

**Telling our Nation's Story  
Yom Kippur Day, 5780  
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A long time ago, David and I attended a comedy show which opened as follows: "Good evening. This is the KPFA 6:00 evening news. Things are worse."

If those words evoked a laugh in the early 90's, today they might elicit a grimace. In the face of an hourly onslaught of bad news, from climate change to the stock market to mass shootings, a sense of malaise has gripped a once optimistic America. The 21st century does not seem to hold out the bold promise of frontiers unexplored, but rather of grave trouble ahead.

Navigating uncharted waters and unsure of the future, we seem to be confronting a crisis of meaning. Look around. Depression levels are at record highs; some 1 in 10 Americans take antidepressants and similar numbers of children suffer depression and anxiety. When I was a child, I had never even heard of depression. The average American is now more likely to die from opioid abuse than from a car accident. In the past two years, more Americans have died from opioids than in the entire Vietnam War. Suicide rates have increased 25% over 15 years. Life expectancy has dropped in America for the third straight year in a row, the longest steady decline since the 19teens in the face of WWI and the flu pandemic. Compared with other developed and many developing nations, the United States continues to rank at or near the bottom in indicators of mortality and life expectancy.

There are many causes that contribute to this depressing picture. One of them, I think, is the fact that many Americans live alone or in very small family units; we do not know our neighbors. We do not see ourselves as part of a story that is larger than ourselves — a larger religious story, a larger American story, a larger story of our community. Experiencing ourselves as part of something larger is, I believe, essential to our well-being.

We are, in fact, part of two civilizations, both grounded in a covenant -- as Americans and as Jews. A covenantal society tells the story of its founders, the journey they made, the obstacles they overcame, and the vision that drove them so that future generations continue to dedicate themselves to those ideals. Telling our story both tells us who we are and it tells us what is expected of us — how we are to live.

There are many versions of the American story, and we have choices about which story we tell: for instance, the Pilgrims established the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1620 fleeing religious persecution. That is a fact. We have choices, though, of what we make of this fact, the story we build around it. We can tell a story that says America was founded by white Christian men who sought to protect their religious practices for themselves and future generations. Or we might take the same piece of history and say: America was founded by people seeking freedom, who sought to establish a nation where all were free. Even if the founders did not envision blacks or women as people, we have used their values to expand their vision. One is a story of tribalism and intolerance; the other of inclusiveness and broad-mindedness. Both are American stories, shaped by different values. Whichever story we choose to tell about our past and present will, of necessity, shape our future.

What story are we telling in America today? It is the most individualistic story that any people has ever told. Think of the gift so often given to young graduates, Dr. Seuss', "Oh the Places You'll Go." It begins: "Congratulations! Today is your day. You're off to Great Places! You're off and away." In the story Dr. Seuss is telling, in the story America is telling, you are the big story

— not your people or your nation or how you will contribute to a cause greater than yourself. Just you and your adventure.

For most of history, our stories were collective stories; today, it is all about the individual. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, “The contemporary West is the most individualistic era of all time. Its central values are in ethics, autonomy; in politics, individual rights; in culture, post-modernism, and in religion, “spirituality.” Its idol is the self, its icon the selfie, and its operating systems the free market and the post-ideological, managerial liberal democratic state. ...In place of community, we have [facebook.] We are no longer pilgrims but tourists. We no longer know who we are or why.”

In this story, it’s all about what you have. Every advertisement sends the same message: acquire this one more thing, drink this beverage, go on this vacation — and then you’ll be happy. Whoever dies with the most toys wins. Instead of belonging to a story of a people, you are defined by the things that belong to you.

This individualistic story begets fierce competition for scarce resources. And if it is all about me and my stuff, then I had better protect myself from people who might take a piece of my pie or change how things are done. We end up seeing those who disagree with us as wrong and those who are different as threatening our way of life. That is the story we are telling today.

The single most important thing that I can offer you is that as Jews — and I think as Americans — we have another story. Our core narrative is yetziat mitzrayim — going out of Egypt. I know that you might think that this is the story of Passover, but Passover is first of all, the core Jewish holiday, and, in reality, we speak of the exodus from Egypt twice each day in our davening: when we make kiddush every Friday night and every holiday we say it is zecher l’tziat mitzrayim — in memory of the Exodus. Every day when we pray we sing the song at the sea that the Israelites sang when they left Egypt and crossed the Red Sea and again, in the blessing after the Shema we celebrate our redemption from Egypt. Week in and week out we read the Torah, which is primarily the story of our journey from slavery to freedom, from Egypt to the promised land, from powerlessness to power. Next week, we’ll celebrate sukkot, which also references the story of this journey. This is our core narrative, our overarching, “master story,” — nearly every ritual, every prayer, every moment in Jewish life — connects in some way to this story.

What does telling this story mean?

When we tell the story of the Exodus, we tell the story of a God who liberates us from tyranny, of the weak vanquishing the strong, of hope over despair. From this story, we learn that strangers are our kin and justice is our inheritance and our duty. We tell the story of God’s presence in our lives. We tell a story of transcendence, wonder, gratitude, humility, empathy, love, forgiveness and compassion, and we do it through ritual, song and prayer.

It is not a story that we learn primarily from a text book, nor is it a treatise of law or philosophy. It is a story told parent to child; it is a story told with food and song and ritual, at the table, across generations. It is a story told with questions and answers. It is a story you were told from the time you were a small child on your mother’s lap; it is a story you were told while your father sliced the brisket. It is a story that resonates deep in your bones and makes you who you are.

From this story we learn: you were oppressed — never oppress anyone else. See to it that you build a world free of oppression. You were strangers. Love the stranger. Welcome her to your table, to your home, to your community. You know the heart of the stranger because you lived it. You were slaves — see to it that others go free. You were vulnerable — take care of the

most vulnerable among you — the widow, the orphan, the stranger. You have power — use it to liberate, not oppress.

No mitzvah is more often repeated; no teaching runs deeper in our core.

In some measure, I believe that Jews have embraced America because we perceive a basic parallelism between America's story and our own. Just as we left Egypt to build a new nation in the land of Israel, our founding fathers fled religious persecution to build a city on the hill in their New Jerusalem. Ever wonder why our towns in Connecticut are called New Canaan, Goshen, Bethel, Hebron, even Bethany. Later, blacks in the American South, throwing off the yoke of slavery, invoked Moses and the children of Israel and a God who liberated slaves— they saw their story in ours. And just as our Torah commands love of the stranger, we understood, when we came here, that America was unique, a nation of immigrants, a place that welcomed immigrants to its shores, a nation that was built and rebuilt by each successive wave of immigrants, who brought with them new skills and new ideas, and who challenged America to become more democratic, to live up to its promise of freedom and equality for all, to incorporate into its founding vision, citizens our ancestors never envisioned — blacks, women, Asians, Jews. It is no accident that the words on the base of the Statue of Liberty were written by a young Jewish woman. We understood that America is great because, first and foremost, it has striven to be good.

My great-grandmother, Tova Rivka, for whom I am named, came here alone at the age of 19, my daughter Hallel's age today. Her father vehemently opposed her leaving and refused to uproot his family to join her — he believed America was a treyfe medina and that she would be forced to relinquish her Judaism there. And so she came alone. She did not speak a word of English. I cannot imagine she had more than \$25 in her pocket, and she had no skills other than domestic ones. What she had was a fervent desire for a new life and the courage to seek it. When she subsequently married, she sent her hair back to her father as proof that she had remained faithful to her tradition. Pregnant with her second child, her husband died. A young widow, bereft, she turned to the rabbi, who suggested she open a boarding house for single Jewish men, of whom there must have been many at that time in New York's Lower East Side. She did just that. As legend has it, my great-grandfather, Samuel, a boarder in her home, suggested to some other man, that he should marry Tova Rivka. After all she was a good woman with two small children, in need of a husband. That man, allegedly, told Sam that if he thought Tova Rivka was such a good catch, he should marry her himself. He did, and together they gave birth to five more children, of whom my grandmother was the youngest.

I can only imagine Tova Rivka arriving in New York Harbor after her long journey across the Atlantic, seeing the Statue of Liberty for the first time, her lamp lit, welcoming the weary travelers. Perhaps someone on deck knew the words on the statue's base and whispered them in her ear. Perhaps she wept, just as I still get teary today when I see Lady Liberty standing proudly in NY harbor — or even just think about it, now.

"...Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

That story is all of our story. That is America's story. I am proud to be Tova Rivka's great-granddaughter and although her strict Orthodoxy certainly did not countenance women rabbis, I like to think that she and I are bound by a shared devotion to Judaism, that she would, in

some measure, be proud of me. She could not have imagined me and my life, nor my many and diverse cousins, her descendants, but that is precisely America's story.

I believe that as American Jews, a people who knows and lives its story, we have a unique responsibility to renew the American story. We need to help America remember that her story is not one of consumerism and individualism, but that our story begins with the founders, that it is a story of liberty and justice and freedom for all, that the American story has always been enriched and will continue to be enriched by each wave of newcomers to our shores, that hope and possibility, not fear, should be our governing ethos.

I am not here to debate immigration policy, nor am I advocating a world without borders. I will leave that to people with much greater expertise than I.

But this I know: putting children in cages is wrong, under any circumstance. Pulling children's from their parents' arms and separating them indefinitely from their parents is wrong. Closing our doors to refugees who seek just what my great-grandmother sought — freedom from persecution and the opportunity to create a better life for their children — is wrong. This year so far, the US has taken in just over 18,000 refugees, a drop in the bucket of the world's 26 million refugees this year alone and way below historic numbers. Rounding up immigrants, even illegal ones, who have lived in this country for decades, who have families, who have worked and paid taxes and held jobs and have committed no crime other than overstaying a visa is wrong. And limiting immigration to those who can "stand on their own feet" is also wrong. Certainly, we should make it easier for students and researchers in our universities to remain here and become citizens. And along with that — we should never underestimate what poor, unskilled but highly motivated people like my great grandmother can accomplish, nor should we forget that terrible things were also said about our ancestors when they came here. They were deemed to be of "inferior stock" as well as unskilled, ignorant, and unable to assimilate into American culture. Science, in the form of eugenics, was enlisted to support this view of an inferior race. Had today's standard of self-sufficiency been deployed in the early 20th century, I would surely not be here today, and neither, I think, would most of us.

The notion that some people are inferior or undeserving is not consonant with the American story that I hold dear. In fact, this is notion is tragically similar to Pharaoh's story. It is Pharaoh who feared that Egypt would be overrun by the Israelites and who thus ordered Israelite babies to be taken from their mothers and drowned in the Nile. Pharaoh feared the stranger. Our Torah begs us not to adopt Pharaoh's world view. Our Torah, knowing that Pharaoh's fear and the actions that emerge from fear come easily to all of us — commands us to love and welcome the stranger. This is our inheritance.

America has never lived up to its noblest ideals; we held slaves, we closed our door to immigrants, we decimated Native American tribes, and put Japanese Americans in concentration camps. The American dream of equality and justice for all has too often been a dream only for those who were white or male or privileged. And yet, over time, we have enlarged this vision to include people the founders never imagined as equals: women, blacks, Asians, gays. We have opened our gates, we have expanded our notion of what it means to be human. Langston Hughes, acknowledging America's shortcomings while simultaneously invoking its promise wrote: "America never was America to me, And yet I swear this oath— America will be!"

This morning I call upon you to renew America's story, to tell the story of abundance and hope not scarcity and fear, the story of being stewards of our land, not gatekeepers, of being enriched by our diversity, not endangered by it. I ask you to help our refugee families and get involved in JCARR, our local refugee absorption project. Envelopes and flyers are outside. I ask you to fight policies that would make Pharaoh proud. I invite you to lift your lamp beside

the golden door as it was lifted for your ancestors. We are not primarily American consumers. We are American citizens, obligated to a story of freedom and justice that our ancestors fought for and that we must make real for vulnerable Americans and immigrants today. Make America good again. Make America kind again. Then we will be worthy heirs to our ancestor's struggle — our great-grandparents and the founding fathers. Then we will live our story because we will know that our story means not to abuse our power but to set others free, as we have been gifted with freedom.

My favorite American song is not the Star Spangled Banner with its bombs bursting in air and high notes I certainly cannot sing, but America, the Beautiful, with its purple mountains majesties and amber waves of grain. As novelist Barbara Kingsolver wrote shortly after 9/11, "It's easier to sing and closer to the heart of what we really have to sing about. A land as broad and green as ours demands of us thanksgiving and a certain breadth of spirit. It invites us to invest our hearts most deeply in invulnerable majesties that can never be brought down in a stroke of anger. If we can agree on anything in difficult times, it must be that we have the resources to behave more generously than we do, and that we are brave enough to rise from the ashes of loss as better citizens of the world than we have ever been. We've inherited the grace of the Grand Canyon, the mystery of the Everglades, the fertility of the Iowa plain — we could crown this good with brotherhood. What a vast inheritance for our children *that* would be, if we were to become a nation humble before our rich birthright," welcoming to all those in need who seek safe harbor at our door.