

“Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?” These lyrics have played in my head ever since I first heard them. They are the words from the finale of the musical Hamilton. (By the way, anyone supplying the rabbi with Hamilton tickets will be inscribed in the Book of Life. Guaranteed. Just saying...) Anyway, these questions --who live, who dies, who tells your story – are the same questions we ask on these high holidays: mi yihyeh u’ mi yamut – who will live and who will die? Both the song and the prayer imply that there is randomness to this question – that’s what makes it such a powerful question. We sit here, on Yom Kippur, reckoning with our lives, our deeds, and we don’t know, none of us do – will we live to see another Yom Kippur? How many more trips around the sun will we have? Who’s not sitting here who sat beside me last year? Will there be time?

The song also asks, “Who tells your story?” Or, to say it another way, “What story will be told?” In unetaneh tokef we say that God, on Rosh Hashana, reads the Book of our Lives and judges each of us by our deeds. The paragraph concludes, “Yad kol adam hotem bo.” The book is sealed by each person’s hand. In other words, God reads the story we have written. We may have little or no control over who lives and who dies; but, the prayer suggests, we have some control over what story is told.

We would like to imagine that our lives, our stories, as read by God on Rosh Hashana, are something like the movie, “It’s a Wonderful Life.” Even though we may feel despairing, when seen from above, we imagine that the countless small acts of kindness that we performed, often unknowingly, had large effects. Unbeknownst to us, life was better for everyone, because we were here.

That is a beautiful story and a comforting one. But is it the real story?

What would it look like if our lives were really on camera? On Yom Kippur, we say they are. God reads the book of our lives. We wrote it.

What’s in that book? When you first imagine this book, you might think of family albums filled with smiling people in beautiful places. A wedding. A bar mitzvah. A family vacation. All our facebook photos.

But in reality facebook, our family albums, are the books we spend our lives posing for. Let’s call it the Book of our Success, the book of the way we have presented ourselves to the world, the book of the prizes, the fancy car, the second home, the beautiful smiling family – this book will tell us nothing we don’t already know. After all, we wrote this book. We spent our lives curating it.

But what if the film was really rolling every minute. On Yom Kippur we say it is. What would we see? What are the videos we don’t put on facebook? We would see that the film that has recorded everything, our failure, our dysfunctions, our heartbreak. We would have to watch it long enough to see the recurring patterns. What keeps coming back? Why do we always have the same frustrations with our bosses whoever they are? Why do we always have the same arguments with our children and spouses? Why do our same problems occur and recur?

Our families record our real stories with unflinching precision. Regardless of what image you have presented to the world, what you put on facebook, your children know the truth. When they sit with the rabbi after you die, what story will they tell? They might tell the story of a loving parent who gave generously to his children, a parent or spouse who was always there for them, your warm smile and loving embrace, the wonderful times together, the certain knowledge of unconditional love. Or they might tell the story of a parent who stayed late at the office, who criticized more than complimented, who didn't have enough time for them, who lashed out harshly, who provided physically but didn't give enough of themselves. We are writing the story every day. What story do you want them to tell?

New York Times columnist David Brooks, in his new book, *The Road to Character*, distinguishes between resume virtues and eulogy virtues. Resume virtues are the skills you bring to the marketplace – hard work, conscientiousness, being a team-player, speaking 3 languages, recipient of such and such a prize, x and y accomplishments. Eulogy virtues are the ones they will talk about at your funeral – what did you give the world? How did you connect to people? What did you mean to the people you love? The small kindnesses, the lifelong passions, the little foibles and funny anecdotes, what made you laugh, the ineffable suchness that was you. We live in a culture that often puts more emphasis on resume values, but they are rarely mentioned at a funeral. You never hear things like, “What everybody loved most about her was how she ate lunch at her desk. Every day.” Or “He didn't have any real friends, but he had 600 facebook friends, and he dealt with every email in his inbox every night.”

Alfred Nobel amassed his enormous fortune producing explosives. When he was 55 years old, his brother, Ludvig, passed away, but the newspaper mistakenly printed an obituary for Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite. The obituary noted that he was the man who made it possible to kill more people more quickly than anyone had before.

Suddenly, Alfred Nobel woke up. He realized that this was not how he wanted to be remembered. Shortly thereafter, he created the Nobel prize. Reading his own obituary, an opportunity few of us have, he decided to change his legacy. He decided to prioritize funeral values over resume values.

What will be said at your funeral? Is it the story you want told?

We write the story of our lives every day. That is the book God reads on Rosh Hashana, the book from which God judges us. But there is another book that we read as well – it is the story we tell about the things that have happened to us. We choose, in large measure, whether we see that story as a story of success or failure, a story of obstacles overcome or challenges unmet, a story of victimhood or a story of agency. I have often taught that the most important thing in life is not what happens to you. It is the story you tell about it. Maybe 10% is what happens. 90% is the story you tell. I learned this most powerfully once when I visited a congregant in the hospital. He was a Holocaust survivor and he had

lost his whole family in the Shoah: wife, parents, siblings. He came to America, remarried, had children and grandchildren and a full life. Now, in his late 70's, he was diagnosed with cancer. Imagine. Surviving the Holocaust, losing his family, living through the very worst, only to face a cancer that would almost certainly kill him. He had every right to be bitter. And yet when I arrived at his bedside, he looked at the photo of his family on his bedstand and said, simply, "My whole life has been a blessing." If he could say that, any of us could. It is all in the story we tell.

"When we treat people as a blessing, they usually respond in kind. When we are grateful for the people in our lives, they often become people worthy of the gratitude we feel for them." When we see ourselves as blessed with opportunities, we find more opportunities. The story we tell becomes the reality we create. We tell ourselves a certain story – good or bad – "and data consistent with the story collects around it like iron filings around a magnet." Our stories transform our very reality. (Alan Lew, *Be Still and get Going*)

All of us could tell the story of a job lost because we failed or because our boss was unfair. Or we could tell of that same incident, a job we lost from which we learned, from which, eventually, new opportunities sprang, if only that we learned more about ourselves and the world and discovered our own resourcefulness. We can tell the story of relationships that ended painfully because, once again, we were rejected, we messed up, we weren't good enough or because the other person was a jerk. Or we can tell the story of how the divorce or the breakup, enabled us to grow, and maybe to find the courage to try again. My own children will tell you that they in no way wanted to leave Cleveland and move to CT. But each of them, in their own way, speaks more often about the resilience they found within themselves, the ways our family grew closer, opportunities like youth group leadership or a special art school, that would not have been available to them otherwise, the discovery that they can make new friends wherever they go. I am proud of them and I know that the story they are telling -- as opposed to the story of how their mother dragged them out of a home and schools they loved across the country to live in the woods – will serve them well as they continue to confront new challenges.

On the High Holidays, as we reflect on our lives, we have the opportunity to retell our story. What story are you telling about your life? How does that story determine the next chapter, the one you are writing now?

As you think about those questions, I want to ask a slightly different but related question: what story are we telling as a Jewish people right now? If we are honest, I think the truth is that we are telling a story of decline. We may celebrate our individual moments of Jewish wholeness – beautiful Passover seders, bar mitzvah's, weddings. But we are not only persons. We are a people. And the story we are telling as a people right now is one of decline, of synagogues closing, of memberships shrinking, of donations falling off. A story of malaise. A story of diminishing care and concern. A story of fear and vulnerability. A story of something precious being lost.

Is this the story we want to tell? Is this the story we want written on the tombstone of the Jewish people?

I believe that we could be telling a very different story right now. We could be telling the story of the rebirth of the state of Israel, of the miraculous return of our people to our land after 2000 years of exile, of the rebirth of our language and nation. Whatever shortcomings the modern state of Israel has – and no doubt it has many – its brave, brash existence is nothing short of a miracle.

We could also tell a story of an American Jewish community that enjoys prosperity, freedom and influence unprecedented in Jewish history. We could tell a story of incredible Jewish creativity – Jews integrating Judaism and environmental stewardship; Jews engaging locally and internationally in the deep work of repairing the world; Orthodox women being ordained as rabbis; Jews studying Torah in unprecedented numbers across the denominations, more than ever before in the history of the world; Jews reviving our ancient spiritual traditions; Jews engaged in global struggles for justice; Jewish Republicans, Jewish Democrats, Jewish Buddhists, Jewish literature and Jewish film. I could go on and on. We live in a time of remarkable Jewish creativity, engagement and learning. Couldn't we be telling that story?

Many Jews viewed the 2013 Pew Study of American Jewish life as if it were a letter written from the deck of the Titanic: it reported a rapid rise in rates of intermarriage and assimilation, an aging community, and increasing numbers of Jews who profess no religion. And yet, the Pew study also reported that 94% of American Jews are proud to be Jewish,  $\frac{3}{4}$  have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people, and six in ten say they have a special responsibility to care for Jews in need around the world. Which story do we want to tell?

Judaism has always asserted that we are the story we tell. To be the People of the Book means to be the People of the Story. In fact, our haggadah is based on a central passage in Deuteronomy in which a pilgrim, living in the land of Israel, brings his first fruits to the Temple. He carries his basket of produce to the priest, sets it down, and declares, “My father was a wandering Aramean who went down to Egypt and sojourned there few in number, but there he became a great nation. The Egyptians dealt ill with us and oppressed us and enslaved us, but we cried to the God of our ancestors and God heard our cry and saw our oppression. And God took us out of Egypt with a strong hand and a mighty arm and with great wonders and signs. And He brought us to this place and gave us this land flowing with milk and honey. And now here I am bringing my first fruits which God has given me...”

This pilgrim never met Jacob or Moses. He did not go down to Egypt and dwell there nor was he enslaved nor set free. Those events happened hundreds of years before he was born. On a personal level, he knows nothing of them. His story is pure fiction. But he tells the story as if it were his own. He tells the story because he has been told the story. Telling the story is the constitutive act of being a Jew. At the seder table. Bringing first fruits. We are the people who tell the story.

In fact, Maimonides, the great 12<sup>th</sup> c scholar, was asked whether a convert, who is not in fact biologically related to Jacob, who cannot genetically speaking say, “my father, was a wandering Aramean” --can he recite this passage when he brings his first fruits? Or say “the God of our fathers” when he recites the amidah? The great Rambam answers, “Yes, he can and should,” because to be a Jew means, ultimately, to be a person who tells this story, who joins his fate with ours.

In the Kuzari, a famous work of medieval Jewish philosophy, the Khazar king goes in search of the true religion. He hears various things from philosophers and other religious leaders, all of which he rejects. When the king meets the rabbi, the rabbi essentially tells him, “I come from a story. That is what makes me a Jew.” Ultimately, the king likes this explanation. He understands that knowing the story, being in the story, transmitting the story makes it as if it happened to you. To tell the story is as if you lived it. Stav Shaffir, the youngest Minister of Knesset, speaking to rabbis at AIPAC earlier this year said essentially the same thing. My country comes from a dream, she said. The dream comes from a book. We are the people who tell the story.

Shaffir made this statement in response to a question about the challenges facing modern Israel. She suggested that what her grandparents faced and overcame was much more difficult than the challenges that lie in front of her people today. By framing her story in the context of the narrative of the Jewish people’s story, as the realization of a dream, a dream from a book, if you will, she was able to reframe Israel’s future in light of that story, with great optimism. The story we tell determines how we live it.

Ten years ago, when I interviewed for my first pulpit position, I gave a sermon about how God redeemed us from Egypt so that we could tell the story. I argued that telling the story, weaving our personal stories and our people’s story, is the defining act of Jewish community, the most important thing we can do to remain a living and vibrant people.

Later that night, at a dinner, I was lambasted by a congregant who thought that stories were just plain trivial. Green Eggs and Ham, he said, was, after all, a nice story, but it isn’t Scripture. He could not see a theology, a community, a nation grounded in a story as meaningful, nor could he see the telling of stories as vital spiritual and communal work.

I sputtered some defense and waited for someone to rescue me. It felt like the night of flying daggers. Today, ten years later, I stand by what I said. Even more so. We are our stories. Our story is deeply imprinted in our souls. When we hear it, we wake up. It feeds us. We are heirs to a great story but some of us never heard it. No one ever told us we were children of the king.

I would argue that the most urgent task for us as a Jewish people at this moment is to tell the story anew, to weave our ancient tale into a new narrative of hope and redemption. The story we tell can’t be a fantasy, but it will determine our legacy. A story of failure will lead us to fail – it will connect us to all of our prior failures in a great arch of failure. And a story of redemption will connect us to all the redemptions of the past and create an

arc where new redemption is possible, where our energies are propelled toward creating that redemption

And like the pilgrim bringing his first fruits, our personal narrative must be woven into our people's narrative. We tell the story that we were strangers in a strange land. That story is at the heart of who we are. It motivates us to love the stranger, to take in refugees, to feed the hungry, to fight for the vulnerable. We tell the story that God rescued us from slavery. It means we are a people of faith; it means that miracles happen; it means that ours is a God who stands on the side of the weak against the strong, a God who stands against tyranny and for justice, then and now. The story we tell becomes the story we live.

Today, we need, as we have always needed, to tell new stories, but those stories – our personal stories, our people's stories – will not arise in a vacuum. They will be real and we will know them to be real because they will resonate with our primal story. The study of Torah has never meant a study of stories long ago, a study of myth or history. That is not Torah. The study of Torah always means the lived relationship between people today, living their lives in this world, the story that is written, and the dialogue between the two. We stand at the end of that long chain of Torah; we write the next chapter and our actions will determine how the chapter after that, the one our children write, reads. As Walt Whitman put it, “the powerful play goes on and you, you may contribute a verse.”

What verse are you writing? What verse would your children say you are writing?

I believe that as long as God wants there to be a Jewish people, there will be a Jewish people. The critical question is, “What story will we tell? What story will our children tell? What verse will we write?” To be a Jew is to find your place in the story and tell that story to the next generation so that they can rewrite it for their children and so it goes. Nothing more. Nothing less. We come from a Book. We come from a Dream. What story will you tell this year?