

Who Tells Our Story
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“Let me tell you what I wish I’d known
When I was young and dreamed of glory

You have no control:

(Sing) Who lives
Who dies
Who tells your story?”

The brilliant writer Lin – Manuel Miranda put these words into the mouths of our founding fathers: Washington, Jefferson, Burr, and Eliza Hamilton, Alexander’s widow:

“Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?”

Learning history gives us clues about how we want to act in the present, about how we create our future. Music has the ability to lift us, to life our souls. So even without having seen it, though that makes me sad, the music and words of Hamilton are in my head. The show brings history and music together – not for mere entertainment; this piece of art asks us to consider how narratives are constructed for individuals and for nations.

This is a crucial question. Who tells our story? AND the more important questions:

- What are the stories of the Jewish people that brought us to this moment in history?
- What is your personal story?

AND

- How can each one of us write our story as part of the Story of The Jewish People?

Let me share with you three brief, important narratives about our People:

In the year 70 of the common era, a little under 2000 years ago, the Roman Army conquered Jerusalem and destroyed our Great Temple. Many of our great teachers were exiled to the north of Israel, to cities like Yavneh and Sippori. That Temple had been the center of all Jewish life. Try to imagine most of Jewish culture focused on the rites and practices of the priestly run Temple. Our lives were oriented towards Jerusalem. Three times a year families came there, we prayed there, it was the only Temple – there were synagogues – but Jerusalem was where all communal events and sacrifices occurred - it was the center of all Jewish life –and then it all stopped.

The Jewish people had not experienced any change as large as this since our Exodus from Egypt. Our ancestors had to learn how to adapt to radically new circumstances. The ancient rabbis had to be **courageously creative** in fashioning a new Jewish world – that was still connected to our older Tradition. The Roman destruction was the second time our Temple had been sacked. The first was in 586 BCE – but then, only 70 years elapsed before some of our exiles returned from Babylonia. I can imagine that in the

first several decades after the destruction of the second Temple – our people desperately believed that they too would return to Jerusalem speedily, and in their day. But, that did not occur.

The Jewish people, over time, responded to the destruction of the Temple with extreme creativity and with a radical new way for Jews to organize, worship, live and see themselves – while at the same time seamlessly connecting their new forms of worship with their past. The early rabbis embodied the ideals of both Tradition and change.

Inheriting the legacy of the Pharisees, the rabbis of northern Israel and later of Babylon created an entirely new way of being a Jew, one that referenced and revered our past Temple culture, but that moved in a new direction organized around Torah, avodah and g'milut hasadim - around study, worship and acts of loving kindness –and around the synagogue. We take this for granted now – but organizing our community in these ways was new, innovative –and spoke to the needs of the time.

The very first document of this new Jewish culture is the Mishna, a legal code and historical treasure trove compiled around the year 200; it connects the Torah of Moses to the new Torah of the emerging rabbinic tradition. Rabbinic Judaism teaches that decisions are to be made here in this world, *lo ba shamayim hi* – not in Heaven. The ancient rabbis wrote themselves as the architects of Jewish culture.

The very creation of rabbinic Judaism WAS the **courageous** and **creative** delayed response to the destruction of 2nd Temple society. It took that response at least 130 years to occur, and would really only be complete – well it is never complete – in was meant to be an evolving Tradition.

To put it a different way, we mourn the society that was lost when the Temple and Jewish sovereignty was destroyed, – but this traumatic event also gave rise to the very creative endeavor that became the Judaism that virtually all Jews today practice.

It is simple science, all action has a reaction – always. Even if that reaction takes some time. Melting icebergs in the artic, means rising waters on our coastline. Action – reaction.

Who lives, who dies, who tells the story: The ancient rabbis rewrote the story of what it meant be a Jew: The rabbis who created the Mishna and new Jewish society, after the Great destruction-took a good long time to write and tell the story of Rabbinic Judaism.

Here is a 2nd narrative of our people:

Fast forward almost 1900 years after the Destruction of the 2nd Temple to 2 events that would shake the core of The Jewish people and change us – one devastating – The Shoah; one joyous- the creation of the State of Israel. Both watershed events in the history of our People. And just as it took many generations after the Destruction of the Second Temple for Rabbinic Judaism to emerge; it will take many years to see what Judaism will become –to see our Re-action to both the Shoah-and to the establishment of the State of Israel. We are still living in the shadow of both of these watershed events in Jewish history. We are part of the reaction.

How can we be **courageously creative** in the creation of Jewish society-like the ancient rabbis were who created rabbinic Judaism?

Now actually to Story 2-

The first event was the unspeakable destruction of the Shoah.

We recognize and speak about the horrifying murder of 6 million Jews. The enormity is too much to grasp. But in addition to the cataclysmic loss of life, and the new found knowledge that humanity could be just that evil, we lost much of the culture and organization of European Judaism. We lost much of the world of yeshiva and secular Yiddish life. We lost schools, communal organizations, we lost different Traditions that emanated from all over Europe, and we lost how we organized ourselves, by shtetels, towns and by regions. We lost the glory of Vilna, the poetry and music of Russia, the enlightenment schools in Western Europe ---we lost regional Jewish cultures. Maybe modernity would have changed some of that- but not in one fell swoop. The largest Jewish community in the history of the world was decimated.

The Re-action to this destruction will take time. In 1991 Israeli author Tom Segev, published a book called *The Seventh Million*. He writes about how the Holocaust affected Israel in its first 40 years; his underlying thesis is that it will take decades or even a hundred years or more before we really understand the impact of the Shoah on Israel – and on all of Jewry.

It took the ancient rabbis several hundred years to cultivate rabbinic Judaism. Even though the world moves much faster now, it will take generations before we understand what post Shoah Judaism is. And while we have the *z'chut*, the honor and privilege, to live among survivors, and their children, we are still living in the shadow of the valley of death – the time frame of Re-action to the Shoah is still now.

And you, and I, get to help tell this story, create this story.

Story # 3

It is finally time for some good news:

The next defining event for the Jewish People, occurred a mere three years later, *reisheit s'michat geulataynu* – the beginning of our redemption in the founding of the State of Israel. 3 years after the war was over we again experienced a radical change in the status of our people. We became our own political entity, experienced national sovereignty. We had the ability to protect and defend our people, to be a shelter for all Jews. And we had to create a society, very fast. We had to absorb immigrants, build roads, schools, and an entire society, while constantly defending ourselves. There was no time for debate about how or why to do things, roads needed to be built. A law of return was established, the religious status quo was established –maybe that law could use some revising. But these were dire times. Young people now can read about how until the 1967 war Israel was in a constant state of mortal danger.

Emil Fackenheim, German born rabbi and philosopher, who was arrested on Kristallnacht and later escaped to Britain, taught that the 614th commandment was to not give the Nazis a posthumous victory by denying our Judaism and that THE overriding mitzva of the time was for Jews to rebuild the Jewish world and to build Jewish institutions- in the Diaspora and in Israel.

And, in America we did this. Our parents and grandparents built beautiful synagogues, like ours, schools, camps, Federations – a new Jewish world. In Israel they literally drained swamps, built roads, built industry. Build that shelter was the command. They were creating a new story, both here in America and in Israel.

In was in those years that shuls on Broad Street moved up to this area and built magnificent structures and institutions – like ours. In those years our camps and day schools were founded. We moved to the suburbs and organized ourselves around synagogues.

Rabbi Ed Feinstein, teaches that in post Shoah and early State building time the Jewish people were numb and our only mitzva was to rebuild Jewish institutions. Because they were traumatized all they could do was build. The idea was to build fast and to not ask many “why” questions. The Jewish world had been on fire-and we needed to build from the rubble.

The reaction to these watershed events is not over, but if we look around at the Jewish world we have entered a new phase of reaction. And in this phase, we need to tell the story, we need to create the story. We need to be **creatively courageous**, like the rabbis of the Mishna – and help a new Jewish future to emerge. In the world, and right here, in Elkins Park.

My friends, we are no longer numb. The world has opened up. Fackenheim died in 2003. Now Millennials are here, Generation x is here –and even the end of the boomers are here, they are not numb – they, we, are asking questions about how and why we are recreating Jewish culture in particular ways.

In the story of Hamilton, only a few years after her husband’s death Eliza Hamilton decided to go above her mourning and to get back to work –to write her husband’s story -through his copious writings. SHE helped write him back into our history. She also wrote her own story – founding an orphanage and more.

Like many of you, I was moved beyond words at the death of President Shimon Peres. What was it that caught our attention? I believe that Shimon, of blessed memory, was a model of what occurred as a result of the Shoah and Israel –when the mitzvah of the Jewish people was to build. He courageously helped to recreate the story the Jewish People. He helped to build Israel’s defenses – in Dimona and in the defense industry. He was the last of the original founders. But he also knew that we needed to keep recreating Jewish life in new ways so he spent the last years of his life seeding the nano-technology industry, supporting works of science and creativity and turning his sights to creating peace. He was a visionary and dreamer – and he kept dreaming. He favored imagination over the past. Even those in opposing parties marveled at Shimon’s ability to be courageously creative his entire 93 years. Judaism needs each of us to add our energy and creativity to our people. Shimon wrote the story of our People. And you can also.

It is time for us to ask big questions and to NOT fear change. Creative change in the Jewish community IS what will keep us vital.

In Israel, many ask: what will the character of the State be? While everyone knows that security is paramount, many Israelis are now willing to say that they want to be able to practice a Judaism that is non-coercive. Many leave Israel to marry elsewhere to escape the status quo Orthodox law, many are

turning to Conservative or Reform rabbis to perform life cycle events –even though it is against the law – for now. Many Israelis are proclaiming that there is more than one way to practice Judaism. So called secular Israelis are outright rejecting the idea that only the orthodox own Judaism and are embracing Jewish text study and meaningful observance on their own terms.

Here, at home, there are also hard questions: What will our communities and shuls look like? What are the best ways to educate our children who do not attend day school? The Sunday school model was based on a Christian model of educating kids in America. What of it works and what needs to change – radically – if the goal is to help Jews be Jews.

And, what about the adults here in this room. We know that you are over programmed, frenetic, busy, and that you will participate in Jewish life if and when it feels meaningful to you, and if it gives you comfort.

This year our community is going beyond its borders and doing creative, collaborative programming with neighbors. Let us be courageously creative and say: how we were once organized may, or may not, work in the future. Let us ask, with a very open heart, how can we create and sustain communities of meaning – for the next generation and for ours.

I recently read a long thread on a Conservative rabbinic discussion group asking how can we expect congregants to relate to a 5 or 6 hour service that is entirely in Hebrew, mostly based in medieval understandings of theology. The thread was titled, “High Holidays in the twitter age”. I personally love the liturgy of these Holiday services – I understand that for some in this room, like me, the tunes and the words work – but some of you will literally vote with your feet and not stay for some parts of today’s service – musaf, the Temples service and the martyology? I know you don’t have lunch plans. I really don’t blame you---As one of your rabbis I assume that after the many, many words of the prayer book you are leaving to take a walk, do some reflection, and do some tshuva ---and that is crucial also. But I recognize that some leave because the service does not engage them - the service only works for some of you-and I struggle to know if it is the time, the Hebrew, the concepts in the service –or maybe that we just can’t sit that long in the twitter age. I want it to work for you. Or I want to find ways for you to connect.

Here is what we know in 2016:

As the ancient rabbis taught, the *shivim panim laTorah*-There are seventy faces to the Torah. Meaning, there are many, many ways for us to create holy, inspired Jewish community and to understand our sacred texts and how they can bring meaning to our lives. We have built good institutions, now we must also be willing to ask big questions, to be courageously creative in our responses to how we will create meaningful Jewish personal and communal lives.

The S’fat Emet – (Rabbi Yehuda Arye Gur Alter of Ger, 1847 – 1905) taught that it is within human power to renew each thing. The renewal is there within everything, since God renews each day, constantly, the work of Creation.” “Constantly” means in each moment.

We have the power, with God’s help, to renew our Jewish community –and ourselves –if we can be as courageous as the ancient rabbis were, if we can be a dreamer like Shimon, z”l, If we can ask big questions.

A.J. Heschel wrote that the significance of Judaism does not lie in its being conducive to the mere survival but rather to its being a source of spiritual wealth and source of meaning to all peoples. Survival, mere continuation of being is a condition that man had in common with animals. Characteristic of humanity is concern for what to do with survival. To be or not to be is not the question. How to be and how not to be is the question. (Speech before General Assembly of Jewish welfare of Federations. 1965) As we live our Jewish lives we need to be less concerned about if we will be – and very involved with how we will be – as individuals and as a community. We need to be open to new ways of gathering, learning and of worshiping. We need to be courageously creative –as we write the story of our lives. And the story of Jewish life.