

*Sh'ma na*. Please listen. I have a story to offer you. It is a true story. It is a personal story. It is important to me. Please receive it with love. Take it into your heart, swirl its sounds, its syllables, its secrets around in your mind and make them your own. This is my story, but we can share it. Together. As One. If we can, in this moment, give one another the Gift of Presence.

I was the child who did not know how to ask. Though I was blessed to know all four of my grandparents yet, in my childhood ignorance, I squandered the opportunity to really learn who they were and what life meant to them. As an adult, I harbor deep regret that I didn't learn my grandparents' stories. I know I shouldn't blame my child-self, but nevertheless, I feel a terrible guilt, an ache in my heart.

In this void of stories, my memory portrays my paternal grandparents as static, two-dimensional fixtures. My conjured images of them are like a child's drawing, scribbled in crayon, or painted in blurry watercolor brushstrokes. They babysat me every Tuesday night

while my parents went to choir practice. Together we watched Wheel of Fortune and Jeopardy. To child-me, my Mom Mom and Pop Pop were simply old. I loved them, but I didn't really know who they were.

My maternal grandparents lived longer. They owned a small home in Fairlawn, New Jersey and a vacation house in the Catskill mountains. As a child, I loved to take the long car ride with my parents up to that house and spend weekends there with them during the summer. I know I have inherited from my maternal grandmother, my Grandmommy, my love of singing, shopping and making things. She was a knockout in her youth and possessed a unique gift of writing song parodies. My Zaida had been a successful businessman, beginning his career in the garment industry. When I knew him, he was a gruff old man and a horrible patron at restaurants. Nevertheless, he was very generous to his family and was overjoyed to live long enough to meet his first grandchild.

Yet, I know there was so much more to my grandparents than these snippets of memories. In my parents' attic, we preserve the old photo albums and family treasures passed down through the years, but we've lost so many of the stories that once accompanied the fading images and dusty objects. I wish I had the opportunity to sit with my grandparents, slowly turning the yellowing pages of the tattered photo books, absorbing their recollections accompanying each black and white scene. If I could, I would go back and entreat them to tell me everything. What was life like? What were your hopes and dreams? What were your greatest successes and most devastating failures? I long to know what words of wisdom they would share with me if my grandparents were here today.

Throughout the High Holidays, we hear the shofar make one hundred sounds. Some notes are long, confident and resonant – sounds of triumphant thriving and effervescent flourishing. Others are fractured and fragmented – plaintive laments of longing and loss. Each person's life story is like this – some excerpts are resounding

celebrations of success and love and happiness. Other chapters sing sorrowfully of failure, heart ache and regret. Our tradition implores us to share it all. To tell the full story of our lives. It is considered a mitzvah to *sound* the shofar and, in turn, it is also a mitzvah to *hear* the shofar sounded. All the more so, it is a sacred obligation to both share and receive our stories.

A year ago, Ben and I gave our four parents the gift of Storyworth. As its name implies, Storyworth is an online tool to help loved ones share their worthwhile stories. Every week for a year, Storyworth sends our parents each a question: “What was your childhood like?” “What are your hobbies?” “What inspires you?” and our parents type their responses and send them back. At the end of the year, Storyworth compiles all of the answers into a hardcover book and everyone receives a copy. At first, we were not sure how our parents would react to the weekly prompt questions asking them to share personal memories and insights with us and their grandkids. We worried that

they might feel burdened by the assignment and simply choose not to respond. Thankfully, our concerns were unfounded.

My parents have told me that, throughout this past year, they regularly discuss the weekly questions together and then unpack and explore how they want to respond. If the automatically generated question doesn't resonate with them, they make up their own question to answer. When my dad sits down to write his answers to questions about his past, he calls it "time travelling." My mom, who claims to have a terrible memory, has miraculously recreated precious tales from her childhood to recount. Often their reflections are humorous. Many are poignant. Most are insightful. All of them make me cry. Each one is a priceless treasure.

This Storyworth experience has been more meaningful and impactful than we ever could have ever imagined. Through their weekly responses, our parents are bestowing stories imbued with wisdom, values, and candor to me and Ben and to our kids. With intention and purpose, our parents are sharing, in writing, that which is most

important to them. This unfolding ethical will of sorts is an invaluable gift from our parents to us. It is a gift for our children and for generations to come. And from our parents' perspective, it has been a gift to be given the opportunity to share, in life and in writing, their insights, advice and blessings with their offspring.

This is the beauty of stories. They are a reciprocal gift. The knowledge and naivetes. The failures and the fruitful work of their endeavors. The loves and the losses. When someone chooses to share with you – every iota of it is a gift. It is a gift because they believe you are worthy of receiving this part of them. It is a gift because they are entrusting you with something important they need to share. It is a gift because they are confident you will hold and honor their story.

Listening to (or reading) someone's story is also a gift. When we listen and bear witness, we accept their words and the messages therein. The listener says, "yes, I will carry your narrative with me. Because it is precious to you, it is also precious to me. I am present in this moment

of exchange. I am truly listening. I will remember. Because I care. I will love this story because I love you.

In our Rosh Hashana Machzor, in place of V'ahavta, there is a reading:

Will you open your soul to me?

Will you speak your mind?

Can you love me? Will you take my words?

Take them with you

Teach them in sunshine

Teach them in kitchens

Make these words psalms

Make them stories and philosophy

Repeat them until they are music

Wrap yourselves inside the sounds

Write these words and keep the writings close at hand

Or better yet

Know them by heart

To gaze upon them with mind's eye

To carry them wherever you go

Thanks to Storyworth, I do not think my children will harbor the same regrets about their grandparents as I do. They are the wise children who want to know the significance of it all, who will readily receive these stories and allow their meaning to permeate their being. Throughout their lives, they will find the answers they seek in a unique volume, made just for them, by their ancestors. It will be a tome to read and reread through the years, even after their grandparents and even we, are gone. From the pages of this book will emanate teachings, wisdom, history, and blessings. It will be their guide. Their Torah.

Through this process, I hope that my children are learning that, not only are their grandparents' stories important, but so are theirs. With a new appreciation for the holy, reciprocal nature of stories, I am working to really listen to my kids' daily anecdotes, whether they be about Minecraft or Pokemon, some drama with a friend at school or a difficult homework assignment, I am trying to show them that their stories matter to me because they – my children – are of the utmost importance to me. Sharing stories connects us deeply. Stories say, "I'm

here. See me. Hear me. Pay attention to me.” I need to remember to receive their gifts more readily, with more gratitude, more focus and attention. To be truly present. Because their stories are presents, each one beautifully wrapped in their childhood innocence and enthusiasm. And, by listening, I bestow upon them the Gift of Presence. “I am here with you in this moment. *Shamati*. I hear you. I am your *ayd*.” I am your witness. And, in this sacred exchange of storytelling, we are One.