

Rabbi Cassi Kail – Rosh Hashanah 5783/2022

Rosh Hashanah is the start of a new year filled with promise and possibilities. And yet, here we are again, reading one of the most challenging stories in the entire Torah. We Jews know how to have a good time.

The text reads, *“Take your son, your favored one, whom you love, Isaac. Go to the land of Moriah and raise him up as a burnt offering.”*

Each year we grapple with Abraham’s willingness to comply with this chilling command. How could the father of the Jewish people even entertain the notion of sacrificing his son?

In the text’s short thirteen verses, we learn about Abraham’s actions and conversations, but Isaac’s voice is seldom heard. Even though Isaac’s life hangs in the balance, he speaks out only once, to express concern.

“Here are the firestone and the wood” he says, *“but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?”*

“It is God who will see to the sheep,” comes Abraham’s reply, as if Isaac’s concerns are imagined. Abraham chooses to tell Isaac—and perhaps himself—that everything is exactly as it should be, that everything will be okay.

As they approach the mountain’s peak, Isaac remains silent¹ despite noticing the sheep’s absence. Abraham in turn says nothing as he lays Isaac on the altar, ties him down, and even grips his knife. They go through the motions, perhaps silently praying for an intervention. It is then, at the last second, when messengers of God call out. *“Will the promises made to Abraham regarding his offspring now be broken?”* they cried. *“The knife is at his throat. How long will you wait?”*²

The Binding of Isaac grips at our heartstrings, as we try to reconcile the compassionate and generous Abraham we know with the Abraham of **this** story. How can the father of Judaism risk the life of his son?

Judaism teaches that children are our guarantors, and we are blessed with Torah only for their sake.³ It reminds us that we have an obligation to make life better for future generations.⁴ How then do we come to terms with Abraham placing his son in such danger? How do we understand this Torah portion, which we read every Rosh Hashanah? Shouldn’t we aspire to something better?

In Torah study, students sometimes ask why we hold onto challenging texts. Even though child sacrifice was common millennia ago, we have thankfully moved away from such practices. Can’t we just put these texts aside? But then, as we read the text, we are blown away by how relevant

¹ In fact, Isaac doesn’t speak again until Genesis 26:7, after he is married to Rebecca.

² Pirkei D’Rebbi Eliezer, as explained in the Stone Edition Chumash on Genesis 22:10

³ Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1:4

⁴ The story about Honi the circle maker illustrates this point

they remain. The beauty of the Torah is that it is as flawed as we are.⁵ It mirrors our complexity, our challenges, and our moral callings.

Today none of us are asked to place our children on an altar, but there are many ways in which we, like Abraham, are complacent in sacrificing the health of our children. There is little doubt that future generations are more at risk than we are, for a number of reasons. Today, I will focus on one that is close to my heart: climate change.

Right now Cuba and Florida are bracing for Hurricane Ian, the Philippines are being hit by typhoon Nora, and Canadians are cleaning up after Hurricane Fiona. Pakistan continues to suffer from flooding that left one-third of the country underwater, and South Africa is recovering from mudslides. After a summer of record-breaking heat domes in Europe, Asia, Africa, and North America, rivers, and water basins are emptying. Wildfire season is well under way, and carbon dioxide levels are the highest they have been in recorded history.

Almost every child on earth is exposed to an environmental hazard, and one billion children are currently at an “extreme risk” of the impacts of the climate crisis.⁶ The global think tank IEP⁷ estimates that the crisis will cause the displacement of 1.2 billion people by 2050.

Climate change isn’t only something being felt by others across the world. We felt it when camp Newman burnt down. We are reminded of it when family members and friends are forced to evacuate their homes, and every time the sky fills with apocalyptic shades. We feel it on our faces in our lungs. Its evidence is all around us.

Many of us in this room feel passionate about our responsibility to take care of the environment. We understand the implications of global warming. We recycle, and compost. We drive electric vehicles, reduce our carbon footprint and strive to eat sustainably.

We internalize Ecclesiastes’ Rabbah’s call that we take care of this world, because if we destroy it “there will be no one to repair it after [us].”⁸ And yet, we know our actions aren’t enough. We know the burden on future generations is great.

And young people know it too. Overwhelmingly, teens and young adults feel that the government is failing them and not taking their concerns seriously.⁹ In a recent survey of 10,000 young adults around the world, 84% said that they are very worried about the future. More than half reported feeling sad, anxious, angry, and powerless in the face of climate change. The realities of climate change alongside governmental failures to act create chronic, long-term stressors. Global warming is keeping our children up at night, and perhaps us as well. Youth

⁵ In his book *The Chutzpah Imperative*, Rabbi Ed Feinstein explains, "According to an ancient tradition, when the Israelites stood at Mount Sinai, God appeared to them as a mirror (Pesichta deRav Kehannah 12). A mirror reflects back to us the truth about ourselves., a truth we have forgotten or hidden from."

⁶ <https://www.unicef.org/stories/impacts-climate-change-put-almost-every-child-risk>

⁷ Institute for Economics and Peace

⁸ Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13

⁹ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(21\)00278-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(21)00278-3/fulltext)

climate activists throughout the world are demanding more.¹⁰ As one 16-year-old put it, "...it's different for young people. For us the destruction of the planet is personal"¹¹

"For more than 30 years, the science has been crystal clear." Greta Thunberg chastised the United Nations "[and you]...come here saying that you're doing enough when the politics and solutions needed are still nowhere in sight. You say you understand the urgency. But no matter how sad and angry I am, I do not want to believe that. Because if you really understood the situation and still kept on failing to act, then you would be evil. And that I refuse to believe."¹²

What is so remarkable about these young leaders is that they do not allow themselves to be lulled into complacency. They refuse to do nothing in the face of this overwhelming crisis. Greta, like her fellow youth climate activists, turn their anger and anxiety into action.

They do what Abraham did not: they speak up. Their words serve as a wake-up call, a shofar blast calling for swift action. Its cries are as relentless as global warming itself.

"Every good prophet, from Isaiah to Heschel, to our most recent Greta, strives to wake us up from the dangers of denial and calls us to wake up to the truth and our own agency," explains Rabbi Joshua Lesser. "Being present to our reality in its full discomfort is the only way to claim the power we have, and we often have greater agency and ability than we realize."¹³

Perhaps Abraham didn't speak up because he didn't realize the power of his voice. Perhaps he didn't speak up because the situation felt so overwhelming he couldn't come up with the words to say. So he waited on a miracle.

Fortunately, he finds one. Abraham raises his eyes to find a ram caught in the thicket. He instinctively knows that God has created a miracle. Abraham is meant to sacrifice this ram in Isaac's place. Elsewhere in the Torah, Ishmael is dying of thirst, when God creates a different miracle: a well of water to revive him.

The Torah is full of miracles and interventions, without which the future would have been bleak. When it comes to climate change, however, we can expect no miracles. There is no ram caught in a thicket, or clear brook of water waiting to revive us.

We are the messengers. The children of the world are waiting. The knife is at their throat, and it is up to us to speak out.

¹⁰ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/11/08/young-activists-denounce-climate-plans-betrayal>

¹¹ Hickman C. "Children and climate change: exploring children's feelings about climate change using free association narrative interview methodology." in: Hoggett P *Climate psychology: on indifference to disaster. Studies in the psychosocial*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2019: 41-59

¹² <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/23/763452863/transcript-greta-thunbergs-speech-at-the-u-n-climate-action-summit#:~:text=%22You%20say%20you%20hear%20us,that%20I%20refuse%20to%20believe.>

¹³ <https://images.shulcloud.com/1071/uploads/holidays/Dvars/RH-Sermon-5780-We-Are-All-Isaac.pdf>

As we celebrate the birthday of the world, let's pledge to protect it. There is already some progress being made. The inflation reduction act will help us to transition to zero-emission economy and develop green jobs. A recently passed California bill will reduce state oil consumption and pollution in favor of clean energy, but we know it isn't enough. We know there is so much more to do.

There is a reason that our Rabbis teach us to pray in a room with windows.¹⁴ Our prayers mean little unless we use them to connect with the plight of others in our world, and upon leaving feel inspired to act.

On Rosh Hashanah we read the story of Abraham who didn't use his voice against injustice, but we, awakened by the shofar blast, are called to raise ours.

We are called to offer new prayers such as this newly inspired Grand Aleinu for the Burning West. Janice Steinberg writes:

If we weep if we sob, wail, keen every one of us tears coursing down millions of faces can we put out the fires? If we mourn together rend our garments, lament, howl, grieve the loss of each woodpecker, egret, Steller's jay, squirrel, bear, deer, chipmunk, fox, raccoon, lizard, banana slug, beetle, every redwood If anguish shakes us so hard we can't stand and we drop to our knees we fall to our bellies prostrate as in the Grand Aleinu Prayer proclaiming God's kingship, said near the conclusion of the prayer service. If, facedown on the seared earth, we open our lips to declare it's up to us to mend the broken world and our mouths fill with ash? Would that be a new beginning, God? Could we save the blazing forests with the rain of our repentance?¹⁵

I pray we can. But it's only possible if we use our agency and raise our voices. It's only possible if not we not only curb our consumption but also demand more of those in power.

In the face of a crisis of this magnitude, it is easy to be discouraged and overwhelmed. Even God anticipated that sometimes we would feel over our heads.

It is at these moments, we are consoled by God's words from the end of Deuteronomy:

"The instruction I place upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond your reach." God says. "It is not in the heavens that you shall say 'Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?' No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it."¹⁶

None of us can battle global warming and climate change alone, but there is much that each of us can do. As Pirkei Avot reminds us, it's not up to us to complete the work, but each of us has a

¹⁴ See Berachot 34bs

¹⁵ <https://ritualwell.org/ritual/grand-aleinu-burning-west/>

¹⁶ Deuteronomy 30:11-14

role to play¹⁷ if we wish to do what Abraham could not, and protect the next generations. “Our concern must be expressed not symbolically, but literally; not only publicly, but also privately” noted Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. “not only occasionally, but regularly. What we need is the involvement of every one of us as individuals.”

Along the way, we may at times, like our youth, be distraught. We may feel downcast and cynical that our actions or our one voice can indeed do much of anything. When I feel this way, I think of ¹⁸teaching by my colleague, Rabbi Debra Robbins. She explains the connection between Tikvah, hope, and kav, thread. These two disparate words share a Hebrew root, she explains. When we are need in hope, let us hold on to the small threads of progress. Let us take heart in the work that has been done, in the concerns being expressed, in our collective desire to do something about it.

And there is something you can do about it. Each year, the religious action center in California picks a few issues on which to focus our lobbying efforts. In an unprecedented move, they decided to create a 2-3 year-long campaign about climate justice. There will be a Los Angeles meeting on this topic on January 29th. I hope you choose to join this effort and engage in any other way you feel called.

The challenge is great, but we have known great challenges before. We are resilient and strong, willing to stand up for justice, especially when it concerns future generations.

Gerald Wolpe tells the story of a man who cried out to God, “God, the world is in such a mess—everything seems wrong. Please, send someone to help change the world!” To this, the voice of God responded. “I did send someone. I sent you.”

As the climate crisis unfolds, we need a miracle, but it will come in the form of a hidden ram or a hidden stream. This time, God is counting on us. This Rosh Hashanah let us learn from Abraham’s mistakes. Our children are waiting. God is calling us to action.

¹⁷ Pirkei Avot 2:21

¹⁸ Deuteronomy 11:26