

I'd like to tell you a story and it's going to be brief so pay attention: Abraham hears the voice of God instructing him to go and offer his beloved son as a sacrifice. He gets up the next morning and leaves early to fulfill the command. They traveled to the top of the hill while Abraham does not answer the direct questions from Isaac. Abraham is about to kill Isaac when God says, “stop”. Abraham sees a ram and kills it for God instead.<sup>1</sup> Good story? Maybe. But it sure wasn't told well. In fact, it's a very poorly written story for which I would have received a failing grade from Mr. Corcoran in my 9th grade English class.

He would have told me that I had failed to develop the characters fully. There is no sense of what they were feeling or what their faces betrayed behind their actions. There was no description of the surroundings nor any sort of denouement. This is one of the most powerful scenes in the entire Torah. Our hero is challenged by his Master and it seems like there is no way to win. For Abraham to win in this game of chicken, Isaac has to lose. We have been rooting for Abraham and Sarah, how can we now see the arrival of Isaac come to a premature end? We want to know what Abraham is thinking. We want to know what happened between the man and the boy. And, we want to know what Abraham says to Isaac on the way home. How does he defend what he was about to do?

I know it is sort of a silly comparison but, how did we fall in love with Tony Soprano from the HBO series? This is a man who by, all reasonable explanations, we should hate. He is a mob boss who flouts the law, demeans and exploits women and murders with impunity. And yet, he is also a loving husband and devoted father. At the end of a long hard day of work, he comes home and struggles to raise his family the best he can. I do that. How about Walter White - The high school chemistry teacher turned drug kingpin from the show “Breaking Bad”? He was a good man who played by the rules and then received a terminal cancer diagnosis. Seeing no

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<sup>1</sup> Based on Genesis 22.

other way to provide for his family he very reluctantly began using his chemistry skills to cook methamphetamines. As he was transformed by the experience, the watcher almost feels sympathy for him and it's because we can see what he's going through and we can even imagine ourselves in his shoes and wonder how we'd handle ourselves differently – or maybe similarly. In important ways, the writers showed us how the characters are struggling to achieve the same values we ourselves strive for – allowing us (shockingly) to identify with them and so, we discount a lot of the other horrible traits. I can find little pieces of myself in Tony Soprano and Walter White - I cannot see myself in Abraham. In fact, think about all the best shows that you have binge-watched over the last several years. I guarantee that the main characters were all better developed than Noah, Moses or Rebecca.

We read that Isaac loved Rebecca.<sup>2</sup> This is as about as explicit as the bible will get when it comes to romance. We read that Leah was grateful for the birth of her son so she named him Judah – from the same root as “*todah* – thank you”<sup>3</sup> If you were counting, that would be 22 generations of humanity before somebody thought to express gratitude to God like that.<sup>4</sup> Is that because every woman before Leah took their children for granted and assumed that God would provide them as a matter of course? No, it is because the authors of the Torah were lousy story tellers! Which is particularly surprising given that the Torah is designed to be a narrative to hold the interest of eons of listeners. Thankfully, the centuries of rabbinic voices have filled in the gaps for us.

Everybody loves stories. I've never met a kid who won't stop what they're doing and sidle on up to an interesting storyteller. One of the most popular podcasts out there today is that of the Moth Radio Hour. Nothing more than regular people telling the stories of real episodes in their lives. Our Talmud is a mixture of stories as remembered by the rabbis and nobody wrote stories better than the Chassids. The best historians are good storytellers who weave together a narrative based on researched facts. Between the knowable facts, there will always remain gaps which are then filled in by the adept writer. The well-known, Israeli

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 24:67.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 29:35.

<sup>4</sup> b. Brachot 7b.

sociologist, Noah Yuval Hariri writes, “Sapiens rule the world because only they can weave an intersubjective web of meaning: a web of laws, forces, entities and places that exist purely in their common imagination. This web allows humans alone to organise (*sic*) crusades, socialist revolutions and human rights movements.”<sup>5</sup> To restate his point, our ability to share each other’s stories is that which defines us as different from the rest of the animal world. Stories are how we know ourselves and stories are how we work together to achieve what the rest of the animal kingdom cannot. We’re not just talking about a narrative of what happened to us yesterday at Trader Joe’s...Hariri is explaining how it is that huge numbers of humans can go to war – all fighting for the same thing. And, he’s demonstrating how we share the same story about climate change without which we could not have witnessed last week’s globally-spread protests.

He is talking about shared human constructs that allow us to create a manageable and organized world in which to function but his defense of stories’ importance apply just as aptly to our individual tale. He says, “the best reason to learn history [is]: not in order to predict the future, but to free yourself of the past and imagine alternative destinies. Of course, this is not total freedom – we cannot avoid being shaped by the past.”<sup>6</sup> This is a more nuanced statement of George Santayana’s “Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”<sup>7</sup>

Think of choose-your-own-adventure books: Once you’ve read a page and made a decision (unless you’re breaking the rules) you are bound to move forward from that point. If you decided to chase the bad guy into the scary abandoned mine and it went badly for you, the next time you have a risky decision to make, you will subconsciously have the first experience on which to base your second set of choices. You’re not completely free but neither are you completely scripted. Or, as Bachya Ibn Pakuda phrased it in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, “Days are scrolls, write on them what you want to be remembered.”<sup>8</sup> We are like choose-your-own-adventure

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<sup>5</sup> Hariri, Yuval Noah. Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow. p. 150.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* p.65.

<sup>7</sup> Santayana, George. The Life of Reason. Vol. 1, 1906.

<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Bachya ibn Pakuda, 11th century.

books. Except with an unlimited number of endings and a lot more data upon which we are making our decisions.

So, despite the fact that the characters are poorly developed, the plots are overly simplistic and the details are fantastic without the usual pleasure of fantasy, I still read the stories of the bible. Why? Because we have the ability to project upon them experiences familiar to us and to utilize them in considering our own next steps. Abraham lied about Sarah being his sister – how did that make her feel? Would he do it again? Next time you're tempted to lie, might you stop to think about how it affects others around you? Miriam attacked her brother for his choices and did terrible damage to her relationship. Would she think twice before speaking out against him in that way? Would you perhaps, weigh the pros and cons the next time you're tempted to point out the wrongs of your loved ones? King David naively followed his sexual drives and they led him into deeper and more damaging choices with Batsheva. Knowing how the story got away from him, would he have exhibited greater restraint the next time he saw a beautiful woman? Having him as a cautionary reminder, could a story like his influence your decisions? With the help of the commentators, we are presented with the right questions to ponder from the stories. So, there is my plug for sticking with the reading of the Bible despite its dated presentation and unsatisfying answers but let's move our attention a little closer to home for some modern story telling.

Psychologists today are in broad agreement that the human's sense of self is little more than one long and complex narrative that is constantly being written and upon which we draw for every single way we understand the world around us. Dan McAdams at Northwestern University calls it "Narrative identity: the idea that who we are "[goes] considerably beyond [biological or demographic] facts as people selectively [interpret] aspects of their experience and...construct stories that make sense to them and to their audiences, that vivify and integrate life and make it more or less meaningful."<sup>9</sup> Our identity, the very nature of who we are, is experienced like a story – it is how we know ourselves.

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<sup>9</sup> McAdams, Dan P. "The Psychology of Life Stories." Review of General Psychology 5.2 (2001): 100-122. Print.

If that's true then it seems to me it would be worth our paying attention to how the story actually is written rather than the Cliff's Notes version we usually share with others and even tell ourselves. But here is the problem – most of us are pretty bad when it comes to our own stories. We're bad at hearing them and we're lousy at telling them. I heard someone say once, "Jews don't listen...we wait." It is obviously not just Jews – everyone is bad at listening. As we take in some of what we're hearing, we're already forming our own responses and waiting for the moment we can offer them.

Think of the last time you really heard a person's story. If you're a therapist, it was probably at 3:30 this afternoon. If you're like most people, it's likely been somewhat longer. Maybe a close friend really needed to talk to you about something happening in her life and you were fully present and pushed away all other distractions. Maybe you remember one of those early conversations in a relationship that seemed to go on all night – you never imagined it possible to get so lost in the thoughts of another. What about the last time you felt someone *really* listening to your story?

Well, if you're in therapy and have a good therapist, it might have been at about 3:30 this afternoon, but most people don't find nearly enough opportunities to tell their narrative. And, then when we do, we're bad at delivering our own stories – something you might think would be second nature. You likely failed to provide the correct and sufficient context to the listener. And you almost certainly neglected to paint a full picture of what exactly was happening for you.

Kim Schneiderman, a psychotherapist and spiritual essayist makes some strong points by way of an explanation. She highlights the ways in which most of us fail to deliver an accurate version of our experience thanks to two narrator negations: the Censoring Ego and the Inner Critic.<sup>10</sup> It's pretty hard, without a technique, to get at the heart of what is really happening to us and around us because our inner mechanisms seek to protect us from embarrassment.

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<sup>10</sup> Schneiderman, Kim. Step Out of Your Story. New World Library, Novato, CA. 2015. p.28

Instead, she recommends a practice proven to be effective by multiple University studies – telling our story in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person.<sup>11</sup> These cognitive and social scientists have discovered, through experimentation that, if we tell the story about an upsetting situation in which we are the main character but, step into the role of the omniscient narrator<sup>12</sup>, we become far more capable of opening up and providing an honest description of what was taking place. The science seems to suggest that a human brain has some sort of firewall that it puts up when it senses that sharing information with the world could render us vulnerable. The brain can be tricked however and this automatic protective feature can be neutralized when we're not talking about ourselves but rather about someone else with the same name in a situation we are familiar with. Even those of you out there who would describe yourselves as mediocre writers: think about how well you could create and describe a character just like yourself in a fictional story. Who would know more about what that character has been through and what others would should know about his/her experience than you?!?

Why is it important that the story of your life enjoy greater accuracy and 360° perspective? What is the goal of getting the details right? Your identity is continuing to evolve and the stories that might feel like the distant past are still impacting how you know yourself. The better one can see the stories, the more accurately and effectively they can help one grow. This means not simply allowing history to take its course and move on, but to embrace its ongoing impact upon who you are now...which will affect who you will be tomorrow.

So, this is your homework. In these days between – the Ten Days of Repentance – we are instructed to do our best to make amends and recommit ourselves to better living. How can you do that if you cannot see your role and your failures clearly. So, between now and Yom Kippur I challenge you to pick an episode that defines you. Choose one that is not simple. Choose one that left you feeling unresolved. Choose one in which other actors played a role. And tell it.

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* pg.26.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

Sit at the computer or with your notepad. Sketch out the basic storyline. Consider the scenes and develop the characters with whatever flashbacks will help explain their behavior. As you narrate the climactic scene, be sure to get us readers into the head of the main character – that’s you. Tell us what he was thinking. Tell us what she was afraid of. Without the judgment of a participant, describe what *they* thought was happening at the time and then turn to the denouement and dictate for us how things were left. What were the enduring memories of all involved and how did they differ from each other? Remember, in this telling, you’re like God in that you become Omniscient. You can know things that the character, you, could never have understood while the events were playing out! Make sure those pertinent details are included.

As you imagine doing what I suggest, can you also imagine forming a different relationship with your memory of that experience? It would certainly be interesting to see what new vantage point would be yours from the narrator’s chair. What new insights would you emerge with?

It’s possible that there are some of you here for whom this sounds silly. OK. There are others of you here who are open to the possibility that narrating your own story might be interesting but are not going to do it, either. OK. There are a few of you here who are already perfect and there really is no work needed on yourself – you probably don’t even need to be here and are excused from next week’s services, too. But, for the rest of you – remember there might be something of value here – give it a try. And be inspired by the words of Megan Miller who built upon Henry Ford’s famous teaching: If you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always got so if you want what you’ve never had, you have to do what you’ve never done.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Miller, Megan. As found on <https://alphahypnosis.co.nz/contact-us/attachment/323886/>. 9/20/2019.