This is a very special day in the lives of each one of us. It is not a moment for bluffing others, nor is it a moment for trying to bluff God, and it is surely not a moment in which to bluff ourselves. And so I want to speak to you tonight as honestly and as openly as I can about a painful but a relevant question. The question is: What should you do when life knocks you down? We all yearn for a life of ease, peace and happiness. But the truth is, life is rarely that.

I have served this congregation for many years, and I well know of many’s tsoris. Is there any one sitting here right now whom life has never defeated? Is there any one sitting here right now who has not seen dreams crushed, and confidence broken and hopes destroyed at some time? Is there any one no one sitting here right now who, at some time, when you thought that you were riding high, has not had the stuffing knocked out of you, and has not fallen from the top to the bottom and not known how to get up again?

I am not sure, but I would wager that if we were honest, there are very few, if any, of us who can say no, nothing like this has ever happened to me. If you are one of those who can say no this has never happened to me, if you
are one of those who can say: I have never experienced despair and depression in my life, then you are very fortunate, and you are also very atypical. Most of us, with very few exceptions, have experienced at least once, and some of us have experienced more than once, the deep defeats and the cruel disappointments that life can inflict upon us.

If you are in this category, as I am and as most of the people whom I know are, then I want to tell you about two people whom I know who learned how to get up off their knees and start over again after a crushing defeat. One of these persons is from the Torah and other from our community.

The one whom you know is Isaac, the second of the patriarchs. And this insight into how to understand him comes from my reading of Rabbi Jonathan Sachs over the summer. He noticed a small nuance in the Isaac story, a nuance that it would be very easy to overlook, and from this small nuance, he derived a very large lesson.

Before I tell you what the nuance is, let me review the life of Isaac for you in brief. If anyone in the Bible had a right to feel sorry for himself, it was surely Isaac. His father bound him on the altar, lifted up a knife, and came very, very close to killing him. Can you imagine the trauma that must have been? Can you imagine the psychic damage that that must have
caused? And then, right after that, when he came home from the Akedah eager to tell his mommy what happened and to find comfort in her embrace, he found out that, while he was away, his mother had died.

Sarah was the one who had doted on him from the day that he was born. Sarah was the one who had forced Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away, for his sake. Sarah was his protector and his caretaker all his life. And now she was gone? Now, just when he needed her the most, now when he needed someone to support him and explain to him what his father had nearly done to him, now she was gone? Can you imagine how bereft and how bewildered, how crushed and how confused, how lonely and how lost, Isaac must have felt on the day when his mother died?

He must have been inconsolable. The words of the Psalms, "Ki avi v'imi ya-azvuni"- my father and my mother have abandoned me describe how Isaac must have felt when his mother died. Isaac must have felt that life had knocked him over and crushed him. He must have felt alone and abandoned, bitter and bereaved depressed and in despair, stunned and sick at heart. He must have felt that he had no strength left in him with which to live. And now comes the passage that can be read two ways:

The Torah says that soon after this event, Rebecca came into his life. It says that when he met her, "He took her into his tent, and he loved her, and
he was comforted for the loss of his mother." What does that mean? It
SEEMS to mean that Rebecca took the place of Sarah in his life. It seems to
mean that she took over the task of protecting him. And it seems to mean
that he was grateful to her for doing that, and so he loved her.

If you read the story this way, then it was Rebecca who healed Isaac
and gave him back his hope and his ability to live. She came into his life and
took over the role of his mother, Sarah. Just as his mother had cared for him
and protected him before, so now she cared for him and protected him. And
thanks to her ministering devotion, Isaac, the person whom life has bruised
and battered, began to live again.

That is one way of reading the story. I confess that that is the way I
have always understood the story until now. It rang true for me, because just
like you, I have known widowers who were broken and nearly destroyed by
the loss of their mates, who sank into deep depression when they lost the
woman who had been their best friend for many years, and then remarried
and regained their will to live again.

That is the way I have always understood this story. I have always
thought of Isaac as the first widower who lost the will to live, and then met
someone who helped bring him back to life again. And that may be what this
story is meant to teach us. It could be.
But if you read the story more carefully, you will see a different lesson. I learned this from Rabbi Jonathan Sachs. He says: Look at the sentence that tells of how Isaac and Rebecca met for the first time. The Torah says that as the caravan that brought Rebecca to him arrived: "Vayitschak ba mibo b'er lehai roi” Isaac had just come from Be-er-Lehai-Roi.

So what? Why do we need to know where Isaac was coming from when he met Rebecca for the first time? If he had been coming from the library, or from the movies, or from a singles bar, or from shul, or from the office, would the Torah have bothered to mention it? Why do we need to know that Isaac was coming from a visit to Be-er Lehai Roi when he met Rebecca for the first time?


Be-er Lehai Roi is the place where Hagar, the stepmother of Isaac, ran away to, when she could no longer endure the mistreatment that she received as a maid in the house of Sarah. She ran out of the house, with no idea of where she was going to go. She didn't know where she was going, and she didn't care where she was going. All she knew was that she couldn't take it anymore where she was. She was exhausted and sick at heart. She was worn out from the abuse she had received. She was in deep despair. And so she
ran away and somehow she stumbled into this place called Be-er Lehai-Roi, and there she met an angel of God who comforted her, and who promised her that God saw her suffering, and that God would help her.

Now comes the insight of Rabbi Sachs: He says that Isaac went to Be-er Lehai Roi in order to see if he could comfort Hagar and lift her spirits a little bit. True, she was his mother's rival. True, her son was his rival for Abraham's love. True, he had every reason to forget about her. And yet, for some reason, at the time when he was in deepest despair himself, he went to find her and to comfort her. At a time when he had ever right and every reason to wallow in self-pity, he went to give comfort and encouragement to someone else.

And THAT was where Isaac got the strength to climb up out of his own black hole. For the first time in who-knows-how-many days or weeks or months, Isaac stopped wallowing in his own tsores, and turned to comforting someone else. In that moment, when Isaac went to Be-er Lehai-Roi, he changed from being the inconsolable one to being the one who tries to bring consolation to someone else.

And that transformed him! That made him fit to be a husband, and eventually a father. Had he met Rebecca while he was still a basket case, while he was still wrapped up in self-pity, he would not have been fit to
marry. If he had met her for the first time before this experience, she might very well have said to herself: "What do I need this headache for?" And she might have broken off the engagement, turned around and gone back home. For what a woman wants when she gets married is not a child to take care of, but an adult with whom to share her life. If Isaac had not gone to Be-er-Lehai Roi before he met Rebecca, he would have been someone so wrapped up in his own misery, so consumed with his own pain, that he could not relate to Rebecca or to anyone else.

Until he sought to comfort Hagar, his whole identity was bound up in self-pity. But now he was able, for the first time, to focus on someone else's pain, instead of only on his own. Now he was able to not only grieve for Sarah but also to grieve for the grief caused by Sarah. Now he was able to transcend himself and his own troubles and tries to heal someone else's pain. And in the process of healing someone else, Isaac healed himself.

Now he was ready to love and to be loved by Rebecca because now he no longer was one who was full of pain. Can you imagine what a disastrous marriage this would have been if he had not gone to Be-er Lehai Roi before he met Rebecca? He would have spent all his days telling her how miserable and how mistreated he was, and after a while that would have gotten very boring.
Now I want to tell you about a person that I very much love in this congregation. I have known her for almost all of my time here. She and her husband brought Laurie and me into this community and literally gave us a home here. She invited us over for dinners, took care of our dog and became one of our closest friends.

Then tragedy struck her, not once but twice. I remember her being totally devastated. It was as through her very world was destroyed. She lost her family, her finances, her home, and her prestige. I wondered how she would persevere.

But I saw her again this summer at a memorial service. This was a very private service for a member of our shul who also knew tsoris. You see, he was devastated with a degenerative back condition that left him mostly paralyzed. He took his own life, having been overcome by the pain. It was a tragedy of unparalleled proportions. I can’t remember visiting a man who suffered more.

And there she was, my friend caring for another. In her reaching out to others, I believe she found healing for herself. In helping another, she was healing her own pain. In losing so much, she was able to rebuild her life, by comforting another.

I have to say, I was so moved to see her there. I left with a new
appreciation on how to pick yourself up following a defeat.

So this is the lesson that I would have us learn today: you and I, and all those who are here today who have suffered defeats in this world and who is there in this world who has not? The lesson is that it hurts; it hurts terribly, it hurts almost unendurably, when life knocks you down. It hurts excruciatingly when the parent or the spouse who has cared for you and protected you for so many years is taken from you. It hurts beyond the ability of words to describe when life knocks you down and crushes your dreams. When that happens, you have good reason and you have good right to wallow in self-pity and to bewail your situation, for a while.

But then, we need to do what Isaac did. We need to do what my friend does. We need to climb up out of ourselves and reach out to those who are in pain, for if we do, we will not only help to heal them; we will help to heal ourselves as well.

Rebecca married Isaac, but not because she was attracted to him because of his weakness. There are some women who do marry men because they are drawn to their helplessness. It makes them feel needed. If you don't believe me, read Jane Eyre. But I think she married Isaac for a better reason. I think she married him because she sensed an inner strength within him. She married him because she saw in him a person who had loved and lost
and was now able to love again. And that is what made him a worthy candidate to cast in her life with, and so she did.

In this New Year that has now begun, may all of us be spared from at least some of the blows that life can inflict upon us. May all of us be spared from the crushing defeats to our sense of self worth and to our dreams that life can sometimes inflict upon us. But if they come, may all of us learn from the examples of Isaac and of a Beth Or member. May all of us learn that by healing we can be healed, and by loving we can make ourselves worthy of being loved.

Let me remind you once again of the psalm that we say at this season of the year. It begins with the words: "Ki avi v’imi ya-azvuni"- For my mother and my father have abandoned me. Can there be any more frightening words, any sadder words, any words of self-pity and of despair greater than these? But how does the Psalm end? It ends with "chazak v’ametz libecha, vikavey El Adonai"- Be strong and of good courage and look to the Lord.

May each of us who have been tempted to lose heart at some time in our lives for good reason and with good cause, climb up out of the pit of despair and transcend our pain, and be strong and of good courage.

May we resolve to do this in this New Year that now begins. And may God help us in this task.