Know from where you came

To where you are going

And before whom you are destined to give an accounting

(Pirke Avot)

הסתכל בשלושה דברים ואין אתה בא לידי עבירה. דע מאין באת, ולאן אתה הולך, ולפני מי אתה עתיד לתן דין וחשבון

1776.  New York City…

And that was the beginning of lin manuel miranda’s brilliant show Hamilton.  And for the next 2 hours of sheer electrifying brilliance, Miranda shared the story of the founding father Alexander Hamilton. And by the end of that show, people of all ages could sing our shared story, could tell you where our founding father came from, what  he aspired to  achieve, and before whom he stood.  2 hours… beginning w 1776. Nyc. Ending with “who lives, who dies who tells our story”. What would you give for LMM’s gift of captivating the imagination through story?

The rabbis knew the value of our stories. In fact in our Book of Ethics, Pirkei Avot, they shared the magic formula for a good life:

“*Know from where you came, know to where you’re going, and know before whom you stand.”* This was the wisdom of the great Rabbi Akavia ben Mehalalel.

The wisdom of our ancestors: **Know from you came**

הסתכל בשלושה דברים ואין אתה בא לידי עבירה. דע מאין באת, ולאן אתה הולך, ולפני מי אתה עתיד לתן דין וחשבון

It wasn’t long ago when a couple; Sarah and Marshall Duke stumbled upon a revelation.  Sarah and Marshall Duke are both psychologists.  Sarah works with children with special needs.  Over time, in her school, Sarah noticed something fascinating about her students:   The children who knew a lot about their families tended to do better when they faced challenges.  She shared her observations with her husband, who was equally intrigued and the couple set out to test her hypothesis. Together, they developed a measure called the “Do you know” scale.  By which they asked children to answer 20 straightforward questions that all began with (of course) “Do you know”.

Here are a handful that you can try for fun:

Do you know where your grandparents grew up?

Do you know where your mom and dad went to high school?

Do you know where your parents met?

Do you know an illness or something really terrible that happened in your family?

Do you know the story of your birth?”

Through extensive research, and overwhelming evidence, the team found, that Sarah’s hypotheses was, in fact, correct:  The *more* children knew about their family’s history, the *stronger* their sense of control was over their lives,  the higher their self-esteem and the higher the children’s resilience.  The “Do You Know?” scale turned out to be the best single predictor of children’s emotional health and happiness.

Isn’t that amazing?!  That somehow knowing where your grandmother grew up, the story of your birth, and about a tragedy in your family - can help a child endure the hurt of a skinned knee, can help a person bounce back after losing a loved one and can help you endure disappointments of your own.

So what was so magical about these insights? As it turns out the “Do you know” scale measures (what psychologists call) a person’s “intergenerational self” -- their sense of connection to the larger family story.  All of the work that grown-ups do today; offering words of praise and encouragement, trying desperately to give our kids a strong sense of self-esteem …. And it turns out that the healthiest, happiest, most resilient and self-confident people are the ones who know that they belong to something bigger than themselves.”

This summer, Sebastian Hunger wrote a book called the Tribe that affirmed the importance of each of us feeling as if we were a part of something greater than ourselves – “Our “tribe” if you will.  And Rabbi Bradley Hirshfield described the merits of the “tribe” in this way:

“A tribe offers [you] experience of being loved and cared for not because of what you do, but simply because you are who you are.  Once you are in the tribe, you are in no matter what.  It is that sense no matter how [much] we screw up, no matter how wrong we may be, there is always a place for us.  Once conferred, that place need never be re-earned.  It may not always be a comfortable place, but it remains yours, no matter what.  However much people may grouse about it, they will be there for you because you are a part of the tribe, and you darn well better do the same for them.  But even if you don’t’, you are still a part of the tribe.”

Nowadays, people are in desperate need of belonging.  Each of us yearns to feel as though we are a part of a larger narrative.  To have the experience of being loved and cared for, not because of what you *do*, but simply because *you are who you are* is precious.  And when people feel connected in this way – it gives us the courage to face the unknowns and uncertainties of the world with more security. It helps us all feel more accountable. And helps us become our “best selves”

This past summer, Christina Huffington (Arianna’s Huffington’s daughter) launched a new series called “Talk to Me” at the Huffington post.  Christina, now in her 20’s shared that her inspiration for the series was her realization that "As a child, it's expected that the conversation [between you and your parents] will revolve around you. As a teenager, there is often little you want to hear less than your mom or dad's opinion," she explains. "But as an adult, there is so much to be gained from flipping the dynamic and asking your parents to talk to you."  And so “Talk to Me” began.

Christina suggested that we use our smartphones and record our conversations with our loved ones.  These are some of the questions that they suggested using as a launching pad:

·         Tell me something you’ve never told me.

·         What do you wish you knew when you were my age?

·         What is the hardest challenge you’ve faced in your life?

·         What’s the biggest lesson you’d like to pass on to future generations?

What are some of the little things you did for yourself or our family that made the biggest impact?

·         If you could have one wish for me and my children, what would it be?

I loved this project for so many reasons:  first, because who, among us wouldn’t give anything… anything… to have that recording…. of someone that we loved sharing their stories and reflection with us.  Especially, when they’re no longer in this world.  Oh, but to hear their voices again, to see them as they were…. Reflecting on their lives.  As a rabbi, I love this endeavor because so often, by the time we sit down together to talk about a loved one, it’s too late to learn the answers.   And there truly is no better time than today, Rosh Hashana – the birthday of the world -- to reflect on our lives and to share our stories.  Our sages, long before the Duke’s research, instructed us that the there are three things that will keep us away from sin [and will help us lead a good life]. The first:  To know from where you came.

II .               ולאיין אתה הולך **… know to where you are going:**

הסתכל בשלושה דברים ואין אתה בא לידי עבירה. דע מאין באת, ולאן אתה הולך, ולפני מי אתה עתיד לתן דין וחשבון

In so many ways, day to day life can sometimes feel like it’s about survival, just making it through the day or the week sometimes feels like an accomplishment.  Perhaps that was why Shimon Peres (z’l) shared with President Obama on a recent visit to the White House that “while people often say that the future belongs to the young, it’s the present that really belongs to the young.  ‘Leave the future to me’” he said, “I have time.”

Just days ago, the last of *Israel’s* founding fathers, the last of David Ben-Gurion’s team of leaders, left our world. Shimon Peres was the memory keeper of the nation, for whatever historical moment had happened, Shimon Peres had been there and could give you the detailed accounting. Shimon Peres understood the importance of *memory*, but he also believed, deep in his soul, that it wasn’t the memories that mattered most – it was the *visions for the future* – that were *far* more indispensable. Shimon Peres dreamed of an Israel that was strong and secure, he dreamed of an Israel that could lead the world in technology and innovation, he dreamed of an Israel at peace with its neighbors. People called him naïve and foolish and yet so many of his naïve and foolish dreams were actualized. Others are ours to keep on dreaming.

Like our sages, Shimon Peres also understood the importance of knowing where you’re going.  Today, we are here to figure that out for ourselves.  What are our dreams?  Maybe it’s too hard to access your life long dreams and visions but what are your dreams for today?  Where do you want your life to head?  Where do you want to go even just this year.

Rabbi Soloveitchik believed deeply that the purpose of these holydays – the very essence of the act of Teshuva – is to re-create ourselves.  To be a Jew is to believe that each and every day we have the potential to begin anew.  To sever who we were and who we are for the sake of who we are capable of being.  What a powerful idea, right!?  That we don’t have to be “stuck” in our old ways.  In relationships and careers and dreams that are no longer alive for us.  That it’s time, to dream new dreams.

Ten years ago, Shimon Peres was about to announce his intention to run for President.  When his advisors came in with a drafted speech for him. Peres read through the speech and noticed that it stated “this will be my last contribution to the country.”  Shimon was 83 at the time.  Shimon approved the entire speech except for one small detail.  He wanted them to change: “This will be my last contribution” to this “MIGHT be my last contribution”.  He figured that the office would be a 7 year appointment, at which point he would be 90, and so, he determined….he wanted to leave his options open.  No matter how old we are, it’s never to later for a new chapter and a new dream.

Today we will spend hours together, listening and praying, I urge you to make time to daydream.  What is it that you want to do, who is it that you want to be.  Where do you want to push yourself this year?  What great thing might you set out to accomplish.  It might not be a Peace Prize but what is it that you would do….if you pointed your feet in the right direction, started to dream and engaged in the act of re-creation?

III.  **Know before whom you stand:**

הסתכל בשלושה דברים ואין אתה בא לידי עבירה. דע מאין באת, ולאן אתה הולך, ולפני מי אתה עתיד לתן דין וחשבון

And lastly our Sage instructs us to “know before whom you stand”.  And for this, I want to begin by acknowledging that feeling “accountable” is tricky.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells a story about a failed visit to the hospital that he made one Sunday afternoon to visit congregants.  On his way back to the parking garage, he passed a guard who was standing outside of a closed building. Confused, the rabbi stopped and asked the guard; “Why are you here today?” The guard explained, “I’ve been hired to make sure that this building is protected.  But what are *you* doing here today, on a Sunday, in a suit and tie?  Who do YOU work for?  Rabbi Kushner was about to tell the guard the name of his congregation but instead he paused, took out a business card and offered to pay that guard five dollars a week to call him every Monday to ask him that question.  “who do you work for?’”

Each of us, at some point today, should ask ourselves that question.  To whom do we feel accountable?  Whose face or voice do we see or hear that guides us and keeps us on the right path?????

Perhaps there is no person who better understood the notion of responsibility and accountability than Elie Wiesel.  Wiesel lived with the feeling that the responsibility of history was on his shoulders. Because of this, he would spend his lifetime sharing his experiences in the concetration camps, using his voice to fight and evil all over our world and standing up for human rights for *all* people. He was the world’s moral compass who reminded humanity over and over again that standing idly by and remaining silent in the face of suffering were not options.

Through his lifetime, Elie Wiesel maintained his humility.  In reflecting on his father’s life, Elie’s son Elisha shared: that the only standard by which his father measured himself…. Was that he wanted to be thought of as a good Jew.  He looked at himself as his mother and father and grandparents would have evaluated him.  That was always in his mind, what would they think of him and his life and what he had made of it.

For Elie Wiesel, being a good Jew meant many different things, [shared his son].  It meant being a good human being and a good father, being a leader in the community when leadership was needed; [being] a good husband; someone who respected and brought respect to the memory and traditions and name of his ancestors; someone who was humbled by the concept of man’s place in the universe but still felt mandated to fix the world; and someone who, when approached by people, would make time to talk with them and make them feel welcomed and listened to.”  For 70 years, Elie had struggled to make sense of God’s role in the Holocaust.  At his funeral, his son eulogized him by saying that, his father would now, finally, “have the opportunity to ask God all of those difficult questions”

Through Elie Wiesel’s life, he had an innate sense of who he wanted to be and to whom he was destined to give an accounting.  He “STOOD” before all of his ancestors and 6 million other Jews who died in the Shoah, the parents who watched over him, God, his creator, and the Jewish People.

But let’s face it…. Elie Wiesel and Shimon Peres are truly role models – heroes – if you will.  With purpose, conviction, perseverance and accountability they approached their lives.  And each and every day, as your rabbi, I am reminded that so often, we ALL live with an understanding of an ultimate accounting:

I see that in YOU!  In small, quiet moments, moments without fanfare where you rise up beyond what could ever be expected.

I see it every time that I walk through the door for evening minyan and see Alan.  And I know that he isn’t showing up for the kaddish.  He isn’t showing up for the prayer. He’s not showing up to connect with God through prayer.    He is showing up for everyone else.  Because he worries that we won’t have enough people to make a minyan and that someone won’t have the opportunity to honor their loved one through the recitation of the kaddish.  Sometimes he waits patiently in his car, sometimes in the chapel, sometimes he leaves when he counts ten and sometimes he stays.  He is accountable to something greater than himself for sure.

I see that same accountability when Martha comes to visit and explains to me that her father abandoned their family when she was young.  He never took care of them, never even sent a birthday card and now, after decades without communication, he was in touch, he’s dying and needs a donor and she might be a match.  And despite the pain, the abandonment, despite everything, she comes in because deep in her soul, she feels pulled to be bigger than he ever was.  To say “yes” not for him but for her. Because she knew, that we are all accountable.

I see that same accountability in my husband who rushes home on Friday night after a full day of work with Shabbat quickly approaching to make a Shabbat dinner for someone at Gilchrist who loved his Judaism every day of his life and because for him and his family, that Shabbat would be his last Shabbat in this world.  We knew that Meir had to have a beautiful Shabbat dinner.  And I see that same accountability in our congregant Steve who showed up, with minutes notice, despite everything going on in his life, to deliver that meal to Gilchrist.

I see that accountability in Brian who heard that another congregant, had reached that point where there was no hope in her treatment plan.  Staring death in the face, feeling the sense of despair of test results that told a story of nothing left to do and then there comes Brian, telling Allison – I’m here.  I’m on it.  I’ll find options for you.  I’ll help you find a way to live.  And suddenly, there was hope again.

What is it that makes us feel accountable?  Maybe it’s our faith in God.  And that feeling that ultimately we will all be judged by our Creator.  Maybe it’s a commitment to each other and believing that somehow, our actions make a difference.  Maybe it’s an accountability to our children who are learning from our actions or our parents or grandparents watching over us from the heavens above.  The Sages wisdom was in knowing that accountability to something or someone greater than ourselves is what keeps us on the good path.  The path that leads us away from selfishness, sin and temptation.  The path that leads us to righteousness.

 5777.  Baltimore Maryland.

Who lives? Who dies? Who tells our story?

Where do we come from?

To where are we going?

And before whom do we stand.

Let’s spend the next 10 days figuring out our answers, telling our stories and let’s begin 5777 together, as a “tribe” with a renewed sense of connection, purpose and accountability!

Chag Sameach!