

**Fear, Trauma, and the High Holidays:
Reading Ancient Texts with Compassion
8/23/2026**

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**I. Fear from Threat in the Present: Ishmael and the Akeda
Genesis 22:5-13, 18**

5	Then Abraham said to his servants, “You stay here with the ass. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you.”	וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֶל־נְעָרָיו שְׁבוּ־לִיכֶם פֹּה עִם־הַחֲמֹר וְאֲנִי וְהַנֶּעֱר וְלָכָה עַד־כֹּה וְנִשְׁתַּחֲוִה וְנָשׁוּבָה אֵלֵיכֶם:
6	Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the firestone and the knife; and the two walked off together.	וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָהָם אֶת־עֵצֵי הָעֹלָה וַיִּשֶׂם עַל־יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ וַיִּקַּח בְּיָדוֹ אֶת־הָאֵשׁ וְאֶת־הַמַּאֲכָלֶת וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו:
7	Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he answered, “Yes, my son.” And he said, “Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?”	וַיֹּאמֶר יִצְחָק אֶל־אַבְרָהָם אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר אָבִי וַיֹּאמֶר הֲגַנִּי בְּנִי וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה הָאֵשׁ וְהָעֵצִים וְאַיֵּה הַשֶּׁה לְעֹלָה:
8	And Abraham said, “God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them walked on together.	וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֶל־לְהָיִים יִרְאֶה־לּוֹ הַשֶּׁה לְעֹלָה בְּנִי וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו:
9	They arrived at the place of which God had told him. Abraham built an altar there; he laid out the wood; he bound his son Isaac; he laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.	וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר־לּוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּבֶן שָׁם אַבְרָהָם אֶת־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וַיַּעֲרֹךְ אֶת־הָעֵצִים וַיַּעֲקֹל אֶת־יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ וַיִּשֶׂם אוֹתוֹ עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ מִמַּעַל לָעֵצִים:
10	And Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son.	וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם אֶת־יָדוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הַמַּאֲכָלֶת לְשַׁחֵט אֶת־בְּנוֹ:
11	Then an angel of the LORD called to him from heaven: “Abraham! Abraham!” And he answered, “Here I am.”	וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו מֵלֶאֱדָה ה' מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲגַנִּי:
12	And he said, “Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me.”	וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־תִּשְׁלַח יָדְךָ אֶל־הַנֶּעֱר וְאַל־עֲתָה יָדְעֵתִי כִּי־תַעֲשֶׂה לּוֹ מְאֹמָה כִּי יָרָא אֱלֹהִים אֹתָהּ וְלֹא חָשַׁכְתָּ אֶת־בְּנִיךָ אֶת־יָחִידְךָ מִמֶּנִּי:
13	When Abraham looked up, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son. [...]	וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיִּרְאֵה נֶחֱשֶׁה־אֵיל אֲחֵר נֶאֱתָן בִּסְבָךְ בְּקִרְבּוֹ וַיִּלְוֶה אַבְרָהָם וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הָאֵיל וַיַּעֲלֶהוּ לְעֹלָה תַּחַת בְּנוֹ: [...]
18	Abraham then returned to his servants, and they departed together for Beer-sheba; and Abraham stayed in Beer-sheba.	וַיָּשָׁב אַבְרָהָם אֶל־נְעָרָיו וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ יַחְדָּו אֶל־בְּעֵר שֶׁבַע וַיָּשָׁב אַבְרָהָם בְּבֵעֵר שֶׁבַע:

a. Fight-or-flight response: a pattern of physiological changes elicited by activity of the sympathetic nervous system in response to threatening or otherwise stressful situations that leads to mobilization of energy for physical activity (e.g., attacking or avoiding the offending stimulus), either directly or by inhibiting physiological activity that does not contribute to energy mobilization. Specific sympathetic responses involved in the response include increased heart rate, respiratory rate, and sweat gland activity; elevated blood pressure; decreased digestive activity; pupil dilation; and a routing of blood flow to skeletal muscles. In some theories, such changes are the basis of all human emotions. Also called **emergency reaction; emergency syndrome**.

-APA Dictionary of Psychology, Updated on 04/19/2018

- “A **fight response** is triggered when a person suddenly responds aggressively to something threatening.”
- “A **flight response** is triggered when a person responds to a perceived threat by fleeing, or symbolically, by launching into hyperactivity.”
- “A **freeze response** is triggered when a person, realizing resistance is futile, gives up, numbs out into dissociation and/or collapses as if accepting the inevitability of being hurt.”
- “A **fawn response** is triggered when a person responds to threat by trying to be pleasing or helpful in order to appease and forestall an attacker.”

Peter Walker, *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving: A Guide and Map for Recovering from Childhood Trauma*, 2013

b. “Or [one of the other hostages] explained that Hersh had repeated, like a mantra, a line from [psychiatrist Viktor] Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning* [...] Frankl riffs on Friedrich Nietzsche’s idea that when a person has a reason to live, he can deal with any challenge. Frankl said, “He who has a *WHY* can bear any how.” Or said Hersh repeated that specific line of wisdom to everyone in that tunnel. “What is your *WHY*?” he kept asking over and over, prompting them to consider what was of utmost importance to them and to formulate their sense of purpose.

Rachel Goldberg-Polin, *When We See You Again*

c “I am sure that this reconstruction of my lost manuscript in the dark barracks of a concentration camp assisted me in overcoming the danger of cardiovascular collapse.”

Victor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*

II. Threat in the Present: Hagar and the Anguish of a Caregiver

Genesis 21:14-21

14	Early next morning Abraham took some bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar. He placed them over her shoulder, together with the child, and sent her away. And she wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.	בִּבְקָר וּבְקֶחֱלָקָם וַיִּשְׁכֶּם אֲבְרָהָם וְחֶמֶת מַיִם וַיִּתֵּן אֶל־הָגָר שָׁם עַל־שִׁכְמָהּ וְאֶת־הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּשְׁלַחַהּ וּתְלֹךְ וַתֵּמַע בְּמִדְבָּר בְּאֶר שָׁבַע:
15	When the water was gone from the skin, she left the child under one of the bushes,	וַיְכַלּוּ הַמַּיִם מִן־הַחֶמֶת וַתַּשְׁלֹךְ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד תַּחַת אֶתֶד הַשִּׁיחִים:
16	and went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away; for she thought, “Let me not look on as the child dies.” And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears.	וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתָּשָׁב לָהּ מִנְגֵד הַרְחֵק כַּמֶּטְחָוּ לָשֹׁת כִּי אֲמַלָּה אֶל־אַרְצָהּ בְּמוֹת הַיֶּלֶד וַתָּשָׁב מִנְגֵד וַתֵּשֶׂא אֶת־קִלְעָהּ וַתִּבְכֶּה:
17	God heard the cry of the boy, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is.	וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱ־לֹהִים אֶת־קוֹל הַנָּעֹר וַיִּקְרָא מִלְאָךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶל־הָגָר מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַה־לָּךְ הַגָּר אֶל־תִּירָאִי כִּי־ שָׁמַע אֱ־לֹהִים אֶל־קוֹל הַנָּעֹר בְּאֶשֶׁר הוּא־שָׁם:
18	Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him.”	קוֹמִי שְׂאִי אֶת־הַנָּעֹר וַחֲסִנְיָקִי אֶת־יָדָךְ בּוֹ כִּי־לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל אֲשִׁימֶנּוּ:
19	Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink.	וַיִּפְקַח אֱ־לֹהִים אֶת־עֵינֶיהָ וַתִּרְאֵה בְּאֶר מַיִם וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתִּמְלֵא אֶת־הַחֶמֶת מַיִם וַתִּשְׁק אֶת־הַנָּעֹר:
20	God was with the boy and he grew up; he dwelt in the wilderness and became a bowman.	וַיְהִי אֱ־לֹהִים אֶת־הַנָּעֹר וַיִּגְדַּל וַיִּשָּׁב בְּמִדְבָּר וַיְהִי רֹכֵב קֶשֶׁת:
21	He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.	וַיָּשָׁב בְּמִדְבָּר פָּאֵרָן וַתִּקְחֶלּוּ אִמּוֹ אִשָּׁה מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

a. Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (2024):

“My central claim in this book is that these two trends—overprotection in the real world and underprotection in the virtual world—are the major reasons why children born after 1995 became the anxious generation.”

Summary of recommendations

1. No smartphones until age 14: Delay giving children smartphones until they’ve at least gone through early puberty to avoid early exposure.
2. No social media until age 16: Social media is inappropriate for younger kids due to risks like addiction, manipulation, violence, and unwanted adult interactions.

3. Phone-free schools: Contact school heads to push for change.
4. More independence, free play, and responsibility in the real world: Replace excessive screen time with real-world activities, chores, and unsupervised play to foster growth and a sense of purpose, countering feelings of uselessness from virtual experiences.

-Interview on the Chris Evans Breakfast Show, Virgin Radio UK, 2025

Also see:

- Levitin MD , Shmulewitz D , Mikulincer M , Gilead M, “The Psychological Impact of Digital Uncensored Violent Content Dissemination: Longitudinal Evidence Accounting for Predisposition”. *Europe PMC* (17 March 2026)
- Sharon Kidon, Tzur Gueta, “[Traumatic and scarring: The mental cost of watching October 7 videos](#)”, *Ynet Global*, (10.09.2024)

III. Fear Relived from the Past

Genesis 22:19

19	Abraham then returned to his servants, and they departed together for Beer-sheba; and Abraham stayed in Beer-sheba.	וַיָּשָׁב אַבְרָהָם אֶל-נַעֲרָיו וַיָּקָמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ יחדוֹ אֶל-בְּעֵר שֶׁבַע וַיָּשָׁב אַבְרָהָם בְּבֵעֵר שֶׁבַע:
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Genesis 22:21

21	Some time later, Abraham was told, “Milcah too has borne children to your brother Nahor...”	וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַיֵּגַד לְאַבְרָהָם לֵאמֹר הִנֵּה יָלְדָה מִלְכָּה גַם-הִיא בָנִים לְנָחוֹר אֲחִידָךְ...
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Genesis 24:58-64

58	Then Rebekah and her maids arose, mounted the camels, and followed the man. So the servant took Rebekah and went his way.	וַתָּקָם רִבְקָה וְנַעֲרֹתֶיהָ וַתִּרְכְּבֶנָה עַל-הַגְּמָלִים וַתִּלְכְּנָה אַחֲרֵי הָאִישׁ וַיִּקַּח הָעֶבֶד אֶת-רִבְקָה וַיֵּלֶךְ:
59	Isaac had just come back from the vicinity of Beer-lahai-roi, for he was settled in the region of the Negeb.	וַיֵּצֵאֵל בְּאֵר מִצְוֹא בְּעָר לְחֵי רֵאִי וְהוּא יוֹשֵׁב בְּעֶרְבַּן הַנֶּגֶב:
60	And Isaac went out walking in the field toward evening and, looking up, he saw camels approaching.	וַיֵּצֵא יִצְחָק לְשׂוּמֵי בִשְׁדָּה לִפְנוֹת עָרֶב וַיֵּשָׂא עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא וְהִנֵּה גְמָלִים בָּאִים:
61	Raising her eyes, Rebekah saw Isaac. She alighted from the camel	וַתִּשָּׂא רִבְקָה אֶת-עֵינֶיהָ וַתִּרְא אֶת-יִצְחָק וַתִּפֹּל מֵעַל הַגְּמֹל:
62	and said to the servant, “Who is that man walking in the field toward us?” And the servant said, “That is my master.” So she took her veil and covered herself.	וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל-הָעֶבֶד מִי-הָאִישׁ הַלֹּכֶה הַלָּזָה וְהַלֵּךְ בִּשְׁדָּה לְקִרְאָתָנוּ וַיֹּאמֶר הָעֶבֶד הוּא אֲדֹנִי וַתִּקַּח הַצִּיצִית וַתִּתְקַס:
63	The servant told Isaac all the things that he had done.	וַיְסַפֵּר הָעֶבֶד לְיִצְחָק אֵת כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה:

The commentators imagine numerous other ways this verse could be understood - especially regarding what *lasuah* means, that fact that he was outside, and that it was nearing evening. These interpretations include:

- Samuel ben Meir (Troyes, c. 1085 – c. 1158), after his death known as the "Rashbam", was a leading French Tosafist and grandson of Shlomo Yitzhaki, "Rashi".

2. A walk and encounter with nature / vegetation.

Abraham ben Meir ibn Ezra, a 12th-century Jewish philosopher, poet, biblical commentator, grammarian, astronomer, and mathematician, born in Tudela.

3. Prayer

The Babylonian Talmud (Berakhot 26b) links the word *lasuah* here with the phrase “*yishpokh siho*,” “Pour out his plea” (Psalm 102:1).)

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4. Study at the yeshiva of Shem and Ever

Genesis Rabbah 56:11, the first collection of midrashim on the Book of Genesis, likely written between 300-500 CE.

“Abraham returned to his young men” – and where was Isaac? Rabbi Berekhya in the name of the Rabbis from over there [Babylon]: He sent him away to Shem to learn Torah from him.	וַיָּחֲזֶק הַיָּכֵן הוּא, רַבִּי בִּרְכִיָּה בְּשֵׁם רַבָּנָן דְּתַמְנָן, שְׁלַחוּ אֵצֶל שָׁם לְלַמֵּד מִמֶּנּוּ תוֹרָה
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5. Inner growth

Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), a German Orthodox rabbi and founder of Neo-Orthodoxy,

שיח (from which we get שיחים, trees, plants), denotes the inner growth of spirit and feelings, gathering thoughts and feelings (cf. שוש = צוץ, שמה = צמח). Like התפלל steeping one's inner self with thoughts and feelings of purity and integrity (= התבלל). Our sages explain it here as being actual praying, like שפוך שיח — באים coming to his home.	
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Genesis 25:8-11

And Abraham breathed his last, dying at a good ripe age, old and contented; and he was gathered to his kin.	וַיָּגַע וַיָּמָת אַבְרָהָם בְּשִׁיבָה טוֹבָה זָקֵן וְשָׂבַע וַיֵּאָסֶף אֵלָיו עַמּוּיוֹ
His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre,	וַיִּקְבְּרוּ אוֹתוֹ יִצְחָק וְיִשְׁמָעֵאל בְּנָיו אֶל־מְעָרַת הַמְּכַפְלָה אֶל־שְׂדֵה עֶפְרֹן בֶּן־צֹחַר הַחִטִּי אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי מַמְרֵה
the field that Abraham had bought from the Hittites; there Abraham was buried, and Sarah his wife.	הַשְּׂדֵה אֲשֶׁר־קָנָה אַבְרָהָם מֵאֵת בְּנֵי־חֵת שָׁמָּה קָבַר אַבְרָהָם וְשָׂרָה אִשְׁתּוֹ
After the death of Abraham, God blessed his son Isaac. And Isaac settled near Beer-lahai-roi.	וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי מוֹת אַבְרָהָם וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־יִצְחָק בִּגְוֹן וַיֵּשֶׁב יִצְחָק עִם־בְּעֹר לְחַיִּי רֹאִי

IV. Anxiety-based fear for the Future

Unetaneh Tokef, from the High Holy Day prayers

Let us speak of the sacred power of this day—profound and awe-inspiring. On it, Your sovereignty is celebrated, and Your throne, from which You rule in truth, is established with love. Truly, You are Judge and Prosecutor, Expert, and Witness, completing the indictment, bringing the case, and enumerating the counts. You recall all that is forgotten, and will open the book of remembrance, which speaks for itself, for our own hands have signed the page.	אָמֵת כִּי אַתָּה הוּא דִּין וּמוֹכִיחַ וְיוֹדֵעַ וְעֹד וְכוֹתֵב וְחוֹתֵם וְסוֹפֵר וּמוֹנֵה וְתוֹזֵכֵר כָּל הַנְּשָׁפָחוֹת וְתַפְתָּח אֶת סֵפֶר הַזְּכוּרוֹנוֹת וּמֵאלוּי יִקְרָא וְחוֹתֵם יָד כָּל אָדָם בּוֹ
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The “great shofar” will be sounded and “the still small voice” will be heard. Angels will be alarmed, seized with fear and trembling, declaring, “this very day is the Day of Judgment”—for even the hosts of heaven are judged; no one is innocent in Your sight. All that lives on earth will pass before You like a flock of sheep. As a shepherd examines the flock, making each sheep pass under the staff, so You will review and number and count, judging each living being, determining the fate of everything in creation, inscribing their destiny	ובשופר גדול יתקע וקול דממה דקה ישמע ומלאכים יחפזו ויחילו וירעדו יאחזו ויאמרו הנה יום הדין לפקד על צבא מרום בדין כי לא יזכו בעיניו בדין וכל באי עולם יעברו לפניו כבני מרון כבקרת רועה יעדרו מעביר צאנו תחת שבטו כן מעביר ותספר ותמנה ותפקד נפש כל חי ותחתד קצבה לכל בריה ותכתב את גזר דינם
On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on the Fast of the Day of Atonement it is sealed!— How many will pass on, and how many will be born; Who will live and who will die; Who will live a long life and who will come to an untimely end; Who will perish by fire and who by water; who by sword and who by beast; who by hunger and who by thirst; who by earthquake and who by plague. Who will be strangled and who will be stoned; Who will be at peace and who will be troubled; Who will be serene and who will be disturbed; Who will be tranquil and who will be tormented; Who who be impoverished and who will be enriched; Who will be brought low, and who raised up. But <i>T'shuvah</i> (repentance), <i>T'fillah</i> (prayer), and <i>Tz'dakah</i> (charity) have the power to transform the harshness of our destiny	בראש השנה יכתובו, וביום צום כפור יחתמו. כמה יעברו, וכמה יבראו, מי יחיה, ומי ימות, מי בקצו, ומי לא בקצו, ומי באש, מי בתר, ומי בחיה, מי במים מי ברעב, ומי בצמא, מי ברעש, ומי במגפה, מי בחניקה, ומי בסקילה, מי ינוח ומי יטור, מי ישלו, מי ישקט, ומי ינוע ומי יתסר, מי יעני, ומי יעשיר, מי ישפל ומי ירום. ותשובה ותפלה וצדקה מעבירין את רע הגזרה.