too, apologize to anyone here whom I have harmed during the past year. In particular, if anything I spoke about in services or wrote about in the *Shir Notes* was inaccurate (and I'd be surprised if nothing was), I take full responsibility.

You may remember that last Yom Kippur I talked about an ex-UCLA Jewish football player, **Alan Claman**, who chose not to play on Yom Kippur despite the coach's warning that he would lose his starting position. He went on to become one of the stars of the team and attributed his good fortune never to get injured on this decision. After graduation Alan went to Harvard Law School, became a successful businessman, and became involved in Israel in both business and charitable work.

Today I am going to talk about an ex-UCLA Jewish basketball player, **Andy Hill**. Andy was a star player at guard for University High School near UCLA, and was thrilled to be offered a scholarship in 1968. He had a successful year on the Freshman team, but found he wasn't as talented as the other players on the Varsity starting in 1969, and spent three years mostly on the bench. He also had a tumultuous relationship with **Coach Wooden** and left UCLA after graduation a disappointed young man, despite being on three national championship teams.

In one particular incident, Hill and his teammates drafted and signed a petition to protest the war in Vietnam and had sent it to the White House on behalf of the entire UCLA basketball team. When Wooden learned of their actions, he singled out Hill as the ring leader and called him into his office to express his deep displeasure over his actions.

"It was chaotic times, the Vietnam War was going on," Hill explained. "Coach hadn't changed much since 1948, the year he came to UCLA, and I wasn't capable of putting myself in his shoes - it was really about my own immaturity at the time."

For many years afterwards, it wasn't a period of time he was very fond of sharing with others he met in his life. "Not many people I worked with ever knew I played basketball at UCLA," Hill said. "I never talked about it at

work because I had been ashamed of my own basketball career."

Upon graduating from UCLA, Hill began a long and successful career in television production. As President of CBS Productions, he supervised the development of numerous family-oriented programs such as *Touched by an Angel* and *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*.

As a top television executive, Hill demonstrated the ability to assemble teams of creative talent and to motivate them to reach for competitive greatness. He didn't realize where he had learned this talent to manage and lead teams of people.

Then during a fateful day on the golf course with Hill struggling with his golf swing, his playing partner suggested to him, "You're hurrying; slow down and get your balance."

The advice rung eerily familiar to Hill and he soon realized he had heard such advice before. It turns out it was the same instruction he had received from Wooden while as a player at UCLA. "At practices, Coach would repeatedly tell us to be quick - but don't hurry," Hill recalled.

Like an epiphany, Hill came to the realization that all he had learned to succeed in business, family, and life had been taught to him by Coach Wooden. Hill knew what he needed to do next. He needed to call Coach. "Never in my life did I think I'd be calling Coach again." Hill reflected.

Working up the courage to call Wooden, the uneasy feelings he had as a player at UCLA all returned. All those years of sitting on the bench until the game result was well in hand had been unbearable for him - especially after joining the team with higher aspirations.

He was about to call the man he blamed for turning a boyhood dream into a life experience he was ashamed to discuss with others. But something inside Hill was urging him to reach out to Coach Wooden.

"Fortunately, Coach still had the same old telephone number," Hill said. "If he wasn't sitting by the phone when I called him, I'm not sure if we would have ever got together again - I consider it one of the luckiest breaks in my life."

Most of all, it was a cathartic experience for Hill - all the pent up angst he had kept inside for Coach Wooden quickly dissipated after the two finally met and talked.

Yom Kippur Dvar Torah

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Hill no longer holds Wooden responsible for his troubles on the basketball hardwood, but instead credits his former coach for teaching him the essentials of how to be successful in life.

"I look back at my days at UCLA and now realize it was the greatest experience any young person could have had." Hill recalls. "I discovered learning can't always be pleasant. Sometimes the people who help you the most when you're young aren't necessarily the ones telling you everything is great all the time."

In 2001 Hill co-wrote a book with Wooden titled *Be Quick -- But Don't Hurry!* It chronicles Hill's experiences as a basketball player and television executive, and provides a model for businesses to follow based upon the teaching principles of Wooden's *Pyramid of Success*.

Hill became one of Wooden's many former players who visited often and assisted him in getting around. They collaborated on motivational seminars, a business Hill still pursues.

Tom Goldman, another Jewish boy made good, and the sports reporter for National Public Radio, said in an interview with Andy Hill, "Wooden is a man of many sayings and quotes. Here's one that seems to fit the old coach and the Jewish boy. Sports don't build character, they reveal it. In the case of John Wooden and Andy Hill, sports have revealed a deep friendship as well."

Hill later had the opportunity to talk to a large group of UCLA student athletes, many of whom might be sitting on the bench even though they were stars in high school. He spoke about "Team Spirit" which Coach Wooden defined as, "An eagerness to sacrifice personal interests of glory for the welfare of all." He told them of his experience and that his own lack of team spirit had led me to feeling disappointed, saddened, and depressed by his role as a seldom used substitute on three national championship teams.

When I decided that I was going to speak about Andy Hill, I sent him an email through his website, explained what I was planning to do, and asked him to call me. He called me within about a half-hour and I asked him about his connection to Judaism and Israel. He said he and his wife belong to **Temple Israel of Hollywood**, and their daughter and her family belong to **Temple Isaiah** in Los Angeles. After graduation from UCLA, Andy played a year for **Maccabi Ramat Gan** in Israel.

Before I conclude my remarks about Andy, let me put in a few words from Coach Wooden who died in June of last year, about four months shy of his 100th birthday. Coach was an inspiration to Andy and me and countless others. His *Pyramid of Success* is a model for life, and he led such a life.

"The people who turn out best are those people who make the best out of the way things turn out."

"You can't live a perfect day until you do something for someone who will never be able to repay you."

"Never make excuses. Your friends don't need them and your foes won't believe them."

"Do not let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do."

There is a lesson to be learned from Andy Hill's statement that learning can't always be pleasant as we conclude the Days of Awe with today's services. Two of the main parts of the Yom Kippur service are the communal confession of sins and the *Yizkor* memorial service.

When we enumerate our sins, let us not gloss over the specifics, feeling either the act doesn't apply to us directly, or the commission or omission is insignificant. Just like a team consists of players with different roles (including those on the bench), our community consists of many members who play active roles and many who are supportive. Our people consists of many Jews who lead exemplary lives and some who have acted in ways that reflect poorly on Jewish values. It is up to each of us to examine our part in the community and how our actions reflect on the perception of Jews.

When we pray the *yizkor* prayers for our departed loved ones, let us also contemplate how their memories can inspire us to greater compassion for the less fortunate and deeds that contribute to well being for our family, our community, and our people. When we pray for the souls of the martyrs of our people, let us realize that their sacrifices made possible our comfortable lives today. This personal introspection may not be pleasant, but then not all learning is.

And where is God in this picture? Whatever our personal conception of God, our personal knowledge of God's presence is based on our observations from our place on Earth. We see a majesty of nature from the vastness of the stars in the skies to the microscopic wonders of the cells in our bodies. We see oceans, mountains, canyons, and glaciers. And we see the amazing plethora of plants and animals, knowing that many others once roamed our planet.

Yom Kippur Dvar Torah

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We see the accomplishments of mankind, from skyscrapers to the electronic wonders of modern technology. And we ask ourselves, could all of this be the result of random events over billions of years? Our universe of galaxies, stars, and planets, orbiting in a space beyond our ability to measure, obeys physical laws creating order, rather than chaos. To me, this is the God I conceive through my powers of reason.

Meanwhile I see a world of many peoples who, through thousands of years have advanced to build the

fabulous cities throughout the world. And I see people who, for thousands of years have slaughtered innocent neighbors and caused untold suffering through exploitation, avarice, and greed. I see people who have invented miracle drugs and medical marvels. And I see people who distribute and sell destructive drugs to those who are vulnerable or thrill-seeking enough to buy them. Mankind has a long way to go to emulate a social order the parallel of God's natural order.

Some of you know that one of my hobbies is writing poetry, mostly for family occasions. I've also written several that I've shared with our congregation. I

Yom Kippur 5772 (October 8, 2011)

Ten Days of Awe, a time to repent;
Time to reflect on what the past year meant.
Let me give you a personal view;
See if it applies at all to you.

I reflect on events in my personal life,
Blessed by a loving supportive wife.
C-def bacteria invaded my intestinal tract,
The paramedics we called knew how to act.

I was rushed to Emergency, hooked to an IV,
Where doctors and nurses attended to me.
It took five days of treatment at West Hills;
Medicare and Blue Cross paid the bills.

I hadn't been hospitalized in fifty years,
But went back the next week despite my fears.
This time for a surgery on my prostate,
I can see the success when I urinate!

I reflect on events in our family,
Family is a high priority for me.
Our daughter-in-law's mother died of cancer;
Suffering from Alzheimer's, death was an answer.

One of Phyllis' daughters will have a baby boy;
At the age of 49, an unexpected joy.
In both death and birth I see a Divine Plan;
The evolving miracle of His species called Man.

I reflect on events in the Valley here
And in our great country that I hold dear.
I see an economy where jobs are too few.
There's no easy answer, but I know we'll pull through.

I reflect on events in the Middle East
Where Israel's problems have only increased.
This was the year of the Arab Spring;
It remains in doubt what good it will bring.

The border with Egypt is hard to defend,
Not knowing to what extent they're a friend.
Israel's relation to Turkey has gotten worse;
Erdoğan switched from blessing to curse.

Iran continues on their nuclear course,
And everyone denounces the use of force.
Ahmadinejad calls for Israel to be destroyed –
Most of the world is hardly annoyed.

And now the Palestinians are seeking a State
Where the UN will decide their fate.
With Israel they won't go face-to-face;
Resolution of the issues can't take place.

So here I am on Yom Kippur day
Looking to discover a personal way.
A way to improve the life that I live,
A way to decide how better to give.

I know how fortunate I am to be here.
My tradition describes the path I should steer.
I must learn from Torah to interpret its stories;
Understand its message within sacred glories.

On this Yom Kippur as I engage in fasting,
I must contemplate that which is Everlasting.
Perhaps the life truly worthwhile living
I live by seeking ways of righteous giving.

Ketiva ve-chatima tovah (May you be written and sealed for a good year.)