



Temple Rodef Shalom

Rabbi Amy Schwartzman

Rosh Hashanah 5780/2019

Living Well in an Era of Trauma

Through the glass doors at the back of the sanctuary, I could see Clyde, our director of security and our Police officer pacing. I tried to concentrate on our service, but I knew something was terribly wrong. My trepidation grew as I left the sanctuary with the Bat Mitzvah family. Clyde took me aside to tell me about the shooting in Pittsburgh. I visualized the gunman in that Temple, and then in our Temple, or any place of worship – horrifying. Something changed in me that day. I suspect it did for you as well. We entered a new “normal” that is anything but normal with it’s persistent heightened levels of stress and anxiety.

People of a certain generation often recall where they were and how they felt when President Kennedy was shot. Anyone over 30 can describe in great detail the morning of September 11. Our teenagers can tell you where they were when they heard that 17 of their peers were gunned down in parkland. All of us are amassing traumatic memories. And they’re taking a toll. Who among us hasn’t had an internal debate, asking, even briefly: should I go to that concert? Might something happen at that rally? Are my kids safe in their own temple? I have those moments and those sleepless nights and I imagine you do too.

Psychologists are increasingly concerned about the negative impact of our continuous exposure to and awareness of traumatic events. Our children, especially, now grow up with active shooter drills in school, hear about white supremacist and anti-Semitism on the news, and can never play alone in their local park. The cumulative impact of our increased contact with trauma is real; it’s distressing and scary and has deep implications for our individual and collective psyches. Maybe you have seen in yourself or others glimpses of the impact of this stress – less sleep, uneven emotions, sadness or deep worry – all of which get in the way of our ability to be good partners and parents, friends and co-workers. All of which diminish our capacity to embrace new adventures, take risks and reach our full potential.

Today we will be introduced to an individual who, like all of us, lived with trauma. In a moment beyond his control he came face to face with death. It changed him. It left him emotionally shaken, his sense of safety and security gone, his perspective on the world forever altered. I speak of our ancestor Isaac, who on this very day lay bound and vulnerable under the blade of his father Abraham’s knife, in the harrowing narrative we call the Akedah.

Remarkably, Isaac went on to live a very full and fulfilled life after the Akedah. The trauma of today’s story could have destroyed him, poisoned him with bitterness and fear, but somehow, he found the strength and resilience to fill his days with value, meaning and purpose. We rarely give Isaac much attention because many see him as a passive bridge between the two greats – Abraham and Jacob. But this year, I want to shine a new light on Isaac. I believe he can model for us not only how to cope with a harsh and changing world, but most importantly how to seek out and embrace the good in the same world. Far from a minor character, Isaac can teach us to live purposefully and joyfully – even and especially in the wake of ongoing trauma.

A quick recap: Isaac is Abraham's second son, his favorite son whom he has with Sarah. I imagine Isaac's life is pretty great, especially after his older brother Ishmael is sent away from the family. (But that's another story.) Our sages claim that it is on Rosh Hashanah that the Torah tale took place: God commands Abraham to bring Isaac to the top of Mount Moriah and offer him up as a sacrifice. Many call this story a test of Abraham's faith. But though Abraham's test ends here, for Isaac, it will have only just begun. His is a life-long struggle to live in the shadow of the horror of the Akedah.

It's no surprise that after Abraham is stopped by an angel and replaces Isaac with the ram caught in the nearby bush, Isaac disappears. Gone. Vanished. We read that Abraham returns home with his servants, but Isaac is missing. We read about the death and burial of Sarah, but Isaac is absent from the whole thing. The Torah is painfully silent about his whereabouts. I imagine that Isaac is traumatized. There are many imaginative, speculative stories, Midrashim, about where Isaac goes in the wake of the Akedah. Of course, no one knows for sure, and he is gone for a very long time.

Sadly, many of us can identify with Isaac. I know that some of you have gone through life-changing ordeals, sometimes like Isaac, in a matter of moments. And many of you have felt tested, possibly even beyond your limits. Perhaps, like Isaac, someone hurt you who was supposed to protect you. Maybe you have faced a situation so dreadful and so unexpected – illness, violence, abuse, financial disaster, a #metoo affront, bullying, estrangement, the list is painfully long. Maybe like Isaac you withdrew in some way, or at least wanted to.

But eventually Isaac returns, and when next we see him the Torah says he: "*Yatzey Lasuah B'sadeh – goes out to meditate in the fields.*" The verb *Lasuah* appears only once, only here, in the entire Bible. No other patriarch or matriarch or king or even prophet – is said to have meditated, pondered, or reflected like Isaac did. Surely his near-death experience on that mountain changed him. Maybe his confrontation with the fragility, the precariousness of life prompted him to wonder: "Who am I?" And... "What am I doing with my days?" and "Will I have the strength to heal?" And not just "How much do I have, or how much faster can I go or what can I win?"

Unlike Isaac, I would not call myself a meditator. But two years ago, I spoke on these High Holidays about the value of silence, of making space to listen to our inner voices, allowing our deeply held goals and values to push through our distracted, busy, worrying minds. In that sermon, I shared my habit of sitting in my car in an empty parking lot. Here I see Isaac alone in a beautiful field, *Lasuah*, reflecting on his life and assessing his trauma, considering the power it would, or would not, hold over him. I imagine him slowly starting to shift the Akedah from the purely emotional part of his brain to the cognitive, thinking part, beginning to grasp that he need not be defined by the experience. In that open field Isaac turns his back on death and re-engages with life.

For it is in that very field, after some time *Lasuah*, of musing, that Isaac makes another important choice that comes to sustain him through life's challenges. The Torah says that Isaac 'lifted his eyes' and saw Rebecca. And she 'lifted her eyes' and saw Isaac. And he decided to marry her. While it sounds like a very schmaltzy movie the text goes on to complete the picture when it adds that Isaac *yehe-ha-veha – he loved her.*

Once again, we have a first. Nowhere else in the entire Torah do we hear about romantic love between partners. I'd like to think that Abraham loved Sarah and Moses loved Tziporah. They likely did. But for the Torah to mention it only for this couple – well – it must have been exceptional. Isaac invested himself fully in this relationship and the text says that Rebecca returned that love and gave him comfort. Later, when they were unable to have children, Isaac takes the initiative to plead with God on Rebecca's behalf; something neither Abraham nor Jacob do when they are in similar situations.

Deep, relational, vulnerable, selfless love - I don't know where Isaac realized its importance...on the mountain...in the field...but the connection he and Rebecca shared helped him to find a way forward. The love and support in their marriage enabled Isaac to take control of his past and become an actor in his own life, rather than the object of other people's actions.

Whose love sustains you in this way? Who do you call when you just feel overwhelmed by it all? With whom can you open yourself, unafraid to show your scars, your fears and your hopes? Who gives you the support and comfort you need to move forward and not back?

One more story of Isaac's life shines a spotlight on his resilience. One more event demonstrates how we know that despite his traumatic experience under the cold blade of his father's knife, Isaac sought out the things that would make him whole.

Eventually, Isaac settles down in Gerar where his family lived for many years, and where his father had dug wells for his clan. We all know that in the Middle East wells are critical for survival. Of course, they provide essential water. And we know from other biblical stories that wells are also a place for community building. If I go to the well once or twice a day, I see my neighbors. I learn who is upset, who is pregnant, who is absent. At the well we talk about life, bad bosses, gardening techniques, personal disappointments, the challenges of aging, and the cute baby next door. And if something traumatic happens to one of us, or all of us, the bonds that we have built will cushion the blows and be critical for our emotional survival. Isaac understood that he needed a community. We need community too. A place to gather, to feel heard, to feel safe.

But when Isaac arrives in Gerar, he finds the family wells have been stopped up. So, he starts digging and opens them. The local Philistines see his work and claim that the wells are theirs. If Isaac had been like his father, he would have started a war to keep the family's wells. But Isaac decides to give those wells up and dig others. Three times this happens; and three times Isaac picks up his shovel, literally grounding himself in this Life-giving goal, and somehow finding the energy to go at it again and again.

It's inspiring that Isaac has this stamina and resilient commitment. All of his effort – physical and emotional - turns out to be worth it. Eventually, the Philistines respond. They are so impressed by his determination and generosity that they make peace with him. And he ends up becoming just as 'well-off' as Abraham and Jacob. I'm imagining how their shared peace and shared wells changed the culture and social norms of the land. Would not a community of former adversaries be strengthened from their lessons learned? Could Isaac have understood the benefits of such a community when he put his shovel in the ground again and again?

Like Isaac, each of us has a well we have to return to, to re-dig, to open up not only for ourselves but also for others. Like Isaac we need tenacity – going again and again – to provide care for our families, to sustain our relationships, to build up our communities including this one. And for other goals: to attend yet another rally to combat gun violence, to yet another meeting at school about prejudice. We will sit down to write yet another letter to our representatives. Yes, it's hard. Each time there is another incident that drags us down, that traumatizes us, we want to lay down our shovel and just walk away. But like Isaac we need to invest in those things that allow us to go back again, to dig deeper and open our wells. We need to find our field; we need to connect with our Rebecca and share our lives with our community.

This is why I love the Torah, and why I think it is sacred. Not because all of its stories are factual - I have no idea about that - but because all of them contain eternal truths and deeply resonant lessons. And whatever happened then, in some way also happens now. Some years on Rosh Hashanah we learn from Abraham or Sarah. For me, this year, it is Isaac – our first survivor.

It's fitting to end by linking Isaac to another survivor, one who lived through the Holocaust, the darkest of dark periods of our history. Elie Weisel is, of course, the exemplar of survival as well as the exemplar of living a full and meaningful life after trauma. In his book Messengers of God, Weisel wrote about Isaac and the Akedah. No surprise that he felt close to Isaac and identified with his suffering as well as his choice to embrace meaning, love and peace.

Weisel asks, "Why was the most tragic of our ancestors named Isaac, a name which evokes and signifies laughter?" His response reflects both his and Isaac's life. Weisel suggests that as the first survivor, Isaac had to teach us, the future survivors of Jewish history, that it is possible to struggle and live an entire lifetime in the shadow of trauma and still experience and embrace joy. It is Isaac's resilience, encoded in his name and his life that should guide us and help us as we make our way through the era of trauma in which we live.

As I worked on this sermon, I felt my own worries soften – after all I have my car and the empty parking lot, I have a loving and supportive listener (Kevin) and I have all of you, my caring and beloved community.

Sadly, it is likely that between now and when we gather in another year at these High Holidays we will be shaken and scared yet again. Will we turn to one another for strength and comfort? I hope so. Will we have made time to walk in the field and listen to our treasured souls? I hope so. As we embrace a New Year with joy, we will have to take up our shovels again and again. But as Isaac learned, it will all be worth it. In our fields, with our supportive companions, shovels in hand we will work to bring joy and peace to this New Year.

KEN YEHI RATZON!

Rabbi Amy Schwartzman  
Temple Rodef Shalom  
Falls Church, Virginia  
2019-5780