On Rosh Hashanah, we gather together to celebrate the seventh month of the year. It’s a time of festivities and joy that herald the arrival of the new moon and new month, but this seventh month also has an element of reflection and introspection. We are gathered together in the synagogue for prayers, songs, melodies, and words of Torah to help us begin this journey.

As Rosh Hashanah approaches, God becomes a major theme. Sometimes my students and their parents ask me, “Do you believe in God?”. It’s not the most relevant question from a Jewish point of view, and I feel like answering, “Only on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday”. I don’t answer this way, because it would be too flippant, and besides, it wouldn’t really express what I felt.

Abraham Joshua Heschel best describes my feelings saying, “There are moments when God seems close”. It’s this desire to feel God’s presence that I’m seeking. And then, on Rosh Hashanah, when I am especially seeking God’s presence, we read the story of the Akedah.

וַיֹּאמֶר קַח-נָא אֶת-בִּנְךָ אֶת-יְחִידְךָ אֲשֶׁר-אָהַבְתָּ, אֶת-יִצְחָק, וְלֶךְ-לְךָ, אֶל-אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרִיָּה; וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם, לְעֹלָה, עַל אַחַד הֶהָרִים, אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלֶיךָ.

God asks Abraham to take his beloved son Isaac, and offer him as a sacrifice. This is not a God I can feel close to. If anything, the story pushes me away.

Back in parshat Lech Lecha, God tells Abraham, go to the land that I will show you. He promises Abraham that he will bless him, the whole world will know his name. God will walk with him, curse those who curse him, bless those who bless him, and most important, the whole world will be blessed because he took this journey. I believe it's this last part of the blessing, that the whole world will be blessed that motivates Abraham to go. I picture God making one promise after another to Abraham, but only the promise of blessing the world sets Abraham and Sarah off on their journey.

I say this, because, as a Jewish educator at Congregation Beth Emek in Pleasanton, I do an exercise with my students and parents when they study parshat Lech Lecha. I ask them to line up on the patio, imagine that God is speaking to them in some way, and making promises to them if they are willing to take a journey. With each step they take, they give up some of the comforts of life. First just cellphones, computers, then finally electricity, tv, cars, medicine, and all modern conveniences. Still, they are promised fame, support, and ultimately if they complete the journey, that good things will happen in the world because they were willing to go. Not everyone reaches the end. We discuss as a group what held people back, and what things made them want to go forward. Of those who reached the end, almost all say it was the idea that the world could be a better place because they were willing to take these steps.

I see Abraham as motivated, like my students and parents willing to take the final steps, with a desire to be close to God and help bring positive change to the world. We read this section of Torah on Rosh Hashanah because we hold Abraham and his devotion to God as the ideal. We see this special relationship when God shares with Abraham his thoughts about destroying Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham questions God, and boldly speaks out, bargaining for the righteous people of Sodom and gomorra. Yet, when God tests Abraham, telling him to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham doesn’t hesitate. In fact, he slips off early in the morning before Sarah is up, because he knows that she would keep him from pursuing his mission. That is why this story is so troubling. We know Abraham is comfortable speaking out, but when given this test, he doesn’t question, just blindly goes off to do what he believes is God’s will.

Back in my college days, my friend Joan, now Rabbi Joan Pitzele-Saxe, wrote a play about the Akedah. In it, God tests Abraham, asking him to sacrifice his son. Abraham listens, and fails the test. God expects him to speak up, just like he did for Sodom and Gomorrah. Instead we see blind obedience, and the tragic results. The play ends with Abraham feeling distanced from God. God no longer speaks directly to Abraham, but sends an angel to convey his words. Abraham goes off with his servants, and Isaac departs separately. We never see Isaac and Abraham together again. At the end of the story, God, a bit more distant and through a messenger, comforts Abraham with the same blessing he gave before; that through Abraham, the world will be blessed. In a way, God is reassuring Abraham that despite the misunderstanding, Abraham will be rewarded for his loyalty and that they still have a special relationship. The blessing of the world, however, come with a twist or more of a clarification. God explains to Abraham that he will have many descendants, and it's through them the world will be blessed.

So, did Abraham pass or fail the test? I give him two grades. ‘A’ in loyalty and willingness to partner with God. For this, Abraham is a great model. I give him an ‘F’ on understanding what God wants. God does not want Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, otherwise that’s how the story would end. Abraham, in his zeal to be loyal to God, rushes out to do what he thinks is God’s bidding, without pausing to consider what the partnership is about, or the promise of bringing blessing to the world.

God explains to Abraham that the blessing will come through his descendants. That's us. We are those descendants, partners with God to bring blessing to the world. As you hear the sound of the shofar, take time to think not only about the personal things you need to change, but also how you can be part of the partnership. Just make sure the voice you are hearing is one that will bring goodness to the world.

I’ll leave you with a midrash about the sounds of the Shofar, only I have twisted it a little bit.

*Tekiyah:* Wake up, pay attention.

*Shevarim:* The world is broken.

*T'ruah:* The sound of crying, open up and feel the pain.

*Tekiyah Gedolah:* We can make the world whole again.

May your reflections and prayers bring you closer to God and bring healing to the world.