

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 Dvar Torah

by Lou Loomis

Good morning, happy 5773!

Two Rabbis walk into a bar....well...it could happen.



But Jews are not known as drinkers. We have all kinds of reputations. Jews are known as enterprising. Some think of Jews as cunning. Clever. Most gentiles in this country don't have a negative view of Jews. But in other countries, where there are few Jews, we are not considered well. And, there is enough anti-Semitic literature, such as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, for the corrupt leaders of those countries to convince their citizens that all their problems stem from Jews. Remarkably enough.

In discussing the Torah portion for the new year, I would like to point out that Abraham, the first Jew, suffered many indignities, and was accused falsely of many crimes. I guess you could say, in his day, he suffered from anti-Abrahamism. But his family grew, despite many obstacles, and became a tribe, and eventually his tribe became a nation. It hasn't been easy. His people are what we today are called Jews, and his nation is Israel.

So, we all know that Jews have been accused of many things over the centuries, including idolizing money, being clannish, poisoning the drinking water of gentiles, and then we come to the blood libel. The blood libel is one of the most historically persistent anti-semitic themes, where the Jews are accused of using the blood of gentiles, especially gentile babies, in the mixture while making Passover matzah.

In 1927, the Zionist Writer **Ahad Ha'am** spoke of the blood libel:

The blood libel accusation, he said, is the solitary case in which the general acceptance of an idea about ourselves does not make us doubt whether all the world can be wrong; and we right, because it is based on an absolute lie. Every Jew who been brought up among Jews knows as an indisputable fact that throughout the length and breadth of Jewry there is not a single individual who drinks human blood for religious purposes..."But," you ask, is it possible that everybody can be wrong and Jews right? Yes, it is possible; the blood accusation proves it possible.

Isn't this blood libel thing silly? Stupid? Ignorant? You would think so. But:

Voltaire, the great French Enlightenment writer, who greatly influenced the French revolution and

European thinking wrote this wonderful statement about Jews: Jewish priests have always sacrificed human victims with their sacred hands. Voltaire wrote extensively about the evil Jews, as well as advocating the removal of the heads, literally, of those who opposed his views on democracy.

Anti-Semitism, it seems, is eternal. There has not been a time when Jews weren't accused of something evil. So, we have been exiled, kicked out of many countries, just for being Jews. Millions have been killed in pogroms, holocausts, and inquisitions. The crime? We are Jews! And if some of us try to deny it, deny our Judaism, try to pass as gentiles, change our names...or convert to other religions, our enemies look at the Jewish blood line and find if even a great-great-grandparent is Jewish, then that person could be sentenced to death!

Harold Kushner, in his book *To Life!* says:

I was once asked at a public lecture: "Doesn't the history of the Jews' wandering and low status prove that they are being cursed for rejecting Jesus?"

I answered, "No, not at all, because the people who predicted that the Jews would suffer are the same people who persecuted them. It would be as if I predicted that the window would break, and then threw a rock through it. That would say more about my propensity for violence than it would about my gift of prophecy."

Anti-Semitism has been called the European disease, or the gentile disease, which today includes much of the Muslim world, both in and outside of Europe. It is rarely considered a problem in America. Except that one American who influenced and abetted much of the world's anti-Semitism before World War II, was **Henry Ford**.

Henry Ford's own newspaper, the *Dearborn Independent*, published article after article about Jews, including this little 1920 bonbon written by Mr. Ford: "International financiers are behind all wars. They are what is called the international Jew – German Jews, French Jews, English Jews, American Jews. I believe that in all those countries except our own the Jewish financier is supreme... Here the Jew is a threat."

As one of our goals we believe that we must be a light unto the nations. Our message is that of *Tikkun Olam*, creating a better world, a more Godly world, a world of good values that reflect the highest standards and the most respect for life. One of the purposes of these holidays is self-examination and self-improvement.

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However, as a result, we now have a double standard imposed on us.

Phillip Roth, in his book *The Counterlife*, explains:

The fellows who say to you, "I expect more of the Jews," don't believe them. They expect less. What they're really saying is "Okay, we know you're a bunch of ravenous bastards, and given half the chance you'd eat up half the world, let alone poor Palestine. We know all these things about you, and so we're going after you now. And how? Every time you make a move, we're going to say, 'But we expect more of Jews, Jews are supposed to behave better.'"

Jews are supposed to behave better? After all that has happened? I would have thought that it was the non-Jews whose behavior could stand a little improvement. Why are we the only people who belong to this wonderful exclusive moral club that's behaving badly?

There is an old Jewish proverb that goes:

An anti-Semite is one who hates Jews more than is absolutely necessary.

So, I want to say:

There is enough anti-Semitism without Jewish self-hatred.

We have university professors who are Jewish who are also vehemently opposed to Israel. Famous writers and financiers who also oppose Israel and, in truth, anything having to do with Judaism. Some of our most popular American humorists fall under this category. If you watch comedy central or HBO you'll see it. Oh yeah, they call themselves "secular Jews."

Some of these secular Jews hate Israel:

They say Israel is a Nazi State.

--Or, as **Karl Marx**, whose father was Jewish, wrote:

"Money is the jealous God of Israel before whom no other gods are allowed to stand.

So? Self-hating Jews? We have to include at least one ultra-Orthodox group, the Neturei Karta, who deny the holocaust and believe Israel is a blot on Judaism. They readily embrace any and all enemies of Israel. But they aren't the only Jews who are deniers of Israel's right to self-defense. How many Jews are there that would like to take away Israel's right to defend itself? How many are there who would like to boycott, divest, and impose sanctions against Israel for its self-defense? There are even rabbis in the Reconstructionist, Reform, and

Renewal Movements, and even Conservative rabbis, who would deny Israel its homeland prerogative.

Fortunately, none of those rabbis are in this room, today.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg once said

"I don't care what denomination you belong to, as long as you're ashamed of it."

Why, you might ask would anyone want to do this, want to deny Israel the right to self-defense? Especially so soon after the last Holocaust of Jews? In short, it is because the six million Jews of Israel have an unfair advantage over the 40, 50, or 60 million Arab Muslims surrounding Israel, who want to destroy Israel and drown the Jews into the sea. Unfair advantage!

Presumably, if Israel would not defend itself when attacked, then that would be fair. It would be better if all Israelis just left, maybe jumped into the sea, or, as one famous journalist recently declared, Israelis should just go back to where they came from. You know, Germany, Russia, Poland. New York City. East Los Angeles.

In all fairness, it is not exclusively Jewish. There are also the usual suspects, the Arab and Iranian organizations, both governmental and private. To them, the only good Jew is a dead one. But, in the name of humanity, they will accept self-hating Jews. In fact, they embrace self-hating Jews. They LOVE LOVE LOVE self-hating Jews. Which to them is proof that they are not anti-Jewish, only anti-Zionist.

So, during this high holiday season, when we are asking others to forgive our hurts, when we are trying to forgive others for hurting us, when we ask God to help us become better people, or to find the strength to overcome health, family and monetary problems, let's also remember that it's okay to get angry at our enemies. It's okay to take pride in our heritage, our people, our God. We've all been through a lot; our people have suffered and persevered. There's a time to beat our chests and say *Al chet*, but there's also the time to celebrate and be grateful for the life we have been given. Please, let's balance the suffering with joy and gratitude of who we are, and appreciation for this holiday season, that enables us to overcome our own negativity, and be happy. We need to be happy.

I wish everyone a new year of more joy than suffering, more love than anxiety, and the best of good health.

Rosh Hashanah Day 2 Dvar Torah

by Stephen Schuster

Boker tov. A good morning to you all.



Well here I am. One more time. Maybe this year I'll get it right.

All of you must be getting as tired as I am, hearing yet another approach to understanding the lesson of this Torah portion.

The *Akeda*, the binding of **Isaac** is still one of the more problematic parshas of them all. If you remember, and I barely can, in previous years I've focused on **Abraham**... speculating on what he was thinking. One year I even suggested that Abe did it on his own – to put on a “show” to demonstrate to his neighbors – the tribes of non-Jews – that his God, our God, forbids human sacrifice. Obviously a political ad to ... Join The Jews and Save Your Sons.

I have also spoken about **Sarah** and how this was God's way of showing Sarah that it was time for her to let her 36-year-old little boy move out and get his own job.

In addition, I've talked about Isaac and what motivated him to go along with his father's – and our Father – capital F – Father's commands... And last year I talked about how we – meaning all people – are too often called upon to sacrifice our own children by sending them off to fight wars to protect and save our nationhoods.

So as I figure it, except for the donkey and the unfortunate ram caught in the thicket, there is only one figure left to discuss and learn from: The angel – in Hebrew the word is “*malach*” or messenger. In this case a divine sheliach or emissary from God.

This will be about 2 distinctly different kinds of angels: those literal angels who reside in heaven but who also can interact with us. They bring us MESSAGES from God. But, I'm also talking figuratively about people like US here in this room,... people with “angelic” qualities – those who do good for others seeking little or nothing in return.

So how many of you believe those literal angels actually exist? Actually that's a trick question: We have a baseball team residing in Anaheim that is full of angels. But I am speaking of angels as messengers of God, ... how many [raise hands] believe there really are such actual angels among us?.

I'm not surprised that so many of you believe. A poll conducted in 2006 found an overwhelming majority of people of all religions said they believed in angels.

That belief is particularly high for Christians (97%), with also high percentages for people from the midwest, and among Republicans, and with a majority of Jews also saying they believed in angels.

We even speak all the time about “guardian angels” - - perhaps it was such a guardian angel that stayed Abraham's hand. And when someone does us a favor we say things like –“Oh you're such an angel for helping me out”.

Jewish teachings about angels are ancient, going back to the first five books of the Bible, the Torah. At the very start, in *Beraisheit* (Genesis), as early as Chapter 3, line 24, we find an early mention of Cherubim – one of the “types” of angels.

These cherubim are later described in the **Book of Ezekial** where the prophet said he saw “the likeness of four living creatures. They had the form of men but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. Their legs were straight, with a sole like the sole of a calf's foot, and “hands of a man” under their wings. Each had four faces: The face of a man, the face of a lion on the right side, the face of an ox on the left side, and the face of an eagle at the back.”

In *Beraisheit* 3, we learn that God gave the two cherubim flaming swords and set them to guard the gates of Eden and the Tree of Knowledge after **Adam and Eve** are banished. Later an angel arrives to tell Abraham he and Sarah will have a child (Gen. 18) and then, as we will soon hear, an angel stays Abraham's hand when he is about to sacrifice Isaac. (Gen. 22). It is an angel who saves **Hagar** and **Ishmael** in the desert (Gen. 21), it is an angel who appears to Moses out of the burning bush (Ex. 3), and there are many other appearances of angels throughout the Torah and the later books.

Sigmund Freud, among others argued that God did not create Man, but Man created God to fulfill our need for understanding why things happen. That need is central to the human psyche. It is in our nature – we are DNA-coded to question and seek answers. In fact, I believe that need to know, to want to know “why” something happens is what separates us from animals as a species. Personally, the things that keep me up at night are such questions as: If you put your two cents in and are asked for a penny for your thoughts, where does the extra penny go? How come Tarzan doesn't have a beard? And why is “bra” singular and “panties” plural?

Very early man wanted to know why the sun rose every day and the moon shone in the darkness. So they guessed that some beings – they called them gods since they obviously were more accomplished and

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powerful than any people they knew – drove a chariot of fire across the sky daily. From there they went on to conjure up a myriad of such gods to account for all things good – and bad - happening to them. To this ancient world, the Jewish faith brings a quantum leap to the table. ... Monotheism – our central belief in “one God” – One TRUE God who is so powerful and all-knowing as to be able to create and order the world and, as our prayerbook says, one who can look into our very souls and knows all of our thoughts as well as our destiny.

But why do angels play such a prominent role in Jewish tradition? Surely a God who could create the entire universe in six days and is so omnipotent doesn't need something else to deliver a message.

Some medieval Jewish commentators propose that angels are necessary because they perform tasks that are beneath the dignity of God's "personal PHYSICAL involvement." God can not be seen or touched. Even though Moses could hear God's voice,.. even he never actually saw God's face.

So part of the allure of angels is the colorful and humanly compelling notion of a representative of God who is more humanlike, and, therefore much easier for us to imagine. For example, as outlandishly otherworldly as Ezekiel's description of angels may seem to us, it is still more understandable to humans than a God one cannot see or physically touch.

Thus, **Angels** are used to give God distance from actual physical interaction – to keep The Boss from having to get involved in actually carrying out deeds or sending emails himself. What I'm saying is it would obviously take physical human characteristics to have God actually wrestle with Jacob. So an angel serves the purpose (Gen. 28) of being God's physical presence. I've come to believe the same can be said of the angel in the Akeda story – since he may have to actually be seen and to touch Abraham to prevent the knife stroke not to mention having to make sure a ram is caught in some bushes, the angel appears instead of God himself.

The same can be said of one of the most interesting angels – the famous, or infamous, Angel of Death. That angel is not one of Satan's minions – his minions of former angels are known as devils and demons although interestingly demonology is not a particularly Jewish belief. Satan himself is only mentioned directly in one book – the **Book of Job** where God and Satan make a “bet” and use poor Job as the subject. God tells **Satan** to “do your best” but he can not break Job's faith in God. And I also find it interesting that when

Satan and his minions were cast out of Heaven – he was not sent down to Hell. No matter what the creators of South Park would have us believe, we Jews don't believe there is a Hell – as a place. Satan, as it says early in Job, has been cast out of Heaven sent to roam the Earth. So beware, my friends. Both devils and angels doth dwell among us – sometimes in the same body.

I see the Angel of Death as, in fact, another example of God using a “subordinate” to actually deliver the “message”, a rather potent message, that a life is ending.

Today we learn that God sent not the **Angel of Death** to stop Abraham – but rather sent an **Angel of Life** – Let's call him **Malach Chai** – and perhaps it was this angel of life responsible for the blessing of **Baby Boy Vorspan**. That angel's message is for Abraham, and for all of us to choose Life - -not death – to choose Good over Evil. That angel's message is “be angelic” or angel-like and choose gemulut chasidim – deeds of loving kindness; giving to charity, helping thy fellow neighbor.

On my morning dog-walks I always say a few prayers – Among them I say “Praised are you, Lord our God, king of the universe, who made me a Jew – and gave me a way to worship you by doing good deeds and pursuing social justice.” That, to me, is the essence of Judaism.

God's message today from the *parsha* is that all of us can be angelic and strive to know and obey our God through our deeds. So now when, in the middle of good football or hockey game on TV, Sima asks me to “be an angel and go to Ralph's and buy some milk” – I'll likely be more inclined to do it. Or when I ask her to make me a Beef Wellington for dinner..... Well, OK that may be pushing it.

G'mar chatima Tovar - May we all have a good, healthy, sweet new year.

Yom Kippur Dvar Torah

by Stan Schroeder



Before I talk about this year's message, I must give you an update on the two UCLA athletes I included in my last two Yom Kippur Dvar Torahs. Two years ago I talked about **Alan Claman** who was a starting defensive tackle on the 1965 – 67 Bruin football teams. In his first varsity year the new coach, **Tommy Prothro**, told Alan if he missed the second game to be played on Yom Kippur he could lose his position and scholarship. Nonetheless Alan, following his rabbi's advice, went to shul instead of playing. The next week Coach Prothro decided Alan was much better than any replacement, and he started in the following game. He became a star player and played in the 1966 Rose Bowl, an exciting upset of favored Michigan St.

Alan went on to Harvard Business School and had a successful career in the aircraft parts business. Later in life he and his wife Pamela moved to Jerusalem, and in 2008 he founded the organization **Thank Israeli Soldiers** that sends care packages to members of the IDF. The first night of my trip to Israel this last July was Friday night, Shabbat. A friend I made through our member **Art Altshiller** arranged an invitation for the two of us to attend a Kabbalat Shabbat program and dinner at a beautiful home overlooking the Western Wall. The home belongs to Alan (now Aba) Claman where he has an IDF unit and other invited guests for Shabbat dinner every Friday night. Small world!

Last year I talked about **Andy Hill** who played guard on the UCLA NCAA championship basketball teams under the legendary Coach **John Wooden** from 1970 – 72. Unlike Claman who was a star, Hill was a benchwarmer. He had been a star in high school and on the freshman team of 1969. After graduating from UCLA, Hill played basketball in Israel for a year and then received a Master's in Education at UCLA. He then had a successful career as a television executive, serving as President of CBS Productions from 1991 to 1996, responsible for development and production of all CBS – owned entertainment programming.

Hill left UCLA basketball with negative feelings about his experience and Coach Wooden because he played so sparingly. He didn't have any contact with Wooden for 25 years. Then one day on the golf course his fellow golfer made a remark that reminded Hill of all of life's lessons he learned from Coach, and how he applied them to his life to become a success. He knew he had to call Coach and resolve his feelings. They met at Coach Wooden's home and Hill quickly became one of Wooden's closest friends and helpers. They

collaborated on a book and a number of motivational seminars. And Andy Hill spoke to over 30 of us at our Congregation Shir Ami *Brunch and Learn* March 4 for no fee. Everyone present came away inspired and praised Andy as "the best speaker ever."

The Torah portion we are about to read from Leviticus chapter 16 describes God's instructions to **Moses** to be given to his brother **Aaron**, who was the high priest, and performed the most sacred functions of the community. At the time the Israelites were camped in the desert and Aaron's two oldest sons had recently been struck dead when they made an unauthorized incense offering in the Tent of Meeting. So these instructions for Aaron to carry out in order to atone for the sins of the community were definitely important, and could even be a matter of life and death.

The instructions covered what clothes Aaron must wear and the details of the sacrifices to be performed, including the process for selecting two goats: one for an atonement offering and one sent into the wilderness with all the Israelite's sins (the scapegoat). The selection of which goat is to be sacrificed is made by lots (in a random fashion). This reminds us of how much in each of our lives due to chance. We didn't choose our parents. And at the moment of conception millions of sperm competed for which chromosomes would become you.

To us the whole sacrificial system with its sprinkling of blood on the altar appears primitive, to say the least. We seldom consider that this was the world the Israelites lived in, and that their neighbors engaged in sacrifices, as well. In fact, human sacrifice was part of many pagan cultures. And we can learn something from the Israelite culture that offered animal and grain sacrifices on Shabbat and Festivals. Israelites, rich and poor, offered their best from their harvest and flocks in service to God. We can give our best, living by Jewish values and performing *tikkun olam*, repair or improvement of the world, starting with our family and community.

The world has changed, and Judaism has changed. Until the destruction of the First Temple, Yom Kippur was observed essentially as described in our Torah reading. The First Temple, built by King Solomon, superseded the Tent of Meeting which the Israelites set up outside their camp to hold the *Mishkan* (or Tabernacle), God's holy dwelling. When the Israelites were exiled to Babylonia for 70 years, there were changes in the Hebrew alphabet and calendar, and scribes and sages replaced prophets as Jewish leaders.

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When the Second Temple was built after the Israelites returned from Babylonia, the sacrificial system was reinstated. It stood for 540 years, through the ups and downs of Greek rule, through the Hasmonean kingdom established after the Maccabean revolt, through the Roman period until Titus destroyed Herod's magnificent enlarged Second Temple in 70 CE. This is the period when the rabbis were compiling the *mishnah* that codified the oral tradition and, after the completion of the *gemara*, became the basis for what is now known as Rabbinic Judaism.

Jews were further dispersed following the Bar Kokhba revolt in 135 CE. Many made their way to the European continent. By the 10th century most of Europe was under the rule of Christian monarchs who made Christianity the religion of their realms. The late 11th century brought the Crusades and the late 15th century brought the Inquisition. And, of course the 20th century brought the Holocaust. Through all that, and more, our people survived and our religion adapted to the environment of the governments under which we lived.

Our *mahzor*, in its reflections upon the Rosh Hashanah Amidah, states:

Every person born into this world represents something new, something that never existed before, something original and unique. ... Every person's foremost task is the actualization of his/her unique, unprecedented, and never recurring potentialities, and not the repetition of something another, and be it even the greatest, has already achieved.

Rabbi Susya (a great Hassidic 18th century rebbe) said, a short while before his death: In the world to come I shall not be asked: "Why were you not Moses?" I shall be asked: "Why were you not Susya?"

I started this talk by updating you on two Jewish UCLA athletes from the 60's and 70's, whose stories I told in my last two Yom Kippur Dvar Torahs. I chose these stories about the two young men because I like to include real people who exemplified qualities and aspects of Yom Kippur that I shared from this bima. Today I talked about the evolution of our Yom Kippur rituals and Judaism, in general. And I want to conclude with the story of another young Jewish man who was a student at UCLA the same years as Alan Claman, 1964 – 1968.

This young man was not an athlete. Although our congregation president, **Jordan Pistol**, and I sometimes focus on the Bruin football team, I know that UCLA also offers academic and cultural

opportunities to its students. This young man studied political science and played the trumpet in the Bruin concert band. He later followed in the footsteps of his father, who was a leading rabbi at then University of Judaism. Following ordination at Hebrew Union College, he was a rabbi at Temple Beth Emet in Anaheim for two years, moving up to become the rabbi at Temple Beth Ami in Reseda.

At Beth Ami he developed programs and services that evolved into our Contemporary Service format, a condensation of the traditional Conservative Shabbat service, featuring guitar-accompanied singing of the liturgy. The sermon is more of a dialogue with the congregation on the Torah portion with **Rabbi David Vorspan's** suggestions on how to apply Torah wisdom to our lives. As many here know, Rabbi Vorspan is also Rabbi-in-Residence at New Community Jewish High School, affectionately known as New Jew. He is helping to form our next generation of Jewish leaders, *l'dor v'dor*.

I close by sharing my concept of Judaism. **Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan**, who was a mentor for David Vorspan's father Max, defined Judaism as an evolving religious civilization. Its elements include religion, culture, and the Jewish people, *klal Yisrael*. Religion is based on Torah and includes the rituals we observe by attending services as a congregation and the rituals we practice in our Jewish home. Lighting Shabbat candles, having a Shabbat meal with blessing of the wine and the challah, having a *mezuzah* on our door, and giving *tzedaka* are some of things we can do to bring our religion to our home.

Jewish culture includes our music, art, literature, food, education, and entertainment. Taking music as an example, we have Hebrew and Yiddish folk music, classical and popular music by **Gershwin, Copeland, Irving Berlin, Richard Rodgers, and Jerome Kern**, to name a few. We are blessed to live in Los Angeles with so many venues for education and entertainment, including American Jewish University, Skirball Museum, Museum of Tolerance, and the many synagogues in the Valley offering programs to the community.

The concept of the Jewish people is that we are all descendants, not necessarily literally, of the Jewish nation referred to in the Torah. God promised the land of Canaan to Abraham's progeny. God spoke to **Moses** of the Promised Land, though he wasn't able to enter it. The promise was originally kept when the twelve tribes divided the conquered land and eventually established a kingdom.

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After the destruction of the Second Temple, although Jews continually lived in and around Eretz Israel we never had control of the land until May 14, 1948. It was on that day that the independent Jewish State of Israel was established based on the United Nations resolution of November 1947. It was on that day that God's promise was again kept in our time.

I believe that there are three requirements for Israel to be the State of the Jewish people.

1. There must be a clear majority of Jewish citizens.
2. The State must be governed based on Jewish ideals.
3. Jews in the Diaspora must identify with Israel and support its institutions and aspirations.

On this Yom Kippur as we chant the same liturgy as our fellow Jews throughout the world, recite the same sins as our fellow Jews enumerated throughout our history, and reflect upon our loved ones as our fellow Jews have in observing this holy day in many lands and in many times, let us realize we are one people. Some are more knowledgeable, some less; some are more observant, some less; some partake more of our culture and some less. But we all make up the Jewish people and we are each responsible for using our unique God-given abilities to make the world better for all God's ultimate creation: our fellow human beings.

L'shanah tovah