

As some of you know I spent the past year in Jerusalem. I walked the cobblestone streets, practiced my Hebrew and a smattering of Arabic, drank coffee in sun soaked cafes, and learned hours and hours of Torah in the beit midrash. But some of my most memorable moments in Israel were spent sitting on the bus.

Every day, I would wait for the bus that would take me from the doorstep of Pardes to the Conservative Yeshiva. I would step onboard, and become immersed in snippets of Hebrew, French, Russian, Arabic, and Amaharic surrounding me, a cacophony of words and phrases that I couldn't even begin to decode.

Every now and then I had enough Hebrew to pick out stories from Israeli boys sitting across from me in their white shirts and black pants, complaining about the food in their Yeshiva and alluding to homesickness for parents and siblings.

A dirt-spattered four-year-old babbling about his day at Gan, Israeli kindergarten, to his father, who's only half listening while preoccupied with his phone.

And once in a while, an English speaker would walk onto the bus, and I would be dropped into the middle of the saga they were unfolding to their friend; stories of pain, love, tragedy, comedy, hope, and loss.

I'd listen for the moment, and then either they would get off the bus, or I would, and their stories would dissipate from my mind, as I raced towards the Conservative Yeshiva, in my mad dash to be on time for my Zo_har class.

Their stories were only ever meant to be a fleeting moment in time.

In Masechet Rosh Hashana 16b, the Talmud offers the following:

א"ר כרוספדאי א"ר יוחנן: שלשה ספרים נפתחין בר"ה: אחד של רשעים גמורין,

ואחד של צדיקים גמורין, ואחד של בינוניים

Rabbi Kruspedai said in the name of Rabbi Yoḥanan: Three books are opened on Rosh HaShana before the Holy One, Blessed be God: One of wholly wicked people, and one of wholly righteous people,

and one of people in the middle whose good and bad deeds are equally balanced

The Books of our Lives have been opened.

God reads through these books, each page offering a thorough, detailed, and **brutally honest** account of all of our actions and deeds.

Our small anecdotes told to one another on the bus are gathered into the anthology of our lives for the past year, and analyzed by Hashem. They become part of the most important story that we will ever tell.

My Midrash teacher at Pardes, may he live long and be blessed, would proclaim every day in our class in his delightful Australian accent (which I will not be attempting),

“We are not The People of the Book, We’re the People of Midrash!”.

Reading the Torah as it stands in black and white will only take us so far. Midrash helps us understand the space between words, the line breaks, the words on the page. Midrash forms and shapes Judaism and Jewish practice into what it is today.

Midrash is the radical act of telling

and re-telling

and telling anew

the story of the Jewish people.

The Jewish people are a people of stories.

And who among us doesn't love a good story?

It's written into our Jewish DNA. Everything from the simplest story of "they tried to kill us, we won, let's eat", to our origin story of humanity, "Bereisheet Bara Elokim", In the beginning, God created.

Each Rosh Hashana, we read the story of the Akeida, of Avraham getting within the knife's edge of sacrificing his son, his favored son, Isaac, whom he loved.

But we have a wealth of unique and meaningful practice surrounding the High Holidays. The many laws of the service of the High Priest, who would offer atonement for the people of Israel, are a potent reminder to us of the purpose of this moment in the year. And yet, that portion from Leviticus is not the Torah we read today. Instead, we read the Akeida.

Why?

Realistically, how many of us would want to sit and listen to the reading of the High Priest's atonement?

Actually, I would, but I recognize that this is not a common experience. #Rabbis.

Instead, every year we read a story of a family engaging with painful relationships, service of God, and encountering their most visceral and broken parts of themselves.

The story of the Akeida becomes the story of us. Who among us hasn't struggled with their parents, their spouses, their children, with the seemingly unfair realities of life?

Some days you have a tremendous fight with your parents, some days your father brings you up a mountain as a sacrificial offering to God, but none of these moments feel anything but broken.

Telling the story of the Akeida reminds us that we have to encounter our story of this year.

What moments of brokenness have we caused?

When have we been part of reconciliation and redemption?

And the biggest question of all: why does our personal experience have to be presented to God?

Why an entire month dedicated to rethinking our personal stories of the year?

There is a social science researcher at the University of Houston, Brene Brown, who specializes in studying shame, courage, vulnerability, and empathy. She offers the following idea:

“Storytelling helps us all impose order on chaos—including emotional chaos. When we're in pain, we create a narrative to help us make sense of it. This story doesn't have to be based on any real information...Facing our stories takes courage. But **owning** our stories is the only way we get to write a brave new ending.”

Put simply, the emotional chaos we experience every day is ordered by our internal storytelling.

The person who cut me off in traffic?

I write them off as selfish and rude.

My classmate that interrupts me every time I talk?

Self-absorbed and self-indulgent.

I tell these stories again and again, day in and day out.

The ending is always the same: the **other** person is doing something terrible, which makes **my** actions excusable in return. I'm not the problem, they are!

So, how do we actually get to the point of, “writing a brave new ending”? In other words, how do we do Teshuva?

To answer, I have to tell a story.

This is a classic chasidic story recounted by Elie Wiesel in, “The Gates of the Forest”.

“When the great Rabbi Yisrael Ba'al Shem Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate.

There he would light a fire,

say a special prayer,

and the miracle would be accomplished

and the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Maggid of Mezritch, had occasion, for the same reason to intercede with Heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say:

“Master of the Universe, listen!

I do not know how to light the fire,

But I am still able to say the prayer.”

And again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say:

“I do not know how to light the fire,

I do not know the prayer,

But I know the place

And that must be sufficient.”

It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Yisrael of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune.

Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God:

“I am unable to light the fire
And I do not know the prayer;
I cannot even find the forest.
All I can do is tell the story,
And this must be sufficient.”

And it was sufficient.

God Made Man Because God loves Stories.”

Why do I bring this story today? Because I too believe God cares about our stories.

Of the many people sitting in this room, the only person who knows the story of your year is you.

You and God.

Right now, God is looking at our stories as we’ve lived them this past year. The pages turn on a divine book, and the many times we’ve made mistakes, the many times we’ve spoken sharply to our friends, the many times we’ve turned away from what we don’t want to see in ourselves--God is reading all of these parts of our story.

What story do you want to tell yourself from this past year?

What story do you want to tell your children, your grandchildren,
perhaps even your Great-grandchildren?

What stories do you want told of you?

Teshuva is when we stop telling the same story of **other** people's guilt and inaction, and recognize that **we** have made mistakes, **we** are guilty, **we** are the ones who have done wrong.

We may not know how to build a sacred fire,
we may not know the location of supplication in a forest in Eastern Europe,
we may not even know the words of a prayer,
but we know our own stories.

And we know how to change them.

It's not too late.

We can write a new ending for this year's story, and we do Teshuva- we can return.

Or in this case, we can turn the page to a fresh start.

But how, how can this really happen?

Only a story, a Midrash can answer this question.

The Sifrei, a Midrashic commentary commenting on the book of Devarim between the second and third century responds:

ספרי דברים מ"ט:ג'

ג) דורשי רשומות אומרים: רצונך שתכיר מי שאמר והיה העולם? - למוד הגדה, שמתוך כך אתה מכיר את הקב"ה ומדבק בדרכיו.

Sifrei Devarim 49:3

(3) The expounders of metaphor say: Do you wish to recognize the One who spoke and brought the world into being (meaning do you wish to know God)?

Learn *Aggadah* (stories.)

For if you do so, you will come to recognize the Holy One Blessed be God and cleave to God's ways.

How can we know God?

How can we see the spark of God in ourselves and each other?

Through Aggadah, through Midrash, through stories.

Stories help us conceive of the impossible, the fantastic, the magical.

Stories open our minds and hearts to each other, seeing across boundaries and borders.

Our stories are bound up together, written across the pages of the Book of Life.

May the story of our year end differently than ever before.

Instead of leaving behind our stories as fleeting moments in our commute, our classrooms, or our conversations; may our stories connect us throughout our year, as we build dynamic and meaningful relationships with one another.

May we have the courage to write a new chapter, to do Teshuva, and see the story, the spark of God, in everyone.

G'mar Chatima Tova.

May we be inscribed in the Book of Life.