



Rosh Hashanah - Day II – 5778
Looking for a Ram

By Rabbi David Klitzker

My friends,

In this morning's Torah reading, our patriarch Abraham is commanded by God to do something terrible and terrifying: to bring his son up to sacrifice him. The Torah doesn't tell us whether Abraham has any objections to God's command, but we imagine that he does. After all, Isaac is his beloved son, and God has promised a covenant to his offspring. But Abraham builds the altar, stacks the wood, and raises his knife.

As everyone knows, there is a fortunate twist in the story. Just as Abraham is about to kill his son, the angel calls to him. The angel says, "*Avraham, Avraham.*" Angels appear in the Torah readings for both days of Rosh Hashanah; they stand in for God, and can call out and raise our attention, but only human action can change the outcome of a situation. We're not allowed to foist responsibility onto a Super Being. Abraham says, "*Hineini/ Here I am.*" Just then, he lifts his eyes, and sees a ram caught by its horns in the thicket. A perfect substitute for his son.

Here's my take on the story: I think Abraham was looking for that ram all along. He was looking for some way to save his son and his dreams. He understood that he was not in charge, but he hoped to find an opportunity to save his son, up to the very moment when the angel cried out to him and he saw the ram in the thicket.

The way I'm reading the narrative, Abraham is a model for us not because he is a religious fanatic who obeys an immoral order, but because he doesn't operate on automatic pilot. When he sees the ram, he's able to stop immediately and take advantage of the moment. He changes the course of history by sacrificing the ram instead of his son.

I think we can learn a lot from this. We have to expect the unexpected. Life is full of surprises, big and small. Sometimes surprises are delightful. Mazal tov, you're going to become a grandparent! And the Cubs are going to win the pennant! But often surprises hit us like a ton of bricks. The doctor's diagnosis is frightening. Our business gets bad reviews on Yelp. A relationship suddenly ends.

Or we experience a political shock. I'm not going to discuss politics this morning. I'm not going to make an argument whether Donald Trump should stay or go. But surely everyone agrees that the 2016 election was an enormous surprise. None of us expected the outcome. Moreover, the eight months of the Trump presidency have been totally unpredictable.

The question is, how can we be like Abraham, and learn to take advantage of the surprises in life? When the ground underneath us is unstable, how can we stay upright? When we find ourselves in a predicament, can we be on the lookout for a ram to help us out of the thicket?

Let me offer three principles about dealing with the unexpected.

The first is: *Don't respond to upsetting situations in a blind and reactive way.* You need to develop some equanimity. Classical Jewish literature has a lot to say about this. One Hebrew word for equanimity is hishtavut, which comes from the root shaveh, which means "equal." Whether things are good or bad, you don't have to lose your balance. You don't have to feel that you are on a roller coaster, either super excited or feeling depressed. You can step back and observe your feelings from a higher plane, a more objective level.

Equanimity is not the same thing as ambivalence. It's not that you don't care about things. Rather, you care deeply, but you learn to rise above your emotions. If something bad happens, you can say to yourself, "Anxiety is there. Yet now it is where I can see it. With it up front, I can tame it and harness it. I'll survive this. I can take the sting out of anxiety."

If you've ever watched paramedics arrive on the scene, you'll notice that they don't run around wildly and yell, like they do on TV. In real life, they clearly assess the situation and let their training do the work. It's an emergency, but they don't go crazy. Paramedics know the value of being fully present, witnessing the pain, yet not fighting fire with fire. That's hishtavut, equanimity.

A young mother asked me, "How can I keep my cool when the kids come home from school and chaos is everywhere and I have to make dinner and answer my work emails?" I told her: "When that happens, take a brief timeout and pay attention to your breathing. Your emotions will pass. Try to refocus and return to the routine that you know is necessary for your household, even if the routine may sometimes get interrupted."

To give one more example, if you pick up the newspaper and read a headline that really agitates you (something that happens to me nearly every day), you don't have to numb yourself by popping a pill or eating a whole sheet cake (as Tina Fey did on a recent Saturday Night Live skit). And you don't have to fall into the trap of righteous indignation, which usually leads us to demonize people whose beliefs and opinions are different from ours. The problems of the world won't be solved by attacking strangers on Twitter.

Instead of flipping out, you can ask yourself, what exactly is unhinging me? If I'm fearful about the future, are my fears reasonable or unreasonable? Can I get my self-control back? Can I find a way to use my gifts and talents calmly and resolutely to make a difference? What can I do that would be constructive and not destructive?

When you step back from the situation for a moment, you can get back on track. With a little practice, you can learn to surf the waves of life. I'm from California and I like surfing analogies. With hishtavut, you won't fall off the surfboard.

Again, the first principle is: *Don't respond to upsetting situations in a blind and*

reactive way.

The second principle is closely related to the first: *be patient, for God's timeline is not always our timeline.* I once heard the story of an elderly woman who had married twice, both wealthy men. She was never much in love with either man, though, and when the second husband died after a long illness, she was convinced that true love would not come her way. Then a great tragedy occurred. Her beloved son was diagnosed with cancer, and he died a short time later. She experienced such grief that she no longer wished to live. She was in her eighties, and felt her life was over. But then something truly unexpected happened. Her heart was exposed in a way it had not been before. She found herself more willing to express her feelings. She became more generous and more sensitive to the pain of others. She fell in love, deeply, with a man a few years younger than she. He adored her, and they were together for several happy years, before she died.

Am I saying that people should wait until their eighties for their true love to come? Maybe. What if our hopes and dreams just don't fly? Well, maybe they're not the right dreams. Or maybe we're asking the wrong question. Not: "When will I find happiness?" But: "How can I put myself in an open and receptive mood while I keep a eye out for those things I want? How can I find a measure of happiness while I'm waiting?"

Here's a little experiment you might try the next time you're stuck at a red light. Instead of being frustrated and saying to yourself, "I won't be happy until the light changes," say instead, "It is with happiness that I will wait for the light to turn green." This may sound ridiculous, but it is a spiritual discipline that really works. Listen to some music, or think a pleasant thought, while you are waiting. Stop putting your happiness in the hands of traffic signals that are slow to change. For that matter, stop putting it in the hands of people who are keeping you waiting until they change. You will feel a lot better.

This, by the way, is the great secret of justice seekers. They do not deny that there is injustice in the world, but they work diligently with love and happiness in their hearts, while they wait for the arc of the moral universe to bend toward justice.

Actually, I feel sorry for those environmental and peace activists who do not have a cultural tradition like the Jewish tradition to call on. Instead of giving into despair, we waited nearly 2000 years for a return to Jewish self-determination. That's a long time. If you think only in two- or four-year terms, you are missing the fact that not all problems have quick fixes. Repairing man-made damages to the environment and making peace between adversaries like the Israelis and the Palestinians are really long-term, generations-long processes.

Don't give up, but be patient, and work persistently for what you believe.

My third principle is: *build a web of trust for yourself.* This is what the Mussar rabbis call *bitahon*, trust or confidence. Starting in November, I'll be teaching an "Introduction to Mussar" class here at Beth Judea. It's a class about how to build character, how to be a mensch.

In Novardok, in Russia, the Mussar yeshiva taught its young students self-confidence

by buying them rail tickets for a destination 200 miles away—but it was only a one-way ticket, and they had no money. The young students would have to confront their fears and make their way back to the yeshiva all on their own. No easy task, in an unsafe environment, especially for Jews in 19th century Russia. Can you imagine such a thing?

I'm not suggesting that we do the same thing with our young people. But I've been hearing a lot of stories about college students today. They seem to have many fears. Of course, they should be kept physically safe; they should never be subjected to violence. And hate speech has no place on college campuses, or anywhere else.

But instead of retreating to “safe spaces” in college whenever they are exposed to ideas that make them uncomfortable, they should learn that you don't have to feel good all the time. If you want to learn resilience, it's better to be aggrieved and offended by what someone says and to try to respond thoughtfully to it. Our students have strengths that they can utilize; they don't need to hide.

In an increasingly tense political and social climate, we all need to draw on our inner resources and learn to be problem-solvers. We also need to put things in perspective. After Charlottesville, I was invited by the local Northwest suburban interfaith clergy to participate in a vigil for peace. Many of you were there that evening.

I want you to know that threatened minorities were not the main organizers of the vigil. Our white Protestant and Catholic friends did most of the work. The racists and antisemites are a tiny group, and we have many friends who will not sit by in silence and watch us be bullied. Of course, we have to stay awake, but there is a web of trust that has been built over many years, and we should give thanks for affirming gestures like that vigil.

I've been talking about trust in ourselves and others. In mussar literature, bitachon usually refers to trust in God. But most of us oscillate between trust and a lack of confidence in God. There are times when God is easy to access, like at a beautiful sunset, the birth of a child, or a wedding. At other times, it is not so easy, when life is tough, when we are suffering pain or grief. Then God is hard to see face-to-face. Yet God is still there, El rahum ve-hanun, the God of compassion in a friend's invitation to have coffee or in someone coming to visit us in the hospital. God is not only in the sunset, but also in a hug or a kind word.

As a religious concept, bitachon is not blind faith. Rather, it is the ability to face uncertainty because you've experienced moments of grace in your life. Your experiences have taught you not to give up on God.

Finally, let me try to apply to the synagogue some of the ideas that I've been suggesting to you. Beth Judea is now in a period of transition. We should acknowledge the anxiety that many people feel. Some may be saying, “Why can't we get through this painful period as quickly as possible? Just hire new clergy and get it over with.” But that would be a mistake. Important decisions can't be rushed. Moreover, the transition should be seen as an opportunity for self-examination. By stepping back, asking questions, and reflecting, we can put the congregation on the path to renewal.

Instead of letting anxiety drive the process, let's be patient, and have trust. Ernest

Hemingway said, “The best way to find out if you can trust anybody is to trust them.” So give the leadership of the congregation your trust. We will try to engage as many of you as possible in a listening campaign, to hear your thoughts. What do you think are the real needs of the shul today? What do you envision as the future of Beth Judea? We need a sense of curiosity to see what new possibilities may be lurking just around the corner. We need to stretch instead of kvetch.

My message this morning is simple. The shofar sound we hear today—the sound of the ram’s horn—is meant to remind us of Abraham’s ram. It sounds to me like an animal being released from a trap. The shofar blasts are so uncanny, that they have the power to release us from the tight grip that our anxieties have on us.

We can learn the lesson of the ram. And the lesson is this: Learn to surf the waves of life. Wait patiently and work diligently for what you believe. Trust in others and in God. Know that at any moment a ram could appear. Don’t be so bogged down in worry that you’re not able to take advantage of that moment.

May this be a year when we face difficult situations in an unexpectedly calm and deliberate manner. May we help each other make the world a better place, without forgetting our soul in the process. L’shanah tovah! A wonderful year, filled with blessings.

Amen.