

Life-Story
Kol Nidrey-2022

So, I was reading Jane's New York Times, again, and I came across an article titled "Is life a game or a story?" (David Brooks, NYT, July 22, 2022)

What do you think? Game? Story?

The question arises from two books by best-selling British author Will Storr. In his most recent work, "The Status Game," he posits that life is about being better than others. We want to be winners and we want people to recognize us for it. So he maintains that "Life is a series of games."

There's the high school game of competing to be the popular kid. The lawyer game to make partner. The finance game to make the most money. The academic game, best grades. The sports game, best record. Even when we are trying to do good, Storr claims, we are playing the "virtue game," to show that we are morally superior.

All of this is particularly striking, because in a previous book, Storr argued that stories are what make us truly human. ("The Science of Storytelling.") So, which is it: Is life a game or a story?

I have to admit the article got me thinking about Jewish life: Game or Story? So I tried applying the game theory to the High Holidays and it came out sounding pretty cynical: Get the most Mitzvah points and you win a place in *Olam HaBa*; Pray the loudest or longest, and you get God's attention; Confess enough sins, Al Hayt, all 66 of them, five time during Yom Kippur, and you win another year of life. I remember that as kids, my brother and I used to compete—who can

fast the longest. Winner gets to feel “holier than thou”...and hungrier. Welcome to Kol Nidrey--say it correctly and collect the prize--a free pass on all those broken vows and promises. Congratulations, you can now have a clear conscience. Judaism, as a game-- definitely cynical. Life so much more so. It seems to me that both are much better as story.

That’s the way one of the greatest Jewish writers, Nobel Laureate, Isaac Beshevis Singer, saw it. He explained the power and importance of stories in a book titled Zlateh the Goat:

When a day passes, it is no longer there. What remains of it? Nothing more than a story. If stories weren’t told or books weren’t written, humans would live like the beasts, only for the day. Reb Zevulun said: “The whole world of human life, is one long story.” Where are all our yesterdays with their joys and sorrows? To the storyteller, yesterday is still here, as are the years and decades gone by. In stories...all creatures go on living forever. What happened long ago is still present.

Maybe, that’s why, as Jews, when we get together on the holidays we tell stories, the same stories every year. On Rosh Hashanah, we read the story of how Abraham and Sarah drove out Hagar and Yishmael. It’s a troubling story of a fractured family. And, it’s the prelude to an even more troubling story which we read on the second day of the holiday, the binding and near sacrifice of Isaac. How could Abraham have even contemplated that?

Why should we tell such distressing stories about our first ancestors on Rosh Hashanah? Perhaps it's because it helps us realize that they had flaws and imperfections and still rose to great heights of faith and lived lives of meaning and value. Remembering their failures, gives us courage to confront our own during the Ten days of Repentance that culminate in our confessions on Yom Kippur. Tomorrow we will tell more stories: the ritual of atonement that the high priest performed in the Temple and the martyrdom of the rabbis who resisted Roman oppression to preserve Torah and Judaism. Stories of the past are critical to our identity. So is Yizkor, in which we recall those we have loved and lost, because their life-stories have done much to shape our own.

The prayers we recite tonight also come with stories, and our new Mahzor Lev Shalem provides many of them. Kol Nidrei--we've talked about its history, its origin in 9th century Babylonia, where it was opposed because communal leaders felt that this formal annulment of vows might lead to taking promises lightly, or perhaps to critics of the Jewish community claiming that Jews could not be trusted to keep their word. But Kol Nidrei captured the very real regrets and fears people have about not fulfilling their commitments and good intentions, so the prayer was preserved. The mournful melody may also have a lot to do with that. Its exact history is unclear. However, in my role as second-string assistant Cantor, I can tell you that there is a tradition that the melody is *Mi-Sinai* (From Mt. Sinai, as old as

Torah, and as Holy) and that's why it stirs our souls. (But only if Cantor Cohen chants it: not old second string, here.)

There is also another legend that grew up around Kol Nidrei. It holds that the prayer was preserved, because, during the Spanish Inquisition, it was dear to Jews who were forced to live outwardly as Christians. These Conversos, or Crypto Jews, would come to the synagogue clandestinely to recite Kol Nidrei and thereby renounce the conversion that was forced upon them. That story, carried forward over the centuries, has made Kol Nidrei a symbol of resistance to assimilation.

And that has added more stories. How many of you have seen the movie "The Jazz Singer," with Al Jolson? (Mostly people over 60.) Did you know that "The Jazz Singer" was the first talking movie? I'm not sure we could even show it today, because most of the movie is silent, and then, in the first scene with sound, Al Jolson's character sings "Mammy," for which he is in black face. Way too uncomfortable, these days!

But the story told in that movie spoke to two distinct generations of American Jews. Jackie, the lead character, is a first generation American, who has left home and his Jewish heritage to become a success singing on Broadway. It has created a rift between him and his father, the Cantor of a small synagogue whose members are immigrants from Eastern Europe. When the Cantor becomes

ill, Jackie returns to sing Kol Nidrei. And the scene of his singing, juxtaposed with the old Cantor on his deathbed, touched the hearts of so many over the years, because it resonated with their own struggles with assimilation. Coming to the synagogue for Kol Nidrei became an important statement of Jewish identity—part of the story of American Jewish life. I remember watching the Jazz Singer with my father, a first generation American whose parents came from Germany and Lithuania; it was the only time I ever saw him cry at a movie. And that’s part of my Jewish life story. How does Kol Nidrei fit into your life story? Will it be such a powerful part of the story for future generations?

That’s what makes a story good, you know, when we can find ourselves in it. Psychologist Dan Gottlieb, who had a radio show on NPR called “Voices in the Family,” says that there are four words that can change the world for a person: “Tell Me Your Story.” As children and as parents, as partners and as friends, we know the power of those words, and a truly empathetic listener, to transform our lives. “Tell me your story.” How many of you have sat across the table from grandparents and had the stories they tell become part of your story, shaping who you are? Indeed, those four words can change the world.

Well, on the High Holidays, that’s what God says to all of us: “Tell Me Your Story:” *“V’Tiftah Et Sefer HaZikhronot, U-Mey’Eylav Yikarey* - God opens

the Book of Remembrance and reads from it. “*V’Hotam Yad Kol Adam Bo--* For it contains all our stories”—yours and mine. It’s personal.

So, what’s your story? What story does God’s book tell about you, this year? Jane and I have had a pretty good year. All the kids and grandchildren are doing well (kinahara, pu, pu, pu). We began getting together as an extended family, again, and going out to restaurants with friends, again. So far, we have weathered COVID, thank God. We even went to Israel with the TBS trip. But, we’ve had some tough stuff too. Our brother-in-law developed Lewy Body Dementia, and this past Shabbat, my 101- year- old uncle, the patriarch of our family passed away. How has this year impacted your life story?

Over this past year, my life story has been enriched by three trips to Haiti with Mitch Albom, where I have gotten to know some of the 60 kids at the Have Faith Haiti Orphanage that Mitch and his wife, Janine, support.

When I visit the Orphanage, I teach classes about Bible and Judaism to the High School age kids. On my last trip, the first week in September, I taught about what is surely the most powerful passage in *U-N’taneh Tokef*: “Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die.” They were riveted. Talk about personal! “Who by flood and who by earthquake? Who by hunger and who by thirst? Who shall be impoverished? Who shall wander homeless and who shall find a safe place?” This

is the story of their lives: the losses, the uncertainty? And now, this whole litany resonates so differently for me, this year. But so does the next passage: “*U-Tshuvah, U-T’fillah, U-Tzdakah* –Repentance, Prayer and Charity have the power to transform the harshness of destiny.” How will that line impact your life story in the year ahead? And how will you impact the life stories of others?

This is some very heavy material for anybody to contemplate, and I didn’t want the kids in Haiti to think that our Jewish New Year celebration was unrelentingly serious and somber. So, I taught them about the tradition of eating apples and honey to symbolize the wish for a sweet year, and at evening prayers, I gave them all some to taste. Now, fast forward: When I came home from shul on the first day of Rosh HaShanah, there was a package sitting at our front door. I opened it and found a beautiful apple and honey plate and a note—“Happy New Year, Rabbi Steve, Love, Knox and Ziggy.” Mitch brought two children from the orphanage up to Detroit for medical treatment--an 11-year old boy, Knox, and an 8 year old girl, Ziggy. At the hospital, the art therapist (who had been in Haiti during my last trip) helped them create a gift for my family. I can tell you that apples and honey have never tasted any sweeter.

It was the perfect counterpoint to those pressing life and death questions raised by *U-N’taneh Tokef*. Of course, you don’t have to go to Haiti to have that prayer hit home. You can just think about the folks sitting in the next row. There

are parents who have had a new baby, and parents who have lost a child. There are stories about marriage and stories about divorce. Stories about aging parents and stories about new grandchildren. Stories about children who have moved far away and stories about children who have moved home. New jobs, lost jobs. Good stories; sad stories. Don't worry, I won't reveal your personal stories. But I will share another of mine.

This summer, when our grandson, Mason, was at Camp Ramah, visiting day was cancelled because of COVID, so instead we had a Zoom with him. As our allotted 20 minutes were coming to an end, we asked him if he needed or wanted anything, and we were a bit taken aback by his response. He didn't ask us to send a favorite food or a piece of clothing or a game. Instead, one request: "Can you send me a Newspaper? We don't get any news of what's going on in the outside world." Our first reaction was to laugh, because it was not what we expected, even though we know that even at age 11, Mason is a pretty serious kid. He likes to read and discuss history, and he is tuned-in to current events. But after the call, we wondered whether we should send him a paper. What are the stories he would read? What would you do?

We sent the paper...along with and a couple of boxes of his favorite Drake's coffee cakes--because...well, we're grandparents. We don't like to say no, and it

really wasn't an unreasonable request. In fact, we were sort of proud of the maturity it showed.

But, I confess, I have been thinking about it ever since. What do those newspaper stories say about the outside world? The world in which you and I are raising our children and grandchildren? What do those stories say about us?

“*Mi Yishakeyt U-Mi Yitoraf*—Who shall be at peace and who shall be troubled?” There are troubling trends that disturb us all: stories about gun violence on the streets of our cities, school shootings; extremism on the political right and left; antisemitism; big lies and conspiracy theories; cancel culture; economic uncertainty; climate change, terrorism, war.” “*Mi YiShaleyv U-Mi Yityasayr*—Who shall be at ease and who shall be tormented.” Are we not tormented by these stories...which are, let's face it, part of the story of our lives?

There is a commentary in our Mahzor (p. 352) which points out that the litany of sins in the *Al Heyt* confession is not there because any of us, individually, has committed all of them, but because they are all so prevalent in our world. And as Abraham Joshua Heschel has said, in a democratic society: “Only some are guilty, but all are responsible.” So, again and again we say: *Al Heyt Shehatanu L'fanekha*—For the sin we have committed against You.”

Now, the “You” in that sequence is usually capitalized to indicate that the sin is against God. But I wonder if it might not be even more powerful if we read it as lower case and the “you” referred to our children and grandchildren, whose life-stories we are shaping by the way we live and the world we make for them.

Al Heyt SheHatanu L'fanekha –

For the sin we have committed against you by the way we do business...or accept business as usual.

For the sin we have committed against you by baseless hatred—tolerating hate speech as free speech.

For the sin we have committed against you by violence—a world in which school lock-down drills are a necessary norm? Did you know that one group that advocates arming teachers refers to schools as “victim zones!” *Al Heyt.*

For the sin we have committed against you by cynicism and rationalization. Is there really nothing we can do about extremism, on right or left? Do we excuse the sins of our side because, hey, they do it too—“whataboutism.”

Al Heyt--For the sin we have committed against you by confusion of values.

And our Mahzor adds some additions:

For the sin we have committed against you by appeasement.

For the sin we have committed against you by complacency.

For the sin we have committed against you by despair.

Confession: I’m not sure that *T’shuvah*, *T’fillah* and *Tz’dakhah* will be enough to solve all of these. But listen again to words of Abraham Joshua Heschel found in our Mahzor: “We are guilty of misunderstanding the meaning of

existence; we are guilty of distorting our goals and misrepresenting our souls...What is the truth of being human? ...the acknowledgment of opaqueness, shortsightedness, inadequacy. But truth also demands rising, striving for the goal that is both within and beyond us.”

The goal of Kol Nidrei and Yom Kippur confessions is not guilt but goad; it is both a call to conscience and a call to action. Atonement is not meant to be a conclusion but a turning point—*T’shuvah*. It can be the turning point in a life story—yours, mine—and thus the life story of our children and their children.

And because Yom Kippur is not the end, let me leave you with one last story.

My very first year as a rabbi, I was nervous about my sermon (still a problem, but that’s another story). I flew from Hampton, Virginia to Philadelphia, to consult with my mentor and teacher Rabbi Yaakov Rosenberg—Yonk, as, he preferred me to call him. He didn’t give me a sermon. Instead, he gave me a story based on Psalm 24, which many Mahzorim make a prelude to the High Holidays, a time when we pray repeatedly for life.

The psalm asks “who shall ascend the mountain of the Lord, who shall stand in His Holy sanctuary?” And the answer given is “One who has clean hands and a pure heart, *Asher Lo Nasa LaShav Nafshi*—usually translated “Who has not taken

My name in vain.” But the word *Nafshi* is from *Nefesh*—which really means “soul” or “life.” Now, the story:

Two friends, Avram and Hayim, always walked to shul together on the High Holidays. One year, when Hayim came to Avram’s house to meet him for their customary walk, Avram noticed that his friend seemed downcast and distressed. “What’s the problem” he asked. Hayim told him “my business is not going well, and I’m afraid I might lose everything, even my home.” “No way to go into the holidays” said Avram, and he and wrote him a very substantial check as a loan, which Hayim put in his Tallis bag. They went to Shul.

As the year progressed, Hayim seemed to be doing much better. His business turned around, he bought a new car and did some renovations to the house. Avram was pleased, but also surprised that Hayim never said a word or offered to repay the loan. Finally, after a whole year, when Hayim came to the house for their annual Holiday walk to shul, Avram could stand it no longer, and asked “what became of the check?” “Oy,” said Hayim, “I forgot all about it. Right after the holidays, things turned around with my business, and I never even cashed it. In fact, it’s still in my bag. Here, take it.”

Avram was very upset: “How could you?” he said, “How could you let it sit for a whole year and not do anything at all with it? You didn’t return it, you didn’t invest it, you didn’t give it to Tzedakah, nothing. So, I gave it to you in vain.”

Then Yonk explained the story to me: “How often do we come before God, on the Holidays and ask God to give us the gift of life, for another year, and then what do we do with it? Do we invest it with new meaning? Do we grow it, share it, make that life better in some way...for ourselves and for the lives we touch? Aren’t we all part of each other’s life stories? When the holidays come again, will

we be the same people we were the year before? *Lo Nasa La Shav Nafshi*--Do we take the life God gives us in vain?"

Folks, life is not a game. It's a story. On Yom Kippur we come before God to contemplate the stories of our lives and consider how we might create an even more meaningful life story. So, what's your story? And what will you add to it in the year ahead? *G'mar Hatimah Tovah.*

