

D'var Torah Rosh Hashanah Morning 5780
“Do Not Sacrifice Children”

Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Bruce Kahn. I am now at the start of my 40th year as a rabbi of this holy congregation. During that span I have heard parents within the Shalom family express more distress over today's Torah portion than in regard to any other, even the creeping crud portions of Tazriah and Metsorah — which are in my view not the worst portions for a bar or bat mitzvah, but among the very best.

In the verses we are about to hear chanted, the Akeidah, the binding of Isaac, the authors and redactors of Torah transmit the ancient tale that God decides to test Abraham by commanding him to offer as a human sacrifice his most beloved son Isaac. In the ancient story, Abraham, without a moment's hesitation, decides to do as he has been ordered. At the last second, in one of the most dramatic verses in the entire Torah, the writers have an angel call to Abraham from heaven:

אברהם, אבראם! ויאמר הנני ויאמר, אל תשליח ידך אל הנער, ואל תעש לו מאומה!
“Abraham! Abraham!” And he answered, “Here I am.” And [the angel] said: “Do not raise your hand against the boy or do anything to him!”

What did the writers have in mind? What is the point of this tale? To answer I focus on the most unusual, remarkable, challenging four Hebrew words in the entire episode: V'AL TA'AS LO M'U'MAH! DO NOT DO ANYTHING TO HIM! Meaning: PUT THAT KNIFE DOWN! LET THE BOY LIVE! GOD DOES NOT WANT US TO SACRIFICE OUR CHILDREN! IF EVEN THE SUPREMELY IMPORTANT CHARACTER ABRAHAM IS PORTRAYED AS HAVING TO BE TAUGHT THIS LESSON, THE WRITERS MUST HAVE THOUGHT IT A LESSON OF THE FIRST ORDER OF IMPORTANCE. V'AL TA'AS LO M'U'MAH!

In the middle of April 2014, 276 female students were kidnapped from their school in Nigeria by Boko Haram. Let us speak and act so that Boko Haram and every other violent dehumanizing group in this world learns we don't sacrifice our children! : V'al Ta'as Lo M'u'mah!

In the middle of December 2012, at Sandy Hook Elementary School, 20 innocent, beautiful little children ages six and seven were shot to death. In the middle of February, Valentine's Day, 2018, at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School, 14 students were shot to death.

Since 2009, 180 school shootings have taken place in these United States. Let us defeat, by every legal means available, the appalling, heartless efforts of those who lead opposition to sensible legislation for control of guns and ammunition. It is way past time to learn the lesson of the Akeidah!

V'al ta'as lo m'u'mah!

In the past 15 MONTHS more than 900 children, including babies and toddlers, were ripped from their parents arms at our southern border. Let us join together and thwart zealously those in power cruel enough to do this to the children: V'al Ta'as Lo M'u'mah!

In 2018, 25,000 sex trafficking cases in this country involved children! And 1.2 million children worldwide. Let us press every level of government to get its act together! V'al ta'as lo m'u'mah!

In 2018 an estimated 5.3 million children died before the age of 5, from starvation and preventable diseases! In the US of A, the wealthiest country anywhere, 16.2 million children live in households that lack the means to get enough nutritious food on a regular basis. Last week alone the Administration proposed cutting one half million children from the free school lunch program because there are just too many hungry young mouths to feed. O God, when will we finally grasp the meaning of the Akeidah? V'al Ta'as Lo M'u'mah!

And finally, one week ago today, at the United Nations, 16 year old Greta Thunberg from Sweden leveled an emotional and scathing speech confronting world leaders about their inaction regarding climate change, the most severe existential threat to all the children on Earth. She said from the podium: "I shouldn't be up here. I should be back at school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words."

AS EVERYONE HERE AGREES, WE ARE TO PROTECT, NURTURE, AND UPLIFT OUR CHILDREN. WE ARE NOT TO SACRIFICE THEM — NOT 4,000 YEARS AGO, NOT 3, OR 2, OR 1 OR NOW! V'AL TA'AS LO M'U'MAH!