**Is the Torah True?**
**RH Day 1, 5784**
**September 16, 2023**

In high school, English was my favorite subject. During my senior year I was lucky enough to study with K Kelly Wise, of blessed memory. The students sat in a circle, in old wooden chairs in a creaky classroom, as he wove his magic web. We discussed "King Lear," "The Brothers Karamazov," "The Painted Bird"—whatever eclectic choice Dr. Wise made that week. There was always and only one question that animated our discussion — what is the meaning of life?

In college, I decided to continue studying English only to discover, much to my disappointment, that the animating question was no longer the meaning of life. Instead we focused on determining  the genre of a piece of literature — epic, sonnet, fable — who cared?

Why am I telling you this? Because I have recently been asked how a person go to synagogue where all we read is “a bunch of lies” and again, “Who can believe all these bubba meises?”

These questions stab at my heart, and yet, they are also critical questions. If I don’t believe, and I don’t, not literally anyway, that God created the world in six days, flooded the earth but rescued Noah, split the Red Sea and brought the Israelites out of slavery, and delivered 10 commandments at Mt Sinai, then why are we telling this story? Why are we reading it and talking about it year in and year out?

Here is where the genre question becomes critical: fiction or nonfiction? were our ancestors writing history? science? or something else altogether? We, who live in a a world of news and fake news, science and pseudo-science, are disposed to value what we might call the truth — that is, historically accurate

events, even though we know that even those are up for grabs depending on who's telling the story and what their agenda is.

But our ancestors were less interested in the literal truth. "They thought symbolically or mythically and [were more interested] in larger matters of meaning. They told stories not to lay out a list of facts, but to get at deeper questions about their own lives and the world around them,"[1]. Those were  the same kind of questions that sparked my interest in Dr Wise's class long ago. Our ancestors wanted to engage the realm of the sacred, and imaginative stories were how they accessed it.

This of course begs two questions — is there a realm of the sacred? And if there is, why tell stories about it, why not describe it, as it were, more directly?

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[1] Toba Spitzer, **God is Here: Reimagining the Divine,** (New York: St Martin's Essentials, 2022), pp. 24-25.

I can't prove to you that there is a realm of the sacred. I also can't prove to you that there is something called love, or good and evil, or even time — all of these are fundamental aspects of human experience, yet they also are all feelings, ideas, or constructs, not necessarily inherent in reality's hardware. They are all nevertheless "true" in that they shape our daily lives and tell us important things about ourselves and the world we live in.[2] What I can say with certainty about the sacred, is that since the dawn of time and throughout history human beings have sought to connect to something greater than themselves. Whether it exists, then, is less a question of belief than experience — do you experience a sense of or a connection to something beyond or larger than yourself? Many people, maybe even you, might answer yes to that question. The stories of the Torah, like the stories of all religious traditions, are human attempts to understand, describe, and interact with the sacred.

[2] Spitzer, 15.

Why then tell stories? Why not just state the facts. Because just as it is difficult if not impossible to prove that love exists — I can't prove that just because someone brings you flowers, or makes you coffee or asks you to marry them, they love you —the same is true of spirit.  I could describe the chemical interactions in the brain when a person feels love, but I doubt that that description would convey what love feels like to you. But a good movie or poem —you would probably cry! We tell stories because they often get at truth in deeper ways.

If you don't believe me, think back on all the high holidays on which you have heard me or some other rabbi speak. I doubt you remember much of what any of us said. But if there is anything that sticks, I bet it's a story. "Stories…have endless facets of meaning. They gain admission to our inner world because they are polymorphous, plastic, familiar and strange at the same time. Once within, they begin their work, turning around and around, and inviting us to play with their meanings. …they are light,

subversive, generating life."[3] Stories have a way of sneaking up on us and penetrating our souls.

Some of our confusion, I think, comes from the notion that science is inherent in nature, and scientists discover it — the theory of gravity was there all along, waiting for Newton to come along and find it. In reality, science is a language we use to describe the universe as we observe it. By all appearances, the sun rises and sets every day, orbiting the earth. Galileo challenged that idea, and Newton built on Galileo's ideas to describe a theory of motion. Einstein, 200 years later, overturned Newton's model with his theory of relativity, and quantum physics poses challenges to Einstein. I just read that the photos from the Webb telescope challenge our current model of cosmology. All of these theories are human ways, a kind of storytelling if you will, to understand reality, with the tools of observation and the intelligence that we have at our disposal. The Bible is interested

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[3] Avivah Zornberg, **The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus**, (New York: Doubleday, 2001, p. 122.

in describing a different subset of reality — the realm of the sacred — and uses its best tools — stories and poetry to do so. Again, what genre you're reading matters.

The Torah, for instance, tells the story of our liberation from Egypt — with a mighty hand, and an outstretched arm God redeemed us from Egypt, raining plagues upon the Egyptians, parting the waters of the Red Sea, and leading us to freedom. Did any of it happen? Probably not — at least, we have no proof of it, no archaeological record, no Egyptian papyri or stele. The story defies the laws of physics and biology as we know them. But what is this story telling us? You were strangers in a strange land. You know what it is to be a stranger. Therefore, do not oppress the widow, the stranger, the orphan. God took us out of Egypt; God wants us to be free. The roots of our tradition stand against tyranny. God is on the side of justice and miracles can happen. The little guy sometimes wins. We understand who we are as Jews and what is expected of us through this story. We are given

to understand that the “arc of the moral universe bends toward justice, “ and that we have a role in bending that arc.

More than that, we live this story. We tell it most prominently at seder, but we tell it every morning and every evening when we say shema, every Shabbat and holiday when we say kiddush. We tell it with matzah, and four cups of wine, we tell it with songs and questions, we tell it with family and friends gathered around a table filled with food and love. Hopefully, we also live this story in the ways we act in the world, how we treat the stranger, and fight for the vulnerable. If I told you this story as a moral truth — don’t oppress the stranger — or as a political truth — justice is a force in the universe — or as a theological truth — miracles happen,  I don’t think it would make much impact. But as a story, told, generation after generation, accruing our own personal and collective stories onto it, like wine staining our tablecloths and haggadahs — the story lives in our bones.

And never say, “it’s just a story.” Consider for a moment, that before the Israelites left Egypt, they slaughtered lambs, put the lambs’ blood on their doorposts, roasted and ate it with bitter herbs and matzah, loins girded, sandals on, ready to go. They celebrated the first seder while they were still enslaved, still in Egypt. Why do it then and not wait until they were safely out of Egypt or safely dwelling in the land of Israel? Because they needed to do it **then**. In order to have have the courage to get up and leave Egypt, the Israelites needed to be able to dream, to tell new stories, to envision a different future. More than that, three times in Exodus 12 and 13 and once later on, the Torah envisions a child in the future asking what this all means and the parent responding with some version of, “This is what the Lord did for me when I left Egypt.” Already, even before liberation, God envisions a future in which children will ask and parents will tell the story. God liberated them, we might say, the Torah essentially says, so that their children after them would continue to tell the

story, making it their own. Stories, the Torah understood, live longer, and closer to our hearts.

The story we tell is not just a story. It determines how we live, the choices we make. When you think about Jews in the concentration camps who secretly made seder, squirreling away flour rations to bake matzah, using a rusty cup of water for wine, writing a haggadah on scraps of paper from memory, you understand that telling this story not only liberated the slaves from Egypt, it freed their descendants, at least internally, and it has continued to liberate us across the generations. Stories beget revolution. There would be no state of Israel  today if we had not told this story across the generations. Robin Wall Kimmerer, in her beautiful book, Braiding Sweetgrass, argues that if we told a different story of human beings' relationship to the earth, a story of mutual benefit and love, instead of a story of

plunder and attendant guilt, we could forge a new path toward saving our planet.[4]

Stories are lifesaving, as they were for those Jews in the camps, as they were on the night of the Exodus, as they have been throughout history.  Remember Arabian nights? The Sultan decides to take a new wife each night and behead her in the morning. Scherezade, the newest wife, facing the same fate as her predecessors, saves her own life and stays her execution by telling a story. The Sultan, intrigued, begs for more, and so night after night, collaborating with her sister, Scherezade tells stories, saving her own life and her sister's, and, in some measure, the world's. In the words of Constance Vidor, librarian and literary critic, "…every story that I read aloud to my students is adding strength to the invisible ring of protection around their souls and their bodies."[5]

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[4] Robin Wall Kimmerer, **Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants,** (Minneapolis, MN, Milkweed Editions, 2013).

[5] I was reminded of the story of Scherezade and heard this quote from Constance Vidor by Laure Patton in a talk she gave to Harvard's 40th Reunion Class on June 1, 2023 at the Memorial Service.

I want to return for a moment to the question of history.  You all know the story of the American Revolution — that we fought taxation without representation, that we dumped tea into Boston Harbor, that Paul Revere, on his midnight ride, warned of the arrival of British troops. You know that we rejected monarchy and sought to create a new form of government by and for the people and that the vision of the Declaration, “that all men were created equal and endowed with inalienable rights,” was grounded in the Bible’s vision of humanity.

Of course, we could poke a lot of holes in this story today. Perhaps the Revolution was a fraternal and civil war between those who wanted to remain with Britain and those who sought independence. Perhaps it was based in economics more than high-minded ideals, and certainly the equality and inalienable rights imagined by Jefferson and the founders pertained only to the lucky few — white male property-owners.

Still, the story of the Revolution, as we learned it in school, and the historic documents it engendered, have defined America, as much by our successes as by our failures, but  also as a nation striving to live up to an ideal, a nation seeking liberty, equality and justice for all. We may fail more than we succeed, but that story is essential to how we understand ourselves in the world and who we seek to become. We should tell the story recognizing all its flaws as we understand them today, but we must also celebrate the story of our dreams and aspirations.

Is the Torah a lie if perhaps, it didn't actually happen exactly as told? Or, are truths sometimes more true in fiction and fantasy than in what we call reality? Does our inner life play a substantial role in shaping the truth? Do we always understand all the layers of reality and causation and how they interact? Does the story we tell about what happened matter more than what actually

happened? I'm not speaking about a court of law here — I'm speaking about how we as humans make sense of our lives.

Many of you have probably heard me tell the story of why I became a rabbi — I was a kid who loved God, I went to prep school and found Judaism, Rabbi Gendler, of blessed memory, showed me the meaning of spirituality… etc etc. All of this is true. But it is also a story I tell to make sense of my life. Maybe, in reality, I was afraid of uncertainty and sought a defined career path after college. Or maybe, mysteriously, I was called to this path again and again by teachers, by Torah, by luck, by forces beyond my full understanding. It is all true.

I have told you before about a man in his 80's whom I visited in the hospital. He had just been diagnosed with fatal lung cancer, in all likelihood a result of particles he had inhaled while working as a young man in Nazi prison camps. I, perhaps insensitively, commented on the painful irony of his life — he had survived the

Nazis and made his way to America only to face cancer late in his life. He looked at me, with deep eyes and peace radiating from his face, gestured to the photo of his family that sat by his bedside, and said, “My life has been nothing but blessings.”

Is that the factual story? A man who was imprisoned in a death camp, who barely escaped with his life, who lost his first wife and children in that death camp and who now faced terminal cancer? The bare facts of that story do not describe a life of blessing and yet that is the story he chose. We humans have the unique ability to make sense of our lives, to choose our story, to find love and blessing and do good, to learn and to grow. Which is the better story? Which is true? Perhaps more truth lies in the stories we tell that comprise a life, than in the mere facts of the narrative.

Stories can help us connect to that which is wild and mysterious, touch feelings of love and terror, surrender and courage, experiences that we can’t quite compass but nevertheless seek

to express. I believe that is what all sacred literature attempts — to describe moments when our ancestors touched the sacred and hopefully, to bring us in touch with similar moments in our own lives. If you have ever felt spiritually parched or filled with wonder at the beauty of the world, if you have ever felt angry enough to want to kill your brother, or divinely blessed by the miracle of a child's birth, if you have ever burned with righteous anger at injustice, or felt confused or alone, if you ever left home to look for something you felt was missing, if you have ever been rescued from a life-threatening event and cried with relief and gratitude, you might find your place in the Torah, in this long story of the Jewish people. May we, like our ancestors, continue to tell this story, may we be renewed by it as we renew it, and may we be safeguarded, as they were, by the invisible ring of protection it affords all who hold fast to it.