

Imagine, for a moment, that *your* father sought to offer *you* as a sacrifice on what you were lead to believe was a father-son camping trip. It makes me pretty glad that Abraham Avinu wasn't *my* biological father. Progenitor of monotheistic tradition, sure; world famous, certainly, but the cost? The cost was far too high.

Look at the toll it took on those around him. Sarah's death, in the very next chapter of Torah, is linked by rabbinic tradition to the events of the *Akidah*. Isaac never again speaks to his father. Presumably reeling from his own childhood trauma, Isaac perpetuates this damage on *his* children by imperiling his wife and showing destructive favoritism between Jacob and Esau. Jacob, the third generation, goes on to do the same thing, choosing Joseph over his siblings to the point that they desire to kill him and only compromise by selling him into servitude. And don't even get me started on the twisted family narrative that leads to Jacob making off with his father's blessing before being likewise deceived on his marriage bed. Trauma, passed from generation to generation, has long been a part of the Jewish experience and is a core component of our sacred text.

While the authors of our Torah didn't have the language of Adverse Childhood Experiences, they knew from inherited trauma and its effects. They understood that negative experiences from our past will unduly, negatively shape not only our future but generations to come unless we actively work to change our trajectory. And they left us a cautionary tale about the effects of unreconciled trauma from which we can learn to this day.

Beginning in 1995, the Center for Disease Control and Kaiser Permanente — the largest managed care consortium in the country — received responses from more than 17,000 people about their exposure to childhood emotional, physical, or sexual abuse.¹ Being sworn at, insulted, or put down by a parent or other adult in the house; being pushed or shoved or grabbed; living with an adult who was heavily influenced by drugs or alcohol; or witnessing another adult — often a mother — being subjected to abuse are emotionally traumatic events for a child. Known as ACEs, Adverse Childhood Experiences, these traumas are surprisingly common — more than half of us have experienced them² — and they often have life-altering consequences.

When we experience ACEs, childhood traumas, our psychopathology, our mental health, changes: depression, anxiety, antisocial behaviors, and risk of alcohol and substance use disorders all increase.³ When we experiences ACEs, our biology

¹ Study methodology and the first wave of analysis can be found here: [https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797\(98\)00017-8/pdf](https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797(98)00017-8/pdf)

² Bhan N, Glymour MM, Kawachi I, Subramanian SV. Childhood adversity and asthma prevalence: evidence from 10 US states (2009-2011): <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4212798/>

³ De Bellis MD, Zisk A. The biological effects of childhood trauma. *Child Adolesc Psychiatr Clin N Am.* 2014;23(2):185–222

changes: cardiovascular disease, obesity, chronic pain syndromes, gastrointestinal disorders, and immune dysregulation, all increase.⁴ When ACEs increase, so do the odds of negative outcomes as adults. Put more simply, the more ACEs we accumulate the more likely we are to die early. And while trauma is easier to study and observe in children — they answer questions more honestly, their resiliency strategies are often less honed and thus less effective, they are both less able to mask their symptoms and have fewer comorbidities — while trauma is easier to study and observe in children we know it can be just as devastating for adults.

Unfortunately, each of us in this room — adults and children alike — know from trauma. We continue to wrestle with traumatic events from our past, with our own ACEs. We are struggling silently to cope with *ongoing* physical and emotional trauma in our lives today. We all re-enter this Jewish space, this sacred community, with the events of October 27, 2018 looming large in our minds. Exposure to community violence can be a traumatic event. Learning about trauma that happened to a relative or in a tight-knit community can be a traumatic event. Being Jewish in Pittsburgh in 5779 was for many a traumatic event.

Our people knows from trauma — as individuals and as a collective community — and we gather tonight, on the cusp of the New Year 5780, in need of wholeness and holiness. Some of us are still grieving the loss of a family member or friend, and I grieve with you. Many are outraged, ready to break free of the inertia and societal unwillingness to prevent future tragedies through sensible legislation, and I am ready to act with you. And all of us gather tonight seeking emotional support to deal with the horror of 10/27 and with our own traumatic events, that we might face the New Year renewed.

Your presence here, tonight, is part of that process.

You are engaging in a spiritual or religious practice...or, if you have been dragged here against your will, you are at least engaging in a group activity. You have surrounded yourself with family or friends or fellow sympathetic travelers on parallel journeys: all activities that build resiliency and wellness. And that's just the beginning. By identifying and addressing our risk factors, by strengthening and expanding our protective factors, and by feeding our resiliency, we can seek to control our reactions to possibly traumatic events that are outside of our control.

Let's begin with the risk factors. You might want to take a deep breath... What are the external factors that keep us from being the people we want to be? Bullying, in school or the workplace or the bedroom? Racism or sexism or weight-based-discrimination? Exposure to violence in the home, whether physical or emotional? Chronic stress that continues to accumulate without relief? Being too emotionally available to others and experiencing their trauma vicariously? *Identifying* these risk factors is part of *addressing* these risk factors. 'Tis the season, as we begin the full accounting of our

⁴ Ibid.

souls, our *Chesbon Hanefesh*. We seek to make amends for the ways we have wronged others during these Days of Awe, and at the same time we become cognizant of the myriad ways we ourselves have been hurt. Not to blame others, not to demand an apology where none is offered, but to do the emotional work to arrest and then counter these risk factors in our lives.

Here I need to pause for a moment. I do not mean to imply that freedom from traumatic events rests entirely within our control. To quickly extricate ourselves from abusive relationships, to end exposure to the structural racism and gender inequality and anti-minority sentiment rampant throughout our nation, to protect ourselves from shocking and inexplicable acts of violence we as a society seem unwilling to prevent feels far outside of our individual agency or ability to change. The victim is not — we as victims are not — to blame: risk factors are *externally* imposed, and we are constantly buffeted by their gale-force winds. We can and must try, however, to identify actions that are within our control, to minimize, to slow, to seek to counter these risks for ourselves and for others.

We must seek to minimize our risk factors, and we also need to bolster our protective factors. Who are your social supports, those family, friends, co-workers, therapists, rabbis, and others with whom you feel connected? What are the ethical principles upon which you hang your hat and rely upon even when, especially when, the going gets tough? How are your boundaries and your ability to say no? When have you reduced negativity in your life, and where might you be able to do so even more? The more protective factors you have, and have identified, in your life, the more effectively you can deal with events that have the potential to become traumatic. These protective factors prevent us from becoming subsumed by trauma and even decrease the risk of negative health outcomes. While self-care may feel like a buzz word that can take a back seat while we tend to the needs of others, putting your oxygen mask on first is essential advice on more than just airplanes.

Finally, what feeds your resiliency? For me it is running (and if there are any distance runners out there, my Kulanu group is always excited for new faces!) and hugging my family and spending a bit of quiet time reading and being immersed in this sacred community. For you it might be different. What do you do to give the overworked parts of your brain and your body a break? Quality sleep and rest might help. Dancing or walking or stretching or Yoga, too. Gardening? Journaling? Hiking? Being around people...or far removed from them. Getting a massage or spending some quality time with a psychologist or therapist. Whatever you do to recharge, doing more of it increases your ability to stay calm and in control when faced with challenges; they increase your ability to bounce back. So do more of it.

Ours is a community that knows from trauma, and many in our midst are suffering: from tragedy visited upon our Pittsburgh community and from our personal circumstances alike. When we read tomorrow the story of the *Akeidah*, the binding of Isaac, I would encourage you to try examining it in a new light, as a cautionary tale about unreconciled and unwittingly-perpetuated trauma. From Abraham to Isaac to

Jacob we are given warning that negative experiences from our past will unduly, negatively shape not only our future but generations to come if we don't act. So? Act. Identify, address, minimize your risk factors. Strengthen and expand your protective factors. Feed your resiliency. Embrace or redouble your efforts toward emotional healing, for there will be many occasions to act when our collective time for healing is complete. We will never forget our traumas, whether personal or collective, but we can reduce their control over our lives and mitigate their effects on those who come after us. And when we are emotionally ready? We will ensure that the lives lost, that our own personal experiences of trauma, were not in vain. *Ken Yehi Ratzon*, May this be God's will.