

A colleague recently informed me that after some number of years, he was excited to announce that he was invited to serve on the Central Conference of American Rabbis Convention planning committee. I couldn't help myself, and I said, somewhat tongue in cheek, that the second happiest day of my professional career was when I was invited to serve on the committee. He then asked, what was the first? And I responded, the day I was done. Not too dissimilar from my time as President of the Rockland Board of Rabbis, both of which concluded this past year.

All teasing aside, my time on the Convention committee is truly reflective of these past few years. It started with a last-minute invite to help with the planning on the Orange County convention in 2018, I assume because someone left at the last minute. Given that I was brand new to the committee, I was actually given very little to do.

Then came the Cincinnati convention. Not only was I given more to do, but I was also made a chair of a subcommittee. This was one of the most successful conventions in years in terms of programming and

attendance. And it was probably the last great gathering at the HUC-JIR campus in Cincinnati, but that is a sermon for another day.

Then came Baltimore. I was so excited about Baltimore. Not only did I know the people and places, as I had served there for six years with my previous congregation, but I had lots of restaurant recommendations. We spent months planning it out. We lined up interesting and compelling speakers. Did I mention it was scheduled to take place in March 2020? Needless to say, two weeks before all of our hard work was to come to completion, we pivoted and made the whole convention virtual. Though the decision was completely understandable, I was, nonetheless, devastated.

The following year, our convention set for New Orleans was moved to be a virtual one as well. And only this past year did we cautiously return to a hybrid in-person convention in San Diego. Like so many of our lives, this experience was a bit of whiplash going from in-person to virtual to hybrid. All with the shadow of the pandemic looming over us. New rules and procedures had to be instituted. New discoveries were made including so many who were unable to be in-person, but glad to

join in on-line. A situation not so dissimilar to what we are experiencing here at RTR. On top of it all, because of all of those experiences my professional organization is examining the very notion of what it means to gather.

I will readily admit, by the end of it all, I was exhausted, and ready to move onto new challenges. But not before I tried something that has long been on my to-do list. I think most of us have those lists.

Colloquially they are now called “bucket lists” the things you want to do before you “kick the bucket.” The phrase “Bucket List” became so popular that it was even made into a movie, the 2007 buddy comedy by the same name. It was directed and produced by Rob Reiner, written by Justin Zackham, and starred Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman. The main plot follows two terminally ill men on their road trip with a wish list of things to do before they "kick the bucket".

I’m not a big fan of the term. I prefer something like “dream list” or “life list” because I feel it should be about what we can accomplish now rather than what we can put off until the end. Regardless of what we may call it, we all have our mental lists and goals. It might be a place we

always dream of traveling to. An artist or performer we wish to see in-person. Someone you would like to meet or an achievement you wish to accomplish. Some are hard, some are easy. Some are expensive, and some just take time.

For me, one of my dreams was to surf. I couldn't even tell you why this has been one of my dreams. I have gone SCUBA diving. I was a trained Ropes Course instructor. I have lived in a foreign country. I have played in numerous bands, mostly Jewish. I have met both Ben and Jerry and Alton Brown. But one dream I have never accomplished was surfing.

That was until our convention in San Diego. One of the pre-convention activities was to go to surf school. When this became an option, I immediately signed up as the convention rep, and three of us went. Alas, our spiritual guide was unable to join us due to covid. We got to the school. Put on wet suits that leave nothing to the imagination, and really bright yellow shirts indicating that we were students.

We then went down to the ocean and met our instructor who turned out to be a Jewish college student from Northern California. He claimed he had never taught a rabbi to surf before. And we explained that he

probably had, but did not know it. And I'll be gosh darned, if by the middle of the lesson, he had us up on our boards and surfing. It was exhilarating and exhausting. And there are even pictures of me doing it. I was also sore for days afterwards from crashing into the sand, and I had saltwater coming out of me for days. Nonetheless, if I have the chance, I would do it again.

Now in case you are wondering, we sent the rabbi to California to surf? Not to worry, the rest of the convention was filled with meaningful workshops and learning opportunities. The most powerful was the celebration of 50 years of women in the Reform Rabbinate. This included us getting to hear from the trail breaker herself, Rabbi Sally Priesand who was ordained in 1972. Hearing her story and what she had to overcome to become the first woman rabbi, was powerful, upsetting, and moving. Not only that, we also got to be in the presence and of Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker, a colleague and the hero of Colleyville, Texas. The chance to surf was merely the cherry on top of a very powerful and meaningful gathering.

Like my own personal experiences, we have learned many lessons from this pandemic. Not all of them positive. We have discovered much about ourselves: our understanding of risk, what it means to be in community, our own resiliency, and about the precious and precarious nature of life. Just as we have learned how much we all hate gas powered leaf blowers. Yesterday we read from the Akeida, the binding of Isaac. In just a few short verses, we witness a major drama play out. And no matter how we spin it, it is a troubling text. Which makes it all the more curious as to why we read it specifically on Rosh Hashanah. In this test of Abraham, though really it can also be argued that it is a test of Isaac, why read about God requesting that Abraham offer up his son as a sacrifice? The traditional answer is compelling if not unsatisfactory, “it contains a message of hope for Rosh Hashanah. In the liturgy we ask God to “remember us for life.” The binding of Isaac concludes with his life being spared, and he too is “remembered for life.” Abraham’s devotion results in hope for life.”¹

¹ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/genesis-221-24-the-binding-of-isaac/>

Or to frame it another way, “Before the Akeida, Abraham is referred to as “*ohavai elohim*,” a lover of God. Subsequent to the Akeida, he is referred to as “*yerei elohim*,” a fearer of God. The question we are faced with is why must God demand Abraham’s submission and fear? Why was his love not enough?”²

To put it through another lens, up until now, Abraham faced few challenges. Everything mostly came easy to him. Even the struggle between Sarah and Isaac and Hagar and Ishmael was resolved with little need for Abraham to intervene as God promised to take care of it. Now, Abraham is presented with a major life decision. Before he was willing to argue with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Yet, when asked to offer up his son, Isaac. Abraham was silent and resolute. There are some who even argue that Abraham failed the test.³ He demonstrated his love and fear of God, but failed in his understanding of humanity.

² <https://www.hartman.org.il/the-akeida-a-window-into-gods-humanity-and-our-own-2/>

³ <https://www.reformjudaism.org/blog/akeidah-abraham-failed-gods-test-god-loved-him-anyway>

And because of it, his relationship with Isaac was fractured. The two did not speak again. Sarah, according to the midrash, died shortly thereafter, fearing that Abraham had, in fact, killed Isaac. It is a deeply troubling text. And that is perhaps part of the reason why we read it every Rosh Hashanah, because it is troubling. It challenges us and forces us to face the questions of our own humanity. What would we do if we were called? How would we respond?

These past two and a half years have gone by in both a blur and in slow motion. We are slowly emerging from the cocoon of isolation back into the world of living. Yet living with trepidation. Mutations of the virus exist, and more members of our community have caught covid, myself included, over these past several months than in the first two years it has plagued us.

Nonetheless, we have also been transformed by this experience in ways that we perhaps never could have anticipated. One way in particular is it has made the urgency of living all the more desirable, which has also had profound implications for our community.

Coming out of the trauma and isolation, we want to travel more. We want to spend more time with family. We want to spend more time with friends. We want to, to borrow from earlier in the sermon, we want to surf! We are tired of being tested. We are tired of being afraid. We want to be remembered for life. We want to live.

For some this means moving out of the area to be closer to family and especially grandchildren. For others, it may mean, finally taking the leap of faith and moving to New York South, or as they call it there, Florida.

For others it means travelling to those places you've always dreamed about or taking up that new hobby you've always had an interest in, but have not been willing to devote the time to, until now.

However, we should also take a moment to acknowledge that like Abraham, that like Isaac, and that like Sarah, we will never be the same because of this shared experience of covid. As individuals, we will carry the lessons and experiences with us. As a community, we are different in how we worship, in how we study, and in how we gather. It is not better, it is not worse, it simply is different.

In addition, these past two and a half years, like Rosh Hashanah, like the Akeida, provides us with an opportunity to learn more about ourselves. I, for one, did not only learn to surf, but I also began to engage in the study and practice of mussar. For those who may not be familiar, “ a Jewish spiritual practice that gives concrete instructions on how to live a meaningful and ethical life.” With a particular emphasis on *hitlamdut* or mindfulness and *hakarat hatov*, recognizing the good, or really, gratitude. Both of which came out of learned experiences from the pandemic.

So the question before us today is, not only about what is on our ‘bucket list’ of options that we could not achieve due to the pandemic or for other reasons, but also, what is on our lists to make us become the more realized people we wish to be. And in return what is on our list to elevate our community to become the congregation we envision and hope?

These are not easy questions to answer. Visiting Paris might present logistical challenges, but to become more compassionate, more patient with others is a truly daily exercise. Taking up photography can be

expensive, but not nearly as difficult as challenging our assumptions about the world and about the 'other' we encounter. Taking on a new career might be risky, but is it as risky as admitting when we were wrong?

Unique moments in ritual and spiritual practice, unique moments in the Torah cycle, and unique moments in life all present us with opportunities to learn, to change, and to grow. And on this day, when the slate is metaphorically wiped clean for the preparation of the New Year, the question stands before you: what do you wish to do with this gift, with this time that has been given to you? How do you wish to spend it? And if the answer is 'surfing,' please make sure to invite me.

L'shana Tova