

**The Isaac Initiative**  
Rosh HaShanah Morning, 2019  
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Our Torah portion this morning teaches the *Akeida* - the binding of Isaac. God tests Abraham, "Take your son, your only son, the one you love, Isaac, and offer him for a sacrifice on the mountain that I will show you."

Take your son and sacrifice him? Isaac, this child of Abraham's old age - the miracle he never thought he could have. Sacrifice him?

If I were there - a "*Jew in the pew*," and I listened to what our text says, it would be enough for me to stay away from *Shul* for a year.

Indeed, the *Akeida* requires a measure of wherewithal, a little creativity, and some deep soul-searching. The truth is, if our texts were all easy to digest, we wouldn't grow. And when our world faces challenging times, like right now, sometimes a challenging text is what we really need.

Yes, our portion is about the *near* sacrifice of Isaac. It's about a father who was on the cusp of killing his son - this is to say, severing ties with the dream of the future of the Hebrew people - all because he allowed a narrow focus to nearly murder his God-given sense of judgment.

Dear friends, we are living in a climate in which the Jewish people is on the cusp of sacrifice once again. It's a climate that is becoming narrow and insular. We are seeing division among party lines that calls into question our allegiances as Jews, our loyalty as Jews, and our priorities as Jews.

And we are in a time when we are seeing increased hatred against Jews. Some have reached out to me asking, "Should I take the mezuzah off my door?"

*"Should I take the mezuzah off my door?"* It really saddens me. What has led us to this place?

Now, those on the left might suggest that current Republican voices are bolstering antisemitism. Those on the right might affirm that Democrats in our country have magnified anti-Israel sentiments.

You are both right.

And that should be of critical concern to us all. Antisemitism on the right. Anti-Israel on the left. The Jewish people in the middle.

Let me offer some examples of what I mean:

On the far left, the rise of anti-Israel activity is getting stronger and stronger. On college campuses, support for the Boycott, Divestment, Sanction (BDS) Movement has gained momentum over the past years. Now, BDS claims to seek humanitarian support for the Palestinians - when in reality it seeks to undermine the legitimacy of Israel.

Please understand - there is much to say about what could and should be happening to create bridges among Jews and Arabs. But that is NOT what BDS seeks to do. Its founder, Omar Barghouti, stated: "Everyone understands that this Palestinian "right of return" would open Israel's borders to a massive

immigration that would quickly overwhelm its Jewish majority and transform it from the one-and-only Jewish state into the twenty-second Arab state.<sup>1</sup>

Organizations that have support among the left, The Woman's March, Black Lives Matter, and many of the LGBTQ groups have used their platforms to rally opposition to Israel. They see themselves as little David among massive Goliaths, and they align themselves with Palestinian voices. It is to the point that many Jews who want to support these progressive causes have been threatened by both the organizers as well as participants. A friend of mine who attended one such rally wearing a Kippah was spat upon for her "Zionist racism."

And so - to those on the left, it is not fair to say that hate of Judaism today is exclusively from the right.

Antisemitism on the right. Anti-Israel on the left. The Jewish people in the middle.

Now, let's look at the other side. The rise in attacks on Jewish institutions across the United States in recent years has been gut-wrenching. Here in the California, the numbers have increased as well. According to the ADL website here are the numbers:

2015-2016: 211 (59 in LA)

2016-2017: 479 (99 in LA)

2017 - 2018: 609 (122 in LA)

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<sup>1</sup> See Ali Mustafa, "Boycotts work: An interview with Omar Barghouti," The Electronic Intifada, May 31, 2009 and Maurice Ostroff, "BDS opposes the two state solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict," The Jerusalem Post, May 12, 2013. <https://www.maccabeetaskforce.org/bds-qa/>

In 2018, there were 1879 antisemitic attacks in the United States. Right wing individuals took responsibility for nearly 71 percent, 1328 incidents.

What is fueling this? After the attack at the Poway Chabad center last April, journalist Zack Beuachamp noted: “the kind of anti-Semitism that’s inspired attacks on synagogues to date is, in fact, a principally right-wing phenomenon. It arises not out of Israel-Palestine grievances, as left-wing anti-Semitism **often does**, but rather from distinctively right-wing forms of xenophobia and racial grievances.”<sup>2</sup>

Antisemitism on the right. Anti-Israel on the left. The Jewish people in the middle.

Friends, we will not be Isaac that is put up for slaughter. Our people has felt more vulnerable now than we have in many, many, decades in this country. And while I don’t have a plan to end anti-Semitism or to broker Middle East peace, I do have a path forward for all of us. I call it “**The Isaac Initiative**.” It’s not enough for our people to survive. We have something to offer to world. It’s got to be more than a pride of what Jews have historically accomplished. The Isaac Initiative compels us to look to the future, beyond the current situation, so we can plant a seed for another generation that carries the torch.

It’s a straight-forward initiative, and it’s based on the letter’s in Isaac’s name.

I - S - A - A - C

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/5/1/18524103/poway-synagogue-shooting-anti-semitism>

## I - **Israel.**

All Jews have got to be part of the conversation regarding Israel. Let's debate the policies. Let's talk about the Prime Minister. Let's wrestle with the social issues. But let us never turn our backs and walk away. Israel today is a growing, thriving, nuanced place. There are challenges. There are advances. And yes, there are set-backs. But in order to truly be part of the conversation, it can't be something we just read about thousands of miles away. You gotta go and see for yourself. I want a commitment from you to travel to Israel. Whether it's a NFTY trip in High School, Birthright as a young adult, Honeymoon Israel for young marrieds, a vacation, a mission .... Go! Your presence evokes the past and ensures the future. It is the most critical investment you can make. If you have been to Israel on an Akiba trip with either myself or Rabbi Maller - you know how wonderful it is to be there as a community.

And so...

We want you to go so badly that today we are formally announcing the first ever Akiba **Family** Trip to Israel in 2022. We will be leading an inspiring journey for people of all ages. We will see first hand why this tiny sliver of land has such a monumental impact on us all. We'll meet thinkers and doers, secular and religious. We'll eat some of the best food on the planet after rafting down the Jordan. We'll explore Massadah, absorb the Western Wall, and float in the Dead Sea. Start planning now. Start saving now. Start dreaming now! More info will follow!

S - **Synagogue.** All Jews should be a member of a synagogue. It's no longer enough to feel like you are a member.

“What if I don’t believe in God?” I’m often asked. (Talk about Grandpa Phil).

What if my kids are out of the house? All the more reason to find meaning.

What if I can’t afford it? We don’t turn anyone away for financial reasons.

What if I have a grievance with Temple issues? Then let’s talk.

What if I pray differently? Then teach me how you pray so I can learn from you.

In these times it is so very important that our people have a place to be, to reflect, to act, and to dream. Your becoming a member of a synagogue shows that you care, you really care, about ensuring that those who love Judaism have a place to convene. When big things happen in the world that affect Jews, we meet at the Temple. It’s our safe spot, our lighthouse, and our place of comfort.

The Temple gives us a place to heal.

The Temple welcomes us with an embrace.

The Temple is a place of both questions and answers.

The Temple has a spot for you to play Mah Jong.

The Temple embraces all who want to make the world a better place.

**A - Action and Authenticity.** This is one that requires careful balance. For decades, many Jews in America have proudly and boldly taken action, standing up for causes that make the world as a whole a better place. We march for justice. We petition for rights. We raise our voices in support of principles we value.

And it means so much.

And it deepens our Judaism.

Sort of.

For many, the actions we take have replaced the Shabbat candles we light. The rights we support have overshadowed the rhythm of our Hebrew prayers. The voices we raise have overpowered our navigation of Jewish texts. And our yearning for universal truths has eclipsed the honoring of our particular Jewish traditions.

Yes - while we stand on the shoulders of giants - we need to ask the question, "*Is engaging in social action and social justice enough to feed the souls of those seeking depth in their lives.*"

We are hungry for authenticity, spirituality and meaning.

So while we want to imbue the next generation with the responsibility to stand up for global truths, we also want to inspire them through the soul of Jewish music, the insights of Jewish sages, the meaning of Jewish rituals, and the passport to wrestle with Jewish texts.

No, the two are not mutually exclusive. Action is a cornerstone. Yes! Get involved in our *Tikkun Olam*/ Social Justice committee. Without action, the world will not get better. But action is not a replacement. So we need to weave action with the depth and riches of Jewish authenticity. Become an adult Bar/ Bat Mitzvah. Attend Torah study. Light candles. Otherwise our children will ask, "What is the difference between being a civic minded person - and a Jew?"

And finally ....

C - **Community**. When I was growing up and our family travelled, the first thing my father would do when we got to the hotel was pull out the phone book and look for other Jewish names. I didn't get it. At all.

But he would remind me of his own father, my grandpa Bert. Grandpa was born in Russia and came to Canada when he was two years old. As a young man, he took the train west where he found himself alone in a small city. He asked the train station clerk if there were any Jews in town. The clerk held up one finger.

Because of that one connection, Grandpa had a warm bed to sleep in.

Dad explained, "Being Jewish is about being in a community, an extended family. We aren't alone because we have connections to people world over.

There's actually a song we teach in our school called, "Wherever you go, there's always someone Jewish" by Rabbi Larry Milder. My favorite line is, "When you're alone and your somewhere kind of newish, the odds are, don't look far cause they're Jewish too."<sup>3</sup>

We need to seek our community out. Please do not be afraid to wear your Chai or your Star of David or your Kippah. These outward symbols are a sign to the community that we are here for one another and that we crave the connections of our global Jewish community.

Indeed, we live in a complicated world.

And when the crossfire of left and right threatens our resolve, we stand tall, reclaiming and renewing what we are right here - and bringing that goodness to

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<sup>3</sup> "Wherever You Go, There's Always Someone Jewish" By Rabbi Larry Milder



the world. We will not allow ourselves to become a remnant people - by giving up on all that has made us a light for millennia.

So we re-discover the spark that has fueled our history - and we ignite a flame that will propel us into tomorrow.

The Issac Initiative:

I - Israel

S - Synagogue

A - A- Action and authenticity

C - Community

We will not be the Isaac who was on a death march.

No.

We will become the Isaac who walked away from the sacrifice and became the father of Israel.

We will become the Isaac who found love.

We will become the Isaac who had insight.

We will become the Isaac who was the bridge - carrying the torch from one generation to the next.

We will become Isaac - not only because of the promise of his parents - the past, but also for the sake of embracing a covenant for the future.

We are Jews... We wrestle with our text, embrace our covenant, deepen our commitment, and begin our initiative to ensure that Judaism doesn't merely survive. No, we are worth so much more than hoping to survive. We want to always be a shining light of vision, hope, and strength. In the words of the great Jewish musician, Debbie Friedman, "We must live for today, we must build for tomorrow."