

Good Shabbos and Good Yom Tov, everyone. I want to wish you and your families a year of *bracha*, *hatzlacha*, good health, spiritual growth, and prosperity. A year overflowing with abundant joy and happiness.

Thank you to the *drasha* sponsors:

- Chaim and Eleanor Leventhal, in commemoration of the first *yahrtzeit* of Chaim's father, Hersh Tzvi Ben Yehuda Leib HaLeivi Leventhal, and in memory of Chaim's grandmother, Jeanette Perlman, Shaindel Sarah bas Binyamin, on her *yahrtzeit*. May the *neshamos* have an *aliya*.
- Hillel & Dena Soclof, in memory of Hillel's father, Avraham Abba ben Shmaryahu whose *yahrtzeit* was on the 27th of Elul, may his *neshama* have an *aliya*, and “*in honor of Rabbi Marwick for all he does for our Shul and Kehilla.*” Thank you!

May the sponsors be rewarded for their support of the shul with *bracha*, *hatzlacha*, good health, and a *shana tova umesuka*!

*Rosh Hashana* is, literally, the *rosh*, the beginning, of the year. As we launch the year ahead, it is a time to take action; to improve ourselves, our families, our people, and our world. It is a time to think big; to dream big—to be ready to take real steps to change ourselves and our lives, in tangible and meaningful ways--to start a new journey in our lives...beginning today. היום הרת עולם...today is brimming with possibilities...for a brighter future...

It is a time, as **Ramchal** writes in the opening lines of *Mesillas Yesharim*:

שיתברר ויתאמת אצל האדם...למה צריך שישים מבטו ומגמתו בכל שהוא עמל כל ימי חייו.

*clarify and process what ...one needs to direct his vision and aspirations in all that he labors, all the days of his life.*

We must take the time to think about our life's goals and our reason for being. Why are we here? For what purpose were we placed in this world? What does Hashem expect from us? And what do we expect from ourselves?

It is quite deliberate that today, for inspiration, we read real life stories of great people like Avraham Avinu, who had big dreams and aspirations. He was not afraid to ask these questions and make major changes in his life, and leave behind all his preconceived notions and routines, in pursuit of a higher truth and a more meaningful life. And we are here today because of those choices he made; his journey.

But it is striking that on Rosh Hashana we do not read about Avraham Avinu's first Lech Lecha לך לך מארצך וממלודתך ומבית אביך אל הארץ אשר אראך, his first journey of self transformation. Instead, we read about his second Lech Lecha — ולך לך אל ארץ המוריה והעלהו שם לעולה—, his second journey of self transformation; we read about the *akedah*-- his willingness to sacrifice everything, including his precious Yitzchak, for the will of Hashem.

What is the Rosh Hashana lesson from this enigmatic story? What are we meant to learn from this episode that is so difficult to relate to?

When the first day of Rosh Hashana falls out on a weekday, we commemorate the *akedah* with the *shofar*, the horn of the ram that was sacrificed instead of Yitzchak שופר של אילו של יצחק. In a year like this one, when there is no *tekias shofar*, how do we remember the *akeda*?

We are all very familiar with the story, but unfortunately familiarity breeds superficiality. So let us take a new look at the story of the *akeda*...

Avraham was told to take his son Yitzchak to Har HaMoriah, והעלהו שם לעולה, *and offer him as a sacrifice*. But just moments before he did so, he was told to cease and desist. At the very end of this dramatic story, the angel of Hashem stopped Avraham and Yitzchak was released from his bonds, and then the angel told Avraham: **עתה** ידעתי כי ירא אלקים אתה *"Now I know that you are a God-fearing man,"*

**Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk** asks: why the emphasis on **עתה**, "now?" If the binding of Yitzchak on the *akedah* was an act of sacrifice that marked Avraham as a **יראי אלקים**, then the statement **עתה ידעתי**, now I know, should have come **earlier** in the narrative, when Avraham bound his son and was prepared to slaughter him. "Now" that Yitzchak was saved, isn't it out of place? It might have said **עתה ירא אלקים אתה** and then הנער ידך אל הנער, *I already know you are Hashem fearing, so no need to slaughter your beloved son.*

The Kotzker's answer is shocking. He says that for Avraham to take Yitzchak **off** the *mizbe-ach* at this moment was even harder than putting him there in the first place! It was more painful for Avraham to release Yitzchak than it was to slaughter him — and that is why the angel said **עתה ידעתי**, **now** do I know that you are really a **יראי אלקים**.

And we see how difficult it was for Avraham to stop because of comments like the following from **Rashi**, who says that when told to stop, Avraham responded, "If I do not slaughter him, I have come here for nothing. Let me at least draw some blood." To this Hashem responded **אל תעש לו מאומה**, do not harm him in any way.

רש"י בראשית פרק כב פסוק יב (פרשת וירא) (יב) אל תשלח – לשחוט, אמר לו אם כן לחנם באתי לכאן, אעשה בו חבלה ואוציא ממנו מעט דם, אמר לו אל תעש לו מאומה, אל תעש בו מום:

And **Rashi** comments further, that, eventually, when Avraham relented and *shechted* the ram, at every step of the way, he said—this is instead of my son...he had *kavana* "as if he was *shechting* Yitzchak..." רש"י בראשית פרק כב פסוק יג (פרשת וירא) תחת בנו - מאחר שכתוב ויעלהו לעולה, לא חסר המקרא כלום, מהו תחת בנו, על כל עבודה שעשה ממנו היה מתפלל ואומר יהי רצון שתהא זו כאלו היא עשויה בבני, כאלו בני שחוט, כאלו דמו זרוק, כאלו הוא מופשט, כאלו הוא נקטר ונעשה דשן:

But what can the Kotzker Rebbe mean by this? Certainly not that Avraham would have had any special pleasure in sacrificing Yitzchak! To cast Avraham in the role of an idealistic sadist is to misread and undo the entire meaning of the *akedah*. But what is the explanation for all of this?

The Kotzker here presents us with a new interpretation of the *akedah*, one which teaches us a very valuable psychological insight. **It is the nature of man, once he has taken a clear position in life, especially if he has suffered for it, not to retreat from it, but to mold the future along the doctrines of the past, in order to vindicate his past choices.**

**It is part of our normal psychology: When we have invested our time and energy, loyalty and commitment, prestige and reputation in a certain approach, we do not want to change; we cannot change, lest we thereby declare that our entire past has been invalid and inauthentic. Unfortunately, all too often, self justification of our past dictates our future.**

Consider what Avraham had to invest in his initial decision to offer up his son. He had to overcome enormous inhibitions in order to bring Yitzchak on the *mizbe-ach*. What greatness, what enormous and even superhuman devotion was required of Avraham during the three days of travel to the appointed place. He had to cut out a whole part of his heart, he had to subdue the tenderest, gentlest, and most powerful love--in order to obey what seemed to be such a cruel demand from Hashem to sacrifice the son, whom he was told would be his future **לך זרע** יקרא. In his mind's eye, Avraham saw his son dead over and over again. As he made his way up the mountain, he rehearsed the bloody scene a

thousand times. His mind ached and his heart burst and his nerves threatened to snap from the death screams of his own child, which he anticipated in such unspeakable agony. This was his beloved Yitzchak, and Avraham was a warm and compassionate father, who now was being asked to subdue his most powerful natural instincts.

Yet Avraham was prepared to follow Hashem's dictate and to sacrifice the love of a father's heart. **The love of Hashem demands that every other love be subservient to it.** And Avraham invested in this momentous decision every fiber of his humanity and his very being. And once he had decided on his path, that was it. Having made his decision, Avraham was no longer the same man. He aged, and was now an old and gray father, whose light of his life was about to be extinguished. He could have become a tragic figure in the annals of history, who had to choose between family and faith, between Hashem and his son, and, having chosen, would never sleep soundly again. This, then, was what was involved in Avraham's submission to the divine command to sacrifice Yitzchak.

Now, at this time, after having made that historic, heart-rending, and soul wrenching psychological decision; at this point when Avraham held the knife above Yitzchak, he had, in the reality of his heart and mind, already sacrificed his son on the *akedah*. The pain, the suffering, the renunciation, the conflict, all of it was over -- only the anticlimax of the actual physical act remained.

And now, after all this, to be told to cease, because it was only a trial, a show, **would have meant invalidating all that he had done, his anguish and his fear, his commitment and his pain, and especially his renunciation of his love for his son.** When the angel suddenly told him to stay his hand, he in effect told him: Avraham, you gave up that boy's life too quickly; morally you already spilled his blood — and it was not really necessary. And after all that, after you were prepared to sacrifice your son, you are not even going to receive the reward of knowing that your sacrifice was a real one. Who would have blamed Avraham for turning to Hashem and saying: "Hashem, are You playing games with me? Once I had decided to stretch out my hand against my son, the entire story was over for me. Couldn't You tell me before it was only a game? Why did You force me into a sacrifice of heroism, and then pull back and reduce a sacred drama to a pretentious gesture?"

The angel's command not to sacrifice Yitzchak meant that Avraham had to be prepared to risk making his whole sacrifice illegitimate -- how much easier and more natural to convince himself that the angel's voice was the temptation of his fatherly love, or Satan, or his inner resistance to the divine command.

In fact, as the **Kli Yakar** points out, Avraham was called twice when commanded him to desist from slaughtering Yitzchak and only once when originally commanded to slaughter Yitzchak.

בראשית פרק כב (א) ויהי אחר הדברים האלה והאלהים נסה את אברהם ויאמר אליו אברהם ויאמר הנני:  
בראשית פרק כב (יא) ויקרא אליו מלאך יקוק מן השמים ויאמר אברהם ויאמר הנני:

כלי יקר בראשית פרק כב פסוק יא. (יא) אברהם אברהם. . דבר אחר, לפי שבשעה שעסק במצוה בעקידת בנו היה כל כך טרוד במצוה לגמרה כהלכתה עד שלא היה נותן לב לקול הקריאה, לפיכך הוצרך לקרותו שנית, וזה טעם לכפל אברהם אברהם, מה שאין כן בראשונה שלא היה עדיין טרוד במצוה. ויש אומרים שאברהם הבין בקריאה זו שמן השמים יעכבוהו לפיכך עשה את עצמו כאיש נדהם וכאיש אשר לא שומע כדי לגמור המצוה עד שקראו שנית:

He was so absorbed, he had already put so much into it, that he wanted to continue and carry it out.

But Avraham was a *יראי אלקים*, a God-fearing man. And a God-fearing man does not look to his own investment, his own reputation, his own sacrifice, or his choices until this point in time. He cares only about the will of Hashem—what he must do at that moment. He is willing to surrender the justification of his past conduct and start all over again. **No matter how much pain and pride he had invested in the past, he is willing to change course.** Avraham's greatness is thus even more evident in obeying the angel's command now to stop--than in obeying Hashem's original command to sacrifice Yitzchak.

Perhaps this is why this story is read on Rosh Hashana; not only because tradition ascribes the event of the *akedah* to Rosh Hashana, **but because Rosh Hashana is the time of *teshuvah*, and repentance implies the subordination of our ego, the confession that our past cannot and will not be justified, the admission that sometimes, all that we have done and been until now is null and void.** For this, indeed, is what Avraham had to do when he obeyed the voice of the angel to release Yitzchak: he had to say that his enormous decision to offer him up in the first place was now null and void. In essence, he was saying: My self-image as a heroic, tragic figure is an error. I acknowledge the crushing of my ego.

The *shofar*, the symbol of the the ram, which Avraham sacrificed in Yitzchak's stead, has ever since been the chilling summons to us to forgo self-justification, to renounce the vindication of a life in which we have built powerful superstructures on shifting sands and uncertain foundations.

Our greatest trial is to say "I was wrong, I'm willing to start all over again, to abandon my self image, to declare myself in error, even destitute." To say "I am willing to invest in things that are less glorious or materially rewarding or prestigious—simply because they are true, is even greater than the sacrifice of one's greatest love." It is a challenge we cannot escape, either individually or collectively.

This limit of self-justification hampers us at almost every juncture of life. Many personal problems can be solved fairly simply. **What causes much *machlokes* is self-justification. A contentious person has followed one policy or way so long that to change would call into question his past wisdom and judgment. It might invalidate his character and conduct and "image" and reputation. So, he decides to spend his energy perpetuating the same mistake, elevating an error into a philosophy and stubbornness into policy, and getting deeper into the same mess, because he hasn't the courage to change.**

And that is precisely the message of the *shofar* and the *akedah*. It symbolizes: עתה ידעתי כי ירא אלקים אתה— true character requires the courage to admit that, despite our best intentions, we were wrong, and now must redirect our course of life. Or, maybe a course of action was correct until now, but things are different now. Our present situation demands a new course of action. Our failure to do just that is the greatest cause of our agony and holds us back from fulfilling our great potential.

This lesson of the *akeda*, as the Kotzker understands it, confronts each of us, then, each in his or her personal way. None of us is perfect. Each of us has failed, in one way or another, in greater or lesser measure, to live by the highest standards and ideals of our tradition--ethically, morally, halakhically. Having chosen one way, we invest in it our logic and time and energy and pride. We are caught up in the grip of inertia. When we feel we must always justify our past, we threaten to sabotage our future. Rosh Hashana attempts to dislodge us from our comfort zone and to encourage us to choose a new way. No one says it is easy. On the contrary, it is the greatest trial of all. It is harder than sacrificing our greatest loves, for it means sacrificing our very egos, our reputations, even our identities. But we can do it. And we must do it. And having done it, we shall be liberated from the tyrannical rule of self-justification.

And I believe this is one of the messages in not blowing *shofar* when Rosh Hashana falls out on Shabbos. It is incredibly difficult to leave the *shofar* at home. The *shofar* has become synonymous with Rosh Hashana. In fact, the **Gemara in Rosh Hashana 17** tells us that the *shofar* has the power to accomplish great things for the year ahead, and that when the *shofar* is not sounded, deleterious spiritual effects result. We feel like we need to blow the *shofar* on *Rosh Hashana*! But we hold ourselves back...

משך חכמה ויקרא פרק כג פסוק כד (פרשת אמור). וכיון שכן, הרי זה גופיה מה שאין אנו תוקעים בראש השנה שחל בשבת, זה גופא עקידה רוחנית מופלגת ומועיל לרצות אותנו, כמו שמרצה זכרון שופר:

Explains **Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk**, in his *Meshech Chochma*, when we do not blow the *shofar* when Rosh Hashana falls on Shabbos: we surrender, sacrificing the potency of the *shofar* because of the

concern that one may violate Shabbos by carrying that *shofar*. What greater expression of self-sacrifice and sanctification of the Name of Hashem can there be than—to protect the sanctity of Shabbos--not blowing the *shofar*. Not blowing the *shofar* today is the performance of a personal, spiritual *akeda* (sacrifice) and serves as an extraordinarily powerful replacement for the actual blowing of the *shofar*. In this situation, we experience another intriguing repercussion of the *akeda* and of the sacrifice that was not made. The slaughter of Yitzchak was voided, yet Hashem considered it as having been performed in full. Similarly, when we do not blow the *shofar*, we are essentially performing an equivalent gesture and hoping that Hashem accepts our lack of performance as an equivalent *mitzvah*.

It is an expression of self control and putting the will of Hashem ahead of our own. The road to holiness is paved with self-discipline, self-control, and a devotion to duty and responsibility.

The lesson of Rosh Hashana is the lesson of Avraham's **second** לך לך. Our job is to decide--today—what is right today, despite the challenges and difficulties in changing course. Today, we are entering a New Year, a new *shana*. That Hebrew word for "year" is related to another meaning. *Shana* can also mean "to change." If this is to be a *shana tova*, a good year, it must be a year of change. We must be ready to change when necessary: to continue that which deserves perpetuation, but to abandon that which does not, even at the risk of self-invalidation.

And it is never too late to change. . . With the example and inspiration of Avraham Avinu, may we all have the strength to examine and assess—unflinchingly--our actions—to continue what is most appropriate and, where needed, to improve. To take an honest look at all aspects of our lives. Do we take our *tefilla* seriously enough? Do we take our Talmud Torah seriously enough? Do we give enough *tzedakah*? Do we do enough *chesed*? Do we act with kindness and patience towards family members and strangers? Do we live lives of *hakaras hatov* to God, and all those who help us in life...

We must believe it is possible, and then take the steps to make it happen. David HaMelech teaches us in Tehillim 27 קוה אל ה' חזק ויאמץ לבך וקוה אל ה', Put your hope in Hashem, be strong and courageous, and put your hope in Hashem. Rav Hirsch on Tehillim, p. 239 “even if your hopes should remain unfulfilled for the present, remain strong, gather new courage from your heart, **and never cease to hope.**”

May we show Hashem *atta yadati ki yerei Elokim attah*, that now we are truly God-fearing, ready and willing to change, and deserving of a *shana tova*, a year of health and happiness, of blessing and peace, a year of fulfillment and reconciliation, for us individually... for Jews throughout the world, and especially in Eretz Yisrael, and for all mankind. Wishing everyone a *Ksiva Vachasima tova* and a sweet new year!