

Yom Kippur 5777

Who lives, Who dies, Who Tells Your Story?

Rabbi Hal Rudin-Luria

Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?

Let me tell you with a little rhyme, since I only have so much time- inspired by Hamilton- both the musical and the Tribe's winning announcer:

(sung to the tune of "My Shot")

We are not throwing away our shot
 The Indians are red hot,
 I am fasting and I'm hungry,
 I am telling you I'm sorry,
 The Tribe has got a real shot.

It's Yom Kippur so we tell the truth,
 We have to hit it further than Babe Ruth,
 In our hearts we must be better,
 To G-d we write a letter,
 Saying it's time to face the truth.

Today we are an open book,
 Come on in and take a look,
 Teshuvah is the key,
 To a life of harmony,
 Forgiveness is the sharpest hook.

Hamilton, the hit Broadway show, asks the big questions: Who lives, Who dies, Who Tells Your Story? This is the question we ask ourselves on Yom Kippur. Who will tell our story? What will our story be? And how will it be told? When our children and grandchildren, our family and friends remember us, what will inspire them and how can we ensure their future?

In the play, George Washington declares, “Let me tell you what I wish I’d known when I was young and dreamed of glory. You have no control- **who lives, who dies, who tells your story.** I know that **greatness lies in you.** But remember from here on in, **History has its eyes on you.**”

Almost as if quoting our High Holiday Machzor, “Mi Yichye u’Mi Yamut,” the Unetaneh Tokef prayer declares, “Who shall live and who shall die, Who will live a long life and who will come to an untimely end? Who will be humbled in life and who will be raised up?” The prayer ends, Teshuvah, Tefillah and Tzedakah- repentance, prayer and kindness- these are the keys to answering life’s questions. It is what we do with our life now that matters the most.

By looking back at our history and learning what our ancestors stood for, what they fought for, what they valued; we discover how to tell our story. It reminds us that the choices we make; the actions we take today are not simply about us. We are a future-focused people; we believe our decisions today guarantee our grandchildren’s world.

Rav Kook, the first chief rabbi of pre-state Israel, taught **“Ha-yashan yit’chadeish ve-he-chadash yit’kadeish”** – “The old becomes new and the new becomes holy.” Our mission in life is to transform and breathe relevancy and inspiration into our history leading to a life of meaning create a lasting legacy. We have to turn history into our story.

That is exactly what Lin Manuel Miranda did in Hamilton; the old became inspired and new. We meet the Founding Fathers of our country at the birth of our nation and follow the rise of the poor orphan Alexander Hamilton from the lowest rung of society to the highest levels of office. The brilliance of the musical is the fusion of a new hip-hop beat with classic revolutionary war history. History buried under centuries of dust comes alive and becomes our story- their struggles resonate with our current day struggles. The Founding Fathers’ revolutionary goals of building a nation on the values of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness nearly 250 years ago- once

seemed so archaic and disconnected from us- yet today, through how their story was told, we are reminded that **we share their legacy**. We are inspired to embrace their values because **now their story is our story**.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, “We are not makers of history. We are made by it,” for without history there is no future. Washington, Jefferson, Lafayette, and Alexander Hamilton- stood for justice and equality- they lived and died for these values- it is what makes America great- and these values still inspire and challenge us. Israel’s late President Shimon Peres, zichrono livracha, has a very Hamiltonian story. Just as the immigrant Hamilton was George Washington’s young protégé in the emerging Republic, so too young Shimon Peres was the protégé of Israel’s first Prime Minister David Ben Gurion. We look to our spiritual homeland, Eretz Yisrael and its Founding Fathers and Mother- Ben Gurion, Meir, Dayan, Rabin, Begin and Peres, their bravery and imagination, their perseverance and singularity of purpose- their belief and hope in a Jewish state- their story is not just our history written down in books- it is our story, too- the shared values of the Jewish people drive and define us. In the words of Robert Penn Warren, “History gives us a fuller understanding of ourselves so that we can better face the future.”

“Who lives, who dies, who tells your story? I know that greatness lies in you. But remember from here on in, History has its eyes on you.”

Our decisions impact our legacy. Our choices today will affect our children and grandchildren, our community and world. **Our actions today are our legacy**. On Yom Kippur, we do not spend the day reading history books finding inspirational stories from our past- because it is up to us act. With Machzor in hand, we turn to G-d and seek forgiveness, we look inside ourselves. As the curtains of the Ark closed concluding the Torah service, we sang together the Hebrew verse: “Hashiveinu Adonai Eilecha v’Nashuva Chadash Yameinu Ke’Kedem- Turn us toward You, G-d, and we will return to You; Make our days seem fresh as they once were.”

This verse contains two mentions of the Hebrew word Teshuvah- repentance and return. It is recited each time we return the Torah scrolls to the Ark and close the curtain. The original source of the verse is the last line we recite on Tisha B'Av- the saddest day on our calendar- from Lamentations (Eichah), the first hand account of the Destruction of the First Temple and exile from Jerusalem 2500 years ago.

“Hashiveinu Adonai Eilecha v’Nashuva Chadash Yameinu Ke’Kedem- Turn us toward You, G-d, and we will return to You; Make our days seem fresh as they once were.” Renew our days as of old.

Is this a nostalgic longing for the good old days? Does this verse describe a physical location; a return to the land of Israel and rebuilding the Holy Temple or to 1776 and Independence Hall in Philadelphia or 1948 in Tel Aviv? Is it describing a spiritual return to the Torah and Mount Sinai?

Is it a return to somewhere we have already been- our childhood home, the first years of our marriage, the feeling of holding our children when they were infants? Is it a return to a place we've been before or perhaps, the verse implies going somewhere new?

This verse reminds us that each year, we are not in the same place- physically, emotionally or spiritually. Kekedem is a place and a time- a moment or perhaps a longing. To me, it is the gap between where I want to be and where I actually am, the longing to be better.

On Yom Kippur, we are reminded of the need to continually move forward, “I know that greatness lies in you, and history has its eyes on you” so now begins the process of claiming our legacy. Ke’kedem is a new beginning, a maturity gained from experience and reflection- from regret, remorse and repair. It is the next step on our journey, a guidepost for the next generation to carry on our legacy. **Who lives, who dies, who tells our story?**

Through teshuvah, repentance and a refocusing, we can write our story. Teshuvah, Tefilah, Tzedaka- By making the right choices, judging ourselves

and righting our wrongs, by living a life of kindness and helping others, we write our story. Teshuvah is not about returning home; it is about returning to a new place, a place we have yet to see, by growing into our future-selves-like Hamilton and Peres who help lead our nations to greatness from very humble beginnings. Teshuvah makes the old new and makes the new holy and special. It leads us to take action now for our grandchildren's world of the future.

Who lives, who dies, who tells our story? Our country has a story of greatness and our community has its own story of greatness (thanks Lebron!). What about our shul community? As a congregation, we are celebrating 150 years as a kehila kedosha- holy community: Honoring our past, celebrating the present and ensuring our future.

When we say, “Renew our days as of old- chadesh yameinu ke'kedem”- we recognize that this is not the same B'nai Jeshurun as it was at its founding in 1866 with a handful of Orthodox Hungarian immigrants; not the same as in 1887 when we moved to what is now the Cleveland Indian's Progressive Field; not the same as 2001 when I joined B'nai Jeshurun's clergy team and not in the same place as we were even just last year.

We honor our synagogue for building lifelong Jewish connections, a deep love of learning and Torah, instilling an unwavering attachment to Israel, embracing the joyfulness in Judaism, providing inspiring prayer services, as a caring community with a commitment to tradition and an eye for innovation, and a drive to better the world through chesed- acts of kindness and social justice. So let me share some Hamilton style thoughts about our synagogue's legacy:

(sung to the tune of “My Shot”)

Please let me provide you a snapshot,
 B'nai Jeshurun is celebrating a lot,
 For One hundred Fifty years,
 Our shul has filled with cheers,

like the Cavaliers, some tears and lots of volunteers.
Looking forward to more that it's got.

We're committed to growing our shul,
We're one big family like the crown jewel,
Connecting to G-d and Torah,
Israel- so dance the Horah,
Our future is the most important rule.

We are giving it our best shot,
Have you seen our Pajama Shabbat,
The next generation is the key,
To keep moving our history,
You are all a part of our legacy.

Winston Churchill stated, "History will be kind to me because I intend to write it." Our tradition believes that we have the power to write our own history, our lives are like a book and our words and actions are recorded on the ledger. **Our choices matter.** What we do and how we live, that is our story.

Rabbi Ed Feinstein advises us the best way to prepare for the High Holidays is to write a letter to those that mean the most to us and put in that letter everything that life has taught us from growing up, to school and work, from our relationships, from successes and failures, to losses and joys. Why should we write that letter? So that we articulate our legacy, our story, our choices- so that we can better recognize our life's path and push us to continue to make better choices. The essence of being Jewish is the passing down of a collected legacy to the next generation. That is what our Biblical Patriarch Jacob did when he gathered his children to him before his death and gave each of them a special blessing. This is called an ethical will that we write in order that our values live on. Rabbi Feinstein suggests, "Write a letter for yourself because somewhere in the world someone is waiting to hear the deepest truth of your life." Whom better than ourselves to tell our story?

Who lives, who dies, who tells our story? It is told that Elie Wiesel, zichrono livracha of blessed memory, once visited Saragossa, Spain. Like most tourists, he visited the sites as well as the impressive cathedral. While walking through the Church, a man approached him speaking French and offered to be his guide. In the course of their conversation, it came out that Wiesel was Jewish and spoke Hebrew.

The man exclaimed: "I've never met a Jewish person before, but I have something I have to show you. Maybe you can tell me what it is." The men walked to the Spaniard's apartment, and when they arrived, he took out an old manuscript. "Is this Hebrew?" the man asked, "My family has passed it down for generations. We were told that if it were destroyed, we would bring a curse on our family."

In fact, it was Hebrew and it was almost 500 years old. Wiesel began to tremble as he read the document. Slowly he translated it for his host: "*I, Moshe Ben Avraham, forced to break all ties with my people and my faith, leave these lines to the children of my children and theirs, in order that on the day when Israel will be able to walk again, it's head held high under the sun without fear or remorse, they will know where their roots lie. Written in Saragossa, this Tisha B'Av, in the year of punishment and exile.*"

"What does it mean?" asked the alarmed Spaniard. The man knew nothing about the history of Spanish Jewry, the Inquisition, the forced conversions or the expulsion of the Jews in 1492. As Wiesel told him the story of our people, his eyes grew wider and wider.

Years later in Jerusalem, Wiesel was approached on the street by a stranger. In broken Hebrew he said, "Mr. Wiesel: Shalom! Don't you recognize me? Saragossa!" It was his Spanish guide.

Once again, the man from Saragossa invited Wiesel back to his apartment, explaining as they walked how he had come to Israel, studied Judaism, and returned to the religion of his ancestors. When they entered his apartment,

Wiesel knew why they had come. On the wall hung the old document he had read years before. As Wiesel studied it again, the man smiled and said: “I haven't told you my new name: Moshe ben Abraham.” That letter was the legacy left to him. It gave him a better understanding of who he was, what needed to change. It made the old new and the new holy.

Who lives, who dies, who tells our story? When we recall those no longer with us at Yizkor, those who in death still inspire and guide us- we are reminded to tell their stories and in doing so, their story becomes part of our story. We remember spouses, siblings, parents, grandparents, children and dear friends who have touched our lives in such unforgettable ways. We recall the love they gave to us, the wisdom and support. At these moments, we can reflect on the deepest truths they imparted on us and the legacies they have left. May they inspire us to tell our story.

G'mar Chatima Tova. May we make the choices that we need to write our story and share our legacy. May we all be inscribed and sealed for a sweet, happy, meaningful and healthy new year.