Nine year old Joey, was asked by his mother what he had learned in Sunday school.

"Well, Mom, our teacher told us how God sent Moses behind enemy lines on a rescue mission to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. When he got to the Red Sea, he had his engineers build a pontoon bridge and all the people walked across safely. Then he used his walkie-talkie to radio headquarters for reinforcements. They sent bombers to blow up the bridge and all the Israelites were saved."

"Now, Joey, is that really what your teacher taught you?" His mother asked.

"Well, no, Mom. But if I told it the way the teacher did, you'd never believe it!"

We laugh because we recognize the truth in the joke.

There is so much in the Bible that is difficult to believe.

Many of us do not believe, at least not literally, every story or event described in the Bible.

In addition, there is much in the Bible that we might believe, but we don't like, we don't accept, we don't endorse.

Did you follow today's Torah reading?

Did you like that God commanded Abraham to raise his son Isaac as an offering?

And did you like the Torah telling us that Abraham was willing to do so?

Perhaps the best we can say is that it is challenging, and perhaps the worst we can say is that it is abhorrent.

There is a long history for either approach.

Many years ago The United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism developed a Bible reading/study program called Perek Yomi.

Perek Yomi means, a “chapter a day."

This program encourages readers to start with the first chapter in the book of Joshua, and read a chapter a day until the end of the Bible.

It takes two and a half years to complete the reading of the Hebrew Bible with the assumption that the five books of Moses are read on your own during the regular Torah readings for the year.

In my previous congregation a small group of learners took on this project.

My father-in-law Al Temin, was one of the participants.

Every few weeks we would gather to review the biblical chapters we read since our last meeting.

There were one or two members of the group who always came ready to point out the most nasty, violent, disagreeable chapters, challenging me to try to make what we read more palatable.

Every once in a while I could do that, but more often than not, I simply had to resort to the position that the Bible sometimes reports and presents the most sensationalistic and outrageous events of life.

This reaction has also been common over the last 10+ years of my conducting a weekly Torah study class.

Any part of the five books of Moses is open to discussion and analysis, but that doesn't mean I always have something good and nice to say about the section under review.

A few weeks ago I was asked to defend, or at least comment on the following passage from Deuteronomy chapter 20, verse 10 and following:

“When you approach a town to attack it, you shall offer it terms of peace. If it responds peaceably and lets you in, all the people present there shall serve you as forced labor. If it does not surrender to you, but would join battle with you, then you shall lay siege to it; and when the Lord your God delivers it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword. You may however take as your booty the women, the children, the livestock, and everything in the town – all its spoil – and enjoy the use of the spoil of your enemy, which the Lord your God gives you."

And then it even gets worse – if the town is from one of the seven indigenous Canaanite peoples, no one is allowed to remain alive, "lest they lead you into doing

all the abhorrent things that they have done for their gods and you stand guilty before the Lord your God."

So we looked at commentaries and rabbinic interpretations and many of the items we read lead us away from the violence and obligatory destruction commanded in this passage.

After all, that is much of what the Talmud, or the oral law, tries to do with the written text of the Torah in specific and the Bible in general.

I believe our sages did that because they didn't want their lives to be guided by the text that on the one hand is supposed to be divinely written, and on the other hand contains many passages that are too difficult to reconcile with a God whom we need to believe is worthy of our devotion.

As a response to this dilemma I will share with you a comment offered many years ago by a Rabbi who served as my teacher, actually more of a mentor because I never formally attended any of his classes.

Rabbi Alan Miller, longtime rabbi of the founding Reconstructionist congregation in New York known as the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, passed away just before Tisha B'Av in August.

I taught at that synagogue religious school in the 1970s and subsequently Alan and Naomi Miller became our very good friends.

They turned to me to officiate at his funeral.

Rabbi Miller's Shabbat morning lectures and sermons were recorded and now they are available, at least in audio, on YouTube.

On the way to New York for his funeral, while Sharon was driving, I listened to one of his Shabbat morning presentations from the late 1960s.

While the entire lecture was quite exciting and engaging since it was immediately after the riots at Columbia University protesting the invasion into Cambodia, it is the comment Rabbi Miller offered to the bat mitzvah of the day that I wish to share with you now.

Rabbi Miller told the 13-year-old girl that he had a memory of her going back to when she was six.

After sharing the memory, he proceeded to tell her that he admired how she had grown and matured and was ready for this bat mitzvah day.

Rabbi Miller said, a girl at 13 is not the same as a girl at six, and that although she was remembered fondly from previous years, she was now a different person.

A few moments later, Rabbi Miller then presented a Bible to the young lady, on behalf of the synagogue.

He told her that this was a very special book, but it represented Judaism at a very early time, and that the Judaism in the book wasn't the same as the Judaism of today.

Just like a 13-year-old girl is not the same as she is when she is six, so the Judaism of today, is not literally the same as the Judaism found in the Bible.

Nor should it be, nor do most of us want it to be.

My colleague from Metuchen New Jersey, Rabbi Gerry Zelizer, wrote an important article that appropriately expands upon this important issue.

The article is titled, "**We must ignore the destructive teachings of Scriptures."**

Here is how it begins:

It's not true that Islam was also "hijacked" by the 9/11 hijackers.

It's not true that the thugs, who vandalized and torched mosques and other institutions in Israel, misrepresented Judaism.

It's not true that prominent Christian preachers in the United States who justified slavery by quoting the New Testament misquoted that Scripture.

It is true that the sacred texts of Islam, Christianity and Judaism are double-edged, conveying contradictory messages.

One edge cuts to hate, exclusion, insularity and violence. The other edge flows to love, pluralism, universality and acts of kindness. Which edge prevails depends on who reads which passage, when it is read and how it is interpreted."

Therefore, when in class we encounter the most difficult passages of the Torah, it is inaccurate to say that the passage is not reflective of Judaism.

If it's in the Torah, it is reflective of Judaism, but it doesn't have to be my Judaism or your Judaism.

It can be reinterpreted as has happened so often, or it can be ignored as is the case with the reform movement than it is more than with us.

Or, it can be that we choose to emphasize and promote the parts of Judaism that are loving, that are reflective of kindness, that help us honor God in a way that makes sense.

Rabbi Zelizer concludes:

"It is as erroneous to claim that Islam, Christianity or Judaism are uniformly peaceful as it is to claim that they are unvaryingly violent.

The sacred literature and history of each contain both peaceful and violent components. It depends where the voice who speaks for the religion chooses to look. In the United States, the preponderance of believers of all three religions opt for the universal and merciful components, eschewing the underside of our Abrahamic religions.

It is that bulk which should be bulked up, becoming increasingly outspoken in public, persuading others to focus on the moral face of our faiths. We should not deny but, yes, ignore the dark underside."

Every year on this holiday of Rosh Hashanah, I wonder why are the Torah readings selected for this holiday two of the biblical chapters which describe the life of Abraham and Sarah and their family.

And this year, the answer to that question seems more obvious to me.

For each and every one of us, a new year represents the opportunity to renew our world, individually and communally.

From my perspective, no one changed the world, renewed the world, helped to create a new and different world in relationship to God, more than did Abraham and Sarah.

They were the first in a long line of religious leaders from our tradition and others who said that the way in which the world up to their time understood God, no longer works.

But rather than live in a world without God, they created and bequeathed to all of us a new and different world with an understanding of God that was worthy of worship.

Every year of our lives brings new challenges, including new challenges of faith.

And so, in every year, we must be like Abraham and Sarah and renew our trust in a God who joins us and guides us through the challenges of our faith.

Thank God we don't have to do this alone.

There are many teachers and mentors to whom we can turn.

One of the most helpful teachers and mentors for me and I think for many of you is Rabbi Harold Kushner.

He devoted his life's work to writing, preaching and teaching about a faith in which he can still believe, even after the most devastating of personal losses – of course I speak about the loss of his son Aaron, decades ago to the insidious disease of progeria – the disease of rapid aging.

Rather than isolating himself and turning inward, Rabbi Kushner chose not so much to ignore, but to deny the Jewish teachings he could no longer accept after this tragedy.

At the same time, he rebuilt his faith in a new direction, not only for him, but for millions of others throughout the world.

And now, Rabbi Kushner has written perhaps his final book – he is 80 years old – called, "Nine Essential Things I've learned about Life."

In conclusion today, I will share a paragraph which appears early in the book:

"For many of us, there was a time when we were young when we felt close to God.

We had been taught that God loved us and was watching over us, and that made us feel safe.

We tried to be worthy of God's love and were troubled by guilt every time we told a lie or took something that didn't belong to us.

When we learned of other people's suffering, as when my best friend died of a brain tumor when he was 10 years old, we fell back on the assumption that God knows what is best for us better than we do.

That childhood faith did not last.

War, crime, serious illnesses affecting people we cared about, the emerging truth about the Holocaust, and the inevitable disappointments of life cost us that simple faith of our childhood…

We found ourselves feeling distant from the God to whom we had once felt so close but now found unreliable.

I hope that this book, born out of my own struggles with faith lost and recovered, will help to close that gap, to let us know that God has not moved but that we have come to see him more clearly."

In this new year of 5777, I look forward to searching for God with you, and that together, by honestly confronting our struggles and challenges, we will help each other see God more clearly.

Amen