

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 Dvar Torah

by Lou Loomis



The commanding officer at the Russian military academy (the equivalent of a 4-star general in the U.S.) gave a lecture on Potential Problems and Military Strategy. At the end of the lecture, he asked if there were any questions.

An officer stood up and asked, "Will there be a third world war? And will Russia take part in it?"

The general answered both questions in the affirmative.

Another officer asked, "Who will be the enemy?"

The general replied, "All indications point to China."

Everyone in the audience was shocked. A third officer remarked, "General, we are a nation of only 150 million, compared to the 1.5 billion Chinese. Can we win at all, or even survive?"

The general answered, "Just think about this for a moment: In modern warfare, it is not the quantity of soldiers that matters but the quality of an army's capabilities. For example, in the Middle East we have had a few wars recently where 5 million Jews fought against 150 million Arabs, and Israel was always victorious."

After a small pause, yet another officer – from the back of the auditorium asked, "Do we have enough Jews?"

In today's Torah reading, we read more about the life of Abraham the Hebrew, the patriarch and the one we consider the first Jew, the founder of Judaism. There are many aspects of Abraham's life that set the bar for us, the descendents of Abraham. One of them is the fight for survival in a very hostile world. Abraham was often challenged, threatened, and nearly killed, many times during his life. We study his life for several reasons, and one of them is his indomitable spirit. He had survival tools. He trusted God who gave him wisdom, and in that wisdom, he developed courage. His many enemies grew to respect him and, by extension, his family. Years and now centuries later his descendents, who became known as the Hebrews, Children of Abraham, Jews, remember how he fought back, and won, despite overwhelming odds.

Abraham was harassed and chased and nearly killed many times. So it is that the Jewish people have been harassed, chased, and nearly annihilated ever since Abraham.

And today, specifically in the last few years, we have seen a significant rise in anti-semitism throughout the world. It is something we need to confront. Especially during these high holidays, it's important to remember that one aim of this anti-Jewish propaganda is to make Jews back down, to feel ashamed of our Jewishness, to want to hide our identities.

Lies are told about us about how evil we are. Did we murder someone else's God? Of course not. Even today, many Jews still believe it. Do we use blood for our matzahs? Yech. Of course not. Blood in food is a major no-no. We don't kill. We abhor the death penalty. But Jews have been blamed for so many crimes: communism, socialism, rampant capitalism, atheism. We turned away from slavery, declared it unkosher long before the rest of the world decided that owning another human being was wrong. Yet, Jews have been blamed for the slave trade and many people throughout the world still cling to the notion that Jews are behind all the evils of the past several centuries. For some reason, Jews instill great fear in the non-Jewish heart.

Rational people reject conspiracy theories. They don't exaggerate the power and influence of the so-called secret societies, and yet, anti-semitism persists, even in the rational. And have you noticed that many Jews, *even Jews*, are inclined to believe some of these falsehoods about their own people?

Today the anti-semites now call the old evil by the name of Zionism. They say Zionists have put the indigenous Arabs in prisons and have mistreated Moslems in so many ways. It gets worse each time Israel is attacked. We might ask how can Jews defend themselves and in doing so, get blamed as the aggressors? It makes no sense.

Some people, even some Jews, will say that yes, Israelis, Zionists, are evil, but c'mon, not all Jews are Zionists. After all, some Jews, maybe half of the world's 14 million Jews, live outside of Israel.

In Europe today, Jews are being hounded from their homes by immigrant North African populations, nearly entirely Moslem, and it is said that they hate Israel so they hate all Jews. They do not distinguish between European or American or Israeli Jews. In European city after city, Jews are being forced to leave their homes. France claims to be the most tolerant of all European nations, but now it is losing thousands of Jews to Israel, Canada and the US because of Moslem mobs and harassment. The old

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Jewish neighborhoods are becoming unsafe. One of the best selling books in Europe is the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the notorious anti-semitic book about the Jewish evil.

But there is a Rosh Hashannah lesson in all this.

Last month, in August, in Spain, at the Rotodom Sunsplash reggae festival the American-Jewish reggae artist **Matthew Paul Miller**, known as **Matisyahu**, was scheduled to appear. But the festival organizers canceled their invitation to Matisyahu, because he refused to bow to the pressure put on the event by organizers of an anti-Israel organization known as BDS, or Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel. The BDS leaders demanded that he publicly support "Palestine." Remember, Matthew Paul Miller is an American.

And here's where it gets really interesting: Matisyahu's disinvitation prompted a worldwide Jewish outcry. Israel's Foreign Ministry registered a complaint with the Spanish government.

Every major American Jewish organization and several European Jewish organizations condemned the blatant discrimination against Matisyahu. One week later, Spain's main newspaper, El Pais, condemned the festival's anti-Semitism. The Spanish government followed hours later.

The festival organizers said that BDS País Valencià resorted to "pressures, threats and coercion" and warned them that its members would "seriously disrupt the normal functioning of the festival." By demanding that an American Jew denounce Israel as a condition for performing, the BDS movement made clear that the only Jews it is willing to countenance are anti-Semitic Jews. The only Jews BDS activists will accept in the public square are those who join them in denouncing Israel and denouncing Jews who support Israel. This time, the anti-semites lost.

The lesson is obvious: When Jews stand up to anti-Semites, the anti-Semites back down.

What I am saying here is not a political statement. Anti-semitism is found nearly anywhere, and, as it is also clear, not just within organizations claiming to only be against Israel. We can see it other places, too, like some innocuous music festival in Spain.

There are many examples of individuals standing up against anti-semitism. And as we all now know, anti-semites are no different from those who express their desire to see Israel disappear. Although the US is far less anti-Semitic than Europe, ironically, it is in our country where Jews have the hardest time defending themselves. The relative mildness of anti-Semitism in the US makes anti-Semitic Jews feel comfortable joining anti-Semitic non-Jews in weakening Israel and the Jewish community.

So, when we read the ancient story of Abraham in the ancient Jewish book, the Torah, so old and so quaint, do we read it as ancient history, or even ancient myth? Or can we find that there really is a timeless wisdom in its lines? Is it just some dusty figment of one people's dusty imagination, or is there something to learn about fighting back, standing up for one's dignity, one's right to survive, without guilt or apology?

During these high holidays I'd like to suggest we read the liturgy as a survival manual, as a guide to good mental and spiritual health, as a tool for personal betterment and improvement. And as a means to bolster and renew our Jewish identities. Remember, Abraham fell down many times, and many more times he picked himself up and kept on going. We're the children of Abraham.

L'shana tova

Rosh Hashanah Day 2 Dvar Torah

by Stephen Schuster

In 1946 – a new book was published. It became a runaway best seller and immediately changed the world view on raising children. It remained a top-seller, for MANY years and, in fact still is. It actually was the first time in recorded publishing history that a book outsold the Bible which had always been THE top seller. The book was written by **Dr. Benjamin Spock** and called *Baby and Child Care* and to this day it continues to be referred to by millions of parents. And I think it is actually a good thing it outsold the Bible ... since our Bible is not exactly full of good parenting advice.



Take our parsha for today – the Akeda or the Binding of Isaac.

You all know the literal events of the story. Early on, even before his name is changed to Abraham, God tells Abram to leave his idol-maker father's house and

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promises that He, God, will make of Abram the father of “a great nation”. So before Sarah, and of course, Isaac, a first covenant is made. All Abram has to do is obey God and follow His commandments. Which, he does **Of his own free will**. For as we know, God is on record as regretting that he gave humans the enormous gift of Free Will -- the ability to **choose** in accordance of their **own** will – choosing to obey God **or**, like Adam and Eve, choosing to disobey God.

Later, Abraham marries Sarah and in her old age, Isaac is born. Sarah convinces God to tell Abraham to “cast out” Ishmael, Abraham’s first born. Abraham banishes his concubine, Hagar, and Ishmael their son, into the desert with a little food and water and they end up needing to be rescued by God himself who promises Hagar that Ishmael also will become the “father of a great nation” – just not the Jewish nation.

Skipping ahead, Isaac is now 37 years old and suddenly, out of the blue, God calls on Abraham and says to him: “Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights which I will point out to you.” So Abraham, knowing he has “free will”, and the ability to defy God, still unquestioningly, does exactly what God asks of him.

What I want to focus on today, however, is not Abraham, but Isaac. He is now 37 years old and no longer a child. There is little in the Torah about him growing up. He seems to have been a “good boy” never calling attention to himself. Sarah keeps a good steady watch over him. She is the prototypical Jewish Helicopter mother, doting on her son, always hovering over him, to the point of being **over**-protective. Even if he doesn’t decide to become a Dr. or a lawyer, she still shields him from every form of harm. She frets about Ishmael’s influence on his half-brother to the point of instigating the casting out of the boy with his mother. There is nothing I could find in the Torah of a growing Isaac having to take on any duties or interacting in any way with the outside world. In fact, even right after the Akeda incident, it is Abraham who manages the finding and procurement of a suitable wife for Isaac.

And so the very next morning after hearing God ask him to sacrifice Isaac, his beloved son, Abraham tells Isaac, as far as we can tell, nothing. Nothing at all. He gets up early the next morning, before Sarah awakes, wakes Isaac and leaves camp with Isaac, two servants and an ass to carry the kindling, the wood for the fire,

and the fire-pot to start the flames for the burnt offering. And off they all go.

Isaac knows they’re going to make burnt offering but has no idea it is going to be him. On the third day of their hike, Abraham sees the destination ahead and tells the two servants “You stay here with the ass. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and return to you.” He then piles the kindling and fire-wood onto Isaac to carry up the mountain, taking the fire-pot and the knife for himself.

Talk about chutzpah! Isaac now has to hike up the mountain carrying a load of wood: The tools for his very destruction. They dutifully climb Mt. Moriah and now Isaac utters his first and only words asking “Father, where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” and his father answers only “God will see to the sheep, my son.”

What do **you** think Isaac is thinking? Is he really simple enough to believe his father or is he growing a bit concerned?

They arrive at the site and the Torah says only: “And Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on top of the wood.” Wow! Still no explanation to Isaac. No good-bye. No “I’m sorry”. No “But God told me to.” No tears. Can you imagine how ISAAC must have felt? He does not struggle. He does not protest. He just allows himself to be bound. How must he have felt when Abraham raises his knife to strike just before the angel intervenes. Then, does Abraham say to his only son whom he loved, “Sorry. Just kidding?” as he unties him? To make everything seem OK, a second angel appears and reiterating, to Abraham, the covenant of a great nation as large in numbers as the stars in the sky and the sand on the shores.

We don’t know if Isaac overheard that angel. I hope he did.

Much later in the Torah, God passes down the ten commandments. Anyone know what the fifth commandment handed down at Sinai is? It reads “Honor Thy Father and Mother”.

“Honor”?

Even a parent who has acted as Abraham had acted towards his son that day? What I want to know is, “Where is the Commandment that says “Honor and nurture thy children””? It took over five thousand years before a pediatrician named Benjamin Spock taught that! And that’s why his book is still, today, known as the “Bible” on child rearing.

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What really troubles me, however, is that next week we will gather to say Yizkor for parents and other departed close relatives. I personally know and have talked with several people for whom childhood was a truly tormenting experience, caused by a parent who bullied, belittled, or even actually physically abused them, leaving them with painful unhealed wounds well into adulthood. The Yizkor readings ask us to remember the kindness and love they gave us in their lifetime. For some, there never were such acts of kindness – at least none that they can remember. This, of course, is true not only for parents but for other family members as well – siblings, spouses, etc.

And this leaves many of us with conflicted feelings. Like Isaac must have felt towards his father. I wish I had an easy answer for those who feel a Yizkor prayer is problematic – even hypocritical.

But now, here is where Isaac's story comes alive to help us. And I think this is why the story was written and why it's read on Rosh Hoshanah at the start of the year.

Right after the Akeda, Sarah dies and Isaac seems to have less of a relationship with his father. In fact, he never even speaks to Abraham again, going his own way.

But Isaac still honored Abraham. Despite the terror he must have felt as he was bound and discovered that he was the lamb. In fact, he, and his brother Ishmael who was cast out by Abraham, both saw to burying Abraham. Together. And in an honorable manner befitting a Patriarch. Both children could be considered victims of really bad parenting but both “honored” their father in his death. For Isaac, it may well have been based on the very same kind of faith in God that Abraham had.

Last week **Vice President Joe Biden** was a guest on **Steven Colbert's** nightly show. It was an intensely emotional interview as they discussed Biden's reaction to the large number of personal tragedies he has suffered, culminating in the recent death of a truly beloved son. Colbert asks Biden if it is **Faith** that has upheld him. The emotional Vice President answered: “Yes. You know the philosopher, Kierkegaard, once wrote: Faith sees best in the Dark.” Faith Sees Best In The Dark. I have always noticed that the most earnest and heartfelt prayers are not said in Temple or Church, but in Hospital waiting rooms.

Isaac, facing the darkest moment possible, still chooses, out of his own free will, to honor his father by retaining faith in God, and in His covenant.

Ellie Weisel, the famous Holocaust survivor and author has said that Isaac is his favorite biblical character. He sees Isaac as the ultimate survivor. Bravely enduring unspeakable horrors yet being redeemed and given the blessing of life. To keeping Faith in, or should I say WITH, God, and ultimately to being given an opportunity to look to the future without letting the past continue to haunt them.

So perhaps the lesson for us all is that as we continue to honor and have faith in God himself, we may also become able to honor those who have hurt us. Let us all resolve to look away from any pain inflicted on us – from any source—accepting that it was ... **not our fault** – and move forward by at least “honoring” even those who caused us that pain. Like Isaac, let us continue, especially in our darkest moments, to have faith in God and optimism in His covenant and give our parents the honor of reciting Yizkor with a pure heart.

Yom Kippur Dvar Torah

by Stan Schroeder



It is my privilege again to share some thoughts on Yom Kippur, our holiest day of the year. I will focus on two aspects of our Judaism: the first is the Jewish concept of space and time, and the second is living our Judaism through personal and communal responsibility.

Our Torah reading tells of God's instructions to Aaron, the High Priest, through Moses, Aaron's brother and God's intermediary to Aaron and the people of Israel. We read of the ritual cleansing, donning the sacral vestments, and the ritual of two goats for the sin offering for the Israelite community. One goat is sacrificed, along with a ram from the community and Aaron's personal offering of a bull. The other goat is sent into the wilderness, symbolically bearing the sins of the community. From this description we have coined the term “scapegoat” used to describe someone who is blamed for another's actions. This goat is sent for or to Azazel, which can be translated as “for absolute removal”. Later rabbis interpreted *la-Azazel* as a combination of the words *azaz* meaning rugged and *el* meaning strong referring to a rugged and rough mountain cliff from which the goat was cast down.

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This story also illustrates that space and time are essential elements of leading a life based on Jewish values. Aaron is told exactly where and when his instructions are to be followed. Places such as “the Shrine behind the curtain”, “the altar before the Lord”, “the entrance of the Tent of Meeting”, and “the wilderness for Azazel” are significant to carrying out the instructions.

We have a sense of space when it comes to Judaism in our lives. We are gathered here in the auditorium of de Toledo High School. To me it is still New Community Jewish High School. But today it is our sanctuary for being together as Jews to celebrate our holiest day of the year, a day when we will later remember our departed loved ones at our Yizkor service. We also hold our Shabbat services in the library/classroom/Shir Ami Shabbat sanctuary near the main entrance of the school.

Perhaps the most important place for our Judaism is our own homes. This is the place we spend most of our time. We are there for Shabbat and its meals and rituals that remind us of Jewish values in our lives. The lighting of the Shabbat and Yom Tov candles and the blessings over the wine and the challah are reminders of the light we can give to the world and the bounties we each enjoy.

And finally, the place that is central to Jews all over the world is the Jewish State of Israel that is the land in which Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel were the patriarchs and matriarchs of biblical Israel. It is the land of Joshua who led the Israelites into the Promised Land after Moses led them for 40 years on their journey. It is the land of King David who made Jerusalem the capital of the Kingdom of Israel and King Solomon who built the first Temple. It is the land of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Elijah, and our other prophets who were God’s messengers to spread God’s warnings. It is the land of Rabbis Hillel, Akiva, Gamaliel, and others of the early Talmudic period who are the forefathers of Rabbinic Judaism. And it is the land that Jewish fighters, many of them survivors of the Holocaust, who fought off the invading Arab armies in 1948 after the declaration of the State.

Not all of us can go to Israel to experience the inspiration, beauty, and wonder of what has been accomplished there in 67 years. I can tell you of my own sense of appreciation and joy I have experienced

on my frequent trips. But we all can learn more about Israel and keep up with the current problems and accomplishments via the Internet and news outlets. And we can support organizations such as the Jewish National Fund, Magen David Adom, Hadassah, and others that provide services and sponsor projects in Israel.

Judaism requires us to look at time in unique ways. The Hebrew calendar is based upon both lunar and solar elements. The months are lunar with 29 or 30 days between new moons at the start of each month. The first day of the month is called Rosh Chodesh, literally head of the month. Months starting after a 30 day month have two days of Rosh Chodesh: the last day of the 30 day month and the first day of the new month. Special prayers are said on Rosh Chodesh. The years are solar years. There are 12 months of the year, the first month being Nisan in the spring. The last month of the year is Adar. A second Adar is added in 7 years of the 19 year Metonic cycle to adjust to the solar cycle.

Our holidays such as Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Chanukah, Passover, and Shavuot always fall in their given season and maintain their agricultural as well as their religious significance. The holidays established in modern Israel such as Yom Hazikaron and Yom Ha’atzmaut (Memorial and Independence Days), Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day), and Yom Yerushalayim (Jerusalem Day celebrating the reunification of Jerusalem in 1967) are based on Hebrew calendar dates.

Our weeks consist of six regular days which have no names and are referred to as day one, day two, etc. and our seventh day of Shabbat. Shabbat is the day we refrain from our regular routines and take the opportunity to focus on Jewish rituals and values. The day starts Friday at sundown and we begin by lighting candles signifying remembering and observing the Sabbath. The flame can “illumine our eyes” and encourage us recognize the joy of Shabbat. Shabbat continues until there are three stars in the Saturday night sky. Traditionally we conclude with the Havdalah prayer that signifies the separation of the holiness of Shabbat and the ordinary of the other days. This prayer starts with another blessing over wine, then a blessing over fragrant spices, a blessing over fire in the form of a multi-wicked candle, and the concluding blessing of God’s separation of sacred and secular. The candle flame is then extinguished with the wine.

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On Yom Kippur we also consider time when we remember our loved ones in the Yizkor service. On page 684 of our mahzor you'll find the words from Ecclesiastes 3 (*Kohelet* in Hebrew):

*There is a time for everything;
there is a time for all things under the sun:
a time to be born and a time to die*

We consider our own lifetimes.

I had already formulated this talk when I read an article in the current *Jewish Journal* by **David Sacks** who produces *torahonitunes.com*. It is entitled "Pesos from Heaven: a High Holy Days Message". David discovers a long lost Ziploc bag containing his deceased parents' old passports and a stack of Mexican pesos. He is about to go on a business trip to Mexico City where his brother-in-law lives. When his wife emailed the brother-in-law asking about a kosher restaurant near David's hotel, she received a reply instead telling of a nearby "restaurant for my soul", a shul. David went to morning minyan at the shul and during the service wanted to give the customary *tzedakah*, a donation for charity. He didn't think he had any local currency until he remembered he had the pesos from the Ziploc bag. He gave the pesos and realized he was completing a task his parents had initiated. We are in a place and time our loved ones can no longer be present. What a privilege to be able to complete the tasks they were unable to.

The other topic I want to share is the Jewish concept of community. In our Torah portion Aaron performs sacrifices and expels the "scapegoat" on behalf of the Israelite community. On Yom Kippur we publicly confess our sins as a community. Here at Shir Ami we even take the idea of community further when we refer to ourselves as the Shir Ami family.

The current Jewish Community Centers (JCCs) grew out of the Young Men's Hebrew Association (YMHA), the first one opened in New York City in 1874. The YMHAs, YWHAs, and JCCs are now organized under the umbrella JCC Association. They offer a wide range of services and resources to help affiliates provide educational, cultural, social, Jewish identity-building, and recreational programs for people of all ages and backgrounds. They also support the largest network of Jewish early childhood centers and Jewish summer camps in North America. There are now over 350 JCCs and camps in the US and Canada.

We can think of our Shir Ami community as part of an ever expanding set of Jewish communities. There are the other synagogues in the Valley, other Conservative congregations in United Synagogue (around 700), synagogues in Los Angeles and surrounding areas, and the Jewish Federation representing congregations and organizations in the US and Canada.

When we say these communal prayers think of all the Jews and all the Jewish communities we identify with and represent. It is comforting to be part of this community and to know their resources are available to us. And it is an awesome responsibility to know that our actions reflect upon our community and the Jewish people.

Some of you may be wondering if I am going to talk about a local Jewish person who has made a contribution to the Jewish community and people. For the past five years I featured four UCLA graduates and last year a CSUN graduate. A member of our community asked me if I would talk about a USC graduate in the interest of equal representation. Of course, I never said anything about equality or fairness. However, because she asked so nicely and continues to ask me, I will tell you about a former Trojan. He is even one who played against my beloved Bruins on the USC basketball team from 1998 to 2002.

David Blu, born **David Bluthenthal**, is the son of a Jewish mother, **Suzanne** who died of cancer when he was 14, and an African American father, **Ralph** who converted to Judaism. While his original last name is believed to be derived from a 19th century Jewish-German slave owner on his mother's side, Blu's ancestry through Suzanne also includes financier **Isaias Wolf Hellman**, co-founder of USC, from which Blu, his great-great-great grandson, recently graduated. Hellman was also one of the founders of Temple B'Nai B'rith, now the Wilshire Boulevard Temple.

Fascinated by his study of genealogy, Blu hopes to maintain a close connection to the Jewish community, the same bond that made his father send David, as a high schooler, to Israel to play with the American basketball team at the 15th Maccabiah Games in 1997.

"I studied my Jewish side and my African-American side, all the way from Arkansas to California," he explained, "and it's interesting to see how both integrated in American culture. I don't know many people with a similar black-Jewish background."

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David attended Venice and Westchester High Schools in Los Angeles. In 1998 during his senior year at Westchester, the team won the California State Championship and David was awarded the 1998 Wooden Award for the California State Player of the Year.

He was recruited out of high school to USC where he played for **Coach Henry Bibby**, a former UCLA star. He helped Team USA win the gold in the 1999 Maccabiah Pan Am Games in Mexico City. David began his professional career in 2002 with Maccabi Tel Aviv in Israel and helped them win the Euro League championship the following year. He had three other stints with Maccabi Tel Aviv, the last ending in 2014 when he again won the Euro League championship, upsetting teams from Moscow and Madrid in the Final Four. He received a hero's welcome in Israel, even getting a call from **Prime Minister Netanyahu**. David has been a star there and is recognized everywhere. In between times in Israel he has played for Euro League teams in Italy, Spain, and France and had a brief time in the NBA.

David became a citizen of Israel and played for their national team in 2010. He is now starting a career as a financial adviser at Merrill Lynch and serving as a member of the USC Hillel Board of Directors. He lives with his wife and children in Southern California. He is registered as a speaker for Jewish National Fund speaking on *Perspectives on Israel and Jewish History, Positively Israel*.

I am happy to include David Blu in my growing list of Yom Kippur local contributors to our Jewish community. He is an example of making the most of his unique circumstances and abilities to make a better world for the Jewish people and Israel. May we each do the same in the coming year.

Shana tova.