

Rabbi Daniel Berman  
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*Abavah v'yirah: On Intimacy, Love and Fear*

*L'shanab tovab.*

During our two days of Rosh Hashanah, we read the stories of a family: Abraham, Sarah and their son Isaac.

We began yesterday morning with a story about Sarah.

We first encounter Sarah in Torah at the end of a long list of names that connect the multiple generations from Noah to Abraham. In that list, countless members of Abraham's family are mentioned, but the only thing we know about them are their names. With one exception: Abraham's wife, Sarah. Sarah is the only person among these many generations about whom Torah offers us any insight. What we are told is that Sarah is childless.

This description of Sarah is given in the middle of a long genealogy. We are reading, with painstaking detail, a story of prolific birth-giving, including the names of ten generations flowing from one to the next. And then there is Sarah, Abraham's wife, who has no children. Her inability to conceive is not only Sarah's individual experience. In the book of Genesis, the book of beginnings, it is a complete rupture in the long family history of childbearing.

Continuing generations is a main theme of the first books of Torah. For much of Sarah's life, she is an outsider to this primary theological objective.

As we began the Torah reading yesterday morning, Sarah had already grown old, long past the time she could imagine giving birth. Yet her life was about to change.

After being unable to conceive all of her life, Sarah, at last, gives birth to a child, a son named Yitzchak, Isaac. Much of our tradition reads and interprets this story as a portrayal of miracles, of the possibility that God takes note of us, remembers our pain, and enables us to experience true joy at the most unexpected moments in our lives.

But it is also a story about longing, yearning for a dream, until now, unfulfilled.

Sarah's life-long experience of longing became even clearer this morning. Every year on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, we read the story known in our tradition as the Akedah, the biblical narrative of Abraham binding and nearly sacrificing his and his wife Sarah's beloved son, Isaac.

As Abraham takes Isaac to offer him as a sacrifice, Sarah is not mentioned at all. Sarah is stunningly absent from the entire story. In fact, she appears only once more in Torah: immediately after the Akedah, we are told that Sarah has died.

We are left to imagine the circumstances of her death. We don't know anything about the cause, the context, or her final words and emotions. In ancient and early Jewish development, silence in Torah was - more than anything - perfect and fertile ground for imagination. So our ancient rabbis filled Torah in, spinning countless stories of Sarah's life right up to her very last breath.

One ancient storyteller imagined that, as Abraham takes Isaac to bind and sacrifice him, an angel comes down from the heavens and tells Sarah what Abraham has set out to do. The angel then assures Sarah, however, that God will intercede and that Abraham will not raise his hand against his son. Instead Abraham will offer a ram for sacrifice. Sarah is assured - unequivocally - that Isaac will return home safely.

According to this ancient story, Sarah knew her son would be ok. He would survive the trauma. And he would be home soon.

And yet, as the story continues, Sarah becomes so uprooted, so dizzy by the thought that she could have lost this child whom she longed for all of her life, that it was so close to becoming a reality –

and that she lived in a world where that could possibly happen! – she cries out six harrowing, piercing wails, and her soul departs.

“What do you mean?” we want to call out to our ancient storyteller. Sarah found out her son would be ok. Abraham wouldn’t go through with this traumatic act. God would intervene. Isaac would be safe.

But Sarah could not bear even the possibility of this loss. Her love for Isaac, who came into her life as a miracle – that love was potent. Her fear of losing her son literally took her breath away. Sarah’s understanding of the fragility of Isaac’s life set her into what the Jewish scholar and author Aviva Zornberg describes as existential vertigo: she could not live on this earth with a love tied so deeply to fear.

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Some of you have read the work of the contemporary Israeli author David Grossman. With his friends Amos Oz, A.B. Yehoshua, and, more recently, Edgar Karet, and following in the literary tradition of Nachman Bialik and Shai Agnon, Grossman is one of Israel’s most important literary voices. A few years ago, he published a book entitled “To the End of the Land.”

The book is about a woman named Ora. Ora’s son, Ofer, has just completed his service in the Israeli army when he is recalled to take part in a dangerous military operation. Ora is overcome with premonitions and fear of losing her child. She begins to imagine being woken in the middle of the night by a knock on the door, and greeted by representatives of the army, who would share the news of the loss of her son.

So she flees her Jerusalem home and goes north, to the Galilee hills, believing that if she can’t be told bad news, well, it simply won’t happen.

She spends her days hiking and wandering the hills with an old friend, thinking back on her son Ofer’s childhood, and telling stories about his life. Ora believes that as long as she continues to tell stories about her son, without stopping, he will be safe.

There is one short passage in the book I want to share with you. As her son Ofer finishes packing up his room before returning to the army, Ora begins to daydream.

Grossman writes: “two decades earlier, in the garden at night, in the middle of hanging up the boys’ clothes, her husband Ilan walked through the crowded laundry lines and hugged her, and they both rocked together, entangled in the damp laundry, sighing lovingly, and Ilan whispered in her ear: ‘Isn’t ...[this] the fullness of life?’ She had hugged him as hard as she could, and had felt for that one fleeting moment she had caught it as it rushed through her, the secret of the fruitful years, their tidal motion, and the blessing in her body and his, and their two little children, and the house they had built for themselves, and their love, which finally, after years of wandering and hesitating was now, it seemed, standing up on its own two feet.”

As Ofer prepares for the military operation, this memory come crashing down upon her. She aches for that fullness of life that her husband painted for her.

In many ways, Ora is a contemporary Sarah. And in fact, Grossman explicitly makes this connection. He compares Ora and her son Ofer with Sarah and her son Isaac. Both Sarah and Ora try to continue to live amidst the terrifying angst they experience.

With Sarah, Torah doesn’t offer us much in the way of hope. After Abraham takes her son to sacrifice him, she immediately dies.

But Ora is able to persevere and survive terrifying and paralyzing thoughts and dreams of losing her son. What at first feels like magical thinking – that talking about her son endlessly as she hiked, far away from the place where she might receive the worst possible news would protect her - begins to take form as tefila, as prayer: expressions of hope, cries of anguish, pained appeals for mercy and compassion.

As some of you may know, when Grossman began writing this novel, his middle child, Uri, was about to enter a military unit. His novel was nearly complete when the war in Lebanon broke out in July 2006. His son Uri was a sergeant of a tank crew in southern Lebanon. Late at night in the

middle of August, Uri and the rest of his crew were killed. He was two weeks short of his twenty-first birthday and three months from the end of his Army service.

In a note to his readers at the end of his book, Grossman writes: “At the time I was writing, I had the feeling, or rather a wish, that the book I was writing would protect him. After we finished shiva, I went back to the book. Most of it was already written. What changed, above all, was the echo of the reality in which it was written.”

The ancient rabbinic midrash of Sarah, retold by David Grossman in the context of modern day Israel, gives us insight into the inextricable intertwining of ahavah and yirah, love and fear.

The Hebrew word, yirah, has two meanings. It can mean fear and it can mean awe.

Yirah in rabbinic texts is sometimes meant as fear of punishment; other times as awe of kavod Hashem, the majesty and grandeur of God’s presence.

Typically these are two very different qualities. But we also experience fear and awe together. Imagine standing at the edge of a powerful plunge waterfall - you’re there with awe of its beauty, fear of its power.

The fear of loss we experience when we dare to love, as Sarah did for her son Yitzchak, as Ora did for her son Ofer, contains both of these attributes: *Fear of losing those we love; awe for the life-sustaining and life-affirming gift of loving.*<sup>1</sup>

On Rosh Hashanah, we are called to acknowledge, understand, and embrace this reality.

One of our most central prayers today is called the unetanah tokef: On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, who will live and who will die, who in the fullness of years, and who before. Our ancient rabbis ask us to consider how little of our lives we actually control. It’s so easy to imagine otherwise.

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<sup>1</sup> [Alan Morinis Every Day Holiness, p. 232)

At the end of this same prayer, the message is, again, both exquisite and hard-hitting. Listen to the prayer's words: Our lives are like a fragile vessel, like the grass that withers, the flower that fades, the shadow that passes, the cloud that vanishes, the wind that blows, the dust that floats and "k'chalom ya'uf" – like a dream that vanishes.

We can't live with the intensity of this understanding all the time. But, in preparing for our High Holidays, we are asked to reflect on two primary human experiences: ahavah v'yirah, love and fear.

In my own process this year, thinking about love and fear, I found myself focused on my children.

As they grow up, there are times I don't quite recognize them. They are constantly new people in the world, which has a kind of magic. Sarah and I want this for our children; we know it's their work, and they are setting a foundation for the kind of self-reliance and confidence they will need in their lives. But we do also feel a loss, particularly aware of the passing of time.

I know many of you have felt similarly about your children, or friends, or parents who are aging or have become ill. We lovingly care for them as they cared for us, at the same time, anguished by the loss of who they were in this world and our relationship with them.

There is a price for intimacy in our relationships. Our love is bound up with our concerns and fears of loss.

As we grow older, we come to notice and appreciate how quickly time passes. We may be wiser and have a broader or more polished worldview. We may be better teachers. Maybe we are more philanthropic, as what's really important comes into sharper focus. Despite all these wonderful things in our lives, we are ever-conscious, ever fearful, of loss.

In Torah, Sarah was silenced, absent from the story as her husband Abraham took Isaac to bind and offer him as a sacrifice. Alone in the world, she could not bear even the possibility of losing her son. And so, she dies.

Learning from this story, our tradition provides an alternative path. So that we don't have to be alone when we confront the fragility of our lives: we come together with family, we prepare and share meals, take time for prayer and reflection, visit with friends, listen to the shofar, even walk to the pond and engage the magic of tashlich.

As a full community, we are in very different life stages: we are children, single adults, young parents, older couples. We've lost our parents, children, and spouses. But we each know from love and fear, ahavah v'yirah. We will love; we will suffer loss.

By asking us to confront this reality, our High Holy Days offer us a spiritual path to live deeply, meaningfully, carefully, and kindly, with forgiveness, patience and hope.

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I want to close with a blessing: that, in this New Year, we continue to come together with our families and community. That we appreciate the unique time we share. And that we welcome one another into our lives with warmth, with kindness, and with care.

May we know that our lives are k'chalom yauf, like a dream that vanishes, and may we gain strength from this shared experience.

May this be a year of renewed relationships.

And may we dwell together in imagination and in possibility.

L'shanah tovah.