

ROSH HASHANAH AND THE ULTIMATE PURPOSE OF LIFE

R. Elie Kaunfer

ROSH HASHANAH CONFRONTS us with a major existential question, implicitly posed by the Akeidah, the binding of Yitzhak. This story is the Torah reading on the Second Day and a main focus of the Zikhronot section of Musaf on both days. Yitzhak's story pushes us to ask: What is the purpose of my life, and how am I making the most of the years granted to me?

This is much different from another central question of the day, posed by the poem Unetaneh Tokef: "Who shall live and who shall die?" In that prayer, we focus on the basic human drive to live. But the Akeidah takes this one step further, and invites us to ask ourselves not just **whether** we will live, but **how** we should live.

Often we approach this question by thinking about the full arc of our lives. Does my career express my values? Am I leaving a lasting legacy to the next generation through the day-to-day contributions of my work and family commitments? What are my deepest-held beliefs, and am I expressing them regularly through my behavior and relationships? This is a critical set of questions we must ask ourselves continually.

But another way to look at the ultimate purpose of our life does not take a cumulative approach. Rather, it centers a specific moment—one you did not expect or even prepare for—that defines your life and its meaning.

Even before October 7th, I was thinking about this question on a trip to Copenhagen, where I went to the Museum of the Danish Resistance, which chronicles the experience of regular Danish citizens who resisted the Nazis. When the Germans caught these men (112 in all), they sentenced them to death. But before the resistance fighters were executed, they were allowed to write farewell letters to their families. In the museum, I listened to audio recordings of these letters. Each and every man stated that they were prepared to meet their end, much earlier than they had anticipated, satisfied that they had done the right thing. Their only regret was the pain they caused their family by not returning to them.¹

I thought of these letters again after hearing the story of Ben Zussman, a 22-year old Israeli soldier killed in battle last December, who left a note for his family to be read in case of his death. In his final words he writes: "I am grateful for the privilege to defend our beautiful land and the people of Israel. Even if something happens to me, I don't allow you to sink into sadness. I had the privilege to fulfill my dream and my destiny."²

On Rosh Hashanah, Yitzhak offers us this model of self-sacrifice in a moment of truth. When we consider the Akeidah, we often focus on Avraham. After all, Avraham knows what lies ahead when heading out on the three-day journey, and he is faced with the choice to follow God's command.

1 These letters are available in the book, *The Final Hours: Farewell Letters from the Executed Danish Patriots*.

2 <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-777508>.

But in considering the purpose of our lives, I want to focus on Yitzhak. How did he consider spending the last moments of his life? The Rabbinic understanding of this story is clear: Yitzhak was not a victim without agency. Rather, he actively decided to submit to his own death. In the words of the Beit Yosef (commenting on the tradition of reading this passage in the daily liturgy), “מסר יצחק נפשו” - Yitzhak handed over his life.”³

This becomes all the more significant if we assume that—as many Rabbinic traditions have it—Yitzhak was not a child at this moment, but a 37-year-old man who could have easily fought back.⁴ But he did not resist; rather he helped Avraham with the task at hand:

תנא דבי אליהו זוטא (איש
שלום) פרשה ב
יצחק שאמר לאביו, [אבא]
כפתיני יפה יפה ותניני על גבי
המזבח, שמא אבעט בך ואכך.

Tanna de-Vei Eliyahu Zuta
2, ed. Friedmann, p. 174

Yitzhak said to his father: “Father, tie me down really well when you place me on the altar, lest I kick or strike you [inadvertently].”

Yitzhak had a choice in this moment of truth, and decided to “cast himself before his father like a sacrificed lamb.”⁵

The power of this story is that Yitzhak’s decision is not a once-in-history situation. Indeed, all of Israel is, in some way, represented by Yitzhak.⁶ There are moments in human history when we are faced with a critical decision that will define the meaning and purpose of our life. This is not a matter of career choice or family values, developed in the luxury of the long

arc of life, but a clear and quick decision that we may face in one life-altering moment. Most of us will live our lives without this experience. But far too much of Jewish history has been defined by these heroic moments of choice and sacrifice. We have seen it with our own eyes on and since October 7th. How might we ready ourselves to do the right thing when it matters most?

The drama of the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah is directly connected to this story of Yitzhak’s choice:

תלמוד בבלי ראש השנה טז.
אמר רבי אבהו: למה תוקעין
בשופר של איל? - אמר הקדוש
ברוך הוא: תקעו לפני בשופר של
איל, כדי שאזכור לכם עקידת
יצחק בן אברהם, ומעלה אני
עליכם כאילו עקדתם עצמכם
לפני.

Bavli Rosh Hashanah 16a

R. Abbahu said: Why do we blow a ram’s horn? The Holy Blessed One said: Blow a ram’s horn before Me, so that I shall remember for you the binding of Yitzhak, son of Avraham, and ascribe to you as if you had bound yourselves before Me.

On Rosh Hashanah, it is as if we bind ourselves (כאילו עקדתם עצמכם). In this view, Avraham’s actions are muted. It is rather Yitzhak’s experience of binding himself—and our implicit association with this willful decision—that God remembers on Rosh Hashanah.

What is the impact of Yitzhak’s actions? In one talmudic rendering (Shabbat 89b), Yitzhak saves the entire Jewish people through his action. When God later accuses the Jewish people of sinning, Avraham and Ya’akov both respond that Israel is guilty and should be punished. But Yitzhak rises to defend the people.

“BY REFLECTING
UPON THE ULTIMATE
SACRIFICES OF THOSE
FORCED TO MAKE
THAT DECISION, WE
WILL CERTAINLY FACE
OUR OWN LIVES WITH
CLEARER PURPOSE
AND MEANING.”

3 Beit Yosef Orah Hayyim 1.

4 See Bereishit Rabbah 55:4 and 56:8, ed. Theodor-Albeck, pp. 588, 603; Seder Olam Rabbah 1, ed. Milikowsky, p. 220; Shemot Rabbah 1:1, ed. Shinar p. 38 and parallels; Rashi to Bereishit 25:20. (One manuscript of Seder Olam Rabbah indicates that Yitzhak was 26 years old; see Milikowsky, vol. 2, pp. 15-17.)

5 Vayikra Rabbah 2:10, ed. Margolioth, p. 50. The parallels to Christianity are striking, however this is clearly a natively Jewish approach. See Shalom Spiegel’s tracing of this development in his masterful book *The Last Trial*, trans. Judah Goldin (1993).

6 Yerushalmi Ta’anit 2:4; 65d makes explicit the parallel between Yitzhak and the entire Jewish people.

He argues that the sins of Israel should be forgiven on his account, “as I sacrificed my life before You.” Yitzhak here is once again the active agent concerning his own sacrifice, and his action brings a form of redemption for the people from their sin.

Another text goes still further, ascribing the ultimate conquest over death to the merit of Yitzhak’s self-sacrifice. In this view, God brings people back to life as a result of Yitzhak’s decision and consequent actions:

פסיקתא דרב כהנא (מנדלבוים) נספחים א,
וזאת הברכה

בזכות יצחק שהקריב עצמו על גבי המזבח
עתיד הקדוש ברוך הוא להחיות מתים.

*Pesikta de-Rav Kahana Additions,
VeZot HaBerakhah, ed. Mandelbaum,*

p. 451

*Through the merit of Yitzhak, who
sacrificed himself on the altar, in the future
the Holy Blessed One will resurrect the
dead.*

Yitzhak understood that life is not only about self-preservation. There are forces stronger than death, and a purpose to life that goes beyond racking up years lived. This is why his action is connected to God’s bringing people back to life. Death is not the final chapter of the story, nor is long life the only measure of a life well lived.

There are few values more important than life in the Jewish tradition. The Torah tells us that its mandates are for the purpose of living (Vayikra 18:5), and the Talmud records that this means human life as such takes precedence over almost any *mitzvah* (Yoma 85b).⁷ But the story of Akeidat Yitzhak teaches us that which Plato attributes to Socrates: “Not life, but a good life, is to be chiefly valued.”⁸ Devoting one’s life to a purpose has an even greater power and value than merely being alive. This choice—and decision—of self-sacrifice for a purpose can arise unexpectedly, in moments that are thrust upon us, as we have seen in the most extreme ways this past year.

It is true that most of us won’t need to make the ultimate sacrifice, and we hope no one ever will. Instead, we are faced with making a lifetime of difficult choices—not the choice to forfeit our lives all at once,

but the choices to truly live lives of sacrifice for others and for God. And yet Rosh Hashanah encourages us to consider moments of life-defining sacrifice. On this day, we take the Akeidah to heart: we reflect on the purposes to which we are devoting our own lives and ponder whether we would be up to the task if ever faced with the hardest decision. This is not an easy question to consider. But by reflecting upon the ultimate sacrifices of those forced to make that decision, we will certainly face our own lives with clearer purpose and meaning. ♦

⁷ For an extensive treatment, see R. Yitz Greenberg, *The Triumph of Life* (2024), esp. chs. 4-5.

⁸ Crito 48b. My thanks to R. Effy Unterman for this citation.