

D'var Torah
Beth Davidson

Second Day of Rosh Hashanah

Good morning everyone! Shana Tovah. I'm Beth Davidson, I'm a member of the Board of Trustees here at Bet Am Shalom and active in a number of our programs for Young Families. If you're visiting us today and looking for meaningful Jewish experiences for your family, I hope you'll take a flyer by the front door, or find us on Facebook, and join us another time soon.

While today's a day of celebration, it's of course also a day of sadness, of remembrance, and of the awareness that the number of Americans who perished 17 years ago today will soon be surpassed by those who have died from 9/11-related illnesses. So as we talk about healing the world, let's keep those first responders, janitors, transit workers, and all who volunteered at Ground Zero, in our prayers and in our hearts. And with those brave Americans in mind, let's study some Torah together.

Believe in Something. Even if it means sacrificing everything.

So I'll be honest. When David Abramson, one of our Ritual Committee members, called and asked me to deliver the Drash on the Akedah, I was really surprised, honored, and then a little *meod mefahked*, which loosely translates from the very ancient Hebrew to completely freaked out.

I mean, while I've only been Jewish for 14 years, I've been a Jewish mother the entire time I've been a mother. During my son's bris, I was one of those moms who hung way back in the corner, just waiting for it to be over, so I could nurse him and hit the schnapps.

So, like many of you I've always had issues with the story of the *Akedah*, the Binding of Isaac. In the story, Isaac is no infant. He's old enough to carry firewood. He's intuitive enough to wonder where the animal for the burnt offering is—so surely, during the 72 hours that father and son traverse the countryside looking for Moriah, he's intuitive enough to wonder what exactly is going on.

As for Abraham, he knows what he is doing feels wrong—at least wrong enough to lie to the servants accompanying them. “You stay here with the ass,” he says. “The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and return to you.” It's possible Isaac is within earshot at this point, and Abraham just doesn't want him to hear, but it's unclear.

When Abraham arrives at the designated place for the offering, builds his altar, lays Isaac on the wood and picks up the knife, we hear the Angel of the Lord, calling to Abraham, we hear Abraham answer, and we hear the Angel call off the deed. It has always struck me as eerie that a third and arguably most important voice is missing from the second half of the parasha: Isaac's.

Now, anyone who has ever traveled more than 5 minutes with a child, whether to Moriah or Mt. Kisco, knows that time is never passed silently. Where are we going, what are we going to do when we get there, what are we having to eat? So we're forced to wonder, What did Isaac know, and when did he know it? Did he understand his father's intent? Did he also hear the voice of the angel? Did he and Abraham speak afterward?

A midrash from the 9th century imagines a heartbreaking response from Isaac to Abraham's violent actions. Midrash Tah-hoom-na says that when Abraham came to slaughter Isaac, Isaac said,

"Father, bind my hands and legs, for the soul is impudent, and when I see the knife I may be frightened and the sacrifice will be no good because my trembling will cause you to make a blemish."

And according to the same midrash, Isaac then goes on to say, "Father, do not tell my mother when she is by the well, or when she is standing on the roof, lest she fall and die."

That's right—Sarah. Another significant character whose voice is omitted from the parasha. One, whom, as a mother, I would like to have heard. Did she try to protect her son from her husband's murderous, if devotionally intended, plan?

The midrash Leviticus Rabba, said to have been composed in the 5th century, tells us that Isaac came back from his journey with Abraham and told Sarah everything—and that she said, "Alas, for the son of a hapless woman! Had it not been for the angel you would by now have been slain!" and that she cried. In fact, the midrash says she utters six cries, which the midrash links to the six blasts of the shofar. And that she barely finishes crying when she dies.

So, thanks to the midrashim, we now have somewhat more of a view into both parents' roles in this difficult story. And for those of us who are parents, or were parents, or have or had parents, it may seem difficult to relate to this story at all, much less derive meaning from it. On its face, the parasha may seem incomprehensible to us—that a parent would make any promise or strike any deal that could result in harm or even death to their child.

It was as I was watching the funeral of Sen. John McCain—and as I listened to his daughter Meghan's eulogy—that my thinking sort of blew open on this. If you didn't happen to hear Meghan speak, there was one particularly powerful passage in which she said,

"My father knew what it was like to grow up in the shadow of greatness, he did just as his father had done before him. He was the son of a great admiral who was also the son of a great admiral. And when it came time for the third John Sidney McCain to be a man, he had no choice but, in his own eyes, to walk in those exact same paths. He had to become a sailor. He had to go to war. He had

to have his shot at becoming a great admiral as they also had done. The paths of his father and grandfather led my father directly to the harrowing hell of the Hanoi Hilton.”

The son of a great admiral, who was the son of a great admiral. John McCain’s grandfather would have known the risks of a military career for his son, as would Senator McCain’s father. As would Senator McCain, having gone to that harrowing hell. And yet he also had two sons who enlisted in the military—Jack McCain is serving an overseas deployment and Jimmy McCain served in Iraq.

Of course, Senator McCain didn’t consign his children to military service, they did so of their own free will, as did generations of McCains, apparently going back to the Revolutionary War. As did my father, and his father before him, who survived both the sinking of the Indianapolis when he was transferred at the last minute to the European Theater due to a lieutenant’s illness, AND the bombing at Pearl Harbor because his boat was out that morning on exercises.

It seems understood from generation to generation that serving our country—in the military, in the intelligence community, as one of those first responders who worked on the pile after 9/11—is an oath, and yes, a covenant worth making. And that America, and our democracy, is worth fighting, even dying for.

Of course, parents whose children serve in the military are not the only ones who live with the daily risk of harm or death to that child. Every day men and women of color let their black and brown sons leave the house, or get behind the wheel of a car to go to work or out with friends, knowing they are nine times more likely than other Americans to be killed by police.

As my friends have told me over the years, these parents don’t do so cavalierly. They have “The Talk.” Be polite. Don’t antagonize. And always, always make sure they can see your hands. The conversation has become a fundamental part of raising children if you happen to be black in America.

And then, of course, there are the parents from Mexico and Central America, who cross our borders seeking asylum from rampant gang violence, including the recruitment of children, and widespread violence against women. I watched cable news, as I’m sure many in this tent did, as reporter after reporter asked mothers whether, knowing their children might be taken from them under the administration’s new “Zero-tolerance” policy, they were still planning to try to cross. And mother after mother said, unequivocally, “*si.*”

They were placing their faith in America, a place they saw as a shining city on a hill. And they were placing their faith in Americans, a people they hoped would lift a lamp beside our golden door. They were willing to sacrifice *everything*. And 500 parents who are today still not reunited with their children, *have*—unless an angel, a dedicated pro bono lawyer or dogged caseworker intervenes.

Parents of gay children will tell you they fear for their children's mental and emotional health—and their physical safety. An estimated 34% of children who identify as LGBTQ are bullied. According to a 2015 report in the Journal of the American Medical Association, 40% of LGBTQ high school students reported seriously considering suicide during the prior year, compared to 15% of heterosexual adolescents. Almost a quarter of LGBTQ students said they attempted suicide during that time, compared to about 6% of heterosexual teens.

And the list of children in physical or emotional danger doesn't stop there. What about the children growing up in the shadows of coal ash piles or petrochemical plants? What about the thousands of children in Flint, Michigan poisoned by their own drinking water and left with potentially lifelong learning disabilities?

As part of my preparation for this drash I looked to how I might personally relate to the idea of risking my child's life, to whether I would ever entrust their health or livelihood to a leap of faith, and it took about 3 seconds.

How many of us send children to school every day? According to CNN between January and June there was an average of one school shooting per week in this country. Within hours after I put my two beautiful children on the bus on the first day of school last week, a 15-year-old boy was shot and killed outside his high school in Providence, Rhode Island.

Of course, there was no second chance for that boy's father. No angel to intervene for his parents. Just preventable gun violence that I know many of us in this tent—many of you who made signs, and showed up, and marched last spring—feel called to help stop.

And for those of us who send kids on play dates, do you ask if there's a gun in the house? I'll be honest, I never have and I don't have a good reason except that it feels awkward. But according to the Brady Campaign, 8 children are shot unintentionally every single day in this country, and one of them killed. Brady research also shows that that over half of parents don't think to ask:

“Is there an unlocked gun where my child plays?”

So after thinking through all these examples, the idea that one might subject one's child to harm in the name of something bigger than ourselves doesn't sound so unrelatable, does it? How about trusting in a higher power to intervene and stop the unthinkable from happening in your neighborhood, in your relative or neighbor's platoon, in your child's school? Isn't that something millions of Americans do every day?

And of course if, as Reconstructionist Jews, we don't necessarily accept the concept of a supernatural God, there is no angel. **There is only us.**

Another question posed frequently by darashim in my research on the *Akedah* is why does no human person intervene in Abraham's plan, or even try to figure out what's happening? Not Sarah, certainly not Abraham's servants.

Again, if we're really being honest with ourselves, is this kind of inaction, even in the face of potential harm, so strange? How many times have we seen someone, even someone close to us, do something we know is not good for them, yet say nothing for fear they'll think we're being judgmental? Or because the topic is something that feels taboo, like addiction, abuse, or mental illness?

There's an entire TV show based on this concept! It's called "What Would You Do?" Any fans? In the show, hidden cameras capture unsuspecting bystanders as staged, controversial scenarios unfold, like 2 college kids pressuring their friend to take Adderall to "have more fun" at a party. A mother treating her foster child more harshly than her biological child. A so-called "free-range" parent leaving their child alone at the beach.

The idea is to see how the average bystander reacts, and whether morality or some blend of politeness and dissociation wins the day.

In the few scenes I watched, people being "tested" were often willing to go to an "intervener"—a police officer, security guard, or some other authority to critique the activity in question—but few were willing to confront the person engaging in controversial behavior directly. "I don't want to sound judgmental, BUT..." was a frequent refrain to the show's interviewers.

So as we look for lessons that we can take away from the *Akedah*, as outdated or over-the-top as it might seem on first read, it's that we must recognize the very real danger millions of parents are forced to subject their children to every day—and the sacrifice, often called the ultimate sacrifice, others are willing to risk, every day, for a cause they feel is greater than themselves.

It's that we have to speak about unspeakable issues—whether it's depression, drugs, abuse, suicide, sexual harassment, the risks of gun ownership.

And sometimes—and now it's going to sound like I'm taking Abraham's side here, and maybe on some level I am—we have to be willing to stand for something, even if it means sacrificing everything.

By now, you've seen the Colin Kaepernick ad for Nike. If you've watched the long version of the commercial, there's a lot that it addresses about overcoming adversity in sports, but the commercial's intent is to remind us that Colin Kaepernick is where he is because he stood up for what he believed in—well, first he sat for it, then he knelt for it—even though he knew he risked losing his football career, his endorsements, his livelihood, and yes, perhaps his life.

How many of us are willing to take that kind of risk? How many of us are willing to speak out when we see a co-worker being harassed or mistreated, if it means we might get disciplined or even lose our jobs? How often are we willing to call out a joke made in bad taste, a racist reference, if it means we might lose a friend?

And we certainly see on an almost daily basis what people are afraid to say when they think they might lose re-election over it.

In the liturgy of Rosh Hashanah we find that it is called the “day of the beginning of Your works.” If we are called by the *Akedah* to weigh faith and sacrifice, then perhaps it is the way in which we address the suffering of 9/11 responders and of children in Flint, Michigan, in which we confront the realities of gun violence, institutional racism, environmental injustice and all the other challenges I’ve outlined this morning, that will shape our role in repairing the world in the coming year.

And while the Hebrew word *Hineni* is most often translated to mean, I am here, there’s another meaning, which brings us back to where we started: **Here I stand.**

In this year that we begin today, what are your works going to be?

What are you prepared to sacrifice?

And what will you stand for?

Shana Tovah.