

What Is Your Story?  
Rosh HaShanah Morning Alternative Service 5778  
September 21, 2017 / 1 Tishrei 5778

Going up? The doors slide open and you step into a small box of a room that just might hold the promise of an encounter that could change the course of your life. You have 25 or 30 seconds to tell an important message, to sell a great idea, to *kvell* about a success in order to pique someone's interest in taking a closer look. Do you break into song (*Hello!*) or do you maximize the opportunity with a show-stopping presentation given at breakneck speed? YouTube features dozens of videos with advice about how to craft and deliver the perfect elevator speech. Ironically, most of them are several minutes long. The gist: have a hook and stick to the book. Distill your pitch to its essence and know your story well before you start speaking because the doors of opportunity open and close very quickly.

A few weeks ago, Rick and I experienced a twist on the elevator speech. The National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia has a small recording studio in which museum visitors are invited to tell their story as part of the larger narrative of more than 350 years of Jews in North America. The studio has the welcoming ambience of a cozy living room. As Rick and I entered, an older couple displayed on a monitor beckoned us to sit down and relax. They explained that we'd have 120

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seconds to tell our story. Then things got a little crazy. A computer console on the coffee table in front of us flashed story prompts and a long list of instructions. At the same time, the kibitzing between the couple on the monitor intensified. I couldn't figure out if they were chitchatting with one other or schmoozing with us. Suddenly, blinding lights switched on in the front corners of the room, and a digital clock began counting down the two minutes Rick and I had to share our narrative. At first the words gushed forth in a torrent: our names, our children's names, where we live, what we do, where we work. Then there was dead silence. Now what? What story did we want to tell? What narrative did we want to record as our legacy? Since we didn't know what to anticipate, we hadn't rehearsed the story we wanted to share. I was keenly aware of the clock and how much time had elapsed. I searched frantically on the console for a pause button, for some way to give ourselves more time or at least to erase and redo the video. Fortunately, we recovered enough to offer a heartfelt explanation about how honored we are to serve as Rabbis, how proud we are of our children, and how important Israel is to our family. We have a copy of the video, but I'm not ready to watch it. It was not our finest moment.

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On Rosh HaShanah, as the old year eases into the new, what a perfect time it is for us to think about our life stories, to reflect on the key elements that drive the narratives of our lives. But this business about 120 seconds or, even worse, six words is so arbitrary. It's preposterous to think that we can do justice to what we want to express within such artificial parameters. And yet, a compelling narrative needs to be expressed efficiently and, at some point, it has to conclude. Even the greatest memoirs and biographies don't go on forever. Boiling down your narrative so that it has some punch, so that it expresses a sense of self and self-worth, is essential for the most important audience of all: you. It takes time to compose the stories that best capture the essence of our lives. And yes, I said **stories**, with an s, in the plural. We all have memorable stories to tell, if not from long ago then certainly from the year that just ended. Think back to last Rosh HaShanah and to last Yom Kippur. Think back to last Chanukah and to last Pesach. Think back to the celebrations and the sorrows. Recall the things that made you laugh and the things that made you cry. Think about what made you proud and what made you *plotz*. Think about loved ones who passed away and how their stories impacted your own. Think about new friends or family who came into your life, adding

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chapters to your narratives. And if you experience writer's block, certainly the current political situation offers food for thought. As you reflect on the passage of the days and the weeks and the months, on the cycle of a year, compose a compelling anthology that articulates the stories of your life.

Rick and I are writing a new chapter in our narrative. Approximately 24½ years ago, we welcomed our oldest son Josh into our family, with Sam and Jakob following behind. Approximately 24½ days ago, Rick and I became empty nesters. Josh is Washington, D.C., Sam is in Jerusalem, and Jakob, most of the time, is in Boulder. I'm not sure where those 24½ years went, especially since there were countless days along the way that seemed interminable. Who doesn't know *that* agonizing feeling: the stopped clock illusion when time stands still? It might happen when we're tired or when we're sick. It might occur when we're worried or when we're angry, when we're anxious or when we have to endure an unpleasant situation. And yet, those hours that crawl and those years that fly are the plotlines of our stories. The interactions with family and friends, the periods of loss and the occasions for growth are what make our stories full of life and dynamic. It's important to reflect, but after reciting last year's story, it's time to move on.

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Today marks the beginning of a new chapter, and each new chapter requires us to redefine ourselves and to reconsider our relationships. And guess what? That takes a lot more time than 120 seconds. Regardless of the time, redefining ourselves, reevaluating who we are in the midst of changing circumstances, is exactly what Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur are all about. These High Holy Days, *Yamin Noraim*, are our opportunity to begin writing fresh new chapters that express who we are and how we want to live in the New Year. In anticipation of the possibilities, think about the relationships you want to build and the relationships you need to heal. Think about the books you want to read, the places you hope to visit, the healthy lifestyle changes you want to incorporate, the Jewish values you want to integrate into your daily life. Do you hope to be more patient? Do you aspire to become a better listener? Are you interested in devoting more time to Jewish study or becoming more active in the Jewish community? Do you want to allocate more time for family and friends or more resources for charitable purposes? It's one thing to articulate our visions for the New Year. It's another thing to work hard to actualize them. The choices we make will become the newest chapters in our narratives.

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As Rick and I finished our two minute taping, I realized that while we share a narrative as a couple, each of us has a different story to tell. Each of us has an individual spin to our mutual experience. That's why, after the initial rush of biographic details, we were at a loss for words. Often as a family we'll reminisce and someone will bring up something that nobody else remembered, or add a certain twist: *Well I remember it this way.* We have a collective family memory, yet each of us has our own story to tell.

One of the things that Rick and I do when preparing candidates for conversion is help them express the story of their journey to Judaism. It takes disciplined practice to describe the past, to articulate what inspired an interest in Judaism, and to verbalize how they envision their future life as a Jew. During our intakes with these individuals, we ask each to write down the narrative their spiritual journeys. Over the course of the months and sometimes the years we work together we'll review these narratives and expand on the stories. In preparation for that auspicious day when the candidate meets with the Beit Din, the Conversion Board, I inform them that the Rabbis on the Beit Din will ask them to tell their story. They often look at me and say: "Why do I need to tell the story when I already wrote it out on my application for conversion? Can't the Rabbis just read it?" That's

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when I tell them that yes, the Rabbis will have read your story, but they want you to tell it to confirm to yourself that your story is special, that your story is sacred, that your story matters. The best way confirm this is by hearing yourself narrate your own story. Besides which, inevitably you'll have to share versions of your story with family and friends in response to their inquiries about your spiritual journey. So there's no harm in rehearsing your story and knowing it well. Similarly, when we as a community celebrate with the men and women who study to become adult B'nai Mitzvah, one of the highlights of that service is when they share snippets of their personal stories. We are the People of the Book, after all, so it's not surprising the chapters of our lives assume such importance.

As we begin this New Year, take the time to think about "Your Story." Will you focus on family or friends, on the home in which you live, on the work you perform or the school you attend? Will you describe places you visited or relationships that make a difference in your life? Will you emphasize successes or will you concentrate on personal challenges? Will you describe an heirloom or will you reflect on a work of art that made you think differently: a book or a movie or a painting or a song? While we're prone to reflect on what was and to write in past tense, this Jewish New

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Year provides us with the blessed opportunity to think about the future and draft new chapters for the year ahead.

You might have noticed that our Rosh HaShanah *machzor* includes five alternative Torah readings and four alternative *Haftarot*. Why use so much paper, especially when all nine texts address the same theme of human struggle and moral choices? Why are these texts included? They serve as an example that there's more than one way to tell a story.

You have your perspective. I have mine. By reading about how others dealt with difficult life choices we might gain valuable insight into how we might react if faced with comparable situations.

Here's a gift as we draft our stories for the year ahead: If last year's narrative didn't play out as you had hoped, now is the time to start writing the next and better chapter. Of course not every life occurrence is in our hands; that's the price of being mortal. But there are things we can change, if we want to.

Jewish philosopher Bachya Ibn Pakuda said, "Days are scrolls: write on them what you want remembered." It's your life. It's your story. May the chapters you write in this New Year be filled with *simchas*, with happiness,

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and with all good and sweet things you envision for yourself and your loved ones.