

# Rosh Hashanah Day 1 Dvar Torah

by Lou Loomis

Good morning and happy new year. I'd like to start by saying to anyone I may have wronged or hurt this past year, that I am sorry, and please forgive me. [*You know who you are....*]



This morning I'd like to talk about the Torah reading and how it relates to courage. The great sage **John Wayne** once said "Courage is being scared to death, but saddling up anyway."

And, the famous **Chocham Winston Churchill** also once said:

*Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.*

So I'd like to ask all of you sitting here to be courageous for the next few minutes...

This week we read the story of **Abraham**, who led a life of great dangers, overcoming those dangers, and created great opportunities for himself and his people. Abraham, the father of our Jewish people, was the world's first great monotheist. Dictators and despots threatened his life from the time he was born. In fact, according to the Midrash, **Nimrod**, the King of Mesopotamia, tried several times to kill Abraham, believing he posed a great threat to his Kingdom.

The Torah tells of Abraham's trials, and various commentators have mentioned 10 or more, including God telling Abraham to circumcise himself at age 99! Abraham was a man of great faith and trust in God. Now, some of us hearing that, might think, well, why did so many horrible things happen to Abraham, since he had such great faith? And the short answer is usually something like: well, bad things do happen to good people. Of course, that is no answer.

But funny, enough, Abraham and his wife **Sarah**, were people not just of great faith, but great optimism and great courage. How many of us, when faced with a hostile neighborhood and despotic government wouldn't just rather go somewhere else?

Our Jewish history is the story of a people who, when faced with unbelievable dangers had emigrated to safer and more friendly places. Who could blame them? The history of the Jews in Europe, as just one example, tells of constant wandering, from one place to another, because Jews were seeking safety, not conquest; freedom, not servitude; family, not self-

aggrandizement. Jews were kicked out of Germany, England, Spain, France, Russia, Netherlands...you name it. By the way, these countries kicked out the Jews numerous times, not just once. Which tells you of the vicissitudes of expulsion. Most of these wanderings weren't by free will, but by force and necessity. The necessity of survival. And, during World War II, the Jews of Europe who could not or did not leave, were exterminated.

Unthinking critics of the Jews claimed Jews were cowards by not fighting back, by abandoning Europe, or just going into hiding. We see that Abraham did that as well, often leaving one land for another. But Abraham grew in courage as his tribe, his followers, grew in numbers.

It is my opinion that Abraham grew in courage over time, after many defeats and retreats, because of his faith, because his back was to the wall, because he felt he had no other choice. After hiding out or leaving one land for another, he ultimately made a stand to stay on the land God gave him, and fight. His trials never got easier, as we can see in the *Akeida*, the Sacrifice of **Isaac**, but Abraham took ever-increasing risks because he knew he could not always hide or always be in retreat.

In a similar manner, as we come here for Rosh Hashanah services, we have the chance to examine our lives, our goals, renew our resolve for our own personal inner strength and inner courage. A new year is not just an excuse for a new start, but a real opportunity.

That's the theme repeated throughout the Torah, throughout the later writings, and eventually the history of the Jews to this day. They, we, didn't give up. They, we, appealed to God, struggled, often against usually overwhelming odds. Everyone pointing to them/us, and saying we should just forget about it. Give up. It's too tough. They are too many and you, we, are too few. The odds are overwhelming. And you know, you can't buck the odds. That's logic.

Well, the Jews never gave up. Abraham never gave up.

Just like Jews have been criticized for not fighting back in World War II, Israelis have been criticized most recently **for** fighting back. So which is it? Don't fight back and get criticized, get run out of your country, and maybe get wiped out in a pogrom or worse? Or fight back, defend your land and family, and get criticized for defending yourself?

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In a way it's funny. Israel is the only democratic nation in the Mideast, the only country to treat women fairly, offering freedom of religion to all, showing respect to gays....the shining example of a democracy, gets blasted by the world media as being a racist, apartheid country, and is fair game to be wiped out. Ignoring all the other countries that are many times worse to their own people and neighbors.

The Torah has been interpreted and reinterpreted by many people over the centuries. And that will probably keep happening. You'll be told not to believe this or that, because it's nonsense and no one in their right mind could possibly believe this. But this Torah story is a theme that has not stopped repeating. It's an individual's story as well as a national one. We can personalize Abraham's struggle, and I believe that is something we're supposed to do. We'll face struggles but we must, like Abraham, grow, stretch, change, overcome our problems, keep fighting. The Abraham story, when carefully read, helps us to gather our strength. It encourages us. It is our football and soccer coach. It is our kindly teacher who urges us to look inward to find our wisdom and strength. It is our parent who lovingly scolds us and wants us to succeed.

Rosh Hashanah is not just the start of a new calendar year, and it is not just the birthday of Earth, it is a way we can use to renew our determination. We're not going to be able to relax. Life is not easy. Our troubles will never end, but, the story of Abraham reminds us that our sorrows can lead to new victories and even greater opportunities.

And you know, it doesn't hurt to have a sense of perspective on our plight, either.

It's like the old joke about the Jew who was in an accident. The Police Officer comes to him, sees him lying on the ground and asks: Are you comfortable?

And the Jew responds, "Well Officer, I make a living."

I'd like to quote another sage, **Ira Hayes**, who once said: "No one ever complains about a speech being too short."

**I wish everyone:**

**Shana Tova u'Metukah, a happy and sweet year!**

## Yom Kippur Dvar Torah

by Stan Schroeder

Again, I am blessed to have this opportunity to share some thoughts with you on Yom Kippur, our holiest day of the year. And again, it is doubly holy because it is also Shabbat. We may also say that its holiness is increased because this is the start of a *shmita* year. *Shmita* years occur every seventh year in the land of Israel as described in Leviticus chapter 25.

During *shmita*, your land is left fallow and all agricultural activity, including plowing, planting, pruning and harvesting, is forbidden. Other cultivation techniques (such as watering, fertilizing, weeding, spraying, trimming, and mowing) may be performed as a preventative measure only, not to improve the growth of trees or other plants. God promises bountiful harvests to those who observe the *shmita*, and describes its observance as a test of religious faith.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century rabbis in *Eretz Yisrael* interpreted the wording in Leviticus "your land" to allow Jews to sell the land (under contract) for a year to a non-Jew and continue farming the land. Many Jewish farmers in Israel continue this practice. However, land used for growing grapes that are used to produce *halachic* sacramental wine cannot be sold in this way.

Nevertheless since *shmita* is a Torah commandment, we can look beyond the literal law and see how the process may apply in our lives. Just as every seventh year the land is renewed, we can find ways during this year to renew our commitment to conservation and bring more of a sense of balance from the usual hectic pace of work and other activities.

I believe we learn from stories, and the best kind is stories of real people. I look for Jewish people who exemplify the values and actions that are part of our Yom Kippur tradition. To briefly review the UCLA graduates I featured in my last four Yom Kippur talks:

Last year I featured **Gary Baseman**, the award-winning artist/illustrator/toy designer who had an exhibit at the Skirball entitled *The Door is Always Open* about his parents and his childhood home in the Beverly – Fairfax neighborhood. His current project is a movie *Mythical Creatures* about his family's World War II experience.

In 2012/5773 I featured Rabbi/trumpet player/educator **David Vorspan**, who continues to lead Congregation Shir Ami and New Community Jewish High School into an exciting and promising future.

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The previous year it was basketball player/television executive/motivational speaker **Andy Hill**, who played as a seldom-used substitute on three national championship teams for the legendary **Coach John Wooden** at UCLA. He left UCLA disappointed by his basketball career, and 25 years later realized how much he had benefited by Wooden's guidance and became one of his closest friends and helpers in the coach's latter years. Andy spoke at our Brunch and Learn in 2012. I spoke to him Thursday to see if there was anything new in his life. He said he recently became a grandfather and he is still talking about Coach Wooden and his Pyramid of Success.

And the first year I started this series, 2010/5771 I told the story of **Alan (now Aba) Claman**, star football player/aircraft parts entrepreneur/founder of the charity *Thank Israeli Soldiers*, who refused to play on Yom Kippur as a sophomore in 1965 despite **Coach Prothro's** threat he would lose his starting position. He didn't and went on to an outstanding career. In 2012 I met Aba at his home overlooking the Western Wall in Jerusalem where he invites members of an IDF unit for Shabbat every Friday evening. Aba and his wife **Pamela** are currently involved in promoting a documentary film *Beneath the Helmet* that chronicles the lives of five IDF soldiers. It premieres at the Museum of Tolerance October 30.

Recently I was approached by a lady at one of our services who said she needed to talk to me. Her message was that she has listened to me talk about UCLA graduates all these years and couldn't I choose a USC graduate? I told her I'd consider it, but for this year I had already chosen a CSUN graduate. Those of you who attended our special *Around the Rabbi's Tisch* at Northridge Mobile Home Park in May heard her speak to us about her career capped by eight years as Governor of Hawaii. She is **Linda Lingle**, a Jewish Valley girl who attended Birmingham High School and received a BA in journalism from CSUN in 1975.

Raised as a Reform Jew, she's the politician who doesn't want to offend anybody and while governor belonged to all three Hawaiian synagogues – Reform, Conservative, and Chabad. When she visited Israel, she brought all three rabbis along. The same three were involved in her inauguration when she was sworn into office on a Tanakh. Linda studied the weekly Torah portion with Chabad **Rabbi Itchel Krasnjansky** every Wednesday. She credits her Jewish identity and the Jewish philosophy of "helping others, respecting the

dignity of others, repairing the world" for shaping her views of public service. She promotes a fiscally conservative agenda and a rein on spending, but is also a strong advocate for the homeless and services for people with mental illnesses.

**Miriam Hellreich**, a longtime friend and Hawaii's GOP national committee-person, first recruited Lingle to run for governor. "She had everything working against her — she wasn't from the islands, she's Republican, a woman and Jewish," said Hellreich. "All I knew was that she had been a problem solver in Maui while the rest of the islands were going to pot. Maui was thriving."

Linda told Shir Ami that bipartisan cooperation and compromise are the keys to political success. And we, as citizens, are responsible to become informed on the issues and vote for candidates who support our values. Linda has been a strong supporter of Israel and was part of **President Bush's** delegation at Israel's 60th Independence Day celebration in 2008. She hosted the Mayor of Tel Aviv for five days in June on his first visit to Hawaii. Just days after his return home the three teenagers were murdered. She wrote to me that it is heartbreaking to be so far away and watch what the people of Israel are being made to live through. She will do all she can in her own small way to help.

Yom Kippur speaks to us on three levels. First, as individuals we must examine our lives, our souls, and find how we can become our better selves. This, I believe is the essence of our morning Torah reading about the High Priest preparing to enter the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur. He performs a ritual cleansing and dons ritual clothing. We each determine what impure behavior can be cleansed and replaced by a purer behavior as our truer nature in the image of God.

The High Priest is also performing these acts as a representative of the entire Jewish people. We, too, represent the Jewish community/people in our daily lives. Just as we are proud when Jews accomplish the wonderful things they do, and ashamed when Jews engage in reprehensible acts that become public scandal, we represent our people to the outside world. We are responsible for acting in a way that projects our Jewish values into the world. And this is the second purpose of Yom Kippur as we confess sins as a community and vow to improve our community in the coming year.

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The third level is illustrated in our reading of the Book of Jonah this afternoon. **Jonah** is the only prophet in the Bible who is called by God to send His message to the non-Jewish world. He is told to go to Nineveh, an important city in the Assyrian Empire, now northern Iraq. The Assyrians are enemies of the Israelites and Jonah certainly doesn't want to go there and he doesn't want God to spare their citizens. So Jonah takes a boat in the totally opposite direction to Tarshish, today Cypress. We know the story: there is a huge storm, Jonah admits he is responsible, the sailors finally throw him overboard, he is swallowed by a big fish (not a whale) and spewed out after three days and nights in the fish's belly – **Yuk!** He walks to Nineveh and preaches God's warning. The King and the people wear sackcloth and repent and God relents, sparing the city. Jonah is the only prophet that succeeds in his mission, much to his chagrin. Jonah is furious and goes east of the city. It is very hot, just like today. God provides a ricinus plant (gourd) to shade Jonah (and air conditioning for us), but the next morning God creates a worm to eat the plant. Jonah complains about the loss of the plant. God replies that Jonah mourns at the loss of the plant he didn't even plant, but has no compassion for the more than 120,000 people "who don't know their right hand from their left." THE END.

So now we know, we are responsible for and to all the people of the world. We are co-creators of the world we live in and each have a unique gift to improve it. We are told that the whole world is in balance between good (holiness) and bad (destruction). Our next act will tip the scales.

Shana tova.