

Rosh Hashana 5787, Day 1: **The Courage to Stop**

Good Shabbos and Good Yom Tov, everyone. I want to wish you all a *k'siva vachasima tova*. . . a year filled with much *bracha* and *hatzlacha*...and a year filled with good health and much success... in *ruchniyus* and *gashmiyus*, a year of *shalom* and *achdus*...and a year of *refuos* and *yeshuos* for all of Am Yisrael.

Thank you to the *drasha* sponsors:

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- Yedidya and Devorah Gradon as a *zchus* for a *shana tova umesuka* for them and their family, and as a *zchus* and in honor for their parents, Jeremy and Devorah Gradon and Shlomie and Sari Bienstock.
- Kaplon Family, in memory of their wife and mother, Marsha Kaplon, Miriam bas Yitzchak Avraham HaLevi, 27 Elul. May her *neshama* have an *aliya*.
- Edo and Atara Lavi, "Thanking the Rav for constant guidance and support and hoping this year's Shabbos Rosh Hashana brings extraordinary blessings for all of us." Amen. Thank you!
- Hillel and Dena Soclof, in memory of Hillel's father, Abe Soclof, Avraham Abba ben Shmryahu, 27 Elul. May his *neshama* have an *aliya*.
- Shraga and Yehudis Sunness, "in memory of our parents, Morris & Sylvia Stoltz and Benjamin & Marian Sunness." May their *neshamos* have an *aliya*.

May all the sponsors be rewarded for their support of the shul with a sweet year of *bracha*, *hatzlacha*, and good health!

I want to consider an important question about human nature: is it harder to **begin**, or is it harder to **stop**?

We assume, almost instinctively, that the answer is obvious. We have a principle, enunciated in the writings of Chazal, *כל התחלות קשות*. Beginning is the hard part. Beginning requires courage, conviction, the willingness to leave behind what is safe and familiar, in search of something unproven. Once we have begun, once we are moving, committed, invested, surely the hard work is behind us.

Stopping, by comparison, should be easy. All it requires is a change of mind.

I want to suggest to you this morning that this is exactly backward. And I want to suggest, further, that the Torah itself, in the very story we read as the anchor of Rosh Hashana, tells us so, not through a grand theological statement, but through something far quieter: the way a single name is spoken.

Read the *Akeidah* carefully and notice something the Torah does with Avraham's name. At the opening of the story, when Hashem sends Avraham up the mountain, the text says simply:

בראשית פרק כב פסוק א (פרשת וירא): וַיְהִי אֶחָד הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְהָאֵלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת־אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי:
"and He said to him, Avraham." One word. One call. Avraham answers, "*Hineni*," and the mission begins.

But three days later, at the top of the mountain, with the knife already raised, the *malach* calls out to stop him, and this time, his name is doubled:

בראשית פרק כב פסוק יא-יב וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו מִלֵּאדָה ה' מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי. וַיֹּאמֶר אֵל תִּשְׁלַח יָדְךָ אֶל הַנֶּעֱר וְאַל תַּעַשׂ לוֹ מְאוּמָה כִּי עֵתָה יִדְעֵתִי כִּי יֵרָא אֱלֹקִים אֹתָהּ וְלֹא תַשְׁכֵּת אֶת בְּנֶךָ אֶת יְחִידְךָ מִמֶּנִּי.

"And an angel of Hashem called to him from the heavens and said, 'Avraham, Avraham,' and he said, 'Here I am.' And He said: 'Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do not do anything to him — for now I know that you are a God-fearing man, and you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.'"

It took just one call to send him up the mountain. But it took two calls to bring him down. The Torah does not waste words. Something in that asymmetry has a message for us.

The **Kli Yakar** asks exactly this question, why the doubling here, and only here? He answers with a psychological insight so sharp that it still unsettles me every time I read it:

כלי יקר בראשית פרק כב פסוק יא... לפי שבשעה שעסק במצוה בעקידת בנו היה כל כך טרוד במצוה לגמרה כהלכתה עד שלא היה נותן לב לקול הקריאה, לפיכך הוצרך לקרותו שנית, וזהו 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.

"Another explanation: because at the time he was engaged in the mitzvah of the Akeidah of his son, he was so consumed with completing the mitzvah properly, according to its halacha, that he did not pay attention to the sound of the calling — therefore he needed to be called a second time. This is the reason for the doubling of 'Avraham, Avraham' — which was not the case at the first calling, when he was not yet consumed by the mitzvah. And some say that Avraham understood, from this very calling, that he was about to be stopped from Heaven — and so he made himself appear stunned, like a man who does not hear, in order to complete the mitzvah, until he was called a second time."

Two explanations, and I want you to notice that they grow progressively more uncomfortable.

The first is almost sympathetic: Avraham genuinely didn't hear. He was totally absorbed in his mission. The precision it demands, the emotional cost it exacts, can make a person functionally deaf to anything else. We know this in smaller ways ourselves. When we are exclusively focused on a goal, a deadline, an argument we are determined to win, we can walk right past someone calling our name. That isn't defiance. That's tunnel vision.

But the second explanation is not tunnel vision. It is something closer to willful resistance. On this reading, at the top of the mountain, Avraham heard the first call perfectly well. He understood, instantly, exactly what it meant, that Heaven was about to stop him. And, so, he did something almost unthinkable: he feigned deafness. He made himself appear unreachable, until the call came again, buying himself, for one silent moment, the chance to finish what he had already resolved, in the depths of his own heart, to do.

Think about that. This is not a minor figure in an obscure story. This is Avraham Avinu — the very man about to be declared, in the next breath, a *yerei Elokim* without peer, momentarily resisting the call from Heaven. Not out of rebellion. Not out of doubt. But because some part of him, at the very peak of his devotion, needed to complete what he had already committed himself to. If Avraham had to fight that instinct and struggled for one crucial moment, what hope is there for the rest of us, in our far smaller and far less holy commitments?

And there is something especially important about this moment. Avraham had not made a mistake by climbing the mountain. He had heard Hashem correctly. He was supposed to go. Everything he had done until that moment was precisely what Hashem had asked of him.

But yesterday's command could not be allowed to drown out today's command. Sometimes changing course means admitting that we were wrong. But sometimes it means something subtler and perhaps harder: recognizing that what was right for one moment in the past is no longer right for this one right now. Faithfulness to Hashem does not mean blindly continuing yesterday's journey. It means continuing to listen for what Hashem asks of us today.

There is a teaching of the **Kotzker Rebbe** that explains precisely what Avraham was fighting in that instant. The *malach* tells Avraham, immediately after staying his hand: "Now I know that you are a God-fearing man."

בראשית פרק כב פסוק טו - יח (פרשת וירא): (טו) וַיִּקְרָא מֵלֶעֶד יִצְחָק אֶל-אַבְרָהָם שְׁמִית מֶרֶץ-הַשָּׁמַיִם: (טז) וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי נְאֻם-יְהוָה לִּי יֵעָן אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ אֶת-הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וְלֹא חָשַׁכְתָּ אֶת-בְּנוֹךְ אֶת-יְחִידָךְ: (יז) כִּי-בָרַךְ אֲבִרְכֶךָ וְהִרְבֵּה אֲרָבָה אֶת-יִרְעָךְ כְּכֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְכָהוֹל אֲשֶׁר עַל-שִׁפְתֵי הַיָּם וַיִּרְשׁ יִרְעָךְ אֶת-נַעַר אֲבִיךָ: (יח) וְהִתְבָּרְכָו בְּיִרְעָךְ כָּל-גּוֹי הָאָרֶץ לְעַבְדְּ אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקִלִּי:

Why now? If the test was simply Avraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, that declaration should have come earlier, at the moment he raised the knife, the moment of total submission, not at the moment he was told to lower it, and obeyed.

The Kotzker offers a very bold idea: taking Yitzchak off the altar was harder for Avraham than putting him on it. Not because Avraham took any pleasure, God forbid, in the act of sacrifice. But because of something universally, uncomfortably true about how the human mind works under the weight of its own commitments.

Once a person has poured everything--years, identity, the very story he tells himself about who he is--into a significant decision, reversing course becomes almost unbearable. Not because the new information fails to persuade. Not because the voice calling for a change of course lacks authority. But because of inertia, coupled with the fact that reversing course means confronting the possibility that everything already invested—the anguish, the sacrifice, the surrendered love—might not have been required at all. The *akeidas Yitzchak*, the binding of Yitzchak, was completed the instant Avraham raised the knife. The *akeidas Avraham*, the binding of Avraham himself, happened only afterward — when he had to surrender something even harder to release than his beloved son: his own certainty.

We know this feeling ourselves, and we don't need a mountain or a knife to know it. We follow a certain path in a career, a marriage, a way of raising children, a destructive habit we have rationalized for years, a religious posture adopted and never revisited — for long enough that changing course feels like defeat. To change now would mean admitting that years already spent might have been spent wrongly. And, so, rather than risk that admission, we do something far more common and far more tragic: we simply keep going. We mistake stubbornness for principle, and persistence for virtue, and old decisions become a fixed philosophy, when in truth we are simply looking to avoid the far harder virtue of honesty and change.

This, I believe, is one of the most under-appreciated obstacles standing between us and real *teshuva*. We imagine the hardest part of change is the courage to finally decide to do something differently. But very often the harder moment is earlier, when we have invested heavily in a story about who we are — and *teshuva* asks us to let that story go, to say plainly: I was wrong, and I am willing to begin again, even at the cost of everything I built around having been right. Human beings have trouble with change.

There is an old story about a battleship captain on a training exercise on a foggy night. He sees a light directly ahead and, thinking it's another ship headed towards him, radios: "Change your course 10 degrees south." The reply comes back: "Change your course 10 degrees north."

The captain responds more forcefully: "This is the captain of a battleship. I say again: change your course 10 degrees south." And the answer comes back: "**This is a lighthouse.**"

There are moments when continuing to move in the same direction feels like strength only because we have invested so much in the direction we chose initially. Sometimes, reality is telling us something different. And no amount of confidence, history, rank, or momentum can make the lighthouse move.

The question to ask ourselves this morning is whether we can move; whether we can change; whether we can adapt.

And remarkably, the **Meshech Chochmah**, whose 100th *yahrtzeit* was recently commemorated, describes a *halacha* when *Klal Yisrael* is asked to do exactly that.

משך חכמה ויקרא פרק כג פסוק כד ונמצא, החולה אם באונס לא יקח מזור ורפואה, האם יתרפא?! כן כשנעדר הזכרון שופר, שמכנסת זכרונות ישראל לאביהם שבשמים, תו החולי בלא מזור ורפואה, וקטרוג השטן במקומו...

"If a sick person, through circumstances beyond his control, does not take his medicine, will he be healed? So too, when the remembrance of the shofar — which gathers Israel's memories before their Father in Heaven — is absent, the sickness remains without remedy, and the accusation of the Satan stands in its place..."

He begins with a genuine *halachic* difficulty. When circumstances beyond our control prevent us from fulfilling a *mitzvah*, we are normally exempt — *ones rachmana patrei*. So why does the *Gemara* treat a year without *shofar*-blowing at the beginning as spiritually dangerous, even when the omission is forced upon us by the calendar placing Rosh Hashana on Shabbos? His answer: *shofar* is not an ordinary *mitzvah* whose absence can simply be excused. It functions as a *refuah*, a remedy — and a sick person who, through no fault of his own, cannot take his medicine, remains sick regardless of the reason.

And then, remarkably, the Meshech Chochmah goes on to explain why, knowing all of this, *Chazal* instructed us to refrain from blowing *shofar* on Shabbos. And this year, this sacrifice of giving up *shofar* is not theoretical. This year, the first day of Rosh Hashanah is Shabbos. Today, precisely when we would expect to hear the piercing cry of the shofar, there is a deafening silence.

... אולם בשבת... והתקיעה מכניס זכות ישראל מה שנחלו מיצחק, למסור עצמם לחרפה ולמכה ולביזה עבור שם השם יתברך... זהו זכות עקידה, שבנינו עוקדים כל תאוותיהם והרגשותיהם ושאלות החיים על מוקד אהבת ה' ותורתו... ובכל זאת אמרו ישראל פן יבולע הלילה למצות שבת אשר מעיד על קדושת שמו יתברך, כי חידש עולמו מן האין הגמור, יהיה מה! יעבור עלינו מה, ויתקדש שמו יתברך!... 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.

However, on Shabbos... the blowing draws in the merit that Israel inherited from Yitzchak — the willingness to hand themselves over to scorn, injury, and disgrace for Hashem's Name... this is the merit of the Akeidah, that His children bind all their desires, their feelings, and their life's questions upon the altar of love for Hashem and His Torah... and nevertheless, Israel said: let it not be, God forbid, that the mitzvah of Shabbos — which testifies to the sanctity of His Name, that He created His world from absolute nothingness — should be compromised. Let happen what may! Let whatever comes upon us come, and let His Name be sanctified!... And this being so, the very fact that we do not blow shofar on a Rosh Hashana that falls on Shabbos is itself an extraordinary spiritual Akeidah, and it serves to find favor for us, just as the remembrance of the shofar itself does."

He explains that the fact that we refrain from blowing *shofar*, despite our deep desire for its merit, is itself a spiritual *Akeidah*, and itself gives us the merit we need.

Do you see how precisely this maps onto both the Kli Yakar and his insight we saw earlier? On an ordinary year, the *shofar* recalls the *Akeidah* of beginning, Avraham's willingness to take the knife in hand and climb the mountain. But when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbos, *Klal Yisrael* is asked to live the other *Akeidah*, the *Akeidah* of stopping. Everything about the spiritual stakes might have argued for blowing anyway. The Meshech Chochmah has just told us, in the plainest terms, how real the spiritual danger of silence is. And yet *Klal Yisrael* stops. Not because the *shofar* has become less important, but precisely while knowing how important it is, we follow the teachings of Chazal. Just as Avraham had to allow the second call to reach him and relinquish the *mitzvah* he was desperate to complete, *Klal Yisrael* relinquishes the shofar itself. Sometimes obedience to Hashem means having the courage to begin. And sometimes it means having the courage to stop.

There is a fitting wordplay folded into the very name of the year now beginning: *shanah*, from a root that carries two nearly opposite meanings — "to repeat," and "to change." Understanding the phrase *shanah tovah* requires knowing, at any given moment, which of the two is actually being asked of us: what deserves

to be carried forward, repeated, and what deserves to be released, changed; whether because we were wrong then, or because what was right for us then is no longer right for us now.

This morning, I want to leave you with two concrete suggestions regarding this mindset.

First: Before defending a long-held position, ask whether you are defending the position or defending yourself. But I want to add something important: revisiting an old decision does not necessarily mean admitting that decision was wrong. It may have been exactly right when we made it, given who we were, the responsibilities we carried, and the circumstances of our lives then. But circumstances change. Our children grow. Careers change. Abilities change. And hopefully, we change. Sometimes the mistake is not the decision we made 20 years ago. The mistake is allowing a decision made 20 years ago to make today's decision for us.

So ask yourself: if I were making this decision today, knowing who I am now and looking honestly at the life Hashem has given me now, would I make the same choice? In how I *daven*, how much I learn, how I parent, how I handle a strained relationship: what in my life am I continuing simply because I have been doing it for so long that I can no longer imagine myself without it? That's the question I would want echoing through the room today, instead of the shofar.

Perhaps, it's a resentment I have carried for many years.

A judgment I made about one of my children that I have never allowed that child to outgrow.

A fight with a sibling in which I no longer even remember the original offense, but only that I was right.

A religious standard I once adopted to make myself better, but now use to judge everyone else.

A way of speaking that I would be horrified to hear someone else use.

An apology I have refused to make because making it now would force me to ask why I waited 10 years.

Or a decision I once made about how much Torah I realistically had time to learn, how much *chesed* I could do, or how much *tzedakah* I could give, a decision that may have been exactly right when my children were young and my career was getting off the ground and all-consuming, but which I have never revisited even though my life has changed.

Not merely: *Can I change my mind?* But: **What have I become incapable of hearing or thinking because hearing or thinking it would require me to become someone new?**

Second: Most of us will not receive a dramatic voice from Heaven this year. We will receive something quieter — a spouse, a friend, a child, even our own conscience, saying the same uncomfortable thing to us twice, because we managed not to hear it the first time. This year, let the first call be enough.

Perhaps this is why the *malach* had to call Avraham's name twice to get him to stop, when once had been sufficient to send him up the mountain. Starting is often just a single instruction away. Stopping requires being called again — because our own investment in the road we have already chosen makes the first call so easy to miss. Maybe that is why this story belongs on Rosh Hashanah. Not because Avraham never struggled to hear. The Kli Yakar tells us that even Avraham Avinu could become so invested in the road he was traveling that he almost could not hear the voice telling him to stop. And his greatness was that eventually, he heard it and stopped.

And perhaps that is what Hashem asks of us as a new year begins. Not that we arrive here having gotten everything right. Not that every decision we made last year was wrong. And not that every decision that was right last year must therefore remain right this year. Not every road we have traveled needs to be traveled for another year. Only that when Hashem calls our name again, we are capable of stopping, listening, and answering: **הנני**.