The story of the binding of Isaac is not often seen as a love story -- probably because it is mostly a story about child sacrifice -- but indeed, it is also a love story. Abraham and Sarah desperately wanted children and for years and years they couldn’t conceive. Eventually, God intervened - and when Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90 she gave birth to their son, and they were thrilled.

But just a few chapters later, the tone of the story changes when God commands Abraham: "אֲשֶׁר־אָהַ֙בְתָּ֙ אֶת־יְחִֽידְ֤ךְ אֶת־בִּנְ֨ךָ קַח־נָ֠א" - God says “take your son - your favorite son, the one whom you love - and go up to the mountain and sacrifice him.” Abraham does as God asks and it is not until Isaac is bound to the altar and the knife is raised that God spares Isaac and praises Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son, his favorite son - the one whom he loves.

This is the first time in the Torah that the word “Ahavah” - or “love” is used. And so, our collective Jewish introduction to love is not in the context of of a romance - it is in the context of a parent and a child.

As we sit here celebrating the New Year, we think back to creation - the very first new year. The first love that God knew was also the that of a parent and a child - between God and God’s “child” - Adam. And, how mighty that love must
have been. When my son Neil was born, I was without words that this tiny human being had grown inside my body like a plant and just emerged, fully cooked, into the world with all his fingers and toes and organs and cells functioning, and while I worked hard at being pregnant (because, let’s be honest, those donuts didn’t eat themselves), I didn’t have to literally make up the systems in my body that would work to grow a child - I just trusted them. So, imagine, then, the magnitude of the love God must have felt at being not just the first creator of life, but the designer of that life - the artist behind each finger and toe - the inventor of all of those intricate organs and systems.

So if God first understood the concept of love through the framework of parenthood - and if we are first taught to understand about love through the same framework in the Binding of Isaac, perhaps there is something there for us to learn - because neither of these would be considered “love stories” in our modern context. They are not romantic tales of true love that take place under a waning moon with violins playing softly in the background. They are the nitty gritty stories of the truths of parenthood. Which is exactly how I understand the phrase “love story” - these are stories about the nature of love - honest, raw and full of truth.
At Rosh Hashanah, we speak of new beginnings, atonement, judgement, forgiveness, and second chances. And yet, what underlies each of these themes is the desperate human need to love and be loved. New beginnings would be meaningless if we constantly had them alone and forgiveness would be irrelevant if we didn’t have a soul-deep conscience begging us to repent and repair the connections we have with others. Love is the framework for our relationships.

Which, if you really think about it, makes every story a love story. Every piece of history, every moment in each of our lives is, in fact a love story defined by even the briefest seconds of human connection that teach us the nature of love - of parents, children, spouses, siblings, families, friends, and even enemies - and beginning with the Torah we read story after story through which we learn to understand love - the magnitude and beauty and brilliance of it - and we learn that it is often hard, cannot be separated from loss and is necessarily bound up in sacrifice. And, as God and Abraham learned specifically, in their rawest moments of creation and parenthood - in rebellion and in sacrifice, we learn that love is not control. And that is the theme of my love story.
I learned the difference between love and control first from my mother - I was in my mid-20’s and when a serious relationship ended, the course of my life changed drastically. In the aftermath of the breakup, I remember feeling SO angry with her. While I was moving past the trauma, and getting on with my life, she was still sitting in shock, rocked by the unexpected. When I asked her why she couldn’t just get on board my train of adventure and flexibility, she said to me, “Emily, the day you were born, a video reel starting playing in my head of all the important moments in your life. I imagined your first day of school and your bat mitzvah and your high school graduation and taking you to college, walking you down the aisle and holding your babies - so when things don’t go as I imagined them, it's not that I’m stuck or disproportionately mourning the change in course - it’s that I’m desperately working to edit the video in my head that I’ve already watched a thousand times -- and I’m not feeling very tech savvy at the moment!”

At the time, I’m not sure I totally understood - but now, less than ten years later, I get it. I now have a video reel in my own head of my son’s life. I’ve watched baby Neil’s first steps and listened to his first words a thousand times since they happened - and my mom was right - I lay awake in bed at night and watch the
upcoming video clips in my head - I can see myself walking him in on his first day of kindergarten, standing on the bimah during his bar mitzvah, I watch myself sit in the crowd at his high school graduation. I imagine all of the t-shirts I’ll have to buy and wear - I’ll be a football or baseball or soccer mom, and then I’ll have a whole wardrobe that says “proud mom of a student at _______ university.” I’ll be a really good mother in law when he gets married and then, obviously, a truly epic grandma that graduates from t-shirts to sweatshirts that say “what happens at grandma’s house stays at grandma’s house....” It nearly makes my heart physically burst to imagine him growing up and having adult responsibilities and an education and a job and a partner and a family. Honestly, even just imagining the moment in that video reel when he learns how to properly say the word guacamole makes me want to cry.

But this is just it - this is the message of each love story and what God learned and Abraham learned and what they are trying desperately to teach us. Love is overpowering. It is blinding and enormous and makes our bodies feel literally FULL - and we are supposed to learn that no matter how big and powerful love is, love is not control. I cannot control whether Neil plays football or or goes
to college or has children or ever learns to say guacamole instead of wakalomey. He is his own tiny person -- and love is not control.

This isn’t to say that love demands blind acceptance. I think it is my right - and my responsibility - to expect greatness from those for whom I feel this love. Because love is an investment. As I watch the video of baby Neil’s life, I feel the weight of my obligation to teach him. I know that between takes in the video reel, I’m teaching him how to to be a mentsch. I see myself teaching him about compassion and friendship and tzedakkah and probably not math, someone else will have to do that, but I’ll teach him about the beauty of family and the richness of his Jewish identity. I even imagine teaching him about love.

What I didn’t imagine was doing it alone.

I didn’t intend to be a single mom, and when I met Neil’s dad in rabbinical school, it really was love at first sight. Our first five years together were beautiful, and as we got married and then when Neil was born, we lived in real and genuine love. But, love is not control, and so Neil and I set out on our own. Since the day we did, life has been remarkable - and often beautiful - because love is not control. And learning this actually gave me back control of my own life. Let me be clear -
that life is also scary. And lonely. And hard. But, I’m not ashamed to be divorced and I’m unspeakably proud to be a single mom - because for me it means that I stood up for myself and for my kid, and that I’m doing my best to build us the life we deserve.

I learned how to stand up for myself from my own mom - and she would be the first to tell you that love is not control. My mom fought hard to be a mom, a wife and a professional. She knew every day that she would have to make personal and professional choices - and concessions - in order to raise two reasonably smart and acceptably well-behaved kids and make a name for herself as a fierce and brilliant law professor. And fierce she was: fiercely smart, fiercely loyal - and fiercely committed to her kids. Every time I made moves in my life, from new jobs in new cities to new schools for new degrees, she showed up, practical visor on, fiercely clutching the wild fistful of bed bath and beyond 20% off coupons we would need to furnish yet another new apartment. Despite the video playing in HER head, she relinquished control and let me find my own way, and in doing so she made me proud to be a powerful woman and mother and she made me so deeply committed to Jewish tradition that I made it my life’s work.
No, she didn’t need control - she loved so powerfully that it seemed the world would bend for her, not because she asked it to, but because the world wanted so much to be near her.

And then my family learned - again - that there are some things we can’t control, no matter how fierce the love is. When my mom was diagnosed with terminal cancer, I was nine months pregnant with baby Neil. She lived just past his first birthday, and I promise you that if love were control, we loved my mom so fiercely that there’s no way the cancer could have taken her from us.

But, love isn’t - and doesn’t give us - control. My love story has taught me that - painfully and irrefutably. In fact, it has taught me a lot about the nature of love - and all the things that love isn’t. I’ve learned that love isn’t a guarantee, it isn’t a safety net, nor is it immortal or indefinite. I can tell you that love is not a get out of jail free card or a promise of forgiveness. And I know that love isn’t always comfortable, it’s often not permanent - and love isn’t always returned.
But, as we learn from God in the story of creation and Abraham in the binding of Isaac and as I’ve learned from my own life and from the lives of those around me, love IS infinitely more than what it isn’t.

Love is the pride of a parent who watches their child take those first steps - and the gratitude of that kid 15 years later when they’re too old to acknowledge how much they need their mom and dad but they absolutely know that parent will still be there for them no matter what. Love is the willing and beautiful sacrifice that a person makes when his boyfriend or girlfriend first moves in with him and he has to rearrange everything in the whole apartment to make room for them. Love is the strength of the shoulder that a friend shoves up into your armpit to hold you up when you literally cannot stand on your own. Love is the 7 lb 4 oz weight of carrying your first baby grandson into the room for his bris. Love is the quiet “I’m sorry” you whisper to your wife in the dark because you know if you go to sleep mad you’ll get heartburn. Love is the smell of your grandma’s chicken soup - not always a good smell - that promises you that your family will be around the table soon. Love is the embarrassing nickname your brother still calls you even though you are a fully grown adult human. Love is also the knowledge that that
same big brother still has your back, even off the playground. Love is the gratitude you feel seeing your Dad show up week after week to watch you lead services, knowing that every single minute he’s also thinking that he’d give anything to be sitting there next to your mom.

And love is this moment today. My love story picks up right here, as I come home to this place where I took some of my first steps more than thirty years ago. It is not lost on me that this is new love for both of us - and as much as I look forward to growing together, I take even more comfort from the way you’ve welcomed me into this beautiful community - so much so that next week during Yom Kippur, I will walk off this bimah for the Yizkor service on Yom Kippur afternoon and join you in the congregation as a mourner and a rememberer as my family and I participate in Yizkor for my mom for the first time. I don’t take that moment for granted - that blessing of opportunity to be your rabbi, but to also be one of you, surrounded by and held up by you and the rest of our clergy in a moment of grief. That is also love.
After God first mentions ahava - love - to Abraham during the binding of Isaac, there are three separate commandments in the Torah that ask us to love. We are told to “Love your neighbor, love the stranger and love your God.” My prayer for each of you as you enter into this new year is that you experience all three of those imperatives.

May you love your neighbor - love that which is known and familiar. May your year be full of old, comfortable love, the kind that makes you feel safe. Maybe this is the crazy but reliable love of your family, or the sweet love of a half century of marriage or it is the love of your best friend who will come over and organize your closet for you when you life gets hard and you just need one thing to make sense. May this be a love that you can count on.

And may you love the stranger - love that which is unfamiliar and uncomfortable. May your love cause you to reach out and help to those in pain and in need - to take care of your community and the world around you. May you find love in pain and in loss, because loving the stranger also means finding love in places that NEVER played on the video reel in your head, and being flexible
enough to press pause, take a deep breath, and then play a whole new video when the time comes.

And finally, may you love God, but even more, may you love LIKE God, who created the world and then left us to live in it on our own. May you love with infinite pride for that which you have grown or created or tended, but also with confidence that love is not and cannot be a permanent spot in the driver’s seat. May you love with contentment, as letting go of the reigns gives you a chance to let go of disappointment, doubt, insecurity and resentment. Love quietly and humbly.

Most of all, may you continue to learn the lessons of your own love story - good or bad, easy or hard, I hope you find each moment of love and tuck it away somewhere safe so you can bring it out when you find yourself in need of guidance or reassurance or a reminder of what love means. As we sit here today, faced with the new year full new chances and new moments, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for welcoming me into your family and your community - and I’ll admit, I’m pretty sure I’ve already fallen a little bit in love with all of you.