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Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York
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“The Sun Still Shines”

In all of Torah, no narrative equals in terror the one we read this morning, *Akedat Yitzchak*, the binding and near slaughter of Isaac by his own father. Biblical historians remind us the text was likely included to signal Judaism’s abhorrence of child sacrifice: what clearer way to say it than God commanding Abraham to stop the killing as he is about to begin. Still, the episode leaves us disturbed, and wondering: what did Isaac feel staring death in the face? One rabbinic legend suggests his heart stopped in his chest.¹

Isaac’s is an extreme example of course, but he is not alone in knowing mortal fear and dismay. Thousands still suffering in the storm-ravaged cities and towns along the gulf coast and throughout the northeast now know it, their stories of survival harrowing. And in a different fashion, so many of you who have peered into an uncertain future, or maybe right now face grim diagnoses, financial worries, or even just another day of loneliness – you, too, have a hint of Isaac’s fright. The wish *l’shanah tovah tikateivu*, “may you be written down in the Book of Life for a good year,” is no casual greeting; it is a *cri de coeur*, a cry from the heart. And on top of those individual burdens we carry, our collective anxieties over Coronavirus alarm us. This past year and a half, we all have been staring up in bewilderment and even dread at what may or may not lie ahead.

Trauma

With Covid, our world has suffered unspeakable tragedy, an indescribable devastation with no end in sight. Our lives were upended, at minimum by unanticipated changes; but for so many, by loss and isolation and fear. We beheld a denial of science and disdain for public health stunning in their disregard for human life and safety. But we also witnessed examples of remarkable courage and strength, and perhaps discovered in ourselves a stamina to persevere we did not know we had. Still we are all exhausted. We are traumatized.

“Psychological trauma” can be caused by suffering or witnessing extreme violence, severe injury, or an imminent threat to survival.² Not all of us faced these horrors, thank God. But Covid battered us nonetheless. Tamar Rodney of Johns Hopkins notes that while research often considers the effect of single traumatic experiences, the pandemic has, over eighteen months, produced an ever-unfolding series of stresses leaving many of us feeling afraid, isolated, and spent.³

When the pandemic first struck, all of us worried for our own wellbeing, and for the safety of those we love. As I, myself, am anxiety prone, I immediately scoured the local markets

¹ *Legends of the Jews* 1:5:237

² <https://medicine.umich.edu/dept/psychiatry/michigan-psychiatry-resources-covid-19/specific-mental-health-conditions/posttraumatic-stress-disorder-during-covid-19>

³ <https://hub.jhu.edu/2021/04/16/covid-19-ptsd/>

for all the disinfectant and sanitizer, all the wet wipes and paper towels I could find. I scrubbed my hands raw and I washed anything brought in from the outside.

Many of us fled the city. Families dispersed: children refused to visit their parents, afraid to get them sick; grandparents seeing grandchildren – out of the question. Then came the shutdowns and the economic collapse. Hospitals filled. Healthcare workers risked their lives without the protective gear they needed. Dozens of our temple members succumbed to the disease and dozens more lost loved ones they could not visit. Some of us who had been infected took months to recover and only now are returning to full strength. Others still suffer the virus’s “long-haul” effects. For many, the loneliness of isolating in their homes was crushing, and led to depression and addiction.

And then, when we hoped things had finally improved last fall, the winter surge came. Only the arrival of the vaccines returned our lives to something approximating a new normal.

That was when my colleagues and I began to return to the cemeteries to dedicate the gravestones of those who had died during the pandemic’s first months. Many families had been unable to travel to their loved ones’ funerals and had never said goodbye. So these unveilings were unusually poignant.

The strain on our children was also significant. At best they were in and out of school. Joyful milestones like weddings and b’nei mitzvah were postponed or celebrated very differently. I often wonder how my daughters will describe the past year and a half to their children. Fortunately most kids possess a resilience that enables them to bounce back from challenging circumstances.

Isaac, though, was not a child. According to one midrash he was thirty-seven.⁴

With Abraham’s knife bearing down on his throat, a divine voice finally commanded, “Stop. Do not harm him.”⁵ Rembrandt captured that instant the angel knocked the blade from Abraham’s hand. The father unbinds his son, and Isaac’s heart begins beating again.⁶ But the emotional scarring becomes apparent. When we next meet Isaac, he is crying out⁷ in the Negev, Rashi suggests the words of Psalm 102:

¹ Hear my prayer, O Lord....

² Do not hide Your face from me....
when I call, answer me....

⁷ I lie awake...alone....

And as he cries he wanders,⁸ the narrative implies directionless. He knows not where to go or how to move forward with his life.

Like Isaac in the wilderness, we too wander a landscape of uncertainty, often navigating with incomplete, even conflicting medical guidance. And many of us are terrified. The delta variant is out there, the virus more contagious than ever. And though vaccines protect against its worst effects, some of those inoculated are still catching it. And our youngest kids can’t yet get

⁴ *Bereshit Rabbah* 56:8

⁵ Genesis 22:12

⁶ *Legends of the Jews* 1:5:237

⁷ One understanding of *la-su’ah*, Genesis 24:63

⁸ An alternative translation of *la-su’ah*

the shot. Around the country millions refuse to take it, many dissuaded by poisonous falsehoods on social media. For millions more around the world, even the option of vaccination would be a gift.

So we too lie awake confounded, wondering: Am I at risk? Do I need a booster? When will it be available? When will my children get their vaccines? Can I unknowingly transmit the virus to them or to other members of my family? Will my kids have to endure another year of pods, quarantines and school by Zoom? Can I endure another year of it!

And as anxious as we may be, for millions of Americans the pandemic represents a trauma of a more searing magnitude. Many, here in our own city, live in cramped projects or housing complexes where social distancing is impossible. Most of their children attend crowded schools with insufficient resources for effective online learning. And most do not have jobs that allow the flexibility to work from home. Recall how, as the pandemic began, we thanked profusely and sincerely the healthcare professionals and all others on the frontlines to whom we previously paid little attention – the bus drivers, the grocery store clerks, even some teachers – whose livelihoods endangered them every day. Escape from the peril of Covid for them was impossible. In disproportionate numbers they got sick and died. We wept for them. But for most of us, their day-to-day experiences remain foreign. Many of us again have the option to stay or leave, and we will choose what is best for our own wellbeing and the safety of our families. But this time we do so understanding the ramifications of our decisions on the inequalities and divisions in our city and our nation.

Uncertainty

When I started thinking about this sermon several months ago, it was going to be about recovery. Things looked so much brighter then! Now it's about uncertainty and living with it.

How do you do it? How do you keep on going, not knowing what the future may hold? I don't know. But I am certain it can be done. So many of you are living proof: you who in the face of sickness and loss have mustered the courage to awaken each morning, embrace each new day as the gift it is, and then move forward, not tentatively but with determination to be productive and even to stand with others in need.

As a rabbi, I marvel at such quiet heroism all the time. Calling to say hi, I ask, "How are you today?" I've learned to add "today" because a more open-ended "how are you" can draw the shadow of longer-term uncertainty across the sunlight of near-term possibility. "Good," they answer. "My treatments are keeping the tumor at bay." "Grateful," they respond. "My husband and I celebrated our anniversary, not the way we wanted to, but we were together." "Hopeful," they say. "I've been out of work for a year, but I have two job interviews this week."

Focusing on short horizons can help. We learn to embrace the prospects each day brings, and an uncertain journey doesn't seem quite as endless.

Each of us possesses more strength than we recognize, though sometimes we need help to be confident in it. And we should never hesitate or be ashamed to seek that help. While we've always known that the challenges of mental health are real, they are beginning to become less stigmatized.

Simone Biles made a big difference here. As eager as we were to watch her bring home the gold, her third-place finish, the bronze medal she received, was worth its weight in gold for all it did to draw back the curtain shrouding our awareness of psychological distress in all its

manifestations. She made it ok to say, “I’m not ok.” We need to be able to air our anxieties and understand we are not alone. And then we need to believe that even we who are broken can be made whole again.

“Ring the bells that still can ring,” sang Leonard Cohen. “Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack, a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”

Whether through therapy or other forms of social support, we all must learn how to acknowledge our cracks and engage with our feelings so that we can reengage with the world. Anxiety, depression and trauma specialist Dr. Philip Lanzisera writes: “we have to find the joy in our...lives....We have to create things in our lives...that are meaningful...to reach out to friends and...be close to people. If [we] are depressed or anxious...finding [ourselves] not wanting to do anything, that’s when [we] have to make [ourselves] do something”⁹...to ring the bells that still can ring, draw back the curtain, and let in the light.

Houses of worship can help.

Saturday marks the twentieth anniversary of the September 11th attacks, a day none of us will ever forget, certainly not those of us then living and working in New York. I was an assistant rabbi at Central Synagogue. My colleagues and I had just watched on the news the North Tower collapse when a boy in our ninth grade suddenly showed up. The temple had locked down, but somehow he had gotten past security. As a student at Stuyvesant High School, which was in the shadow of the World Trade Center, his teachers had told him to go home when the planes struck. He had tried calling his parents but the phones were out, so he began running uptown to the one other home he knew would be safe: the temple. I’ll always remember that moment, and what it taught me about the role of the synagogue as a shelter and a comfort.

And that is what we have tried to be this past year and a half. At our best we are a harbor for the battered spirit, a refuge to find strength and share it, a haven to rediscover through prayer and learning the beauty of our Jewish faith overflowing with wisdom that emerged from days far more uncertain and perilous than these.¹⁰ How moved I have been across these many months to hear congregants who are struggling with illness, loss and loneliness poignantly describe the temple as nothing short of “lifesaving.” In sorrow and in joy, in tears and in laughter, we need each other. We are like reeds in the field, the Talmud says. A single one is weak and easily broken. Bind them together and they do not bend.¹¹

We haven’t and we won’t. We will look to the future with hope, drawing strength from the unrelenting force of our Jewish tradition, which in response to every challenge, every trauma, has grown only more durable, more resilient, more inspiring.

And so, I promise, will we.

And in that spirit, I want to celebrate again the exhilarating news our president Harris Diamond shared last night, evidence of our confidence in the future. John Streicker, our immediate past president, and his family, who five years ago enabled us to create the world class cultural education program we call the Streicker Center as a source of inspiration for our members and hundreds of thousands around the world, have now committed a second extraordinary gift to expand our reach even further: to the thousands of Jews in their twenties and thirties living in New York, to unaffiliated Jewish families making decisions right now about

⁹ <https://www.henryford.com/blog/2021/03/pandemic-ptsd>

¹⁰ <https://www.kcrw.com/news/shows/press-play-with-madeleine-brand/fires-california-coronavirus-salons-sports-films/rabbi-steve-leder>

¹¹ *Tanchuma, Nitzavim* 1

their children's religious identity, and to that group we call "seekers" searching for spiritual moorings amidst the turbulent currents of our time....

Because we all need that safe harbor.

Courage

Kol ha'olam kulo gesher tzar me'od, "The whole world can sometimes seem a very narrow bridge," Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav recognized. *Veha'ikar lo lifached k'lal*, "But the important thing is not to be afraid."

Even though we live with uncertainty, we mustn't live in fear. We know that it is much easier to fall into the pit of anxiety, than to climb out of it. And, admittedly, we are all prone to moments of despondency, those grey days when it requires real effort and courage to keep going.

But this we also know and of it we are certain: every shadow bears witness to light. No shadow could exist without it. It is the way of the world. The sun still shines. The clouds of uncertainty will break. As Psalm 23 assures us, we will not remain "in the valley of the shadow." We will "walk through" it, together climbing toward the light of a brighter day.¹²

And when we emerge from this pandemic and we will, we will be stronger, wiser – our eyes opened anew to what matters most in life: the blessings of home and family, the friendships that in our busyness we may have overlooked or taken for granted, and the strength that God has imbued in each of us. The past eighteen months taught us to cherish these gifts. And to adapt, to find inspiration in new sources of creativity and joy, even as we returned to the old fonts of wisdom and strength.

But perhaps our greatest encouragement should come from a truth so obvious we may easily forget it: we have been through this before and are here to tell the story. Together again we will move from the shadow of trauma into the light of hope.

Just like Isaac. He too recovered. He went on to plant¹³ in the field once watered by his tears new seeds of promise for his descendants, for us, the Hebrew people. He was resilient. So are we. As individuals and as a community we will watch new joys grow out of the trauma we have endured.

Jewish tradition offers a blessing for such moments as this, known as *Birkat Hagomel*. It is a blessing for survival. Yes, the road ahead may be uncertain, but we have made it this far, and we are together. So I ask you, with courage and with faith in the future, to recite its words after me first in Hebrew, then in English: *Baruch atah Adonai...she-g'malani...kol tov*. Blessed are You God...who rewards us with goodness.

Mi she-g'malcha kol tov, hu yi-g'malcha kol tov, selah. May God who rewards us with goodness reward us with goodness for ever.

Amen.

¹² <https://www.kcrw.com/news/shows/press-play-with-madeleine-brand/fires-california-coronavirus-salons-sports-films/rabbi-steve-leder>

¹³ Rashbam in Zvi Ron, "Isaac's Personality and the Meaning of *La-su'ah Ba-sadeh*," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, https://jbnqnew.jewishbible.org/assets/Uploads/431/jbnq_431_zvionlasuach.pdf