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Yom Kippur Day – Me Too

Almost a year ago, back in November, Comedian Larry David hosted Saturday Night Live and delivered an opening monologue that created quite a stir. It ended bizarrely, as he wondered what it might have been like if he, a nebbishy Polish Jew, had been interred in a Concentration Camp and tried to ask a female prisoner out on a date. This comedic offering was so offensive that I couldn’t help thinking that it wasn’t meant to be funny, but rather, that he used this absurd concept to deflect attention from his previous topic, which involved Jewish men and sexual harassment.

“I couldn’t help notice a disturbing pattern emerging,” he said, in a Woody Allen-esque manner, “that many of the predators, not all, but many of them are Jews. And I have three words to say to that: Oy Vey Z’meer. I don’t like it when Jews are in the headlines for notorious reasons. I want: Einstein discovers the theory of relativity. Salk cures polio. ... What I don’t want [to hear about] is Weinstein...”

As he delivered his lines, the properly primed SNL audience obligingly laughed at all of his facial gestures and assorted signs of discomfort. But sitting on my couch in the privacy of my home, I couldn’t stop myself from cringing.

It’s been nine months since I heard that monologue, enough time for me to move on to other matters, of which there are plenty. Yet I continue to think about it because sexual harassment is a story that isn’t going away. And as the list of accused men grows longer, Jewish men, an ethnic group which comprises approximately two percent of the men in this country, we continue to be over-represented.

I’m sure if we tried we could come up with a number of reasons why this is just an aberration. But I’m not interested in rationalizations. For while Jewish men may be smart, handsome, thoughtful and good providers, there’s clearly something wrong with how we’ve been treating women, and instead of looking for excuses, I think the times call for us to do some soul searching and see if there’s a common thread. Because if there is, we need to recognize it, so

that we can take responsibility for our errors, ask for forgiveness, and begin a process of change.

I'd like for us to look at two areas of Jewish law – not because we Reform Jews, or the vast majority of American Jews apply them in our lives, but because they form the foundation for the norms of behavior, the culture that has come to exist within our community for hundreds and hundreds of years, helping to shape our attitude and outlook.

The first area to consider is our approach to women. In all honesty, there are so many laws that fall into this category that I couldn't begin to give an overview, which in itself is quite interesting. Why would the rabbis, all men, have spent so much time and attention on women if not to control their behavior? In any case, let's look at a couple of examples of the place of women in Jewish tradition.

According to the *Tanakh* – the Bible, when a man took a woman as his wife, she left her father's house and ancestral tribe (her extended family) and moved to her husband's community. If she had children, they were immediately accepted into her husband's family. If her husband then died, she would remain with the family to raise his children. But if they had no children when he died, she could only remain if one of his relatives agreed to marry her. If not, this woman was expected to return to her family of origin. Her status in his family was entirely dependent on either her husband or her offspring. She had no independent status of her own.

To be fair, this was the custom throughout the ancient Near East. And given that the Israelites lived in this world, we should not be surprised that they adopted a similar practice. However, this cannot excuse the fact that thousands of years later, Jewish tradition has done little to modify this attitude.

Let me give you one more example from the Torah. If a woman made a vow (a promise) while she was living in her father's house, when her father learned of this vow, he had the right to annul it. If the woman was married and living in her husband's house when she made the vow, when her husband learned of it, he had the right to annul it. Regardless of the reason for the oath – whether it was related to her family, her household, or even if it pertained only to her, this woman did not have the right to independently accept any obligation upon herself; for she was already obligated to either her father or her husband. And to take on an additional obligation without their consent would deprive her father or husband of *their* right to her complete attention.

Unfortunately, these two examples are not outliers; they are the norm. And despite how reprehensible this may sound, a tradition which treats women in this manner is a tradition that considers women to be nothing more than possessions; first, of their father, and then of their husband.

Now to our credit, as Judaism developed it tried to reshape this reality by teaching that, rather than being seen as subservient, women hold "different roles" in society than men do. Men

represent the family to the outside world, while women control the internal world – they’re in charge of the home. Yet, if we’re honest, while the concept of “different roles” is a lovely thought, it does nothing to level the playing field or alter a woman’s place in society. Men were in control. Women were subservient. And this is easy to see.

Consider the rituals of traditional Jewish life where the length of a woman’s skirt and style of her clothing are proscribed; where once she is married, only her husband is allowed to see her hair; where men are not permitted to sit next to a woman, see her, or even hear her when they are praying, lest they become distracted from their obligations.

Rather than recognizing that women might have the same need or desire to pray as men, women were seen as distractions, treated as objects. And what do you do with an object that’s causing a distraction? Move it out of sight. Put it in a closet. This is how traditional Jewish practice treated women, not as soulful beings, cleaving to be in relationship with other people and God, but as objects that distract men from their tasks, and are best kept out of sight.

Can there be any doubt that this attitude has left a lasting mark, not only on Jewish attitudes towards women, but on our society as a whole, where women are still treated as “less than.” How much do women earn? Less than men. What right do women have to medical treatment? Less than men. What right do women have to make decisions about their own bodies? Less than the courts or the legislatures, which are still controlled by men. We may preach equal rights, but it remains more theoretical than reality.

The second area for us to consider is the concept of Chosen-ness. We Jews are the “chosen people.” We were chosen by God. The way Reform Judaism looks at this concept is a little different than others. We believe that “chosen-ness” means that *we* chose God, and in so doing, we accepted additional obligations and responsibilities upon ourselves. It is for this reason, because of our deeper commitments, that God sees us as special. In other words, we earned it.

Other streams of Judaism, however, have no qualms about accepting the idea of “chosen-ness” on its face value. God chose Abraham, God chose us – and therefore we are special; we are better than the other nations of the world; better than the other *goyim*.

Truthfully, there’s nothing unusual about feeling proud of yourself, of seeing yourself as special. In fact, we preach this to our kids all the time. We want them to have good self-esteem, to see themselves as worthy, to achieve. The issue with chosen-ness has less to do with how an individual or member of a group sees themselves, and much more with how they view or treat others.

There’s a story from the Talmud that helps explain this issue. It concerns Rabbi Shimon ben Shetah who spent his life working in the flax trade. His students said to him: “Retire, and we’ll buy you a donkey, so you won’t have to work so hard.” They bought him a donkey from a non-Jewish trader, and while they were bringing it to him, they realized that there was a precious

gem hanging from its neck. When they came to him, they were overjoyed and said: “From now on you [really] won’t have to work anymore!” He asked them “Why?” They explained, “We bought you a donkey from a non-Jewish trader, and then we found this precious gem hanging from its neck.” (In other words, since we bought it from a non-Jew, we are not obligated to return the gem, even though it was clearly not a part of the sale. Back to the story...) Shimon said, “Did its master know?” They replied, “No.” He said, “Then go and return it... Do you think I am a barbarian?! I want to hear the non-Jew say: ‘Blessed be the God of the Jews’, more than I want all the material rewards of this world!”

Rabbi Shimon is a righteous man who expected his students to go “beyond the letter of the law.” But if it had been up to them, the students would have been quite content in following “the letter of the law,” and acting in a way that resembles thievery. All this is to say, that Rabbi Shimon is the exception. When it comes to applying the letter of the law, our Jewish tradition held that there was one standard for dealing with our own people, and a different standard for dealing with others.

Once again, in a different time and place, in a world where Jews were discriminated against and persecuted, we could understand where this attitude might have come from. But in our day and age, the idea of treating another human being in this manner must be condemned. The Torah itself teaches that we are to have one law for both the citizen and stranger alike. This is how a just, fair and righteous society behaves; it is how a just, fair and righteous individual acts. But it is not how we Jews have always behaved.

Friends, elements from our traditional teachings about women and the non-Jew have long been part of our culture. Today they continue to subtly exert influence in quiet ways, in locker room language, in conversations in frat houses, in ingrained biases that we might not always be aware of, but are present, and clearly exert a pull on our attitudes and behaviors. Just look at the list of names. They’re not all Jewish. We’re not the only ones who disrespect women. But we certainly have not provided an alternative point of view. And that’s the least of what we should demand from ourselves.

There are sins of commission; and those who have acted in unethical ways must be held accountable for their actions. There are also sins of omission. And I believe, as a Jewish community, we all must take responsibility for allowing an immoral culture, which degrades and disrespects others to persist. We must act to reshape this culture.

We must teach our sons and our daughters the dignity of all life – regardless of gender, race, religion or nationality; that each of us was created *b’tzelem Elohim* – in the image of God; that each of us was formed with a spark of holiness; that none of us were made to serve another, but rather all of us were made to serve God – by striving to be holy.

We must teach our daughters and our sons the lesson that God taught to Cain – that yes, we are our sibling’s keeper; that we cannot turn a blind eye to the wrongs that are committed against others; that we will not remain silent or indifferent.

We must teach our children the words that Moses spoke to the Israelites as they prepared to enter the promised land: *Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof* – Justice, justice shall you pursue! As Rabbi Harold Kushner explains: “More than merely respecting or following justice; we must actively pursue it.”

On this Yom Kippur, this day of acknowledging shortcomings and failures, we, as a community, are called on to acknowledge the mistakes of our past, and to remove the cultural undercurrents, which for generations have wounded, demeaned and belittled our mothers, sisters, daughters and wives, disrespected our neighbors and friends, and given permission for Jewish men to act in ways that desecrate the name of God.

Repeat after me:

Let us sin no longer.

We ask for forgiveness.

We will be silent no longer.

We have work to do.

Let it begin now.

Amen.

Kol Nidre – The Struggle

On Erev Rosh Hashanah I spoke about the challenges facing Israel. Not external threats from Iran, Syria, Hezbollah or Hamas, but the internal challenge of defining the nature of the State. As I explained, the vision that Israel’s founders had for their country was a Jewish State in the fashion of a Western democracy. And yet, from the very beginning, there was a counter narrative, which saw the re-birth of Israel as a religious event; the manifestation of God’s promise to return our people to our land. It is a beautiful, stirring, hopeful idea. But it doesn’t come without a cost.

According to our religious brothers and sisters, since God upheld His end of the bargain by bringing the Jewish people back into our land, we must uphold our end by ensuring that Israel’s policies follow the dictates of Jewish law, and by enshrining the teachings of the Torah and Talmud as Israel’s Constitution.

If this world view were to hold sway, Israel would not be a Western country, it would be a religious country, or perhaps even a theocracy. And thus, some seventy years after the rebirth of the State, the vision of Israel’s pioneers, (as well as the majority of her population) is clashing against the world view of Israel’s “religious” citizens.

Truthfully, it’s a poetic clash, for most Israelis are not antithetical towards religion. The vast majority of Jewish Israelis, even those who are proudly secular, enjoy Shabbat dinner with their family, appreciate the rhythm of the Jewish calendar which is based on the cycle of Israel’s seasons, and integrate Jewish tradition into their daily lives. Judaism is alive in their culture: in their art, music and theater, in their schools and civic events. With Hebrew as their mother

tongue, Israel as their homeland, and the IDF in which they serve protecting her population, Israelis of all stripes have an incredibly strong relationship with their Judaism. Thus, the question facing Israelis today is not: Should Israel be a Jewish State? Rather it's: How far should Israel go towards becoming a Halakhic State – a State that operates according to the teachings of the Talmud and Torah?

I'll tell you, from my perspective – for the sake of both the people of Israel, as well as the integrity of Judaism, it is vitally important for there to be a separation between religious authority and political power. For as we have seen throughout history and into modern times, whenever a religion attains the powers of a State, it cannot help itself from using those powers to impose its religious doctrines, not only on its own people, but on outsiders as well. And there is nothing that corrodes the beauty and integrity of religion; nothing that scars the purity of a soul, more than coercion.

Religion is at its best when it speaks to the hearts of its adherents. But when religion has access to power, it forsakes the heart and uses might. This is why Israel's current struggle is so important, for it could end up defining, not only the nature of Israel's civil society, but also the character of Judaism.

Now I know what some of you are thinking: "Rabbi, you spoke about this topic last week. Why are you bringing it up again?" I know this might sound a little strange, but I'm bringing it up because I'm a bit jealous. After all, not only do Israelis live in the land of our ancestors, speak the language of our people, and are building a 21st century Jewish nation in the middle of a hostile neighborhood, they're also grappling with what it means to be a Jew.

For Israelis, Judaism is not an extraneous part of their lives – it's integral to who they are and how they live. It's an important topic at their dinner tables and in the Knesset. It provides the framework for examining some of the most serious questions of the day. It is a living part of their existence. Like oxygen, Judaism is in the air they breathe; sometimes creating confrontation, other times bringing comfort; sometimes causing confusion, other times offering clarity, but none the less, it is always there.

I'm jealous because you and I are blessed to live in a democratic country, where our rights are protected, and discrimination is a crime. We live in a community where the concentration of Jews is large enough to make the fact that we comprise less than two percent of the population feel absurd. And yet, for far too many of us, Judaism is largely absent from our lives. Yes, we attend High Holiday services and belong to congregations, where we support Jewish life and education, and provide resources for the next generation. But you know as well as I, that many of our Jewish friends and neighbors do not. They've decided that it's too expensive, or it's not a good value, or it's not that high a priority. They need a Bar Mitzvah? They turn to a tutor and private clergy, or perhaps to Chabad, throw themselves a nice party, and check the "raise the kids Jewish box" off their checklist, as if just reading from the Torah indelibly marks a soul as Jewish.

I know that we're not the first generation in America to treat our Judaism casually. I remember hearing similar sermons when I was growing up. But there was a difference. They had something that we no longer possess. They were living at a time when the Holocaust was recent history, in an America that was nowhere near as tolerant and accepting of us as it is today.

European Jewry understands what I'm talking about. For them, anti-Semitism is once again becoming normalized. It's alive and well in Great Britain, where an anti-Semite leads the Labor party. It's thriving in France, where an elderly Jewish woman was brutally murdered, but the police refused to investigate because they decided that she accidentally fell from her balcony. Meanwhile, in Sweden the courts have refused to punish a man who tried to burn down a temple while 30 young people were celebrating Hanukkah inside. These attacks don't strengthen the Jewish communities of Europe; little by little they're pushing them out. But they have strengthened European's Jewish identities. Their children attend Jewish day schools where they learn to speak Hebrew, observe the Jewish holidays, and practice Jewish ritual. Meanwhile, for far too many of us, Judaism lies dormant.

From what I've seen, our approach to Judaism appears to be fairly similar to our neighbor's approach to Christianity. They might go to church on the holidays, but mostly, Christmas and Easter are celebrated with a festive meal featuring traditional foods eaten around a table filled with extended family. In our world, family dinners don't happen as often as they used to, so this is a special way to mark the holidays. But as my minister friends tell me, it's not Christmas.

What am I after? It's pretty simple really. I want the most fortunate Jews in history, I want us to be more engaged with our religion, take it a little less for granted. I'd like us to struggle more with our Judaism, treat it as if it was important to us, like it mattered.

Last week at our Second Day Rosh Hashanah service, seven courageous men and women walked onto the bimah and read the story of creation from the Torah. It wasn't easy. In fact, I think a few of them were even sweating. But I'll tell you, I felt proud. I was proud that they cared enough to take on a task that made them sweat, that made them work; that they cared enough to be challenged.

You know, the things that matter most to us are the things we struggle over. If it didn't matter, we'd give it up and walk away. Marriage is something that's worth sweating over. Providing for our family is worth sweating over. Caring for friends is worth sweating over. Honoring the sacrifices of our grand and great-grandparents, passing along our heritage, living with good values, being part of something that is larger than ourselves, having a sense of purpose, these are all things that are worth sweating over. They're worth the effort.

When I was growing up I remember people worrying that, even though we survived Hitler, Judaism might not last another hundred years. Our birthrate was too low. The number of elderly Jews far surpassed the number of Jewish children. That it was only a matter of time till Judaism disappeared.

We don't have to worry about this anymore. Honestly, Israel is a vibrant, vital country. And those Israelis are having lots of children. So many, that they passed by America as the most populous Jewish nation in the world. They're strong, smart and committed. They're building something of great value. They take pride in themselves, their accomplishments and their identity. They aren't going anywhere. They're staying where they are and are growing. Friends, I'm not worried about the future of Judaism anymore.

But I am concerned about our future – the future of American Jewry. I'm worried that we have other interests that are higher priorities, or that we simply can't be bothered to dedicate the time, not to mention the money. America is too comfortable, too easy, too filled with distractions for us to focus our attention on things that are vital, things that make us sweat, things that are a struggle.

I want to take us back to a story in the book of Genesis. The story of Jacob, who left home as a boy and returned as a man. He left home because he had been lazy. His mother wanted him to be a success. She watched over him, cared for him, and whenever the opportunity arose, she made sure that he received every blessing that was available to him, whether he deserved it or not.

Jacob knew better. He knew that not all those blessings belonged to him; that at least one of them should have gone to his brother. But like I said, he was lazy. So, he allowed his father to put his hands on his head and give him a blessing that was intended for someone else. When his brother learned what happened, he was furious.

Like she did throughout his life, Jacob's mother protected her son from his angry brother, and sent him off to live with her family, where he married, had many children, and attained a measure of wealth. After twenty years away, Jacob, no longer a boy, decided to return home. While he and his family traveled, word came to him about his brother, who had turned himself into a mighty man. Jacob learned that Esau was headed in his direction, accompanied by 400 armed men. Jacob worried about what was to come. Indeed, he even sweated.

Jacob divided up his family and their possessions into two camps. He placed one in the north, and the other in the south. He told his wives and children: "If Esau intends to do us harm, when he attacks one camp, the other one must flee." And then he left his family and headed down to a river where he spent the night.

As Jacob sat by that river he watched the moon rise, saw the clouds roll in, cover it up, and blot out its light. In the darkness, a dread fell upon him and he found himself engaged in the battle of his life. For how long he wrestled with that man in the dark, he never knew. But when dawn finally broke they were still engaged. The man, or was it an angel, was trying to flee, but Jacob clung to him with all his might. "What do you want from me?" the angel cried out. "I want a blessing" said Jacob. "You already have a blessing," he responded, "the one you stole from your brother." "I want one of my own," said Jacob, "one that I sweated for myself."

The angel said to him: “What’s your name?” He replied: “Jacob.” The angel said: “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human and have prevailed.” (Gen. 32:28) According to the text, Jacob’s struggle is contained within the name Yisrael; that part of what it means to be “Israel” is to struggle.

Friends, I’ve often thought about the fact that Israel, the Promised Land, never really turned out to be flowing with milk and honey. It was a place that required its inhabitants to work. Even in modern times, while many of Israel’s Middle Eastern neighbors had the blessing of oil flowing out of the ground, Israelis didn’t even have water. And yet, where did the blessings of Israel’s neighbors get them? What successes have their countries achieved? And what about Israel, the country that lacked everything, that needed to scrimp, scrape and save to get by; the country that needed to struggle. How has that worked out for them? Pretty well, I’d say.

Friends, I think struggling gets a bad rap. Yes, it’s hard work; it’s not always pleasant, but it’s pretty darn fulfilling. It means a lot to look back and see all that you’ve accomplished. And those accomplishments become more dear than just about anything else you have when you’ve worked so hard to bring them about.

On this night of Yom Kippur, I want to ask for a blessing for the children of Israel – not the blessing that Jacob received from the hand of his mother, but the blessing that Yisrael earned for himself from the sweat of his brow, from a difficult struggle. On that dark and lonely night, Jacob came to know himself, his courage and strength, his achievements and accomplishments. He saw himself, not as a child, but as the father of a nation; a father of children who would work hard to create something of themselves, something that no other family on earth could lay claim to. They would hear a call to be holy, become a community, teach their children values to live by, hold their heads high, and when life became difficult, they would never give up, they would struggle on, because there is dignity in struggle, there is worth in sacrifice, there is honor in righteousness, there is holiness in our heritage, and all of this belongs to us, as long as, like Jacob, we refuse to let it go.

O God, let us feel the spirit that came upon Jacob on that dark and starless night. Let us feel the sense of worth in struggling for something ancient and holy, something enduring and worthy, something the generations bequeathed to us, that was more precious than any other possession. Let us feel the honor, the dignity, the achievement of being the children of Yisrael, and feeling the satisfaction that comes from struggling for something that is worthy. Amen.

Erev Rosh Hashanah – Building Israel

My first memories of Israel came from Israeli teachers in Hebrew School, who introduced me to Jaffa oranges, and kibbutzniks in blue hats who drained the swamps and made the desert bloom. They taught me that being Jewish was about more than how one prays; it could also be how one works with their hands, faces challenges, and builds a country.

My first trip to Israel came when I was 19. I worked on a Kibbutz for eleven months and stayed on when the war in Lebanon began and half of the men were called up to fight. During that year I asked my Kibbutz family, the Ozinsky's, if I should make *aliyah*. "Only if you're going to live on a Kibbutz," they said. "Israel's changing."

My third year in Israel was 1987. While I studied, the Palestinians decided to revolt – it was called "the Intifada." Israel was caught off guard. As the Palestinian protests raged, Israelis called on their government to respond. They called for change. Israel did, entering the era of the Oslo Peace Process.

In 1995, when I came to Beth-El, there was still hope that Oslo might succeed. I remember giving a sermon suggesting that one day there could be two Jerusalems – one, comprised of West Jerusalem and part of the old city, that would remain as Israel's capitol; and the other, comprised of East Jerusalem and part of the old city, that could become the Palestinian's capitol. Not everyone in the congregation agreed with that sermon. As it turned out, neither did the Palestinians.

After Israel spent a decade searching for a path to peace, the Palestinians decided to pursue a different course. They chose terror, and Israel changed again. With no other way to defend themselves and their children, Israel took a passive approach, building a wall to separate their families from suicide bombers. The world screamed. I cheered. Could there be a more righteous response to those seeking to kill us, than to simply keep them away?

Sometimes it's hard to remember that Israel is more than just a conflict zone. As the years have passed, she's changed in other ways. From an economy based on agriculture, Israel moved into science, medicine and technology. Based on their experience living in a water poor land, Israel developed new methods to conserve and recycle water, to desalinate the oceans, even finding a way to draw water out of thin air.

Israel has shared its agricultural knowledge with the nations of Africa; and even offered it to its enemies. In times of crisis all over the world, Israel is among the first countries to respond. When wounded Syrians appeared at the border Israel cared for them, making sure that when they were able to go home there would be no trace of Israel on their clothing, for that could be deadly. No matter, these survivors will always carry a piece of Israel in their hearts; as do the Syrian refugees living in Jordan, to whom Israel continues to provide covert aid.

The truth is, I could talk for hours about Israel's morality, her achievements. I could speak for hours about the evil practices of the Palestinians whose new method of "fighting the occupation" is to send flaming kites and balloons into Israel, burning down thousands of acres of crops and wilderness areas; or their murderous neighbors to the north, the Syrians who gas and slaughter their own people. There's no question that Israel is not a perfect country. But its merits far outweigh its sins. And for this we should feel a sense of gratitude and pride.

And yet if I'm honest, along with those feelings of gratitude and pride, these last few years a sense of ambivalence has crept into my soul; like we've been moving in different directions and I'm being left behind. Not just me personally, but us Reform Jews, us pluralistic Jews, us American Jews; that Israel's attitude toward us is changing, which inevitably means that so will our relationship.

Where does this feeling come from? It's a combination of things. It's the government's gymnastics over keeping its promise to create an area at the Kotel where Reform and Conservative Jews can pray like we do at home. It's the publication of an Israeli Rabbinate blacklist of American Rabbis (Reform, Conservative and Orthodox) whose conversions are not accepted. It's the "modesty" police in towns like Beit Shemesh, who shame Orthodox girls for wearing dresses they deem too short. It's displays at museums that omit references to the age of antiquities or geological events for fear of challenging the beliefs of Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Jews. It's the creeping power of a fundamentalist sect of Judaism that rejects modernity and has more and more control over Israel's civil and social life. It's the feeling that Israel's Jewish identity is changing so much that, *as a Jew*, I'm not sure it will still be a place that I will feel at home.

Now if there's a silver lining to this situation, it's that I'm not alone. There are actually many Israelis who share these same feelings – particularly over the issues that affect their daily lives. They're upset that a week ago, a religious party threatened to shut down the government if bridge work over a major Tel Aviv highway took place on Shabbat, so that tens of thousands of commuters could get to their jobs on time when the work week began. This should have come as no a surprise since last year, work on a high-speed train from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem almost shut down the government for the very same reason.

Over the last years, the religious parties have objected to convenience stores, coffee shops, restaurants and theaters being open on Shabbat. And since Israel has a six-day work week, it leaves Israelis with far fewer options for enjoying their "one-day weekend".

When it comes to the big picture, Israelis are unhappy that they have to foot the bill for the Haredi way of life. Since they spend so much time studying instead of working, and have large families, their community receives a disproportionate share of governmental support.

Israelis are also upset that, while the Haredi community is happy to take handouts, it's unwilling to do its share to protect the country. A few years ago, the government passed a law requiring their children to perform civil service or serve in the IDF. The result has been protests in the streets. Meanwhile, those Haredim who have decided to fulfill this obligation are ostracized from their community.

Religious tension is also present in the modern Orthodox community, whose children willingly serve in the IDF. Some Orthodox troops have objected to listening to Hatikvah when it's sung by a woman. And recently, a group of soldiers turned their back on their commanding officer, refusing to follow an order, because she was a woman.

Yes, it appears that Israel is changing. But it's not only we American Jews who feel alienated; there are millions of *sabras* who are uncomfortable as well. Where did this issue come from? Surprisingly, it goes back all the way to the founding of the State. You can hear its echo in the words David Ben Gurion spoke on, May 14, 1948, when he took to the airwaves to declare Israel's independence. I want you to listen to a bit of that address now, both to be reminded of the vision Israel's founders had for their country, as well as to see the roots of the internal challenge that Israel faces today.

"The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books.

After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people kept faith with it, never ceasing to pray and hope for their return. In recent decades they made the desert bloom, revived the Hebrew language, built villages and towns, and created a thriving community controlling its own economy and culture. Loving peace but knowing how to defend themselves, they brought the blessings of progress to all the country's inhabitants, as they aspired towards independent nationhood."

It continues: "...On November 29, 1947, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution calling for the establishment of a Jewish State in Eretz-Israel... ACCORDINGLY, WE ...HEREBY DECLARE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A JEWISH STATE IN ERETZ-ISRAEL, TO BE KNOWN AS THE STATE OF ISRAEL.

...ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; and safeguard the Holy Places of all religions...

...WE EXTEND our hand to all neighboring states and their peoples in an offer of peace and good neighborliness...

WE APPEAL to the Jewish people throughout the diaspora to rally around the Jews of Eretz-Israel in the tasks of immigration and upbuilding, and to stand by them in the great struggle for the realization of the age-old dream - the redemption of Israel.

Placing our trust in the *Rock of Israel*, we affix our signatures to this proclamation in the city of Tel-Aviv, on this 5th day of Iyar 5708 (14th May, 1948)."

While this stirring text is worthy of study, there are just two observations I want to call to your attention. First: How did Israel's founding fathers envisage the character of this state? As you heard, Israel was to be based on freedom, justice and peace; would ensure complete equality

of social and political rights to all its inhabitants, irrespective of race, sex or religion; guaranteed *freedom of religion, conscience*, language, education and culture. In short, this Jewish state was founded on Western values. Israel was to be a country where we Reform Jews would feel very much at home.

The second observation: If you were to read the *entire* text, of the Declaration you would find that God's name is not to be found. This was not an oversight. The vast majority of Israel's Zionist leaders were proud secular Jews. They were not religious. And as we've seen, the vision they had for this state was of a pluralistic country, not a religious country or a theocracy.

There was, however, a small religious faction on the Council which approved the Declaration. It was led by Rabbi Yehuda Maimon, the leader of the Religious Zionist movement, who later became Israel's first Minister of Religion. Rabbi Maimon wanted a clear reference to God in the proclamation. As a result, wording was added to the final section that read: "Placing our trust in the *Rock of Israel* we affix our signatures...."

While this phrase "Rock of Israel" (*Tzur Yisrael*) is found in our prayer book, and is understood to refer to God, it was ambiguous enough to allow non-believers to accept that it was referring to the "land" of Israel. Therefore, they grudgingly agreed to this change from the original text.

Rabbi Maimon, however, was none too happy and objected to this euphemistic language. But Ben Gurion warned him that if he were to put the change to a vote, the rabbi would lose. So Maimon grudgingly accepted the compromise language.

Now if you read the complete text of Ben Gurion's address, you'll find it includes a promise that within five months the new State would adopt a Constitution. Israel missed that deadline, and seventy years later is still without it.

Several reasons have been given for this omission. The first, that immediately after the Declaration was broadcast to the world, Israel was attacked by seven Arab countries: Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, who sought to destroy the Jewish state before it had a chance to take root. Given these circumstances, it is quite understandable that Ben Gurion's deadline passed before a Constitution could be agreed upon.

But why, after the war concluded, did Israel still not adopt a Constitution? Most likely it was because the religious and secular parties held very different views as to the nature of the country. The religious parties believed that Israel was the work of God's hand, clearly evident in her miraculous rebirth and survival through the war of Independence; and furthermore, as a Jewish country, it already had a Constitution – the laws of the Bible and Talmud.

Meanwhile, as we have already seen, the secular Zionist founders of Israel had a very different kind of State in mind; a modern nation, whose citizens had the autonomy to choose their own path and need not be constrained by the religious practices and traditions of their ancestors.

Today, those old divisions have grown deeper. And the inability to clearly define Israel's social and cultural identity has led to the alienation we feel here in America.

So where does that leave us now? The truth is, actually, it leaves us in good company. Earlier this week, the results of an annual survey on Religious Pluralism in Israel were released. It found that two-thirds of Israelis disapprove of how their government handles religious issues **and they want American Jews to intervene in the debate.**

The issues they're most upset about? Topping the list: The government's unequal support for the Haredi community, which comes at the expense of other societal needs. Next, 70% of Israelis want the government to recognize all forms of marriage. 70% want increased public transportation to be available on Shabbat. 66% want Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Judaism to enjoy equal status. Friends, Israel is calling for us to engage, for us to get involved. Still not sure? 65% of those who voted for Netanyahu want to hear our voice!

What can we do? Our movement has launched a Campaign for Religious Equality, to bolster the institutions of the Reform Movement in Israel: to add to the 100 Israeli ordained Reform Rabbis and 40 Reform communities and congregations; to support the work of Israel's Religious Action Center which uses the courts to fight against religious discrimination and coercion; to lobby members of the Knesset; to build connections with Israelis on the issues we share; and to continue to educate Israelis about Reform Judaism which teaches that respect for our Jewish traditions and values does not have to come at the expense of one's conscience, and that Judaism need not conflict with modernity.

Friends, we must not allow ourselves to be alienated or ambivalent. We cannot sit on the sidelines and watch others shape the direction of society; not in Israel and not in America. There are tools we can use to be engaged, to exercise power, to make a difference. And there is a desire among Israelis for us to do so. A majority of Israelis want us to show them, teach them, work with them, to create the type of society that their founders dreamed of; the kind of society that we cherish, the kind of country that can live up to its promise.

Let's show our Israeli brothers and sisters that we care for them, not only when they're fighting wars, but also when they're fighting for the soul of their country; striving to create a better quality of life for themselves and their children.

My first memories of Israel came from Israeli teachers in Hebrew School, who introduced me to Jaffa oranges, and kibbutzniks in blue hats who drained the swamps and made the desert bloom. They taught me that being Jewish was about more than how one prays; it could also be how one works with their hands, faces challenges, and builds a country.

As a congregation, as a community, we can help build a country by joining our movement's Campaign for Religious Equality. Please be in touch with me so we can discuss how can make a difference – for our sake and for the sake of Israel.

May 5779 be a year of action and involvement; of strengthening relationships and building something of lasting worth. Am Yisrael Chai!

ADDENDUM: Complete Text of Israel's Declaration of Independence

The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained to statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books. After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people kept faith with it throughout their Dispersion and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration in it of their political freedom.

Impelled by this historic and traditional attachment, Jews strove in every successive generation to re-establish themselves in their ancient homeland. In recent decades they returned in their masses. Pioneers, ma'pilim [(Hebrew) - immigrants coming to Eretz-Israel in defiance of restrictive legislation] and defenders, they made deserts bloom, revived the Hebrew language, built villages and towns, and created a thriving community controlling its own economy and culture, loving peace but knowing how to defend itself, bringing the blessings of progress to all the country's inhabitants, and aspiring towards independent nationhood.

In the year 5657 (1897), at the summons of the spiritual father of the Jewish State, Theodore Herzl, the First Zionist Congress convened and proclaimed the right of the Jewish people to national rebirth in its own country.

This right was recognized in the Balfour Declaration of the 2nd November, 1917, and re-affirmed in the Mandate of the League of Nations which, in particular, gave international sanction to the historic connection between the Jewish people and Eretz-Israel and to the right of the Jewish people to rebuild its National Home.

The catastrophe which recently befell the Jewish people - the massacre of millions of Jews in Europe - was another clear demonstration of the urgency of solving the problem of its homelessness by re-establishing in Eretz-Israel the Jewish State, which would open the gates of the homeland wide to every Jew and confer upon the Jewish people the status of a fully privileged member of the comity of nations.

Survivors of the Nazi holocaust in Europe, as well as Jews from other parts of the world, continued to migrate to Eretz-Israel, undaunted by difficulties, restrictions and dangers, and never ceased to assert their right to a life of dignity, freedom and honest toil in their national homeland.

In the Second World War, the Jewish community of this country contributed its full share to the struggle of the freedom- and peace-loving nations against the forces of Nazi wickedness and, by the blood of its soldiers and its war effort, gained the right to be reckoned among the peoples who founded the United Nations.

On the 29th, November, 1947, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution calling for the establishment of a Jewish State in Eretz-Israel; the General Assembly required the inhabitants of Eretz-Israel to take such steps as were necessary on their part for the implementation of that resolution. This recognition by the United Nations of the right of the Jewish people to establish their State is irrevocable.

This right is the natural right of the Jewish people to be masters of their own fate, like all other nations, in their own sovereign State.

ACCORDINGLY WE, MEMBERS OF THE PEOPLE'S COUNCIL, REPRESENTATIVES OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF ERETZ-ISRAEL AND OF THE ZIONIST MOVEMENT, ARE HERE ASSEMBLED ON THE DAY OF THE TERMINATION OF THE BRITISH MANDATE OVER ERETZ-ISRAEL AND, BY VIRTUE OF OUR NATURAL AND HISTORIC RIGHT AND ON THE BASIS OF THE RESOLUTION OF THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL

ASSEMBLY, HEREBY DECLARE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A JEWISH STATE IN ERETZ-ISRAEL, TO BE KNOWN AS THE STATE OF ISRAEL.

WE DECLARE that, with effect from the moment of the termination of the Mandate being tonight, the eve of Sabbath, the 6th Iyar, 5708 (15th May, 1948), until the establishment of the elected, regular authorities of the State in accordance with the Constitution which shall be adopted by the Elected Constituent Assembly not later than the 1st October 1948, the People's Council shall act as a Provisional Council of State, and its executive organ, the People's Administration, shall be the Provisional Government of the Jewish State, to be called "Israel".

THE STATE OF ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

THE STATE OF ISRAEL is prepared to cooperate with the agencies and representatives of the United Nations in implementing the resolution of the General Assembly of the 29th November, 1947, and will take steps to bring about the economic union of the whole of Eretz-Israel.

WE APPEAL to the United Nations to assist the Jewish people in the building-up of its State and to receive the State of Israel into the comity of nations.

WE APPEAL - in the very midst of the onslaught launched against us now for months - to the Arab inhabitants of the State of Israel to preserve peace and participate in the upbuilding of the State on the basis of full and equal citizenship and due representation in all its provisional and permanent institutions.

WE EXTEND our hand to all neighboring states and their peoples in an offer of peace and good neighborliness, and appeal to them to establish bonds of cooperation and mutual help with the sovereign Jewish people settled in its own land. The State of Israel is prepared to do its share in a common effort for the advancement of the entire Middle East.

WE APPEAL to the Jewish people throughout the Diaspora to rally round the Jews of Eretz-Israel in the tasks of immigration and upbuilding and to stand by them in the great struggle for the realization of the age-old dream - the redemption of Israel.

PLACING OUR TRUST IN THE "ROCK OF ISRAEL", WE AFFIX OUR SIGNATURES TO THIS PROCLAMATION AT THIS SESSION OF THE PROVISIONAL COUNCIL OF STATE, ON THE SOIL OF THE HOMELAND, IN THE CITY OF TEL-AVIV, ON THIS SABBATH EVE, THE 5TH DAY OF IYAR, 5708 (14TH MAY, 1948).

Rosh Hashanah Day – The Unanswerable Question of the Akedah

There's an annoying commercial that I feel like I've seen too many times, a BMO Harris ad featuring a little girl who asks "Why?" after every statement a banker makes, until finally he turns to her mother, looking for a reprieve. Instead, the mother looks at the banker and exclaims: "What? These are important questions." In truth, as annoying as the question "Why" is, the mother is correct.

Over my years as a rabbi, the most difficult question I've been asked is: "Why?" Like the banker, I've heard it too many times: from parents and spouses, siblings and children, relatives and friends. It's a question I often don't have a good answer for.

Today I want to look at a text – the Torah's preeminent "Why" text: the Akedah. It's the story of a journey taken by a father, Abraham, and his son, Isaac; a story we Jews have puzzled over for more than a millennium, trying to decipher its secret meaning.

The story begins with a call that is unlike anything Abraham has experienced before. In the past, when God spoke to him, His words brought blessing. But this time they bring nothing but heartache. God tells Abraham to take his son, his favorite one, whom he loves, and offer him as a burnt offering on the place that he will show him. And all I can think to do is scream: Why?

For over a thousand years we've looked at this story, searching for meaning. Some have viewed it as a Jewish response to the savagery of human sacrifice, and say it is a test that Abraham failed. Others, during times of brutal oppression and forced conversion believed just the opposite – that it was a prototype for *kiddush hashem* – for martyrdom, a test not for Abraham, but for Isaac, which he passed. In every generation we are told to read this story and challenged to find its meaning. This is mine.

The Akedah begins with a concise introduction: "Sometime afterward, God put Abraham to the test." What follows is an account of that test. But what is not clear is what is being testing.

Our sages had great difficulty defining this test, because no matter how hard they tried, they were always left in an untenable position. Most believed the test was an ethical challenge; that God's call for Abraham to sacrifice his son was immoral. And that, in order to pass the test Abraham needed to reject the command. Yet, Abraham accepted the command and received a blessing. So, did he pass or fail?

Others believed that Abraham's faith was being tested: Would he obey God's command when it caused him harm? And that while Abraham passed the test, (he was faithful,) God failed for calling on Abraham to act immorally. While this view lets Abraham off the hook, it creates a theological problem for all of us: How can we worship a God who tells his followers to kill their children? As I said before, this test is a real conundrum.

But what if instead of an ethical challenge; what if instead of a question of faith, we view this as a test of character. Instead of: "Will Abraham offer up Isaac?", the purpose of this test is to see: "How?" How will Abraham respond to this monumental crisis?

Think about it for a minute. Abraham left his birthplace, his family and friends, and went on a journey to an unknown land, just because God asked him. In return, Abraham was to be rewarded. He was to become the head of a new nation. His descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky; as countless as the grains of sand on the shore of the sea. But Abraham had lived for one hundred years and had not had the child who would fulfill the promise.

And then finally, Isaac was born. Isaac was Abraham's future, his hope, his dream. It was for Isaac that Abraham had endured his journey. And now, Abraham learns that his life's work has been for nothing. Abraham is told that his future, his hopes and dreams are gone. Isaac will die. Abraham faces a crisis.

Abraham's test, this ancient story, does not need to question Abraham's faithfulness. It has already been proven. This story does not need to question Abraham's morality. He demonstrated his worth when he argued on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Instead, this story comes to show us something of Abraham's character. The challenge is not: "Will Abraham sacrifice Isaac?", but rather, "How will Abraham face this crisis?"

Abraham's test is now relevant to us; in fact it is timeless. For even though none of us will be asked to take our children up a mountain, bind them and offer them as a burnt offering to God, all of us will have to deal with moments of crisis; times when our future becomes uncertain and our hopes and dreams seem impossible. How do we deal with these moments? Well first, let's see how Abraham dealt with his.

The first thing we learn about Abraham is that he did not put off dealing with his crisis, as we so often do. Instead, "he rose early the next morning." Abraham also did not expect others to solve his problem for him. After all, he was a rich and powerful man. He had many servants. He could have delegated responsibilities. He could have told one of his servants to saddle his ass, and another to split the wood. In fact, he could have had his servants prepare the whole offering. He could have had them take the wood up the mountain, build the altar, and bind up Isaac. He could have left every bit of the preparations up to them. This would have been an easier way to deal with the crisis. But this was not Abraham's way.

Abraham realized that in order to deal with this crisis he had to face it himself. It was not up to others to handle it for him. It was his dream that was dying, his future. Thus, it was his responsibility. Others could be with him on this journey, comforting him on the way, but in the end, it was he who had to act. Him alone.

So, Abraham saddled his ass, split the wood, and with his son and two servants beside him, he set out for the place of which God had told him. Abraham passed the first part of this test.

The second element in this test concerns Abraham's relationship with Isaac. Isaac was the fulfillment of Abraham's dream. But now Isaac was going to die. If I was standing in Abraham's place, I might have been tempted to blame Isaac for my situation. After all, if Isaac had never been born then I would not have to lose him. If Isaac had never been born then I would not have placed so much hope in him. I would not have planned my future through him. I would not be losing so much now.

If I was standing in Abraham's place, I fear I would have begun to resent Isaac. I would not want to see him on my journey. I would not want to talk to him. In fact, I might even begin to curse

him and the day he was born. *The pain I must now bear is because of him. This test is his fault. He is to blame.*

But Abraham was stronger than me. He was wiser. He realized that Isaac was not to blame for this situation. In fact, he cherished the journey with his son, realizing that this would be the last time they would be together.

Abraham's love for Isaac is clearly reflected in our portion. When God spoke to Abraham he referred to Isaac as "your favorite one, whom you love." Indeed, in this short story, Abraham refers to Isaac as "my son" and Isaac calls Abraham "my father" no less than twelve times. The story also tells us not once, but twice, that Abraham and Isaac "walked together."

Our portion tells us quite clearly, that Abraham did not blame Isaac for this crisis. He did not look for a scapegoat. Instead, he continued to love his son. He understood that in spite of the difficulty of the moment, Isaac still deserved a loving father. He did not make Isaac suffer for *his* trial. Once again, he took the responsibility on himself. And he passed this second part of the test.

At this point we might be tempted to think that the test is over. After all, Abraham did all that was asked of him. He took his son up the mountain, bound him, and was prepared to offer him as a burnt offering to God, when at the last possible moment, he was stopped by an angel. He did not ask others to handle this problem for him; and did not blame others for this dilemma. He acted with love, care and responsibility. But the test was still not over.

The Torah tells us that after the sacrifice was stopped, Abraham saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. He took the ram and offered it as a burnt offering in place of his son. It was at this point, and not before, that the angel reappeared and gave him God's blessing.

Why is this part of the test? Once again, permit me to stand in Abraham's place. If I was standing on a mountain top with my child, whose life had just moments before been spared, I don't think I would have noticed a ram caught in a thicket. And even if I had, I can't say that I would have bound it on an altar and offered it up to God. I think at that moment, I might have resented God. I would not have been searching for a way to honor Him. After all, God had caused me to undergo a tremendous trial. Instead of thanking God, I might have shouted at Him: "Why God, why? Why did you put me through such a crisis? Why did I need to endure such suffering? Why did you treat me this way?"

But again, I am not as strong as Abraham, nor as wise. For Abraham understood that *sometimes there is no answer to the question: "Why?"* He realized that this situation was beyond his control; that there could never be a satisfactory answer to the question. Instead, he concentrated his energy on "HOW?". How should I deal with this crisis?

Abraham recognized that God was a source of strength in his time of weakness, and a source of comfort in his time of pain. Abraham realized that the “why” was really not important. He realized that what was important was **how** he endured this trial; how he would live through it.

Abraham recognized that God was an important part of his life, whether he was celebrating a joy or mourning a loss. He recognized that he needed God, and that in all times God’s presence is a blessing. And so, when Abraham saw that ram caught in the thicket, he did not hesitate to bind it on the altar and offer it up in praise of God. It was through this action that Abraham passed the third and final part of his test.

Abraham’s test was now over, but the story is not. The Torah gives us one more detail about this event. After receiving his blessing Abraham left the mountain, but he did not leave it alone. The two servants who had accompanied him on his journey had remained. And so, Abraham, together with his servants, left the mountain and returned to Beersheva.

Why is this detail included in the story? What is significant about Abraham’s servants? I believe that we’re given these details to remind us that no one, not even a person as strong, wise and courageous as Abraham can survive a crisis alone.

It is true that Abraham accepted responsibility for this situation upon himself. And that he did not try to blame others for his test. But Abraham was aided in his actions because he knew that he had two companions who would travel the bitter path with him. He knew that whatever the outcome of his trial, in the end he would not walk alone. There can be no doubt that this knowledge aided Abraham throughout his journey.

This is the story of the Akedah; the story, not of “Why”, but “How”. Not the unanswerable: “Why did this happen to me?” but the other question we all must face: “How do I deal with it? How do I carry on? How do I love and care in moments of heartbreak? How do I find the strength to live up to my potential? How can I be a good companion and friend, walking alongside those I care for? How can I find blessings, even in the midst of sorrow and pain?”

“Why?” is a question without an answer. “How” is a path that we can follow; a path that leads to fulfillment, purpose, perhaps even to holiness; to finding meaning even in chaos, to finding light even in darkness, to walking with God and being a blessing.

Adonai, on this Rosh Hashanah, this day of new beginnings, may we learn from the Akedah. May we realize that there are some questions that have no good answer; and come to understand that tests are an inevitable part of everyone’s life; that rather than spend our years asking why, we spend our days moving forward, step by step, mile after mile, year after year; walking along the path of life with courage and faith, love and dignity. And if we’re fortunate, may we also be, and be blessed with, the companionship of good friends, and the comfort of a community whose presence enriches us through all the seasons of our lives. May this be God’s will. Amen.