

Creating The Story Of Torat El

Shanah Tovah. It is so wonderful to be with all of you this evening as we begin our journey of personal and communal introspection during these Yamim Noraim, literally, these "awesome days." Before I begin I would like to extend a very big Todah Rabbah, thank you, to the many *many* members of this community who have dedicated so much time and energy to welcoming Jane-Rachel, our children, and me to our new community. You have helped us make a smooth transition to our new home and life on the Jersey Shore, and we are thankful to have met such generous and thoughtful people throughout the search process and over these past few months.

Tonight I'd like to ask you to think about your connection to this congregation, and what your involvement has meant to you. Did you celebrate your child's baby naming, bris, or bar or bat mitzvah in this community? Were you, or your children, or your parents married here?? Did you take classes in the synagogue, either as a child and teen, or an adult? Did you go to Israel with this community? Have you experienced a loss during your time with this congregation? Have you attended services regularly on Shabbat, or occasionally for holidays and other special occasions? Have you built relationships here? Have you celebrated wonderful moments together? And have you been comforted or comforted others in moments of pain?

Now I'd like you to reflect on what all of these experiences have meant to you. How have these moments in time, these hours of involvement, or these lifetimes of commitment shaped who you are? What values and practices have you learned from your participation in this synagogue, and how has your life been enriched by your relationships with people here? What have you learned or gained from your involvement in synagogue life?

Eli Wiesel begins his book, The Gates of the Forest with the following Jewish legend:

There is a story told that when the Baal Shem Tov had a difficult task before him, he would go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire, and meditate in prayer. And then he was able to perform the task.

A generation later, the Magid of Mazrich was faced with the same difficult task. So, he went to the place in the woods, but he had forgotten exactly how to light the fire as the Baal Shem Tov had done. He said: "Ribono Shel Olam, Master of the Universe, I can no longer

light the fire, but I can still speak the prayers." And so he prayed as the Baal Shem Tov had done and he was able to complete the task.

A generation later, Rabbi Moshe Lev had to perform the same task. He too went into the woods, but he had not only forgotten how to light the fire, he had forgotten the prayers as well. He said, "Ribono Shel Olam, Master of the Universe, I can no longer light the fire, nor do I know the secret meditations belonging to the prayer. But, I do know the place in the woods to which it all belongs- and that must be sufficient." And it was.

Finally, when another generation had passed, Rabbi Israel Salanter was called upon to perform the task. He sat down in his home and said: "I cannot light the fire. I do not know the words of the prayers. And I no longer know the place in the forest. But I can tell the story of how it was done- and that must be sufficient." And it was. God created man because He loves stories.

Stories are holy and the sharing of stories has the potential to be transformative. Rosh Hashanah is the perfect time to think about our stories due to the traditional focus on *Cheshbon Hanefesh*, personal soul searching and reflection. Both Cheshbon Hanefesh and Teshuvah, repentance, rely on an individual looking closely at his or her life story in order to see what might be learned from it.

The critical value and importance of stories is emphasized by the holiday's traditional image of God as an author who spends time opening, writing, and signing the Books of Life and Death.¹ We can certainly understand this concept of God as a model for us, God's children, made in God's image. Just as God spends these days involved in the stories of our lives, so too should we.

And despite these images of God writing in and sealing our Books of Life, ultimately it is us, and not God, who are the authors of our own stories. The *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer we chant during the Mussaf service says: "*chotem yad kol adam bo*," God finds each of *our* signatures inside the Book of Remembrance. And the Slonim Rebbe, Rabbi Sholom Noach Berezovsky, a twentieth Century Hasidic Rabbi, taught that the books which are opened by God during these High Holidays are actually new, blank books waiting to be filled in by each one of us.²

¹ Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah, 16b

² Netivot Shalom, Hayom Harat Olam, 109-110

A community, like the individual, must also endeavor to explore its collective story to see what it can learn when entering a New Year. This year in particular, in addition to our own personal reflections, we have the powerful opportunity to envision what will be written in our communal Book of Life. What will our new story of Congregation Torat El be and how will we work together to honor our old story? That is the question that we collectively seek to address as we begin this New Year together.

I hope many memories and reflections came to mind as you thought about the questions I asked just a few moments ago. And naturally your answers reflected your particular experiences as a part of either Congregation Beth Torah or Congregation Beth El. All of you have been blessed to have been a part of these two amazing communities, each with stories that are to be remembered, celebrated and honored. And as the story of the Ba'al Shem Tov points out, long after the memory of Beth Torah and Beth El as separate entities is gone, their stories will live on and their stories will be holy.

Of course, we do not know exactly what the story of Torat El will look like. But one thing is certain: The way we listen, value, and honor the stories of our past will inform the way we write the story of our future. Every morning when we rise up and every night when we lie down we say: Shema Yisrael, "Listen" Israel. Our entire belief system is couched in the language of listening, a clear reminder that listening is holy work. Listening, and listening with respect and a desire to understand, is the key ingredient to creating our new story.

We are a people of the book, a people whose religion is rooted in Torah, rooted in narrative. Judaism has never been monolithic, however, and our narrative has always embraced multiple traditions. Just look at any traditional page of text and you will find multiple voices coming together to make one whole. Our task in life is to take hold of our collective narrative, our own Torah of multiple voices, and embrace it in such a way that we might learn from it, be changed by it, and use it to change our world as we seek to bring meaning, purpose, holiness and wholeness into our lives and into this community.

As we begin this New Year together it is my hope and prayer that we can listen to one another's stories- to the stories of Beth Torah and the stories of Beth El/Bnai Shalom and to honor them as we work to create the new story of Torat El that at this point has but a mere introduction.

I am thrilled to be a part of this holy process and to join in creating this new story together. I feel blessed to have met so many of you over this past month, and I look forward to meeting many more of you soon in the months and years to come. I am also personally thankful that I have begun to learn about the histories of both communities and look forward to learning more. Please know that my door, my e-mail and my phone are open to you and I hope to connect with many more of you soon! As we move into this next chapter of our story, it is my hope and prayer that we listen to and honor one another as we together strive to build and grow our kehillah kedosha, our holy community. May the pages of Torat El's new Book of Life exemplify the best of our stories, our memories, our traditions, practices, and values.