

Imperfect Torah, Imperfect People

Rosh Hashanah 5787

Rabbi Barry H. Block

This morning's Torah reading is just awful. Sure, the עקידה, the Binding of Isaac, ends well, but do we really venerate a man who would sacrifice his son? Worse, do we want to worship a God who would command such a thing? The best spin I've heard put on the story is that God is testing Abraham, and Abraham gets an F—that is, God wants Abraham to refuse. That really **is** spin. After all, God's messenger rewards Abraham for his obedience.ⁱ

Soren Kierkegaard, the philosopher whose 1843 book, *Fear and Trembling*, praises Abraham, writes that, in binding Isaac to the altar for sacrifice, he expresses an “absolute duty to God” that places obedience above morality—in this case, the prohibition of murder.ⁱⁱ For Kierkegaard, that's a good thing, but Abraham's intention is echoed by today's religious extremists—Christian, Muslim, and yes, Jewish—who justify murder as God's will. Kierkegaard was wrong. Obedience to religious dogma must not trump morality.

Nicholas Lemann addresses unsavory sections of the Torah when discussing his recently published book, *Returning*, which chronicles his family's century-and-a-half sojourn in Louisiana. While he reveres his ancestors' memory, he also acknowledges their wrongdoing. The family's “mythology,” as he calls it, is that they only became plantation owners after the Civil War. However, his research uncovered evidence that his forbears often purchased land with enslaved workers attached, and they had “no compunction” about selling them.ⁱⁱⁱ Lemann compares confronting this unsavory fact about his family to “one of the ways in which [he] find[s] reading Torah enriching.” He says that Torah is “not a collection of good people, including the patriarchs and matriarchs, even including God, ... arguably. Reading the texts forces you to engage with a moral world that has some points of intersection with yours and some points of wild disagreement with yours. And, ... being a Jew, you're not allowed to say, oh well,” just ditch the Torah.^{iv}

Some Jews **are** comfortable deleting or skipping parts of the Torah we find disagreeable, but Rabbi Yael Vurgan is not. She is the rabbi of *K'hilat Sha'ar HaNegev*, comprising communities bordering the Gaza Strip, including Kibbutz Kfar Aza, where at least sixty-two residents were killed and another nineteen taken hostage on October 7. I had visited Kfar Aza and the region with Rabbi Vurgan eight months earlier. We met the mayor of Sha'ar HaNegev, Kfar Aza member Ofir Libstein, who passionately told visiting North American Reform rabbis about the work he and the regional council were doing to improve life for their Palestinian

neighbors across the fence in Gaza, with hope to do still more. He was among the first to be murdered on the morning of October 7.

Rabbi Vurgan's community was replete with peace activists such as Libstein before that unspeakable day. Rabbi Vurgan serves everyone, including both those who are untroubled by civilian deaths in Gaza, believing everyone there to be guilty, and those who doubled down on their peace activism in the wake of the massacre. Across the spectrum, the community adores Rabbi Vurgan, and they know who their rabbi is—a public peacebuilder long before she became their rabbi.

Rabbi Vurgan struggles with the current Israeli government. As a lay cochair of Combatants for Peace, she often goes to the Occupied West Bank to provide protective presence for Palestinians when settler extremists attack, besiege, or rob them. She is distressed, too, by more than a few Torah passages, not least God's message to our pregnant matriarch Rebecca, telling her that she would give birth to twins, one of whom—the second born, Jacob, who would become Israel—would dominate the other, namely Esau and his descendants.^v

In a midrash, Rabbi Vurgan asks whether God really intends that one people, even our Jewish people, dominate another. She abhors West Bank vigilantes who seek to fulfill God's message to Rebecca by brutally attacking Palestinians in the hope that they leave the Land of Israel. Rabbi Vurgan hears her government and many of her fellow citizens proclaiming their expectation that they “will live by the sword forever,” that permanent military domination is the only way for the Jewish people to survive, and she “grieve[s] that they prefer the bad prophecy that Rebecca heard over the good one of Isaiah,”^{vi} “Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, nor learn war anymore.”^{vii}

Rabbi Vurgan does not deal with a troubling Torah text by ignoring it, and certainly not by forswearing our Jewish tradition. She is dismayed that a problematic prophecy may inspire hateful violence, so she seeks to repair the Torah—not by excising or ignoring a difficult verse, but by citing **other** words of Torah that counteract the message she cannot endorse.

We do not come to Temple on the High Holy Days to examine and repair flaws in the Torah. Instead, this season demands that we look into our own souls to inspect our behavior over the course of the last year, apologize to those we hurt, and commit ourselves to תשובה, to making changes in ourselves, to repair the damage we have done to our own souls.

We can learn from Rabbi Vurgan's method. Just as she finds verses elsewhere in our Holy Scripture to mend the words she finds disturbing, we can utilize our best qualities to address the places we fall short.

My friend and classmate, Rabbi Marla Subeck Spanjer, is brilliant and thoughtful, but in the forty years I have known her, I have yet to meet anyone so disorganized. She knows that about herself—and worse, that her disarray often inconveniences others—so she had worked on it for years without success. Then, a conversation with Alan Morinis, our shared Mussar teacher, changed everything. Alan was visiting Rabbi Spanjer’s congregation, and after he spoke on the *bimah*, they walked back to her office together. Rabbi Spanjer asked him how she might work on becoming more organized. She describes his response: “Dr. Morinis glanced at the tallit I had thoughtlessly tossed onto my desk after services. ‘Why not start simply by taking care to neatly fold ... your tallis after every service?’ ... Then, he asked me if I knew why he had chosen that particular practice as a way to begin. ‘Yes,’ I replied. ‘You know that I already have *kavod* (כבוד, “honor”) for the tallit, and the best way for me to strengthen” in an area in which I’m weak “is to link it to one in which I am already strong.”^{viii}

Like the Torah, and like Rabbi Spanjer, each of us possesses good qualities that can help us correct our flaws. Perhaps you are plagued by jealousy that leads to unkindness toward people you perceive to have more than you. Maybe, though, you are good at expressing gratitude. Kick that into overdrive, thanking people even for small kindnesses may heighten your awareness of blessings in your life, minimizing your tendency to covet. Or perhaps you’re liable to speak harshly to the people closest to you but at other times to be generous to them. Adopt a practice of **speaking** generously to them, committing yourself to complimenting them at least once daily. Over time, you may habituate yourself to speaking kindly even under stress, to stop lashing out.

Let these Ten Days of Repentance, the period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, be a time of setting intentions for the year ahead. We know that we should change our ways, but if we could simply stop behavior we know is harmful, we would have done so long ago. Therefore, we must use these days to ask where our strengths lie, and then determine how to muster our strengths to help us to correct our shortcomings. Then, may we truly live, in goodness, throughout the year ahead.

Amen.

ⁱ Genesis 22:17-18.

ⁱⁱ Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, Tr. Alastair Hannay, Penguin Classics, 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nicholas Lemann, “The American Jewish Past and What Comes Next,” *Identity/Crisis* podcast, June 1, 2026.

^{iv} Lemann. Lemann’s words, after “oh well,” are “screw that.”)

^v Genesis 25:23.

^{vi} “One People Another,” Midrash by Rabbi Yael Vurgan, to be published in a forthcoming volume of *Dirshuni: Contemporary Women’s Midrash*, edited by Tamar Biale.

vii Isaiah 2:4.

viii Rabbi Marla Joy Subeck Spanjer, DD, “*Histapkut*—Simplicity: Recognizing Our Blessings,” *The Mussar Torah Commentary*, CCAR Press, 2020, p. 208.