



## Genesis 22:1-2

וַיְהִי, אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה, וְהַאֱלֹהִים, נִסָּה אֶת-אַבְרָהָם; וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו, אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִנִי.  
וַיֹּאמֶר קַח-נָא אֶת-בְּנֶךְ אֶת-יִחִידְךָ אֲשֶׁר-אָהַבְתָּ, אֶת-יִצְחָק, וְלֶךְ-לְךָ, אֶל-אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרְיָה; וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם, לְעֹלָה, עַל  
אֶחָד הַהָרִים, אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלֶיךָ

Now, it was after these things that Divine Providence sought to test Abraham and said to him: "Abraham!" And he answered: "Yes." And the voice continued: "Take your son, your only one, which you dearly love, that is Isaac, and go forth to the Land of Moriah and offer him up as a sacrifice on one of the mountains which I will reveal to you. And when Abraham woke up...he did as the voice commanded.

For the past twenty years, we have read the story of the Binding of Isaac as our Rosh Hashanah Torah reading. In back-to-back chapters, Abraham is required first to expel his wife Hagar and son Ishmael, and then to offer his remaining son Isaac as a burnt offering. This combination of sacrifices always seemed a bit too much to me. Yet, Abraham has never failed to obey God; why these tests?

I think that some of us might feel a bit tested too, as we start our second Jewish New Year under the very real pall of Covid-19. As I have mentioned before in my sermons, our Sages were not unaware of the questioning minds and hearts likely found in the congregations of believers. They chose to offer one answer found in the Books of our Prophets. On page 199 of our High Holidays prayer book, there is a Haftarah portion for Rosh Hashanah from Isaiah which states: "For my thoughts are not like yours, nor are your ways like Mine, says the Eternal One."

It is fair to say that none of us are looking forward to another year of testing. However, I think that I can speak for all of us when I say that I would be quite happy if, as for our Patriarch Abraham, an angel descended from heaven and proclaimed an end to our test and the blessings of Divine Providence upon us, our families and the whole world. And, perhaps, some relief from the depredations of global warming.

But, there is another way our Torah and Prophets can speak to our wishes and the world's needs. Rosh Hashanah is, by definition, a new beginning. And sometimes--

times like the ones we are experiencing--we crave a REALLY new beginning, and this year, our tradition steps up with just such an event. For the year 5782 is a Sabbatical Year. In ancient Israel, The Sabbatical was a year of enforced rest within society's agricultural and commercial spheres. The grain in the fields, the fruits on the trees and vines, were available to all. Debts were to be canceled and those in bondage set free.

Just as the Sabbath day accorded every Israelite a day free from mundane labor to restore their body and spirit for the coming week's activity, so the sabbatical year accorded the whole of society—people, animals, and even the land itself—an opportunity to restore the integrity of people and nature. For our ancestors, the sabbatical year was a way of achieving wholeness by consciously not performing activities customarily associated with work; and by not doing, helping the natural process which, through time and rest, heals the wounds in nature and in peoples' hearts.

So what can this Sabbatical Year do for us? The name of our congregation, Tikkun Olam, proclaims a Reform Judaism in which members choose to engage as partners in the process of making fundamental and critical changes in society for the benefit of everyone and everything. Tikkun Olam describes the process of acting to make the world more holy and more whole. It is something we commit ourselves to in partnership with our own concept of the divine or transcendent to consecrate the mundane and make holy the profane.

Tikkun Olam is about treating others—persons, animals, and nature—with Hesed, that is, with deeds of lovingkindness. While we have been raised to think of deeds of lovingkindness as referring to what we can do for others, the caring that motivates, underlies and empowers all such deeds must be grounded in acting with lovingkindness towards oneself. There is a saying: "You cannot give what you do not have." In these difficult times, we need to take some time to show ourselves lovingkindness in order to better share it with those around us. Many of us have

spent the better part of a year trying to fill our days with constant—and perhaps mindless—activity. Let us resolve to take some time to apply the process of tikkun olam to ourselves, to create a regular practice of cultivating caring for ourselves so that we can be "charged up" when we act to show it towards others.

One way to do this is to dedicate some time each day to letting ourselves just be, to deeply relax. This doesn't have to happen in some particular place, just someplace where we can deeply relax. We could sit outside and watch the sky and the clouds floating by; or the birds and squirrels, or the snow. We could take a quiet walk around the neighborhood. While we gently relax, we need to pay some attention to our breathing—not necessarily counting the breaths or focusing on the breath, but gently ensuring that we are breathing as deeply as is comfortable. We need to create a regular program during the day to let ourselves experience the deep rest embodied in the idea and practices of the sabbatical year.

So let's join together as Congregation Tikkun Olam to take a moment to sit easily, relax, take a breath as deeply as comfortable, and let it go slowly, paying attention to being at rest on this holy day of rest at this start of a sabbatical year of rest.

Now, look around you, those in your immediate vicinity. As we enter this New Year, this Sabbatical year, the mitzvah we are called to is the mitzvah of lovingkindness: first towards ourselves; then, for those that we find immediately around us; for those who are a bit more distant, and even for all those outside our immediate communities and circles of care. It is the practice of this mitzvah of lovingkindness that the world needs most in this time of increasing division and fear.

The practice of lovingkindness for others begins with ourselves so that it can be extended to others. This is our responsibility that we carry into this New Year, the

task of tikkun olam, of doing acts of lovingkindness, to make an increasingly fracturing world whole again, not only for our families and communities but for everyone's families and communities. And when this service concludes, look at all the faces you will see at the end of this Zoom service and wish them a Happy, Healthy, Sweet and Peaceful New Year from your own heart of lovingkindness.

*Keyn yehi ratzon.*

We continue now with the Prayer for the Health and Wellbeing of All People.