

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 Dvar Torah

by Lou Loomis

George Burns once said, sincerity is everything. If you can fake that, you've got it made.



But as our religion brings us to these days of self-assessment, there are things some people can't handle during the High Holy Days, and prefer other ways to better themselves. They strive to stay youthful, get tattoos, pierce their ears, noses, and other body parts to feel hip, with it, and better than the great unwashed, the crowd of common people. Some seek this hipness in other ways. How about astrology?

Science fiction writer **Arthur C Clarke** once said, I don't believe in astrology. I am a Sagittarius and we're very skeptical. But those of us here today have kept to Judaism and as we approach the new year, we get another chance.

Today is the first day of Rosh Hashanah, and I wish everyone a happy and healthy 5774. Rosh Hashanah is not just a holiday of wonderful food and being with loved ones, but it begins the formal days of self assessment in the Jewish calendar. It is highlighted with Yom Kippur, the day of atonement.

In today's Torah portion, we read about the life of Abraham, the first patriarch of the Jewish people. And throughout the book of *Bereishit*, Genesis, we learn how the patriarchs and matriarchs struggled, overcame problems and difficulties, to found this peoplehood of the Jews. And, fortunately for us, we can understand the lives and struggles of our founders by reading later works, in the lives of other leaders, such as Moses, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Sara, Rebecca, Rachael, and Leah. Just to name a few.

Let me jump ahead just a little. In the Hebrew year 2448 (1312 BCE), Moses carved the second set of Tablets out of sapphire, as recorded in Exodus 34:4. After seeing that the Israelites had made the idolatrous Golden Calf, Moses broke the first set of tablets (Exodus 32:19) and God then instructed Moses to carve new tablets. The second set of tablets was placed in the Ark of the Covenant, along with the first broken set. The Rabbis say that this second set symbolizes the ability of every person to make amends and rebuild anew. In fact, it was on the day of Yom Kippur that Moses came down from Mount Sinai holding the second set of Tablets, and we are told that is on every subsequent Yom Kippur day that we have a special opportunity to make amends.

Now that we are about to start Rosh Hashanah, let's see how the story of the broken tablets and Abraham's life relates to us, today.

Most of us think that the Patriarchs and Matriarchs were always wise and faithful leaders of the Jewish people, throughout all their lives. But the Torah, Commentaries, and stories following the Torah tell another story. We learn that Abraham had to face many trials, 10 very difficult tests, before he could be called the Patriarch of the children of Israel. In fact, his final test, the sacrifice of Isaac, is often considered as the most controversial and significant. Why is that? And what are these tests? Why is it so important that we know about the tests?

I suggest that Abraham was not born enlightened or faithful to the one God, but had to suffer, change, and to grow into the role of Patriarch. One way to look at it is that he had to **grow up**. He had to do what we are about to do this High Holiday season, what the Israelites did after the Golden Calf episode, and throughout their 40 years of wandering; and that is to examine our faults and overcome, to change our less wise selves. We all make mistakes. All of us. Honestly, how wise, how patriarchal and mature was it that Abraham disguised his wife as his sister just to protect himself. Doesn't that seem just a bit selfish? He did it more than once.

When we do *teshuvah*, do we repent and never repeat the mistake? Well, sometimes we do. But Abraham kept trying to do better. He didn't just throw in the old towel, but never stopped. It was not until after he tried to sacrifice his son, Isaac, and then was stopped, or stopped himself, that he actually became the father of the Jewish people. Abraham chose life, or was commanded to chose life. Either way, what would have happened if he had succeeded in killing Isaac? He would have become the father of what? Nothing! And, at over 100 years old, it is doubtful that he would have been able to father another nation. So, when he returned from failing to sacrifice his son, only then did he deserve the title Patriarch.

And, if we read the lives of the other Patriarchs and Matriarchs, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, they too, had to grow, to do *teshuvah*, to chose life, to overcome their handicaps and immaturity, their mistakes, in order to deserve the titles we give them. And if we go a little further into the Torah, we read how Joseph also had to grow, overcome many of his personal faults, in order to become the leader and savior of the Jewish people.

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So, what is the lesson here?

Abraham was over 100 years old when he did his last recorded teshuva, the Akeida, the sacrifice of Isaac. However, even before that, he had built quite a reputation as a wise leader, a brilliant military general, and as a successful business man. Even more, Abraham was growing his family and followers by his increasingly growing wisdom. He was a man who had to overcome adversity, trials and difficulties. As he did that, he became wiser and greater. With each trial, he grew, he matured, and changed, and became more and more the patriarch that we honor in the Torah.

Today, many of us are again starting the new year with renewed resolutions, to be happier, healthier, better people, all around. We want to improve our lives. We'll read in the high holiday Machzors the list of *Al Chets*, sins, we want to repent. To stop doing. And if we think about our lives, our own daily trials and tests, the list of chets becomes understandable. Yes, we have a lot to be thankful for, and still, for most of us, the humble ones in the room, a long way to go before we are satisfied with our selves. Our daily lives are really daily struggles, and they require daily efforts, daily prayers, daily renewals of our vows to be the better people to which we aspire.

Abraham was a revolutionary, and developed something very new, very different, than was known before. Like Abraham, who had to endure the contrary character of the world, without losing heart--- to stubbornly continue the struggle against adversity, that was the virtue he most needed to transmit God's new way. That was the way the people of Abraham have kept to the new way and have transmitted it to the next generation. And yes, sometimes, oftentimes, it was unpopular with the rest of the world.

Have we ever known the Jews, throughout our history, to be honored by the world for our struggles? Except for maybe briefly? Like our ancestors, we here today are locked in a struggle. We struggle to overcome our negativity, our selfishness, our mean and base natures. But like Abraham, and the rest of the patriarchs, the leaders who followed, we can still do teshuva, to make ourselves better people, happier people. We're here today for that reason.

George Bernard Shaw wrote: a life spent making mistakes is not only more honorable, but useful than a life spent doing nothing.

You know, It's funny, and the Rabbis tell us us that we can actually change our past by being the people who admit our mistakes, and use those mistakes for personal betterment. We will be able to say, yes, we did such and such, and it was wrong, but because of that, we've determined never to make that mistake again, and have become better people as a result that weakness.

These high holy days, holidays, are a great kick-start for those of us stuck on problems. I wish everyone a successful, healthy, and happy High Holy Day season and may that lead to a successful and happy new year.

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 Dvar Haftorah

by Barbara Joan Grubman

For 15 years, I had the honor and the privilege of being a *doula*. As such I attended many births and hopefully made life at this special time, a bit easier for the birthing woman. I came to this late in life, in my sixties, because pregnancy and birth have always fascinated me, and I longed to be present as a new life appeared. Finally, I found my way, when someone explained to me that *doula* is a Greek word for servant, and with training and observing, I could be one.

If I thought I could get away with it, I would have asked every pregnant woman I saw in Ralph's Market, "Can I be at your baby's birth?"

Today's Haftorah portion tells of Chana, one of Elkanah's two wives. Childless, Chana wished very much to bear a child, and often silently suffered from the many humiliations that child bearing Peninah, Elkanah's other wife, heaped upon her.

In much distress, Chana goes to see Eli, the High Priest, who was the judge of Israel at that time, and asks for him to grant her a son. In return, Chana promises to consecrate her child's life to God. Her wish granted, she gives birth to Samuel and gives him to God when she feels it is the right time, making her ultimate sacrifice.

Women do not forget the times of giving birth and who among us could have made the promise that Chana did. As an only child, I was obsessed with wanting a sibling. Any gender would do. Sadly, my Mom died at 47 years old, before she could fulfill my childhood dream.

I can also vividly recall the evening sometime before my Mom died, when the specter of death came to me. I was sitting on the porch of our summer bungalow in Long Beach, New York, enjoying the calm of the evening dusk. It occurred to me that I could not possibly live forever.

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Soon after, I began asking my parents to call God and tell him that I did not want to die. I must have asked them several times, not now recalling their answers, but wanting to check to see if they did it.

Birth and death, those two momentous occasions are always with us. They are the both sides of that thin dime. Birth on one side, and death right close, on the other. When we are born, we take our first breath in and when we die, we take our last breath out. In between those two breaths, we lead our lives. If we are lucky, the coin does not flip over too early in our lives. Birth and death are so clearly marked in our lives.

On September 5th 2012, I had a friend who was in a nursing home and had just put himself on hospice. I had planned to visit him on the 6th, a Thursday. Suddenly about four o'clock on Wednesday, a feeling took hold of my body and thoughts. I knew I had to go to see Dan right then, or I would never see him alive again. It was hot and humid, rush hour time. I was hungry and tired, but I got in my car and went, propelled by this overriding desire.

I felt strangely calm seeing Dan, realizing how lucky I had been to follow my intuition. He lie there, quietly, yet his face showed so much. He could not greet me he made no eye contact with the two sons who were at his bedside. I stepped outside to the little courtyard that adjoined his room, to afford the family privacy. It was not five minutes later, that his older son came out to me, put his arms around me and said "My Dad just took his last breath."

Life and death. Do we remember our first breath, or our last? No, but they play such important roles in our lives. One signals the beginning and the other the end. I love this quote and it seems somehow appropriate to end with it. "Life is not measured by the breaths there are in a moment... rather, it is measured by the moments that take our breath away." In the coming year, may you have many such moments.

Rosh Hashanah Day 2 Dvar Torah

by Stephen Schuster

Whenever I feel a class is drifting off in boredom during my mostly brilliant lectures, I stop and tell them "clear your desks – we are going to have a pop-quiz." Instantly, I have all of their attention. I can tell that from the very audible groans. I then announce, "now that I've got your adrenaline flowing we won't have a pop quiz – I just wanted to get your attention."

Sadistic and cruel of me? Perhaps. But as my good friend **Lou Loomis** told you yesterday, that's close to what God does to Abraham in our *parashat*. Abraham is told he's going to be given a "test". And that gets his attention. He responds not with adrenalin flowing chaos, anxiety, and tumult. Because Abraham has studied and knows he can ace this test, so he goes about taking it in an almost eerily calm and efficient manner: rising early, gathering his men and a donkey – and Isaac – all quietly enough not to rouse Sarah and making it easier for him to pass the test by not passing any anxiety along to the other participants.

Why do teachers give tests? Obviously it is to find out if the student has learned something and can parrot it back to you. Truthfully, I tell my students I hate to give tests and pass out grades based on them. I tell them that if were in charge of the world, I would give all my students an Incomplete as a final grade and then five years from now suddenly show up at their places of work and see how much they really learned about working with, and managing others. Of course, the bureaucracy won't let me do that now. I HAVE to give everyone a grade. But if I really wanted to know if they'd learned anything – I'd want to see if they actually USE it.

In a sense that's what God did – he seems to really have given Abraham "Incompletes" on the other 10 tests God had given him. Now is the time for his FINAL – he's studied for it and is ready. To pass, all Abraham has to do is PERFORM. And his grade and reward will be having the Covenant confirmed.

Regarding tests, my favorite story happened to me about three years ago at CSUN. I had given back a mid-term exam which had a short (1 page) essay as part of it. That part was worth about half the total points. This one student had written an answer talking about something else entirely. I gave him 0 points and he failed the exam. He came up to my desk after class and asked me why I'd given him a 0 on that question. I said, "Because you didn't answer the question." He said "But I thought you knew the answer." I replied, "I do know the answer. The question was to see if YOU knew the answer." He walked away with no more complaints.

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But he raised an interesting dilemma. Many times I not only know the answers but I also know the students well enough to know which of them already knows the answers before I give them the test. I can usually tell how a student is going to do on a test – but I give it anyway..... Sound familiar? God knows Abraham will pass. Then why do we, and God, give tests? I think the most important reason is: **To let you (the student) know that you have what it takes to pass (or fail). Your outcome is a sort of feedback that if you “passed” increases your self-confidence and makes you feel better about yourself – while Failing gives you feedback that you have not learned the lesson and, maybe, that you’re not ready to USE what you should have learned - that you still have some work to do in improving yourself.** I don’t know about you, but I hate it when someone fails the DMV test but drives anyway.

THAT is why God believes he has to test Abraham one more time – even if HE (God) knows Abraham will pass. He wants Abraham, and Isaac, to feel confident about carrying the title, and burden, of being Patriarch to a great nation. Remember - God created Mankind with **Free Will**. Free Will to do sin and evil as well as the will to do good. Eve, and Adam set the standard – they failed the test and got themselves evicted from Paradise. Their child Cain fails the test and kills his brother. In fact, God becomes so upset with how mankind is using their free-will, He decides to kill everyone and start over with Noah and his family.

If God is all-knowing, surely He knew what Free Will would do to mankind. But he also knew what Abraham would do with his Free Will when asked to sacrifice his son. Having that covenant confirmed, has to have proven once and for all to Abraham that he was ready.

The question should not be whether it was a “good” thing for God to do, but what can we learn from the story. Because, you see, we – every one of us on this planet – are “tested” every day. We are used to taking tests. I mean real “scored” tests. We know how to drive but we have to take that stupid DMV test every few years. Whenever I go my doctor to get my blood tested, Sima always tells me I should stay up late studying so I can pass it. I remember after taking the final test for my PhD saying to myself – at last – I’ll never have to take another test. Wrong! Guess what. I did have another. And another. There’s always another test to take.

The tests OF us, from God, are always here. Keeping Kashrut is a ‘test’; saying “yes” to a charity appeal is a

‘test’; being kind to each other is a ‘test’. The *Al Chait* is a litany of test items. Some we easily pass and some we fail. No one’s perfect – after all. God gave us the blessing and the curse of ‘free will’ and we use it daily for both good and bad.

What’s most interesting is that, as you recall, I said that it’s the RESULT of the test that gives us important feedback: From Real confidence to fear. I never cease to smile when I give back a test and a student turns his or her paper over, sees an “A” and responds with a “YES!”.

Who’s “grading us” during the Al Chait? As **Rabbi Vorspan** often tells us – God does not really write down in a book a score or grade. When we read that list in the *Al Chait*, every one of us knows in his or her heart how we have done on that item. On some, I know I have to give little harder beat on my chest.

And we also know the same every day. I recently read an article about Giving and Altruism, questioning why people GIVE but often get nothing in return. Charity costs us money. But we give anyway. To economists it makes no sense. This article reported some amazing discoveries that some neuroscientists recently discovered about our brains. They wired up some volunteers and put them through an experiment where they had choices to make about giving away \$ they were earning being in the experiment. So it was really their own money they were parting with. The scientists were stunned to find out that when the volunteers agreed to give away some of their earned \$, the part of their brain – the mid-brain, “lit up” with increased activity. This is the part of the brain that controls responses to high pleasure. In other words, doing good literally did make them feel better. That center in the brain creates and distributes the hormone oxytocin – a hormone that promotes social bonding.

So God gave us free will, but then created in our bodies a hormone that makes us feel pleasure when we “do the right thing”. Ask yourself – at the end of a long grueling day of fasting and prayers, how do you feel when Neilah finally ends? We should be tired and exhausted but instead we are exhilarated, excited, and looking forward eagerly to yet more bonding with friends and family.

So with so many tests, the key is not to get a “perfect score” but to at least “pass the course”. God has allowed us to get continual feedback on how we are doing in this course called “Life”. Let us pay attention to the information we get concerning our behavior. Let US be the grader. And remember - To feel good – do good.

Yom Kippur Dvar Torah

by Stan Schroeder



It is my privilege to once again give this Dvar Torah on Yom Kippur. I usually include relevant stories of real people in my talk because I believe we all relate to people, much like ourselves, who have made a positive contribution to our world. Three years ago I found a former UCLA football player who refused to play on Yom Kippur in the second game of the season, potentially giving up his position as a starter on the team. It was significant to me because I went to UCLA, am a big Bruins sports fan, and I played in the football and basketball bands. His story is especially appropriate today because UCLA is playing their second game of the season today, Yom Kippur. However I looked at the roster and didn't see any Jewish players I could identify.

Alan Claman 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 in July of 2011 was Friday night, Shabbat. A friend in Jerusalem 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!

Two years ago 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 at University 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 96, 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* in March of last year for no fee. Everyone present came away inspired and praised Andy as "the best speaker ever."

The UCLA graduate I talked about last year wasn't an athlete, but his contributions are even more personal and relevant to us. He went to UCLA from 1964 – 68 and like me, he played in a UCLA band. Only he played in the concert band because the football games were all on Shabbat and he couldn't play on Shabbat because his father was a rabbi. **David Vorspan** studied political science at UCLA. 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*.

Today is also special because it is the 40th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War in Israel in which there was a surprise attack by Egypt and Syria on Yom Kippur day. I say "surprise" because the government led by **Prime Minister Golda Meir** was definitely surprised, even though everyone knew the Egyptian army was amassing in the Sinai preparing to move northward. The Israelis even considered a preemptive attack, similar to the 1967 Six Day War, but Golda decided against it. This was partly due to advice/pressure from **President Nixon** and **Secretary of State Kissinger** not to attack first.

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I mention this for two reasons. The first is because on Yom Kippur we remember the martyrs who gave their lives for our freedom and survival. During the Yom Kippur War over 2,500 Israeli soldiers were killed and over 7,000 wounded. This is by far the most, except for the War of Independence. When we read the prayer on the top of page 690, let us remember those who perished in seven wars and various military operations necessary to create and defend our Jewish State in its 65 years of existence.

The second reason is to realize the definite parallel between 1973 and today. Just substitute Iran for Egypt and **President Obama** and **Secretary of State Kerry** for Nixon and Kissinger and you realize how precarious and dangerous the situation is. This is not a political statement. In 1973 we had a Republican administration and today we have a Democratic one. The parallel is that the US sees Israel as an important ally, but has more global concerns than an important ally in the Middle East. For Israel, it is a matter of its very existence.

The earlier part of the Yizkor prayer service focuses on our personal loved ones who are no longer with us in body, but whose memories we want to preserve. The first to be mentioned are our parents, starting on page 686. There are many ways of preserving the memory of a parent. The UCLA graduate I feature this year had his own unique way. **Gary Baseman** was born in Los Angeles in 1960 and graduated from UCLA with honors and a degree in Communications. Before UCLA he attended John Burroughs Jr. High, like Rabbi Vorspan and me, and Fairfax High, like Rabbi Vorspan. He grew up near Beverly Blvd. and La Brea Ave., his mother worked at Canter's Deli on Fairfax, his father was an electrician. Both his parents were Holocaust survivors. His oldest brother was born in Austria, his other brother and sister were born in Canada. He had his Bar Mitzvah at Shaarei Tefila Orthodox shul on Beverly Blvd.

As a child the history of the Holocaust was always present in his home. His father did not talk much, but when he did, it was of survival and sacrifice, and he inculcated Gary with the mantra that if you work hard and are a good person, anything is possible. If there ever were a problem, he would say in his Yiddish-accented English, "The door is always open." This was his way of expressing the blessing of living in America. Gary had two childhood trips to Israel — one at age 4 with his mother, the other at 12 with his father — and he was told the reason his parents had survived so much, the reason they worked so hard, and even the reason Israel was founded, was all for him.

Although he never had any formal art training, Gary knew early on that he wanted to be an artist. At 11, he twice won the monthly Bob's Big Boy art contest, and in 1978 he won the Area E art contest judged by well known artists of Mad magazine and Marvel Comics. From Fairfax High, he won the Distinguished Art Service award for illustrating the school newspaper and the yearbook.

After graduation from UCLA, Gary felt the responsible thing to do was to pursue a commercial art career while continuing to make art, "on the side." He did a short stint at an ad agency, but that did not really agree with him, so he began to pursue work as a commercial illustrator. An image he made for the cover of *The New York Times* Sunday Book Review put him on the map.

To make his American Dream come true, Baseman moved to New York in 1986. "The advertising and publishing and art world were all in New York," he said. At the time, he believed, "Every major artist was in New York, and if you lived in L.A. you were a substandard regional artist. You had to go there." He became very successful with numerous assignments from *Time*, *Rolling Stone*, *The New Yorker*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and many others. He became a New Yorker, but found he didn't like it and longed to return to L.A. His opportunity came ten years later when he started creating TV concepts.

Los Angeles was more to his liking. He sold a show, "Teacher's Pet," which began airing on the Disney Channel in 2000 and became a great success, winning four Emmys, including an outstanding performer win for Nathan Lane. He enjoyed the collaboration with other animation artists and writers, as well as making the "Teacher's Pet" movie in 2004. At the same time, he was invited to show his art in a serious gallery, the Peter Mendenhall Gallery in Pasadena, and to work with Kidrobot to create limited-edition designer toys.

In the meantime he was undergoing a personal transformation. In 2009, he returned to Israel for the first time in 36 years to teach at the Bezalel Art Academy. While in Israel, he also had a show of his work, which he called "The Sacrifice of Ooga" — *ooga* (sponge cake) being his favorite Hebrew word as a child. His canvases were filled with his "Wild Girls," who represented Baseman's own sexual revolution, and other characters called "Chouchous," who represented the still unattainable bliss and goodness that was complicated by all his demons.

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Gary's father died in 2010 at the age of 93. He later recalled, "When my father passed ... I realized that I was the keeper of his story, and if I didn't tell his story, it would be lost forever." While visiting with some distant cousins in Israel, he learned of the existence of a *yizkor* (memorial) book from his father's town that his father had never told him, or any of his siblings, about. He wondered why. After his father's death, he found the book hidden in a container in a closet filled with bills and other papers. The book contained several pages describing his father's heroism as a partisan. Gary knew he had to go to Eastern Europe, visit his parents' hometowns, and pay his respects.

So Gary arranged for a Fulbright fellowship to teach at the Art Academy in Riga, Latvia. From there, through social media, he connected with two artist friends who lived in Lviv, Ukraine, and they arranged for him to come to Lviv to speak to art students from all over Ukraine. They also offered to drive with him from Riga to Lviv, and then on to his parents' towns, outside Rivne. It was a very emotional experience.

He placed pictures of his grandfather at the cemetery in which he had been buried, and the gravestones had been reused. He created and wore a costume depicting a giant magi with a cone-like head with one giant all-seeing eye, and wearing an apron with the Hebrew word for truth, *emet*, printed across his chest. He wanted "to let people know there and everywhere that you can't hide the truth," he said, and to remind them "that [there are] souls there."

When he returned from the trip he arranged to create an exhibit at the Skirball Museum called 'The Door Is Always Open'. The exhibit contained furnishings and memorabilia from his childhood home. It also contained exhibits of the various characters he has created and sketchbooks used in the creative process. Gary personally made an audio tape for each room so you could get a glimpse at his feelings and motivations. I met Gary when I visited the exhibit earlier this year and we chatted for a few minutes. Unfortunately the exhibit closed last month.

This morning's Torah portion describes the ceremony performed by the High Priest in the days of the Temple. The specific instructions are directed to Aaron, as told to Moses by God. They start with the nature of the offerings that are required and the garments and preparation for the offerings. Then the most remembered instructions pertaining to the two he-goats, the method of selecting which will be sacrificed and which will be sent into the wilderness for Azazel bearing the sins of the Israelites. Then the procedure

for the actual sacrifices is specified. Following the offerings, the Priest places both hands on the head of the live goat, confesses the sins and iniquities of the Israelites, and sends off the goat. We know this goat as a "scapegoat".

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan was a Conservative Rabbi in the early 1900s when he formulated a modern interpretation of God, the Torah, and the Jewish people. This theology was later known as Reconstructionism. Rabbi Kaplan tried to get his ideas incorporated into the Conservative liturgy, with limited success. He founded his own Synagogue called The Society for the Advancement of Judaism in New York City on the Upper West Side in 1922. It had many of the elements of today's Jewish Community Center. The Reconstructionist Movement exists today as a small, but vital, independent movement with its own rabbinical college in Philadelphia.

Rabbi Kaplan also became a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Conservative rabbinic college in New York City. Among his disciples there were future Rabbis **Max Vorspan** and **Harold Schulweis**.

Kaplan wrote several books about his theology and ideas of Judaism, starting with *Judaism as a Civilization* in 1934. One of his later books is entitled *Not So Random Thoughts* published in 1966. It is a compilation of his quotations, somewhat similar to the Book of Proverbs. In it he comments on our Torah portion, as follows.

"Like so many other things in the Bible, the scapegoat is not at all what people think it is. They apply the term "scapegoat" to any person or group that is falsely charged with being the cause of the evils that befall them. No one ever thought of holding the goat responsible for the sins it carried to Azazel. The meaning of that ritual was that you had to get rid of evil before you tried to do good."

We can learn from him that our task is to reflect within ourselves which are the evils in our own behavior. We do that today with the repeated recitation of the various sins. Then we must find a way to eliminate that behavior, in order to better prepared to perform *mitzvot* and create a better world with our unique God-given capabilities.

Among Kaplan's other quotations about Torah are:

"The foremost problem in Jewish religion is how to get Jews to take the Bible seriously without taking it literally."

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(continued)

“Some rabbis preach as though nothing has happened since the days of the Talmud. Others preach as though nothing happened before the last Sabbath.”

In conclusion, I realize that I am the luckiest man in the world. Like Gary Baseman’s father taught him, and like our sages taught that every person should say, “The whole world was created for me.” This is not a statement of self-centeredness, but of responsibility. We each have the responsibility of making the world a better place for all of us.

May we each have a year of health and fulfillment in this better world.