

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 Dvar Torah

by Lou Loomis

Good morning! Happy 5784



Before I start, I'd like to share an old old story which most of you have probably already heard. Some of you may not know the story, so don't spoil it by saying the last line out loud. Especially because you may wake up the person sitting next to you.

A Jewish guy walks into his synagogue on Yom Kippur with his dog. The rabbi stops him at the door and says "Moishe, what's the matter with you? You can't bring a dog in here."

"Don't worry, Rabbi," replies Moishe, "Isaac here is just as observant as I am, and he's come to pray." And as soon as he says that, the dog stands up on his hind legs, pulls a kippah out of Moishe's pocket, grabs a prayer book and starts praying in perfect Hebrew.

The Rabbi is amazed. "Oh my god," he says, "this is incredible, Moishe. You should make this dog become a rabbi!"

"You tell him that, Rabbi," replies Moishe. "He wants to be a doctor."

There is a popular camp song for this time of year, some you may know it, whose words in Hebrew go

*Kol Ha Olam Kulo
Gesher Tsav Me'od
Ve ha Ikar
Lo Lefached K'lal*

"The whole world is a narrow bridge. The main thing is to have no fear."

Rosh Hashanah is both the end of the Jewish year 5783 and the beginning of the Jewish year 5784. Symbolically it is the end of a year of struggle, of sorrow and loss. Hopefully it has also been a year of overcoming, a year highlighted by joy and victory over fear. RH is also the beginning of a year that, like Jews of the past nearly 3,000 years or so have had to work through difficulties, and start anew. RH starts joyfully, as it gives us wonderful opportunities to

reconnect and repair our relations with family and old friends, by offering our apologies for wrongs we have done to others, forgiveness to others who may have wronged us, and the renewal of relationships often harmed by thoughtless words and actions. It is a time to admit to others that we make mistakes; we are only human. Some people recite this set of words, almost a formula: I apologize for any hurts or slights I have made this past year.

In Hebrew we can say: *Selikah*. Please forgive me.

It is also a time of the blowing of the shofar, to remind us that there is something very important lying ahead of us and that we should be on our guard in order to live another year of unknown events and outcomes.

RH ends a week later with Yom Kippur, a period of fasting and introspection. We may reflect on the passing of loved ones and the accomplishments of our equally beloved youth. Some of us may suffer from fasting and coffee-withdrawal headaches, as well as wondering if we have done enough to reset our lives in a direction in which we want to go. Have we repaired any broken relationships, or have we at least forgiven others who have inadvertently offended us? **Forgiveness is better when it's a two-way street.**

In years past, I personally have left the final Yom Kippur service, *Ne'ilah*, with doubts that were even greater than when I started the week of the high holidays.

One question that others have asked and weren't satisfied with the answers has also bugged me. I have often wondered how Abraham, the hero of this week's Torah reading, could have lived through all his many challenges, including the one that is most severe **and controversial**, where he is by commanded by God to sacrifice Isaac, **his only son**. In the Torah readings, God promised Abraham that his descendants would spread out over the entire world and become a great and influential people. So, if God demands Isaac's sacrifice, how could a 100- year- old plus Abraham father such a

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mighty nation? Or indeed, any nation?
Furthermore, the God of Abraham has forbidden human sacrifice. So, what gives?

Abraham is admired for challenging God when he scolds the almighty over his plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. God appears pleased to be challenged and rewards Abraham. The takeaway lesson from this event is that we humans are not ruled by God, we are not puppets, blindly following the dictates of an invisible being, but are asked to internalize what it truly takes to be human and free. But now we read about the call for Abraham to sacrifice his beloved Isaac. And Abraham is silent. I wondered how could God ask that of Abraham? And what is the lesson we are supposed to learn from this shocking event? This trial, this Binding of Isaac?

Abraham had just been through the greatest trial of his life. He'd been asked by God to sacrifice the son he had waited for so many years. He was about to lose the most precious thing in his whole life. I can't imagine his state of mind as this trial unfolded.

Just as he was about to lift the knife, the call came from Heaven saying 'Stop', and the story seemed to have a happy ending after all. But there was a terrible twist in store. As Abraham was returning home, relieved his son's life has been spared, he discovers that the trial had a victim after all. And so, we read of the death of his beloved wife Sarah. Try and put yourself in the situation of Abraham. He has almost sacrificed his child and now as an indirect result of the trial itself, the news has killed his wife of many years, the woman who stayed with him through all his travels and travails, who twice saved his life, who in joy gave birth to Isaac in her old age. Had Abraham grieved for the rest of his days, we would surely have understood. Instead, we read the following:

And Sarah died in Kiryat Arba, that is Chevron in the land of Canaan, and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her, and Abraham rose up from before his dead.

The Sages suggest that the two events were simultaneous. As Rashi explains: "The account of Sarah's demise was juxtaposed to the Binding of Isaac because as a result of the news of the 'Binding,' that her son was prepared for slaughter, and was almost slaughtered, her soul flew out of her, and she died." We'd say today she had a heart attack from the news.

Abraham mourns and weeps, and then *rises up* and does two things to secure the Jewish future, two acts whose effects we feel to this day. He buys the first plot in the Land of Israel, a field in the Cave of Machpelah. And then he secures a wife for his son Isaac, so that there will be Jewish grandchildren, Jewish continuity. Abraham grieves knowing what he has lost. But then he rises up and builds the Jewish future. And **here** seems to be the lesson and what we can learn from these high holidays: **There is a limit to grief.** This is what Abraham discovers.

Abraham endows this singular gift on his descendants.

The Jewish people suffered tragedies that would have devastated other nations beyond any hope of recovery. The destruction of the first Temple and the Babylonian exile. The destruction of the second Temple and the end of Jewish sovereignty. The expulsions, massacres, forced conversions and inquisitions of the Middle Ages, the pogroms of the 17th and 19th centuries, and most recently, the Shoah. Yet somehow the Jewish people mourned and wept, and then rose up and built the future. This is their unique strength and it came from Abraham. Or, as the song goes, "The main thing is to have no fear."

Abraham knew that there must eventually be an end to grief. We must turn from yesterday's loss to the call of a tomorrow. We must help to be born.

I wish everyone a happy and healthy New Year, a year of overcoming, a year of prosperity and especially joy.

Yom Kippur Dvar Torah

by Stan Schroeder



Boker tov, Good morning.

We are gathered here today on our holiest day of the year. We are doubly blessed to be holding our services in the auditorium of de Toledo High School. You don't have to look too far around you to notice that our congregation is largely senior. That means that we have had the opportunity to gather wisdom from our tradition and our life experiences. During the next few minutes, I plan to share some of that wisdom. This auditorium also serves as the meeting place for the students of this school who represent our future. Thanks to the efforts of **Dr. Bruce Powell**, head-of-school, and **Rabbi David Vorspan**, founding Rabbi-in-residence, and both retired, the next generation of Jews is preparing to carry on a 3500 year old tradition of beliefs and values going back to Abraham of Ur.

You may know that at our Shabbat services, I have the opportunity to speak at the end of our communal period of sharing what we are thankful for. I have been sharing about people, past and present, that have contributed to the world I am blessed to live in. And I get to speak at this Yom Kippur service. I am going to combine the two by being thankful for **David Suisa**, editor of the *Jewish Journal*. You may also know I am a long-time UCLA sports fan, having played in the football and basketball band 1948-52. This week's *Journal* has an article by **Morton Schapiro** about **Sandy Koufax**, whom he once met. It is well known Koufax refused to pitch in the World Series on Yom Kippur in 1965. Less well known is that a young Jewish UCLA football player also refused to play that day. **Alan Claman**, now **Aba Claman**, founder and President of Thank Israeli Soldiers. I first spoke about Claman here in 2010 and was a guest in his magnificent home in Jerusalem's Old City during my trip to Israel in May.

As our Ritual Vice President I coordinate the assignment of honors awarded for our High Holy Day services. I understand the honor of speaking from the bimah on this holiest day of our year, and I take the responsibility seriously. But that doesn't mean that I can't start with a bit of humor, as I do at our monthly Shabbat Torah study sessions. This

one was sent to me by our member **Judy Eisikowitz**, who received it from a friend, who received it from Chabad.

Leah Epstein invites some family and friends to dinner and at the table, she asks her 6-year-old daughter Rivkah to make a bracha (blessing)."

"But Mommy, I don't know what bracha to say," replies Rivkah.

"All you need do," says Leah, "is to repeat what you heard Mommy say."

Rivkah thinks for a moment and says,

"Dear God, why on earth did I invite all these people to dinner?"

Speaking of taking something seriously, Rabbi **Mordecai Kaplan**, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, believed one of the foremost challenges of Judaism in his time (he died in 1983 at the age of 102) was convincing Jews to take Torah seriously without taking it literally. This is no less true today. I believe the Shir Ami tradition of our members delivering the High Holy Days dvar Torahs is a way of encouraging this. And the monthly Shabbat Torah study sessions that I conduct put this belief into practice for our congregation.

Rabbi Vorspan has been discussing how we struggle with a concept of God in today's modern world. He told us how Rabbi **Harold Schulweis**, a student of Kaplan at Jewish Theological Seminary (the Conservative movement rabbinical school in New York City), integrated Kaplan's theology by ending his prayers with the two words "through me."

Schulweis' 1994 book *For Those Who Can't Believe* explains his theology in an easy-to-read format. Kaplan, the son of a renowned Orthodox rabbi in Lithuania, developed a theology consistent with the physical world of the early 20th century. He saw that we live in a universe of physical laws operating from the microscopic to the cosmic spheres. This order was the opposite of random connectivity. And he called the force that created this orderly universe God. Jews and, of course, other religious groups, formed in biblical times and before. Judaism is the evolving

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religious civilization of the Jewish people. Kaplan wrote the book *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* in 1934.

The concept of random occurs in two of our Bible stories we read today. This morning we read about the High Priest and two goats, one to be a Temple sacrifice and the other thrown into the wilderness with the sins symbolically upon it. From this story, we've derived the "scapegoat." The other is the story of Jonah we read this afternoon. Jonah is attempting to escape God's command on a ship to Tarshish. A huge storm ensues and the sailors cast lots to determine who is the cause of the storm. Both stories demonstrate that randomness or chance are part of everyone's life. We use our free will and make choices for blessings or curses. And we can use the values we learn from Torah and tradition to give direction to the twists and turns of our lives.

During this time for many years, I have told the story of many Jews, mostly local, several of them athletes, who demonstrate Jewish values we can incorporate. Today, on the 50th anniversary of Israel's Yom Kippur war in 1973, I will tell part of the story of the most well-known Jew who left a legacy of his struggle with Judaism.

There is no more famous embodiment of what Yom Kippur is to us than a Jew who lived many years in Los Angeles and died here in 2016 – **Leonard Cohen**. In October 1973, then young and famous Cohen, had been shaken to the core of his being by the outbreak of the Yom Kippur war. As told in detail in **Matti Friedman's** recent excellent book "*Who by Fire,*" words taken from the *U'netaneh Tokef* prayer, Cohen was at the time enjoying a Bohemian life on the Greek Island of Hydra. He was sitting on the beach on Yom Kippur and heard on the radio that war has broken out in Israel. Without thinking much or packing much, Cohen hitched a ferry to Athens and got on a plane to Tel Aviv, where he planned to find a kibbutz he can volunteer on. After landing,

Cohen stopped in a cafe on the Tel Aviv beach where two famous Israeli singers think they just saw Leonard Cohen, but have a hard time believing he is there, so they go and ask him. He told them he is and that he is planning to volunteer on a kibbutz, and they respond that he would do more good by performing on the front lines.

The rest is history. Cohen went on to sing in hospitals where injured soldiers and soldiers in their last hours sang on the frontlines in the Sinai, and reinvigorated the spirits of many Israelis who felt alone and in despair. Decades later, after becoming a high-ranking Buddhist monk, living in silence and seclusion, Cohen always knew where he belonged. In some ways, Cohen's story is like the joke about a monastery in the Himalayas that only few can enter. A Hasidic woman from Brooklyn shows up at the monastery dressed up as if she is walking on 13th Ave. in Brooklyn, and demands to see the head monk. She is told it is impossible to see him as he hardly speaks or eats and meditates most of the day. After asking many times, they allow her in on the condition, she can only say one sentence. The woman agrees. She walks right over to the meditating Monk and says: "Chaim, it is me, your mother; come back home." In his final years, Cohen expressed his will to die as a Jew, and was buried in a traditional service in the Shaaray Shomayim congregation in Montreal.

I conclude with a short poem for this Yom Kippur.

Let us remember as we enumerate our sins,
It's within ourselves that change begins.
And as we remember those we held dear,
Their lives have meaning through what we do here.

I appreciate what others have done for me,
And I am blessed to be in the land of the free.
I have a caring community of my fellow Jews
And they're entitled to their sincerely held views.

Last summer we laid to rest **Fran Kobulnick**, past Social Action Committee Vice President, and longtime Shir Ami valuable leader. See my poem at the end of your Book of Remembrance remembering **Fran**.

Shana tova, G'mar chatima tova