



## Living With Scars

Rabbi Calvin Dox-DaCosta, Temple Israel of Hollywood  
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A long time ago, when there were Blockbusters, my parents took me and my sister to pick out something for each of us to watch. My sister went straight for her tried-and-true—something starring the Olsen Twins which she had probably already seen at least 10 times. I, on the other hand, walked up and down the aisles pretending to be a super edgy movie buff. My dad, recognizing that I could be there for hours, grabbed a box, handed it to me, and assured me that I had to watch it...“it’s a classic.” I looked at the cover wide-eyed....hesitant...comforted only slightly by the PG rating. I brought the box up to the counter, we paid the rental fee, and we drove home.

When we got home, I set up my folding chair in my room, pushed the vhs into my tv, dimmed the lights a bit, and sat down. The movie started...the first scene ended...and I jumped up to eject the tape. Sufficiently traumatized, I walked out of my room and paced around the house looking for anything to take my mind off what I just watched. My dad bumped into me in the kitchen and asked what I thought. “Oh, yeah...super great so far...I’m probably going to finish it tomorrow though...”

It would be years until I worked up the courage to watch *Jaws* again, and I was so grateful when I did. After getting through that first scene again I was amazed that you never even see the shark, but you know it’s there. And they set it up beautifully for the rest of the film—whenever you see the water you’re thinking the shark can’t be far off...whenever you hear (those two notes) *dun dun*...you know it’s coming.

Later in the movie, our three main characters—the police chief, an oceanographer, and a shark fisherman—are out at sea at night, relaxing in the cabin of their boat. Waiting for the shark to show up again, these relative strangers begin sharing stories of various scars they have. Two of them are sitting around a table comparing their visible marks left behind by brawls, arm wrestling matches, and encounters with other sea creatures. As the two continue to try and one-up the other, we get a shot of the police chief standing at a distance, ever so slightly lifting up his shirt—clearly deciding whether he’s comfortable with sharing the story of a scar.

It’s at this point in the scene when the stories shift from the external and visible signs to the internal and invisible scars: the oceanographer jokingly offers up that his heart was broken by a former love. Then, the police chief, who has been standing off to the side and not revealing anything himself notices a marking on the shark fisherman’s arm which he hasn’t shared yet. He reveals that it was a tattoo which he got removed, but there’s a bit of tension now rising: the scar remains even though he tried to rid himself of whatever pain caused it. He can’t hide it anymore, so he shares...and over the next four minutes, the character delivers a harrowing monologue about his time on the USS *Indianapolis*, a real World War II naval ship sent on a secret mission to deliver some of the parts of the first atomic bomb. The ship sank when it was hit by Japanese torpedoes killing about 300 men on impact. Out at sea, floating between life

and death, dehydration and shark attacks, the remaining 900 men waited for a rescue which was not coming. 316 men survived.

This scene is a small but incredible look into the lingering effects of trauma, how it affects our interactions with others, and how deep down there's a desire in all of us for our pain to be witnessed—to cry out and be heard—"Hineni, here I am."

To be human is to live in the anticipation of pain and suffering. Our lives are brief, our end is unpredictable, and all that we love, we will ultimately lose. Suffering and loss are hallmarks of the human experience and yet they do not make sense to us.

The Greek word for "wound" is "trauma," and while this idea is typically associated with extreme psychological or physical shock, trauma can result from any experience which overwhelms the coping mechanisms of an organism—having "lasting adverse effects on an individual's functioning as well as their mental, physical, social, emotional, and/or spiritual well-being."<sup>1</sup> Responses to trauma are embedded in the parts of our brain concerned with survival.

As isolating as pain can be, in a counterintuitive way, it is life-affirming. We don't want to feel pain, nor do we want to suffer. Our once irrationally and subconsciously perceived immortality disappears, and we are forced to confront the fragile nature of our finite humanity. We feel because we are.

When we try to discuss suffering within a religious context, we often categorize our questions into ones of theodicy—questions concerning the nature of God and why our pain was permitted to exist in the first place. This kind of thinking shifts God to the center of the conversation, marginalizing our subjective human experiences.

French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, believed that it was essential for us to disregard theodicy as an outdated philosophical model. For Levinas, our understandings of the universe ultimately do not matter unless we can come to recognize someone when they are in pain or have experienced trauma. The one who is suffering, whom Levinas refers to as "the Other," is only recognizable when we become fully aware of them—when we react to and engage with them. The Other is not God but rather another human being.

Because of this, Levinas believed that "the meaning of something is in its relation to another thing"<sup>2</sup> and that our sense of self becomes defined through the encounter with the Other. We must be ready to respond to the Other when we encounter them. Just as they cry out to us in their suffering, "Hineni!" we must be ready to respond "here I am."

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<sup>1</sup> Jennings, P. A., & Siegel, D. J. (2019). *The Trauma-Sensitive Classroom: Building Resilience with Compassionate Teaching*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.

<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 86.

The Torah portion we're about to read is bookended by trauma. Abraham has just sent away his son, Ishmael, to die in the wilderness, and after this unimaginable burden God approaches him with a test and Abraham responds "*Hineni*." I am here... God tells Abraham

קחנָא אֶת־בְּנֶךָ אֶת־יְחִידְךָ אֲשֶׁר־אַהַבְתָּ אֶת־יִצְחָק וְלָךְ־לֶךְ

"Take your son, your favorite son, the one whom you love, Isaac, and lech kecha o forth....and offer him as a burnt offering."<sup>3</sup>

From here until the end of this experience Torah gives us a sparse and surface-level encounter as we witness the scars forming. Abraham and Isaac leave Sarah behind, and when they arrive at their destination, they leave their servants behind telling them that they will be back down after they worship. Now it's just Abraham and Isaac ascending the mountain together and Isaac begins to ask questions: "Hey dad?" Abraham responds again with "*Hineni*." "So...I see that we're going to offer some sacrifices...there's the wood for the burnt offering and the flint to light the fire, but where's the sheep?" "God will see to the sheep for the offering, my son." The two don't speak again for the rest of this journey to the top of the mountain, and upon reaching the top Abraham binds Isaac to the pile of wood, draws his knife back and is about to kill his son when an angel of God calls out to stop him "Abraham...Abraham!"

The text gives us no insight as to what Abraham is going through, but we bear witness to the pain. Abraham, the same man who bargained with God over saving Sodom and Gomorrah from destruction if there were at least 10 good people—the same man who sent off his firstborn to die in the wilderness—the same man who is then asked to kill his only other child....It's no wonder that Abraham's response to the angel is "*Hineni!*" here I am...please....I am hurting....

The trauma of the *akeidah* persists: we never learn if Sarah even knows where Abraham and Isaac go off to and the next time we see her she dies; Abraham and Isaac don't speak again for the rest of the Abraham's life nor are the two of them ever mentioned as being together; Isaac clings to Rebekah almost immediately upon meeting her as she is the first person he is able to find comfort with after his mother's death.

Whether these stories happened or not, there is truth to the pain our text captures. Our tradition emphasizes that even from the beginning, trauma is a part of the human condition—moments like the exile from the Garden of Eden, the first murder, the great flood which wiped out the entire population of the world, and the technological disaster of the Tower of Babel. What other traumas are we still trying to make sense of? How does this pain affect how we experience the world around us?

We can try to suppress our emotions when they become overwhelming—we can try to hide our pain, recoil from the world fearful that someone—even ourselves—might see our scars. We move through our cycles year after year, absorbing the pain and memories of those we encounter throughout our lives. We carry these with us and pieces of it remain, sometimes becoming who we are, but often reflecting who we always were.

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 22:2

The High Holidays invite us to reflect on the ways we may have hurt others, but this season also gives us a chance to be honest with ourselves about our own pain. We confess as a community to demonstrate that we are never alone in this journey. We experience each other calling out "*Hineni*—here I am—and we acknowledge each other in our vulnerability, responding "I am here."

A story in the Babylonian Talmud shares that

Shimon bar Yochai spent 12 years in a cave dwelling in reclusion with only his son as a companion. After he re-emerged from his cave, Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair heard of his return and went to greet him. He brought Rabbi Shimon to the bathhouse to tend to his skin, because it had been terribly cracked and damaged from the dark and dry environment of the cave. Rabbi Pinchas began to cry, tears falling from his eyes at the sight of Rabbi Shimon's great physical pain. Rabbi Pinchas said to him: "Woe is me, that I have to see you like this, my friend, with such wounds from your time in isolation!" But to his surprise, Rabbi Shimon responded, "Happy you should be to see me like this, for if you had not seen me this way, you would not have found me at all."<sup>4</sup>

Over this next week, may we be open to and acknowledge the scars we have developed. And may we come to recognize that pain always has a place in our communities. After all, we're the people who carried around broken tablets and called them holy.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 33b

<sup>5</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra 14b