

This summer my wife, Anne, and I spent a wonderful week in Tuscany. The Tuscan capital, Florence, is a beautiful city. Like all tourist towns, however, it is a study in contrasts. Magnificent sculptures in the museums are mimicked by street entertainers, dressed as statues, who pose with vacationers. Michelangelo's "David" is breathtaking. And in the market the more intimate part of the sculpture is reproduced on coffee mugs, t-shirts and (my personal favorite) boxer shorts.

Like every dutiful tourist in Florence, we lined up to see the paintings at the Uffizi Gallery. After leaving the crowds on the third floor, we entered a small room a level down by ourselves. On the wall was a work completed in 1602 by the Italian painter Caravaggio. A painting I had seen in pictures, it overwhelms in person. His depiction of the *Akedah* (the Binding of Isaac) is dark and foreboding image. Unlike most paintings of this story, where Isaac appears serene, the Isaac in Caravaggio's work is stricken with terror. Abraham's thumb presses harshly against Isaac's cheek, pinning him down. Isaac's eyes are black pits, with the barest hint of color a symbol of the life draining from him. His mouth is agape as he shrieks, for even though the angel grabs Abraham's arm to stay the slaughter, the knife remains tightly in his grip. This is no Isaac of passivity or piety, but one who lives at the edge of the knife.

I am haunted by the fear in the eyes of Caravaggio's Isaac and by his silent scream. And it is a terror that is a reflection of our age - a time when fear runs rampant, and people feel as if they too live at the edge of the knife. The man who painted this knife was a man who carried fear within him. Caravaggio's dramatic, realistic and naturalistic style was shocking to the people of his time. More than that, he was a man who struggled with many inner demons. Accused of killing an opponent over a score in court tennis, he was imprisoned for a number of physical assaults. He was always on the run and died at only 37 years of age. Caravaggio was a man living on the edge. And he is a mirror to so many in our time who also live on edge and uneasy.

A dear friend told me that whenever she goes in a tunnel into the city, she holds her breath until she gets out. "Ever since 9/11," she admitted, "I wonder what I might do if I was suddenly stuck in there." A local resident told me that one of the reasons he keeps his boat - rarely used - is that he wants to have a way to get off Long Island should something terrible happen and there is no way off by car. I must admit, there are times when my mind races and I worry about things I never thought I would have to think about. If a cargo container let off radioactive waste, would I race east or north? Would I want my family

scattered, so the risk to us all is spread, or do I pray that they are close so we can face our fate together?

I get angry with myself sometimes. Why am I hounded with such thoughts? In this less innocent time, how do I cope with these dark fears? And it is little reassurance knowing so many others carry similar uncertainties. Living at the edge of the knife, how do we avoid psychic and spiritual paralysis? How does the terror out there not terrorize us in here? Or, more importantly ... in here (pointing within)?

When I was 10 years old my Cub Scout pack had a fund-raiser selling doughnuts door-to-door. I still think we ate more doughnuts than we sold. Nevertheless, we dutifully knocked on doors in the neighborhood, asking if someone wanted a dozen sugar-coated, cinnamon or sprinkle covered doughnuts. Once, I returned back to see a fellow Scout surrounded by adults. He was pale, sweating. Then I saw that his pants were torn and blood-soaked where a dog had taken a bite. From that moment I was overwhelmed with fear whenever I saw a strange dog. It took me decades before I was able to still the fear in my belly whenever I heard a dog bark or run towards me.

In reality, there are many terrors we carry in our lives. And as we grow, the things we are afraid of change. Our childhood anxieties may fade, but new shadows - and murkier ones - coil around our heart. A month ago our daughter had her wisdom teeth removed. Routine surgery. In and out. But not this time. Her heart beat was elevated and would not go down. She was rushed to the hospital. As I left the doctor's office a nurse reassured me, "it'll be fine." But I have tasted too much of life to know that such things will always turn out fine. A routine surgery can turn dire. An accident driving to pick up milk at the store can change the fate of families. The dark spot on an x-ray is not always "nothing." Everything is not always fine here where we live - here on the edge of the knife.

Perhaps as a new year begins, as the nights grow noticeably longer - and the uncertainty of where we are heading occupies our mind - that is why we read the story of Isaac's binding. At this time of reflection, we realize that we live at the edge of the knife ... and it terrifies us. "Who *shall* live and who *shall* die." Indeed ... who shall?

Yet wedded to the uncertainty in this morning's Torah portion is also a redemptive message. Hope is there, hidden though it may seem. Consider, for a moment, the conversation of Abraham and his son. Isaac notes that his father carries the firestone and wood, but asks **וַיֹּאמֶר הַשָּׂה לְעֹלָה** "yet where is the ram to be offered up?" What is fascinating is that in the inventory of items he notices something important is left out. He

speaks of the firestone and wood, but says nothing of the knife (called, in Hebrew *הַמְצַבֵּקֶת* - which literally means “the devourer” coming from the root form meaning “to eat”). We know the knife is present, because we were told earlier in the story that Abraham took it with him. So why does Isaac not ask about it, too? Is it because he knows how dangerous it is - particularly in a world where child sacrifice was commonly practiced? The knife is his fear. And to speak of it is, perhaps, too frightening. Spoken of or not, however, it is present - soon to be revealed in all its terrible glory.

The hope inherent in the story is in Abraham’s response to his son. We know the end of the story, but we cannot assume that Abraham knows. For all we can tell, Abraham is prepared to do whatever it is that God requests. Isaac asks about what lies ahead. And all the father can honestly tell his son is what any parent can truthfully predict about the future. *אֱלֹהִים יִרְאֶה-לוֹ הַשָּׂה לְעֵלָה בְּנִי* “God will reveal the ram, my son.” In other words, I don’t know what will happen, but it will be revealed ... in God’s good time. Our fate is in God’s hands.

Abraham’s words could have led him to a fatalistic conclusion - since we know nothing, we have no control over what life brings us. But this is not his conclusion. Rather, Abraham decides that since both his fate and that of his son are fraught with uncertainty, the best thing to do is to be together. Not once, but twice, Torah indicates the unity of father and son. *וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו* “And the two of them walked together.” The first time we read this comes immediately after we read that Abraham was carrying the wood and the knife. The second after the presence of the knife is hidden.

In the text of Torah, then, comes the great truth of this day - whether the knife is revealed or hidden, whether we live in a generation of peace or terror, whether ours is a time requiring a small sacrifice or great - the only legitimate response is our willingness to move forward ... uncertain perhaps, but hopeful.

As terrifying as is Caravaggio’s painting, the artist understood the hope inherent in this story. Though most of his painting is dark, a glimmer of light appears in the distance, behind the landscape of Tuscany typical in works of the period. As the angel grabs Abraham’s arm, he points in the direction of the ram. Perhaps, however, the angel is actually directing Abraham (and we, too) not only towards the ram, but beyond - to the light that signifies a new day ... to the possibility of hope.

The prophet Zechariah preached to his fellow Israelites some twenty-five centuries ago. He lived in a time of renewal, as his fellow Jews were returning from exile, and a new

Temple was being built in Jerusalem. His name, which means "God remembered", may be a pseudonym, adopted as symbol of the hopeful message he brought. Although the nation of Israel had lived through much suffering, Zechariah spoke confidently - instilling hope at a time when it was probably all too rare a commodity. In one of his orations Zechariah called his fellow Jews something they had never before been called, but an appellation that is as apt a description of who we are as any I know. We Jews, Zechariah said, are אֲסִירֵי הַתִּקְוָה, "prisoners of hope." (Zechariah 9:12).

A few years ago, when the fighting in the south of Jerusalem between the Palestinian town of Beit Jalla and the Jewish neighborhood of Gilo was at its peak, I called a friend of mine, Yaron, who lives there.

"How are you doing with everything going on?"

"You know," he answered, "we only live a couple of hundred meters away from the fighting. But I heard nothing until I turned on the news in my car in the morning."

"Did you go right home?"

"For what?," he said, "I had to go to work."

Was Yaron in denial? No. He just realized that the only legitimate way to face fear is to live one's life. Like so many other Israelis - like Jews throughout the centuries - Yaron is a "prisoner of hope."

A few generations before Zechariah, another prophet - Jeremiah - was placed in prison because of his railings against his government. He predicted the utter destruction of the nation, death and exile. By temperament and circumstance Jeremiah had every reason to despair. Yet his ultimate message is one of hope. It is not by chance that the *haftarah* traditionally read as a counterbalance to the *Akedah* is from this prophet, who, even in prison awaiting the Babylonian siege proclaimed, "there is hope for your future, declares the Eternal." (Jeremiah 31:18)

This idea of moving forward - of hope - that found its first stirrings in Abraham, and was fully expressed by the prophets, was revolutionary. The pagan world from which Judaism arose saw the world in terms of cycles of nature. Human beings were part of the inexorable rhythm of the seasons - ever-returning, never changing. Jews introduced a linear concept of time - teaching that there is a beginning and an ultimate redemption. For the first time, Rabbi Avis Miller notes, "people realized that the world could be changed, could be perfected through human efforts. The Torah teaches that God wants and demands our participation to make the world we leave better than the world into which we are born."

Does not hope that lie at the very core of these Days of Awe? We affirm that the wrongs we have done are not eternal stains. You and I can repent, overcome our fears, find forgiveness for our transgressions. The process of *teshuvah*, the inner turning of the soul, is hope implanted within us. "Prisoners of hope" - we do not despair even when dreams are thwarted and relationships are damaged.

Over the past four years - since the Rosh Hashanah in the year 2000 - when violence broke out in Israel as the Oslo Accords failed to move forward, hope has been in short supply. Nearly 1000 Israelis have died. Over 3600 Palestinians. The optimism felt at that time seems a distant dream. Few seem to have any confidence that things can get better. But, despite it all, I remain hopeful. Do I think peace will suddenly break out between the Palestinians and Israelis? Look, I'm hopeful, not psycho. But there are many shades of gray between all out violence and full tranquility. And there are some positive signs.

In the past year the number of violent incidents in Israel has decreased. Tourists, who avoided traveling there even a year ago, are now starting to return. We should be proud that in the past year one of our students - Josh Bloom - spent five months in a Reform movement program there; while Arielle Buss, one of POWTY's co-presidents, joined 350 Reform teens who traveled there this summer. Israel's economy has grown, and Tel Aviv's stock market is up significantly. Restaurants are filled and, ever the "prisoners of hope", Israelis just live.

Despite all the violence directed against it, Israel's determined maintenance of its civic will, cultural norms, and vibrant democracy - and its ability to fight terrorism forcefully while maintaining a high degree of civil liberties and societal normalcy is a powerful inspiration and model for us. Israel is a reminder of Jeremiah's promise. "There is a hope for your future."

As I sign of solidarity and as a statement of hope, I think the time is right, therefore, for our community to engage in closer ties with Israel. Sure, you and I can do that through gifts to UJA or Israel Bonds. But what is needed now is our presence. With this in mind, I hope you will consider joining Anne and me in Israel a year from this December in a congregational family trip to Israel. If you are interested - or even if you are thinking about it - just let us know when details and an interest form comes out in a few months. "Prisoners of hope" - do not let fear keep you away. "Prisoners of hope" - come to the Land of Hope, the Land of our dreams.

This past June Naomi Shemer, one of Israel's most prolific songwriters, died of cancer. At a memorial concert for her over 70,000 people showed up, a testament to how - for decades - she captured the soul of the nation in song. Shemer is probably best known for penning the ballad *Yerushalyim shel Zahav*, "Jerusalem of Gold," which she wrote just before the Six-Day

War, later adding to it the final verse about returning to the Old City. A few year later, during the Yom Kippur War she wrote a song *Lu Yehi* - may it be, may what we seek come to pass, may the light finally break through the dark clouds on the horizon.

Shemer also wrote a song that is one of my favorites - a song that mirrors the dark and light of Caravaggio's painting, a song that is really a prayer of hope:

<p><i>Al kol eileh (2x)</i> <i>Shmor na li eili hatov</i> <i>Al had'vash v'al ha'oketz</i> <i>Al hamar v'hamatok</i> <i>Al na ta'akor natu'a</i> <i>Al tishkach et hatikvah</i> <i>Hashiveini v'ashuvah</i> <i>El ha'aretz hatova</i></p>	<p>For these things, O God of goodness, guard me please with Your good: For the honey and the sting, For the bitter and the sweet. Never uproot what has been planted, Do not forget the hope. Bring me back and we will return, To the land that is so good.</p>
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Shemer's words are those of a modern prophet - *al tishkach et hatikvah* - do not forget the hope; the hope planted within us, the hope that things will get better, in the dream of a restored Jewish nation, that there is a future worth hoping for.

In her poignant lyrics, Shemer reminds us that hope is not some Pollyannaish belief that everything will turn out alright. Life, after all, is the "honey and the sting", the "bitter and the sweet." What we can pray for, however, is God's goodness. Living at the edge of the knife, perhaps that is the best we can do, moving forward together with those who matter to us hoping that with them the pains of the journey do not lead us to despair.

What do we do, however, when the worst of our nightmares becomes real? What if we lose someone who gave us hope? How can we maintain our faith if our prayers for resolution or healing are unanswered? It is not easy. We all know times of weakness. We fail and fall. Dreams are dashed. Relationships end. Life ends. No one is spared the "valley of shadows."

But then, Naomi Shemer teaches, then - more than at any other moment - we must not uproot what God plants within us: that ethereal and precious gift of hope. It is then that we must be like the angel in Caravaggio's painting - grasping the hand of the one who forgets to hope, pointing to a better tomorrow.

As many paintings as there are of the *Akedah*, almost every one is of the scene Caravaggio paints - of the moment when the angel appears, breathing life into Abraham's hopes. Of all the many artistic works of this story, I recall seeing only one of what happens after Abraham and Isaac came off the mountain. But, at the end of the day - after all the drama - down they did come, back into life.

The singular exception is by the artist Theo Tobiasse, who barely survived the Holocaust hidden in a Paris apartment for over two years. In his painting the central figure is not Abraham, but Sarah. She holds Isaac as a babe-in-arms, mock the attempt to offer his life up for faith. Though some rabbinic traditions say Sarah died before seeing Isaac again, I prefer this modern, artistic *midrash*. In this version, Isaac's mother is transformed into mother of our People - walking, like Abraham, but to a more certain embrace of life. Like Naomi Shemer, who sang "bring me back and we will return", Tobiasse's Sarah brings Isaac back. Even after all the pain, after all the hurt, Sarah understands - life must be renewed, hope cannot be lost.

Can you and I come from the spiritual heights of a new year's beginning and enter into life with Sarah's faith? Can we maintain hope that Israel will be secure, just and at peace? Have we been so hardened by life that we have forgotten our ideals, or can we embrace God's call that we be a "nation of priests" and a people of compassion? Do we let ourselves hope that whatever hurts separates us and our parents, or children or siblings, might be resolved? If we have lost someone, can we allow ourselves the hope that our heartache may ease? Will we let ourselves have hope that the world is not something always to fear, but that our land and our people, indeed all humanity, can be led to a better tomorrow? That is the challenge for we who live at the edge of the knife - not to vanquish the fear, perhaps, but to mute the terror with hope renewed.

A closing thought. The great Rabbi Akiva, who was martyred by the Romans over 1800 years ago because he would not abandon the teaching of Torah, taught in the Mishnah dealing with Yom Kippur that God is called *Mikveh Yisrael*:

How fortunate you are, O Israel, before whom do you cleanse yourself, and who cleanses you? Who renews our hopes, and banishes discouragement from our heart? The Holy One, blessed be God, *Mikveh Yisrael*, the hope of Israel.

Akiva understood that God, in the end, is hope. "Return us," we pray, or maybe we are really just reminding ourselves - *al tishkach et hatikvah*. Do not forget to hope. Renew us onto life. Restore our faith in ourselves - to repair the harm we have caused, the hurt we have inflicted. Renew our hope in Israel. Replenish our wells with hope, God who is the Well of Hope. Let us not forget to hope - through life's bitter and its sweet.