



## HIGH HOLIDAYS

Rosh Hashana 2

Synagogue Shootings, The Akeidah and How To Overcome Challenges

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## SYNAGOGUE SHOOTINGS, THE AKEIDAH AND HOW TO OVERCOME CHALLENGES

### ABSTRACT

As the curtain comes down on 5779, and we celebrate the New Year of 5780, we look back and review the past year, as well as prepare for an even better year ahead. Many beautiful things happened in 5779, and we acknowledge those blessings. Yet there were also many challenges, which we also much address.

No one will quickly forget these words: Tree Of Life. Poway. Words that capture the tragic events of the past year.

Just a few weeks after last year's High Holiday season, on Shabbos, October 27, eleven Jews were murdered al kiddush Hashem, in Tree Of Life in Pittsburgh. Exactly half-a-year later, six months to the day, on the last day of Passover, a pure soul, Mrs. Lori Gilbert-Kaye, was killed in cold blood in Poway.

This past year brought personal challenges as well. Some of us may have lost loved ones. Some may have experienced family crises. Some lost jobs, faced health issues, emotional traumas, or psychological challenges.

Whatever the challenge may be, the real question is as we enter a New Year: How to deal with and overcome them?

The answer is found in a fascinating story related to events we recollect on Rosh Hashanah: how Satan challenged Abraham and Isaac on three three-day journey to the Akeidah. Not once, not twice, but three times. First as an old man, then as a young millennial, and finally by means of a seemingly insurmountable obstacle.

These reflect three general types of challenges each of us face in life.

And our forefathers' response to these challenges is also ours.

### 1. As the Curtain Comes Down on 5779

Gut yom tov and a *gut yor!* A *kesiva v'chatima tova!* A happy and sweet new year!

As the curtain comes down on 5779, and we celebrate the New Year of 5780, we look back and review the past year, as well as prepare for an even better year ahead.

Many beautiful things happened in 5779, and we acknowledge those blessings. And we are confident that 5780 will be even more blessed and more positive.

Yet there were also many challenges in the past year, which we also much address. Indeed, one of the ways we ensure that life always gets better and the blessings only increase, is by confronting any challenges in our personal or communal lives, and ultimately working to transform them into opportunities.

The beauty of Judaism is that it does not escape challenges, but faces and transcends them. We find hope in hopelessness. We light candles in darkness. We turn pain into joy.

## 2. The Challenges of 5779

No one will quickly forget these words: Tree Of Life. Poway. Words that capture the tragic events of the past year.

Just a few weeks after last year's High Holiday season, on Shabbos, October 27, a Jew-hater shot up the Tree Of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In the deadliest attack on the Jewish community in the history of the United States, eleven Jews were murdered *al kiddush Hashem*.

Exactly half-a-year later, six months to the day, on the last day of Passover, another Jew-hater walked into a Chabad House in Poway, California spraying bullets at Jews in shul, simply because they are Jews. A pure soul, Mrs. Lori Gilbert-Kaye, was killed in cold blood. The Rabbi, Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein, had his fingers blown away.

No one will ever forget those images.

I am evoking these memories not to sadden us on this wonderful holiday, but to honor these souls and their memories. And above all, to ensure that their deaths were not in vain, but serve as an inspiration to us to be better Jews and better people, committed more than ever to building a better world, as we begin a New Year.

## 3. The Challenges of 5779

Rosh Hashanah has much to teach us about dealing with challenges, even the most difficult ones. And beyond that: Rosh Hashanah, the head and central nervous system of the year, actually empowers us with the strength and resources to face and grow through these challenges.

This is also true about the personal challenges we each face on an individual level. Some of us may have lost loved ones during the past year. Some may have experienced family crises. Some may have lost jobs. Some may have undergone health issues, struggled with emotional traumas, or psychological issues.

Some may be challenged by their children. Some wish they had children. Some may be challenged by their parents. Some wish they had parents. Some of us may be challenged by our children, hoping they walk the right path and be blessed with all they need. Some of us may be challenged by our parents, caring for them the way they cared for us.

Some of us may be challenged by religion, by G-d, by trying to be better Jews. Some may find it difficult to

keep the Shabbat or eat kosher. Some may struggle with studying Torah every day, or even once a week.

On the global stage, Israel, the Jewish home, faces existential threats and serious challenges every single day. Both from within its borders and from without.

Whatever the challenge may be, on a global, national, or personal plain, on a physical, emotional, or spiritual level, Rosh Hashanah has much to tell us about how to deal with them.

#### 4. Satan Doesn't Scare Me (Anecdote)

One Rosh Hashanah, just before the blowing of the Shofar, an angry, old man covered in a billowing black cloak and holding a gnarled, spiky walking staff, walks into synagogue filled with young Jews. Behold! It is the Satan himself, the deceiving, conniving, villainous distractor of all things good. All of the members of the congregation, praying dutifully, suddenly start screaming and running for the front entrance, trampling each other in their determined efforts to get away.

Soon, everyone is evacuated from the synagogue except for one elderly woman – Sarah Greenberg, who sits calmly in her pew, praying from her Siddur, seemingly oblivious to what's going on.

This confuses Satan more than a bit. The dark villain walks up to Sarah and says, "Hey, don't you know who I am?"

"Of course I know who you are!"

"Well, aren't you afraid of me?"

"Nope."

This is a first. Perturbed, Satan says: "And why aren't you afraid of me?"

"Well," says Sarah with serene dignity. "I survived Auschwitz. How much worse could you really be?"

We Jews shouldn't be afraid of the Angel of Death, of Satan, of any evil no matter what you name it: You see, we've already experienced it. We experienced it in Auschwitz, in the pogroms, in bus bombings, in stabbings, in synagogue shootings. And, more than survived, we have thrived. So, no, we aren't afraid of challenges. We overcome them.

The question is: How? Where do we get the power to deal with and grow through our challenges?

Rosh Hashanah provides us with the answer.

## 5. Diagnosing the Challenge

The first step in addressing a challenge, is diagnosing it. When a person goes to a medical doctor, before the doctor treats the condition or illness, the doctor first must review the history, data, and symptoms to diagnose the core issue that has to be addressed. One cannot prescribe a cure if one does not first define the problem and diagnose the illness.

The same is true with challenges. Each challenge, like each ailment, has its root cause and issue that, once defined and discerned, may be addressed and cured.

We Jews always look for and build upon precedence. One of the advantages of being a 4000-year-old people and living in a 5780-year-old world is that we have thousands of years of precedence to learn from and build on.

Our eternal tradition had addressed, helped us cope with, and helped remedy every challenge imaginable.

And the challenges of the past year, 5779, and the ones of the coming year, 5780, are no exception. If we look back to a series of challenges overcome by our forefathers Abraham and Isaac, we will surely learn many lessons on how to address the challenges of today.

## 6. The Akeidah

Today, on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, we read the famous Akeidah story, when Abraham and Isaac travel together to Mount Moriah for the Binding of Isaac<sup>1</sup>. This would be Abraham's tenth and final test, or challenge, to see whether he was worthy to perpetuate, propagate, and progenerate the unity of G-d into this world and the nation that would exemplify and uphold it.

The story is well-known. We read it today and we recite it every day at the outset of the *karbanot* section of the morning service. In short: G-d commands Abraham to take his favorite son, Isaac, and offer him up on the Temple mount. They travel for three days with all the necessary materials. On the third day they lift their eyes and finally arrive at Moriah. There, Abraham prepares the wood and altar, binds Isaac, and is about to offer him. An angel appears and tells Abraham that he passed the test, G-d knows that he's a G-d-fearing man; he should not sacrifice Isaac, from whom the Jewish nation will spring. Abraham lifts his eyes, sees a ram caught by its horns, and offers that ram in Isaac's stead.

This story is one of the Torah's deepest. Much has been written to explain the story itself. I want to focus on the three-day journey to Moriah and the immediate aftermath. And it features the world's most conniving, deceiving, lying, tricking, subterfuge character -- Satan himself.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 22:1-24.

<sup>2</sup> Note to Rabbi: Later in the sermon the word "satan" is explained. But in case you feel that you want to immediately dispel any

## 7. A Journey With Many Detours, Delays and Recalculations

The Midrash elaborates on the story, providing us with a fascinating account of the challenges Abraham and Isaac faced on their way to the Akeidah.

From verse three we know that Abraham arose early in the morning, and he saddled his donkey, and he took his two young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for a burnt offering, and he arose and went to the place of which G-d had told him.

And then the very next verse, verse 4, states: On the third day, Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar.

What happened between Abraham rising early in the morning to start his journey and three days later when he lifted his eyes and saw the destination?

What happened on the three-day journey from their home in Beer Sheba to Mount Moriah in Jerusalem?

The Midrash relates:<sup>3</sup>

As they embarked on their journey, suddenly an old man appeared. This was the Satan dressed as a wise and seasoned man of many years and much experience.

“Where are you going?” Asks the old man of Abraham.

“I’m going to pray.”

“Really? Then why do you carry fire, a knife in your hand, and wood upon your back?”

“Perhaps,” says Abraham to the old man, “we will stay for a few days and slaughter and animal, cook it, and eat it.”

Says the old man: “Was I not there when G-d commanded you to take your son? Will a man of your age give up and lose your precious son miraculously gifted to you when you were a hundred years old? Have you not heard the parable of the person who had the prize in his hand, lost it, and then tried to find it by others?

“Maybe you’ll tell me you’ll have another son. I tell you it’s all ludicrous. This journey of yours is from the dark

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misconceptions about the word (which many associate with the Christian version of satan, you can add this:

But first a few words to dispel different myths about the name Satan. In Judaism Satan refers to the prosecuting angel (as we find in the Book of Job), or to a negative, dark force that attempts to obstruct and oppose our way in all good things. As shall be discussed later in the sermon, the Hebrew word Satan is rooted in *le’satan*, to thwart, distract or deter a Jew from fulfilling his purpose. The Talmud (Baba Batra 16a) associates Satan with the evil inclination and the angel of death.

<sup>3</sup> Tanchuma, Vayeira 22.

side! If you kill your son, you will be charged with murder and be guilty by law!"

Abraham calmly responds: "It wasn't the dark side who commanded me, but the Holy Blessed One. I shall not heed you."

When the old, conniving man saw that his old man ploy wouldn't work, he dressed up as a young man and approached Isaac.

"Where are you going, young sir?"

"I'm going to study Torah."

Said the young devious man to Isaac: "Are you going to study Torah while alive or while dead?"

Says Isaac: "Is there a person that studies Torah after death?"

"Insolent the son of insolence! How many fasts did your poor mother fast so that you should be born! And you listen to this foolish old man [Abraham your father] who tricked you into this whole charade. He's going to slaughter you!"

"Nevertheless," says Isaac, "I will not waver from my inclination, nor will I go against my father's will."

The Midrash continues to explain why their journey took three days, when the trip from Beer Sheba to Jerusalem should be far shorter.

When the dark angel saw that his challenges and arguments were not working, he resorted to a third trick in his bag. When he saw that he couldn't change or challenge their conviction, he created an obstacle outside of them. He placed a massive river in front of Abraham and Isaac, so that they could not pass.

With a seemingly insurmountable obstacle in their path, separating them from their destination, Abraham could have simply turned back; this was the perfect excuse to abort the mission -- especially as it involved offering his son up to G-d!

But that's not what Abraham did. He immediately walked into the river. When the water reached up to his knee, he motioned for Isaac to follow him in. Halfway into the river, the water reached their throats. Just then Abraham raised his eyes heavenward:

"Master of the universe, You chose me, You distinguished me, and You revealed Yourself to me. You told me that You are One and that I am one, and through me the entire world will know Your Name. And, when You told me to raise my son for an elevation offering, I did not hesitate and committed myself to fulfilling your command.

"And now the water reaches up to our very souls. If I, or my son Isaac drown, who will fulfill Your mission?

Through whom will Your Name be unified?"

At that moment G-d replied: "I promise you, by your life shall you unify My Name." Then G-d caused the river to immediately dry up.

This obstacle and seemingly unpassable challenge is what caused a short journey to take three days.

The bottom line and end of the story is that no challenge could stop Abraham and Isaac from fulfilling their Divine calling.

## 8. Thwarting Your Mission Knowing What

This story, which we recollect in today's Torah reading, offers us remarkable lessons in dealing with our own challenges -- personal and collective. The difficulties faced by the first Jew, Abraham, is experienced by every Jew throughout history, including everyone of us.

We each are charged with our unique calling. And we will each face challenges that will attempt to oppose and impede us.

The Hebrew word *Satan*, come from the root of *le'satan*<sup>4</sup>, which means to thwart, distract or deter. As we travel through life, driven by our divine mission, we each will be confronted by a "satan" in one form or another who will try to distract and obstruct us from fulfilling our mission and reaching our destination.

This dark, sinister character symbolizes the epitome of a challenge: a soul clearly knows where it must travel to and what it must accomplish. But then this negative voice, comes all dressed up and attempt to convince us with all types of enticing arguments that you're really meant to travel elsewhere. And he'll explain to you how what you're doing is senseless and goes against the will of G-d.

Thus, the first message to know is that when you are challenged in life, it's only because, as a Jew, a grandchild of Abraham, you are on the path to a divine destination, you are on a G-dly mission to unify G-d's Name across the world. That is why the "dark angel" tries to thwart your path, just as he tried to thwart your grandfathers Abraham and Isaac.

And, as we see from the above narrative, the greater your mission, the more the deterrent, the thwarter, the distractor, will try to stop you.

## 9. Three Types of Challenges

These challenges and impediments come in three general forms:<sup>5</sup>

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4 Numbers 22:22.

5 See Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer #31 and #32, for additional Satanic challenges and acts associated with this story.

- 1) Old challenges that have been around for a long time. They appear to us in the form of a wise, seasoned and experienced, voice and that try to change your thinking with logic and sense.
- 2) Young, new, and innovative challenges that speak to the passionate youthful energies of our spirits. They attempt to alter the minds and hearts of impressionable neophytes, and try to change their convictions by questioning them and offering better ones.
- 3) External blockages and obstacles that stand in the way, seemingly insurmountable hurdles, which give you the impression that you have no control over the situation. They try to impress upon you to turn back and retreat, because these impediments stand between where you are and where you want to be.

## 10. Challenge Type #1: Old, Classic Challenges

First the conniving negative influence comes to Abraham, and every Jew, dressed as an old man. “Take it from a wise old man,” says Old Grouch. “Your mission is foolish. It makes no sense. You finally have the prize in your hand, will you give it up for some folly that you’ve been told? Anyone suggesting as much, must be ungodly,” argues the voice of the elderly “dark angel.”

Everyone of us has faced such a challenge. We knew in our inner hearts that our mission consisted of reaching a particular positive goal -- a spiritual objective -- our Jerusalem and Moriah. We felt driven by a divine calling to achieve a particular destination.

But then a “logical, old, wise” argument took over. Does it really make sense for me to actually do this? Should I really sacrifice everything I love just for some supposed G-dly command? It must not come from G-d.

This is a mighty challenge. To which Abraham, and every Jew, has an even mightier response.

“No, old man. G-d Himself told me this is what I have to do. Period. If G-d Himself tells me something it must be Truth and I will do everything to fulfill my mission!”

## 11. Challenge Type #2: New, Innovative Challenges

When he sees that logic doesn’t work, the dark villain starts playing on the emotions and impressionable traits of the youth -- the young spirit in each one of us.

Dressed as a young, hip millennial, he comes and says: “Why would you listen to that 137-year-old old man. He’s so old fashioned and out of style. He’s not doing right by you. He wants to slaughter you! Think about your poor mother who prayed and fasted for you. Shouldn’t you aspire to more than just being a sacrifice? Forget your father’s ways. Follow your own passions. Find your own path. Be a trailblazer. A revolutionary. Be young and change the world!”

This in many ways is a mightier challenge than the first. Certainly Abraham, 137 years old and married for more than a century, won't change his ways. But Isaac, he's only 37, he's an impressionable, passionate, single young man. Why should he not heed the young dark joker's call to arms?

This siren's cry is heard every day by our youth. Forget the old ways, abandon the path of your elders. Disrupt! Blaze a new path. Innovate, start-up, be new!

And, like all of the cynic's good arguments, there's a kernel of truth in this argument. There is much to be said about the virtues of innovation and pioneering new ways. But all great discoveries are built on eternal truths and based on principles that preceded us. New fruits come from powerful roots.

The dark angel's intentions are not to create new opportunities, but to thwart any forward progress. His argument is just dressed up in "new and creative" ideas, but his intentions are destructive: To impede the way to reach your destination and fulfill your mission.

Isaac does not have to be told to innovate, to be young and hip, to blaze a path. He already is! Only, it's not the villainous character's path, it's his own -- driven by his divine path.

Thus responds Isaac: "Thanks for your kind advice, young revolutionary, but I think I'll stick with my own convictions, not yours, and I also will not be thwarted from the ways of my father. I am secure enough that I can be me, my own young man, while also sharing the same mission as my father."

### Challenge Type #3: Uncontrollable Obstacles

Finally, when this dude named Satan sees that he cannot change you and your convictions -- not with "old" or "young" arguments -- he pivots to a third tactic: Your commitment is admirable, but their are external obstacles in your path, which will not allow you to reach your destination and objectives.

This type of obstacle is one we face every single day. Yes, we may have secure and unwavering conviction and we may be completely focused on our mission and purpose here on earth. But then a monkey wrench is thrown into the equation, an obstruction that seems completely and utterly out of your control.

Someone gets sick. A loved one passes. A job is lost. A "satan" shoots up a synagogue. These challenges can seem insurmountable. How can we ever reach Moriah when a young innocent body is blown apart by a terrorist?

And the deeper we walk into the "river" impeding our way, the more it seems to threaten us. Until, at the deepest point, with the waters at our throats and about to go under, we raise up our eyes to heaven and say:

"Master of the universe, You chose me, You distinguished me, and You revealed Yourself to me. You told me that You are One and that I am one, and through me the entire world will know Your Name. And, when You told me

to raise up my life for an elevation offering, I did not hesitate and committed myself to fulfilling your command.

“And now the water reaches up to our very souls. If I, or my family drown, who will fulfill Your mission? Through whom will Your Name be unified?”

At that moment G-d replies: “I promise you, by your life shall you unify My Name.”

It is then that the obstacle dries up and the path to Moriah is clear.

The short journey may take three days, but the destination will be reached.

### 13. The Jewish Secret to Overcoming Challenges and Transcending Obstacles

This is how we Jews deal with a seemingly insurmountable obstacles, challenges that seems to be out of our control: We turn our eyes to heaven and remind ourselves that the Creator of it all, even of Satan, even of distraction and disruption, put us on this journey for one reason: So that the whole world should know His Unified Name.

Can any physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, political, personal, global obstacle get in the way of that?

History is witness to the countless ways the Jewish people have endured and grown stronger through our challenges.

And on this day of Rosh Hashanah we commit anew to our divine calling and mission.

As we read this Torah portion and go on our own three-day journey, remember that nothing has, nothing does, and nothing ever will stand in the way of our mission.

And, through our conviction and faith, may we merit a world without any challenges at all, but only complete and utter blessing, prosperity, health, and life, both materially and spiritually.

Despite the many challenges that come along with life, we hope, pray and believe that 5780 will be a tremendously positive, painless, blessed year. More: Because we will address and transform life's challenges, we know for certain and with conviction that 5780 will be a tremendously positive, painless, blessed year.

Like Abraham and Isaac, when do not allow challenges to distract us but instead always write positivity and focus into the books of our lives, we are guaranteed to be written into The Book of Life!

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