

Every year, on Rosh Hashanah morning, when we read the story of the binding of Isaac from the Torah, I, like any other rabbi speaking about this difficult passage, try to discover a different perspective that will yield a new insight or lesson. A father who is commanded by God to sacrifice his son is, on the surface, not an easy tale to discuss or even apply to our modern lives. For the 30<sup>th</sup> time on Rosh Hashanah morning, I find myself in this position. This year, I hope to suggest a new way to cast Abraham’s actions as an example of how he was, in some way, giving his best to God.

As I was considering how to find a silver lining in the Akedah story, a news item caught my attention about which I had to listen and learn more.

You may also have heard about the courage of Kaleb Eulls, a star quarterback and defensive end for Yazoo County High School in Yazoo City, Mississippi. Just before 7am on September 1, Eulls was sitting in the back of his school bus, eyes closed, listening on his mp3 player to music that had just about lulled him off to sleep. Suddenly, Kaleb’s sister, Kimberly, roused him with a sense of urgency, “Kaleb, the girl has a gun!” 22 children were on that bus ranging in age from 5 to 18. Eulls explained later, “I just immediately woke up and put my glasses on to see what was what. The girl was just pointing the gun at different students.” Surveillance video from the bus showed a girl on the bus standing up, taking out a .38 caliber handgun and walking up and down the aisle of the bus brandishing the weapon. Police later said that she was angry at someone on the bus who had been picking on her. The girl ordered the bus driver to pull over. She could have shot anyone on that bus, but Eulls wasn’t going to let that happen. He quickly opened the emergency door in the back of the bus so the other students could get out, and then he confronted the girl, calmly telling her to give him the gun or put it down. Eulls, who had not one but three sisters on the bus, was waiting for a moment to act. He found it when the girl looked away for a just a second. He lunged at her,

and when the two of them went down, she dropped the gun. Eulls grabbed the gun, holding it up to show everyone that the girl had been disarmed, He then jumped out of the back of the bus, safe along with the driver and all of the other children.

County Sheriff Thomas Vaughan was grateful for and impressed with Eull’s bravery, He commented, “There would have been a lot of sad families today had Kaleb Eulls not taken swift action. He made the statement to one of my deputies that if she was going to shoot anyone, he would rather she shoot him. Watching him doing such a heroic act and not even caring about his own safety, that’s something you don’t see every day.”

Eulls, a 6-foot-4, 255-pound senior, will play college football next year at Mississippi State. He may have an incredible career in college and even beyond, but we can be certain that this one act of courage will characterize him and stay with him the rest of his life. He will hear many calls to action in the future, but when hearing this particular call, he selflessly gave his absolute best.

This morning, we recited the powerful words of the U’taneh Tokef prayer: “On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed – how many shall pass on, and how many shall come to be, who shall live and who shall die.” Those words of the prayerbook are like poetry that we can interpret in our own way. I chose to read the full text this year because the story of Kaleb Eulls described a situation in which “who shall live and who shall die” could have been literal and very real. This Rosh Hashanah prayer later declares that “the great shofar is sounded, the still small voice is heard.” It asserts that “judgment’s decree” – the possible “sentence” against us based on the full weight of what we have done wrong - can be tempered and even drastically altered through repentance, that is, returning to the right path; prayer – contemplating how we can improve ourselves; and charity. Repentance, prayer and charity together represent the

**best that we can give to others and to ourselves. Yet, to give our best, we first have to be open to hear the call to action – the ethical t’kiah g’dolah from the outside as well as the voice of conscience inside. In many pivotal moments of our lives, the great shofar is sounded, the still small voice is heard.**

**Dr. Ron Wolfson brought together classic Jewish statements about how we can give our best in his new book, *The Seven Questions You’re Asked in Heaven*. Five of the questions that he collected come from a passage in the Talmud, in which Rava, a rabbinic leader who lived 1800 years ago, wondered what God might ask us at the end of our life’s journey. He believed that we would hear these crucial questions:**

**Did you deal honestly with people in your business practices?**

**Did you busy yourself in procreation – in other words, did you have time for family or leave a legacy to the next generation?**

**Did you set times for study?**

**Did you hope for deliverance – or live with hope in your heart?**

**Did you seek wisdom and understand one thing from another?**

**19<sup>th</sup> century Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch provided the sixth question cited by Ron Wolfson when he said, “When I stand before God in judgment, I believe I will be asked, “Did you see my Alps?” – or – did you enjoy everything that has been created in the world?**

**And finally, the seventh question comes from this Hassidic tale: Rabbi Zusya once said, "When I reach the next world, God will not ask me, 'Why were you not Moses?' Instead, God will ask me, 'Why were you not Zusya?'" – in other words, “Why were you not who YOU needed to be?**

**Honesty, leaving an immortal legacy, study, hope, seeking a deeper understanding of what we know and gaining a better sense of our own priorities, experiencing all that we can in our lifetime, and perfecting who we really are –**

these are questions we have to hear not later, but now, while we still have a chance to make a difference and a positive change for ourselves and for the people important to us. One passage in the Ron Wolfson’s book offered a poignant reminder about wisely prioritizing our lives, to realize what matters most to us at any given moment. Wolfson cited several of the phone calls made by victims of 9/11 who were on the upper floors of the World Trade Center in New York City. One of them, newlywed Melissa Harrington Hughes, who was attending a conference on the 101<sup>st</sup> floor, called her father nine minutes after the first plane hit. Her father told her that she should get to the stairwell as fast as she could, and that he loved her. She replied, “I love you too Dad – you have to do me a favor, you have to call my husband and tell him where I am and tell him that I love him.” She was able to make a second call to her San Francisco home and left this message for her husband before he woke up: “Sean, it’s me. I’m stuck in this building in New York. There’s a lot of smoke and I just wanted to let you know that I love you always.” Those calls were a gift of love to family and a reflection of what is most important in life. At times of reaching out in love, the great shofar is sounded, the still small voice is heard.

Gerry McNamara was one of the passengers on United Flight 1549 on January 15 which Captain Sully Sullenberger skillfully landed on the Hudson River well enough that the crew and passengers could be rescued. Having flown out of LaGuardia Airport the morning before, I had an extra sense of amazement at the tragedy that was averted that day. Gerry McNamara shared in a widely circulated email his thoughts on surviving. He said: “I am struck by what was truly a miracle. Had this happened a few hours later, it would have been pitch dark and much harder to land. Ferries would no longer have been running after rush hour and it would not have been the same uplifting story. I witnessed the best of humanity that day. I, and everyone on that plane, survived and have been

**given a second chance. It struck me that in our work, we talk to clients about the importance of experience and the ability to execute. Experience showed up big time on Flight 1549 as our pilot was a dedicated, trained, experienced professional who executed flawlessly when he had to. There is a great deal to be learned from this experience including: Why has this happened to me? Why have I survived and what am I supposed to do with this gift? For me, the answers to these questions and more will come over time, but already I find myself being more patient and forgiving, less critical and judgmental.**

**For now I have several lessons I would like to share:**

- 1. Cherish your families as never before and go to great lengths to keep your promises.**
- 2. Be thankful and grateful for everything you have and don't worry about the things you don't have.**
- 3. Keep in shape. You never know when you'll be called upon to save your own life, or to help someone else save theirs.**

**At those times when we realize we have been given a second chance at life, the great shofar is sounded, the still small voice is heard.**

**Life's experiences can be like a shofar call, or a still small voice, to guide us to find our best selves, to return to who we truly are and to be grateful, generous and kind as family and community members. I believe that one person who learned this lesson later in his life is the man who came to be called the “Liberal Lion,” the late Senator Edward Kennedy. In my conversations with people about Ted Kennedy, I have heard comments ranging from admiration to disdain. In reading about his life, it is apparent that the trial of his nephew, William Kennedy Smith, in 1991 put the Senator on notice. That call for him to change was loud, clear and urgent. His marriage to Vicki Reggie was a turning point, and the last 17 years of his life offered Kennedy a second chance to be at his best as a**

**family member, a friend, and as a statesman who, in a style of politics that I know I sorely miss, could build bridges across the aisle and forge strong and respectful relationships with Republican Senators, even those with whom he sometimes vehemently disagreed. There were many tributes from his political allies and friends as well as from long-time opponents with whom he was able to work for productive ends. Former Kansas Senator Bob Dole said, “If you made a list of the issues he was involved in, it would stretch from here to Hyannis Port. Social Security reform, the Americans with Disabilities Act, civil rights....He was proud of what he did, but he didn’t wear it on his sleeve and remind you every day what a great guy he was. He was doing things that should be done. He was not helping the rich. He was helping the disabled and seniors and children who didn’t have enough to eat. Who can fault that?” Senator Orrin Hatch, who ran for the senate to, as he said, fight Ted Kennedy, developed an unexpected friendship with his ideological foe. He wrote, “We shared many laughs and more than a few disappointments. Through good times and bad, whether we agreed or disagreed politically, I found Ted Kennedy to be an honest, decent, and honorable man and a loyal friend....He was a happy warrior who was valiant and gracious in victory and defeat. He loved his country, home state, and colleagues – and Americans from all walks of life and political persuasions learned to love and respect him in return....He was an American original. I will forever treasure his memory.”**

**At those times when we need to turn our lives around, the great shofar is sounded, the still, small voice is heard.**

**My lens for the story of the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, this year is one of hearing that call – the shofar, the still small voice, common sense, a vision of the future – that will lead us to improve ourselves and to give our best. In this test of Abraham’s faith, we usually focus only on his near-sacrifice of his son. We wonder why he would even agree, in the context of this tale in the Torah, to this**

possibly tragic experience. I submit that perhaps the most important part of the test was that, after being told to do one thing, Abraham had to listen to the voice that told him to do the opposite. Giving his best meant following all of the directions he heard, including that last, crucial call, **STOP! DON'T LAY A HAND ON THE BOY! DON'T DO ANYTHING TO HIM!** Some commentators and historians explain that this story offered a clear condemnation of other ancient peoples who did sacrifice their children as part of their worship. The essence of Abraham's faith could be the fact that he heeded the angel's call to stop, enabling him to see a ram nearby. Giving his best meant, for Abraham, to be open to the all of the calls outside of him and from inside. The rabbis in their explanations of this trying tale assert that Abraham knew, deep down, the lesson that God was trying to teach him, that his best would come mostly from his own mind and heart.

On this Rosh Hashanah, like any other, the shofar is sounded, the still small voice is heard. We have a second chance to hear those calls to return to or remain on the right path, to the best we can be, to search inside our souls with honesty and humility, and to turn to all humanity, at any given moment, with love, generosity and kindness. May this be a year when we realize, more than any other, that life is a gift that we can share with each other as partners on a journey that can be both uncertain, yet, still, filled with hope and promise if we but hear and listen to the call. So may we do and let us say Amen.