

You is Kind. You is Smart. You is Important.

This is the wisdom of Aibileen Clack, a character in the 2009 best selling novel *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett. This affirmation is a refrain that Aibileen, a black nanny, repeats over and over again to her charge -- a little white girl named Mae Mobley.

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When the world tells you otherwise, let this be your core narrative.

We all have core stories that we tell about ourselves, that we learned as children, that we learn in our jobs or from our friends or spouses or communities. And those core stories can be life changing.

This week's parsha commands that Jews tell two stories about themselves. The first is a story of gratitude. When a person brings their first fruits to the Mikdash every year, they respond-- **וענית**-- Rashi says this word means that they respond loudly, with the story that is the heart of the maggid at our seder: **ארמי אובד אבי**-- my father was a wandering Aramean and now I have been freed and brought to this land-- and here are its first fruits, and I am so grateful for it all.

The Second is a story of Generosity. This is the vidui maaser, a declaration of: I have tithed according to the law. I have given appropriately to the Levi, the stranger, the orphan and the widow. If the first story, the Declaration of First fruits-- is told out loud-- as a **וענית ואמרת**, you shall respond and you shall say-- this story, the Tithing Confession-- say the Daat Zekeinim-- was told quietly -- just a **ואמרת** --and you shall say.

One story is told loudly, the other quietly. One story is told every year with the firstfruits, the other only once in a seven year cycle, after the third year. Nechama Leibowitz suggests that these stories are put next to each other for a reason-- because otherwise they don't belong here. The other rules about tithing, and even this particular point in the seven year cycle-- were described earlier in Devarim, in Parashat Re'eh. Other obligations involving gratitude for the land are in Parashat Eikev, where we have the mitzvah of birkat hamazon-- to give thanks for the output of the land and for the food that we eat. Leibowitz suggests that they were put in juxtaposition one to the next so that we could compare and contrast. And that's exactly what the Mishnah in the second chapter of Bikkurim does: this is what Bikkurim have that Maaser doesn't have, **ויש בביכורים מה שאין כן בתרומה**, **ובמעשר**, and their laws are compared and contrasted. No doubt the root of this Mishnah lays in the same careful analysis of these two declarations and their placement in the Torah.

But I wonder whether, in addition, these two declarations were put here to remind us to tell important stories about ourselves.

In a seminal study called "[Stereotype Susceptibility](#)," psychologists Margaret Shih, Todd L. Pittinsky and Nalini Ambady discovered that the stories people tell about themselves can make quantifiable differences in their lives. They gave a math test to Asian women and told some of them to write "Asian" across the top, some of them to write "Woman" across the top, and some of them to write nothing (a control). The ones who were primed for "Asian" scored the highest of the bunch significantly. These women reminded themselves of the story "Asians are good at math" and they performed way better than the women who reminded themselves of

the story “women are bad at math.” Their priming, the stories they told about themselves in that moment as they sat down to take the test, changed their performance.

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The stories we tell about ourselves matter. They are external, they are stereotypes, yes, but they make a difference.

The Sefer HaChinuch asks: why do we even have the Tithing Confession-- the viduy maaser? You did the Mitzvah, you tithed, why do you now need to go and talk about it? And he answers: because people are careful with their words. They are more careful with their words than they are with their actions. If they need to report about themselves, they'll do it more and better than they would if there were no report.

Which is all to say-- We become the stories we tell about ourselves. If I tell you a story about how well I tithe, I'm more likely to be great at tithing.

So this time of year, in Elul, as we reflect on ourselves and try to make improvements-- let's ask ourselves: what are those stories? What stories do I tell about myself to my friends, to my children, to my colleagues?

Which ones do I say loudly-- like the first fruits declaration-- the stories I wear on my skin and clothing, that I tell about myself in the public sphere --- and which ones do I share only quietly, like the tithing confession, where I share it only with my confidants, my family, maybe only myself.

And then there's step two: evaluation. Do I like these stories?

The Torah gives us some ideas, in this week's Parasha, about good stories to tell.

The First Fruits Declaration, a public story, is a story of gratitude: I am abundantly grateful for all that made it possible for me to be here, with my first fruits today. This was all given to me by Hashem-- אשר נתתה לי ה'.
A story of family connectedness: My story starts with my forefathers and their suffering. ארמי אובד אבי.
A story of productivity: I made something and here it is. הנה הבאתי את ראשית פרי האדמה. I now bring the first fruits of the soil.

The Tithing Confession, a more private story, is a story of generosity-- I have given to the needy and to the levite. With my giving I am a supporter of essential Jewish institutions, and I help create a more equitable society.

A story of observance -- I have kept all of the mitzvot that Hashem has commanded. Even when they were hard or inconvenient or confusing עשיתי ככל אשר ציותני. I have done just as you commanded me.

And a story of merit-- now, after I've done my part, I've earned your good will. השקיפה ממעון קדשך מין. - look down from Your holy abode, from heaven, and bless your people Israel.

These stories and more are present in the Torah's First Fruits Declaration and Tithing Confession. And we are commanded to tell them in the first person singular.

There are a lot of stories, in the upcoming days and weeks, that we do not tell in the singular. **אשמנו בגדנו גזלנו** -- We have sinned, we have acted treacherously, we have robbed, we have spoken slander. We have acted perversely, we have acted wickedly, we have acted presumptuously, we have been violent, we have framed lies.

These are our communal confessions-- but we have a choice as to whether they are “my stories, my confessions” or “our stories, our confessions.” And we need to be very careful with that choice. Maybe it makes sense for these stories to be “my stories” for a couple of weeks right now-- maybe that will help me in my Teshuva process. Or maybe that isn't a healthy story, maybe I need to distance myself from these stories by keeping them in the plural-- and for the most part, our liturgy gives us that option.

The Torah gives us no option about the positive narratives. The First Fruits Declaration and the Tithing Confession, in Temple times, **must** be said in the singular. This is my story, my statement and I must now transform myself into compliance with it.

Rav Kook writes in the third chapter of Orot HaTeshuva that the beginning of the Teshuva process is a Return-- a Teshuva-- to ourselves. To our best selves.

Telling better stories is that beginning. That's step three, after we evaluate the stories we already tell about ourselves-- we fix them. We commit to telling better stories. Stories that serve us, remind us of our truest, best selves and help us get there. Stories that enable us to say-- yes, I have done wrong things in the past, **אשמנו בגדנו גזלנו**-- but I am not defined by those things. They happened, but they are not my core stories.

Instead, as recommended by our parasha, here's a core story to consider: I am grateful, I am connected, I am productive. I am generous, I am observant, I am worthy.

Shabbat Shalom