

**Tshuva: Telling the New Story of Your Life**  
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**Rosh Hashana 5780**

“Sometimes you need a story more than food.” Telling stories, I believe, is **a**, if not **the**, essential human act — a story is how we understand who we are and our place in the world. Our large corpus of Jewish literature indeed is primarily a corpus of stories.

This High Holidays I have decided to do something different— rather than giving four sermons on four disconnected topics, I will give four interconnected sermons around the theme of stories. I will begin this morning with thoughts about telling our own personal stories; tomorrow we will detour to our Big Read, Eternal Life, which is also, not incidentally, about the importance of stories. On Kol Nidre night I will talk about telling our synagogue’s story and on Yom Kippur day I will talk about telling our national story.

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This fall, while contemplating the approaching holidays, I had a new thought about tshuva, repentance. After all, change is hard, most of us are pretty set in our ways, good or bad, and I must acknowledge to you that I arrive here on the holidays with more or less the same list of shortcomings I had last year, or even ten years ago. Is there any hope for change? Do people really change?

My new thought was: what if all we need to do is to tell a new story? How many of us are clinging to stories of personal victimization that no longer serve us: I had a terrible childhood, so what do you expect from me? I want to find a loving partner — it’s just that I keep finding myself with a guy who’s just like the last one. I wish things were different with my kids, but no matter what I do, we keep having the same argument. I gave them so much and now they barely ever call or visit.

Rabbi Alan Lew writes: “I wonder how many of us are stuck in a similar snare. I wonder how many of us are holding on very hard to some piece of personal history that is preventing us from moving on with our lives, and keeping us from those we love. I wonder how many of us cling so tenaciously to a version of the story of our lives in which we appear to be utterly blameless and innocent...Forgiveness, it has been said, means giving up our hopes for a better past. This may sound like a joke, but how many of us refuse to give up our version of the past, and so find it impossible to forgive ourselves or others, impossible to act in the present?”

My question this morning is what would happen if we let go of stories of our past that do not serve us? What would happen if we told a different story?

I believe **what happens** to us in our lives is not the most important thing. In other words, there aren’t objective amounts of miserable or joyful experiences that determine whether our lives have been good or bad. Rather, it’s the story we tell that makes all the difference. We tell a certain story and it becomes like a magnet — data, like iron shavings, are immediately pulled in that direction, while data not consistent with our story falls away, unnoticed. The story we tell about our past shapes, creates, even wildly impacts our present and our future.

Take this example. Some years ago, I visited a congregant named Jonathan in a hospital. Jonathan was a survivor of the Holocaust. His parents and six siblings perished in the Shoah. Now, here he was in his 80’s facing what would probably be fatal lung cancer, which had been caused by his exposure to particulates in the labor camp in Poland in which he had slaved as a young teen. Here was a person who had every right to be bitter and angry. Here was a person

who had survived the Nazis, who had lived through hell, only to face a death brought on by cruelty and misfortune.

Yet when I arrived in his room, Jonathan pointed me to the photo of his family on the bedstand — his wife, three children, many grandchildren — and said, quite simply, “My whole life has been a blessing.”

I was floored. A man who had lost so much. How could he say it was all a blessing? I asked him. Jonathan said he had been so lucky to come to America, this great country, to be given a new lease on life, to find a wonderful and loving partner, to father three children and witness the arrival of many more grandchildren, to practice Judaism and find God again. How could he think of his life as anything but a blessing?

It is all in the story you tell. Jonathan put down a magnet of blessing, and blessings gathered around it like bees to honey. He could have told a story of bitterness and defeat, but he didn't. The facts of his life — the shoah, the cancer, America, his family — were what they were, but he had chosen how to see and interpret everything about them. Where others might have seen curses, Jonathan found blessings. And telling that story, the story of blessing, transformed how Jonathan's life played out. Telling a story of blessings enabled more blessings to accrue, while other facts simply fell to the wayside. The facts were still real, like the cancer, but they were not the story he was telling or the reality he was living. Even as he lay dying.

I want to tell you another story about my own daughter, Hallel. I do so with her permission but I also want to ask you a favor. As you know, I often talk about my family from the bima. But, in reality, it was I who chose the limelight of rabbinic life — not them. So to honor her wishes, I ask you not to bring this up with her when you see her. Thanks.

From a young age, Hallel struggled in school. We had her tested for learning disabilities when she was in 4th grade, but found nothing. We spoke to the pediatrician a couple years later, but he had nothing to offer. David and I always believed in Hallel, always sensed her innate intelligence. But, as she wrote, “I had decided at a young age to stay in the shadows of my A-student sister and my Phi Beta Kappa mom. ... School was for winners like my sister with her collection of gold stickers and good grades, a place where my doodles and disorganization were not welcome.”

Hallel had concluded that she was stupid; that was the story with which she made sense of her situation. As she wrote, “No matter the countless times my parents reassured me that I was intelligent, I didn't believe them. I doubted anyone else was so easily fooled.”

By miracle or coincidence, depending on the story you are telling, Bennet and Sally Shaywitz, members of our synagogue, phoned me about three years ago. We met in my office and talked about about the synagogue. As it happens they are international experts in dyslexia and run the Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity. I had had the mistaken idea that dyslexia meant reading the letters backwards, but I learned from them that dyslexia is an unexpected difficulty in reading in an individual who has the intelligence to be a much better reader. As they spoke, I kept thinking of Hallel. Could she be dyslexic? So many symptoms they described matched hers. When I shared my question, they urged me to bring her in and have her tested.

Hallel was tested and the Shaywitzes found that she was, in fact, dyslexic. This news was life-altering. For the first time, Hallel had proof that she wasn't stupid. She began, slowly, to tell a different story of her life. She transferred to ECA, an arts magnet school, where she could spend her afternoons doing what she loved, she crawled out of her room and made good friends, her grades improved dramatically, and when it came time to apply to college, Hallel was accepted at every school to which she applied, an outcome I would not have dreamed of

a year earlier. A month ago she began her studies at the Tyler School of Art at Temple University, and despite the usual college anxieties, she is excited, ready to learn, and confident.

This is the note that Hallel sent to Sally and Bennet last fall: “My mom says what happened was *bashert* and I have to say she was right. The moment you stopped into her office, God put things into play, so thank you! Thank you really doesn’t begin to describe how thankful I am that you came into my life. With your diagnosis, I was able to stop telling and believing a story that I felt was true at my very core. I was able to believe that another story could be told. You have changed my life and allowed me to see a different future.”

With this new insight, that she was dyslexic, Hallel was able to reinterpret her struggles with reading and school and tell a different story. It was not simply a question of developing a new internal monologue. She also had to change her behavior— transfer schools, actively seek friends, and see and project herself with new confidence as she applied to college. And, in turn, her new story made more new stories possible.

We don’t get to choose what happens to us — so much is beyond our control. But we do get to choose the story we tell. Giving up on a certain story of the past transforms the future. Michelle Obama, in her autobiography, writes, “I grew up with a disabled dad in a too-small house with not much money in a starting-to-fail neighborhood, and I also grew up surrounded by love and music in a diverse city in a country where an education can take you far. I had nothing or I had everything. It depends on which way you want to tell it.”

I believe that this idea, that *tshuva* means changing the narrative, is at the heart of these high holidays. I believe it is why the rabbis chose the *haftorot* we read on Rosh Hashana, stories of two women who do just that: the story of Hannah’s quest for a child and the story of Rachel, weeping for her children, who have gone into exile.

Let me offer some context. The story of the Torah, writ large, is the story of siblings fighting, with deadly consequences: Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah, Joseph and his brothers. This goes on and on through the whole Bible. Even the 2nd Temple, we are told, was destroyed because of *sinat hinam*, baseless hatred of one Jew for another. It’s like that song, “it’s always the same, it’s just a shame, that’s all.”

The same terrible thing happens again and again and we don’t learn anything.

But then along comes the story of Hannah, the one we just read. Elkanah has two wives, just like Jacob did: one, Hannah, is beloved but childless, like Rachel, while the other, Penina, like Leah, has children but is unloved. Penina taunts Hannah because she has no children, while Elkanah attempts to comfort her, saying, “Am I not better to you than ten sons?” Ten sons — Elkanah deliberately evokes the memory of Rachel and Leah — Rachel was barren, conceived with great difficulty, and died in childbirth, mother of only two of Jacob’s 12 sons; Leah and the concubines bore the other ten sons. Will this be the same painful story, yet again? Will Hannah be like Rachel, beloved by her husband, but hated by her co-wife and barren?

But Hannah, unlike Rachel, decides not respond to Penina’s taunts. At this critical moment, Hannah chooses to change the familiar pattern; she chooses to create a different script. Instead of answering Penina’s cruelty with cruelty, instead of continuing the deadly competition for children which consumed Rachel and Leah, Hannah doesn’t respond to Penina’s taunts. How does she do this? What happens inside her? The Bible doesn’t tell us, but I imagine that in that moment Hannah saw Penina with compassion, not as a cruel and heartless woman, but as a suffering woman, unloved and longing for her husband’s affection. With that insight, that choice of compassion — even towards someone who had been cruel to her — Hannah steps out of the drama of competition and chooses to go on with her own life.

Hannah goes to the Temple in Shilo, an audacious act for a woman alone, and prays there for a child. When Hannah gives birth, she does not name her son Yosef as Rachel did, meaning, “Give me another child!” Rather, she names him Shmuel — God has answered me — an expression of gratitude. She ends the competition. Rachel seemed only to want children so she could win the rivalry with her sister; Hannah opts to focus on gratitude; to tell another story, to see her life as one of blessing. Remember Joseph’s coat, which was a source of envy to his brothers? In this new story, when Hannah’s son, Shmuel, goes off to the Temple, Hannah makes him a little coat, and each year, brings him a new one. This coat, symbolic of the way Hannah has interpreted her life story, has nothing to do with eliciting envy; it is a pure gift of love and gratitude.

Hannah is saying, “Things don’t have to follow the predictable pattern. I’m not playing the Rachel and Leah game anymore.”

Hannah’s brave, ground-breaking prayer for a child becomes the model for all Jewish prayer. Shmuel, her son, ultimately anoints two kings and for three generations the northern and southern Israelite tribes are at peace with one another. As a people, we get to take a breath. When David, the future king, and Jonathan, the son of the current king who has sworn to kill David, hug, it’s enough to make you weep.

With the brave but simple act of walking away from the conflict with Penina and going on with her life, Hannah transformed the future for herself and the Jewish people.

Similarly, on the second day of Rosh Hashana we read the story from the book of Jeremiah of Rachel weeping for her children. The text reads: A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping, bitter weeping; Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children, who are gone. Thus says the Lord; Restrain your voice from weeping, your eyes from shedding tears... There is hope for your future, declares the Lord, Your children shall return to their country.”

As we have seen, Rachel doesn’t come off that well in the Torah; she is locked in bitter competition with her sister. Even in death, she describes her life as one of suffering and with her last breath, she names her newborn son, Ben-Oni — son of my suffering. (His name is later changed to Benjamin.) She views her life and her legacy as endless suffering.

Surprisingly, though, she enjoys a much more favorable afterlife. She becomes Rachel Imenu, Rachel, Our Mother, which is how she is known in common parlance, even though her maternal qualities in the Torah seem pretty negligible. It is this passage in our haftarah, in the afterlife, in which she becomes our quintessential mother. We see her rising from her grave, as it were, where she is buried on the road to Jerusalem, weeping for her children as they go into exile. The language of they are gone — ki aynenu — is the same language that the Torah uses to describe Joseph during his long absence — ki aynenu — he is gone. But it is not Joseph she is weeping for. It is the people of Judah, who have gone into exile here. Judah is Leah’s son, not Rachel’s. In other words, Rachel is weeping for Leah’s children, effectively saying, “They are my children too.” Rachel is rejecting the competition, reclaiming Leah’s children as her own. Putting aside her story of rivalry and victimization, she chooses to tell a new story; all the facts are the same, but she has created a new reality: that Leah’s children are also her own.

It is not an accident that we read these two stories of tshuva, of changing the narrative, on this day. Tshuva doesn’t require a 180 degree turn — you don’t have to become someone else, someone more holy or more talented or more lovable. Rather, one small turn can change the story; one small turn can be redemptive.

This poem called *The New Story of Your Life* by Michael Blumenthal captures the essence of this change:

Say you finally invented a new story of your life. It is not the story of your defeat or of your impotence and powerlessness before the large forces of wind and accident. It is not the sad story of your mother's death or of your abandoned childhood. It is not, even, a story that will win you the deep initial sympathies of the benevolent goddesses or the care of the generous, but it is a story that requires of you a large thrust into the difficult life, a sense of plenitude entirely your own. Whatever the story is, it goes as it goes, and there are vicissitudes in it, gardens that need to be planted, skills sown, the long hard labours of prose and enduring love. Deep down in some long-encumbered self, it is the story you have been writing all of your life, where no Calypso holds you against your own willfulness, where you can rise from the bleak island of your old story and tread your way home.

On these high holidays, we tread our way home. We imagine, in our liturgy, that God takes out the Book of Remembrance and reads from it and judges whether we will be written for life or death. But the prayer continues — *וְחֹתֶם יָד כָּל אָדָם בּוֹ* — and each of us has signed the book. God is not reading some random book of our sins. God is reading the book we wrote, the book of what we have done with the life we were given. We cannot control what happens, but God is reading the book we write — and we are the ones who get to tell the story.

My invitation to you this Rosh Hashana is very simple but also very hard — to tell a new story. Is there a story you are telling that could use a re-write? What would it mean to give up a sad story that you might have been telling, and to tell a new story of your life? Not a story where you are a victim and stuff happened to you, but a new one that puts the responsibility for the creation of your life squarely on your shoulders. The facts are the same — the Holocaust, cancer, struggling in school, a too small house and a disabled dad, an unloved wife, infertility. But with insight we can tell a new story. Jonathan told the story of his life as a blessing; Hallel stopped telling the story that she was stupid. Michelle Obama told a story of love and hope. Hannah and Rachel each chose to end the sibling rivalry that has consumed the narrative and begin a new story for the Jewish people. What growthful stories could you tell this year? That your life is full of blessing? That you have the power to create satisfying relationships with the people you love? That you can accept your flaws and keep growing? That you don't have to accept limitations others may have placed on you or that you have internalized about who you can be? Changing the story, choosing to see the past and present differently, makes a new future possible.

Will you tell a new story this year? If you choose to, life will still be difficult and much will be out of your control. But the new story you tell about your past has the power to transform your future. I invite you to turn, ever so slightly, and tell a new story of your life, one that brings you more aliveness, abundance, and blessing in the year to come.