

Writing Our Stories

Who has been the biggest influence on your life? What are the most important lessons you've learned in life? What was your childhood like? Who were your favorite relatives? What are the classic family stories? Do you remember your grandparents? How did you decide what to study in college? When did you first fall in love? How did you get engaged? When did you first vote and who did you vote for? What was it like when your child was born? How did you get your first job? How did you get your last job? Is there a childhood friend who you lost touch with, but who you will never forget? Where were you when Kennedy was shot? Where were you on September 11th? What book changed the way you look at the world? Do you believe in God? Where is your favorite vacation spot? What have you learned from life?¹

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

¹ Some questions taken from www.storycorps.net

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.

That is how Eli Wiesel, who we were honored to have with our congregation just a few weeks ago, begins his book, The Gates of the Forest. Elsewhere, Wiesel continues²:

My father, an enlightened spirit, believed in man.
My grandfather, a fervent Hasid, believed in God.
The one taught me to speak, the other to sing.
Both loved stories.
And when I tell mine, I hear their voices
Whispering from beyond the silenced storm.
They are what links the survivor to their memory

² Wiesel, Souls On Fire

It is the power of our stories, and God's love of stories that brings us here today.

For what are we supposed to be doing during these High Holidays if not exploring the stories of our own lives and examining how they intersect with the lives of others. That is what the process of *cheshbon hanefesh*, soul searching, and *teshuvah*, repentance, is all about. It is through exploring our life stories that we can grow and change. It is by telling these stories that we can hope to ensure that our families, friends, and future generations learn something from the lives that we lived. And because we are each created in God's image, our stories are not only sufficient, they are holy.

Renowned storyteller Peninah Schram writes:

Stories connect to our lives. They "talk" to us on different levels. Sometimes we have to hear a story many times in order to discover its meaning. We have to live with the story, think about it, dream about it. There is much wisdom in the requirement that the Jews read and listen each year to the same stories of the Bible, the Hanukkah story, the Megillah, the Haggadah. The same words, the same trope, yet the stories change as we grow wiser with each hearing and as we ourselves change....

The Jews are a storytelling people. We cherish our memories and celebrate them through our stories. We are called the People of the Book, but we are also a People of the Spoken word.³

Perhaps the critical value and importance of stories is why our tradition on these High Holy-days imagines God to be an author who spends time

³ *Jewish Stories One Generation Tells Another*, xxi, xv

opening, writing, and signing the Books of Life and Death⁴ On the one hand, this imagery may seem too simplistic, but if we take a closer look we can understand this concept of God as a model for us, God's children, made in God's image. For just as God spends these days involved in the stories of our lives, so too should we. As we write our own signatures into the Book of Life, we are reminded that we are the authors of our own stories. The Slonim Rebbe, Rabbi Sholom Noach Berezovsky, a twentieth Century Hasidic Rabbi, believed 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;⁵ stories about our life that are just waiting to be told.

Examining our own stories is a powerful tool for exploring our own personal growth. Our stories help us gain a deeper appreciation of who we are, where we have come from, and where we would like to be going. If I asked you to write about the most meaningful events of this past year, you would probably discover a great deal. And if I asked you to write about the most meaningful or significant events of your life, these would likely be stories that had a major impact on your life's hopes, dreams, fears, and worries. Imagine what the recollection of these stories could teach you about where you have come from, where you are right now, and where you would like to be going?

⁴ Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah, 16b

⁵ Netivot Shalom, Hayom Harat Olam, 109-110

And while some of our stories may feel private, most of our stories ought to be shared. It is through the sharing of stories that we assure that the deeper truths and meaning of our existence matter in this world.

I was reading a recent NPR article suggesting that there is evidence that for those who are reaching the end of their lives, for those people who society has cast aside as no longer productive or significant, this storytelling and reflection is particularly useful as it can give patients a renewed sense of purpose and meaning. Psychiatrist Harvey Chochinov developed this process he calls "dignity therapy" when he realized that, "what people found most assaulting and annihilating [about dying] was this idea that who they were would completely cease to exist after their death." Chochinov worked on the assumption that having something that will outlast you deeply matters to people and worked with his patients to create a formal written narrative of their life that could be passed on to the people that they loved. As Jews, we certainly know that our tradition encourages us to tell stories of our loved ones *after* they have died. It is through telling the stories of their lives, who they were, what they believed in, and how they lived, that their lives continue to hold meaning and purpose long after they are gone.

But telling stories should not to be reserved for people who are dying, and should not only be shared about people who have died. The importance of

sharing the stories of our life is not time bound. The value of sharing our stories so that we and those listening may come to know the deeper meaning and significance of our lives is continually relevant. It is through the telling of our stories that we can understand, and can help others understand, the way each of our lives has affected the world in which we live.

Rabbi Ed Feinstein tells the following story:

When the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, died, his disciples gathered to distribute his worldly possessions. One was given his tefillin and another, his *shtender*—his lectern. One received his books and another, his cup.

At the end of the line waited one faithful Hasid. But there was nothing of worldly value left, so he was given only the master's stories—and the responsibility of sharing them with the world.

The Hasid was dismayed. He would much rather have received something of tangible value. But he was conscientious and therefore set out into the world to share the master's stories. He didn't starve, but neither did he make much of a living. After all, Jews were poor. And how much could poor Jews pay for even the most enchanting of tales? So when word came to him that a wealthy Jewish man in a far-off land was prepared to offer a great fortune for the stories of the Ba'al Shem Tov, he praised God for the blessing and set off for the man's estate. Arriving on a Friday afternoon just before Shabbat, he was welcomed with great warmth and escorted directly into a magnificent banquet hall. After dinner the man and his guests turned to the Hasid and begged him to grace the evening with one of the Ba'al Shem

Tov's stories. At that moment the Hasid's mind went blank. Not one story could penetrate the fog, not one anecdote, not one reminiscence- he could remember nothing. In all the years of storytelling, this had never happened. Blushing with embarrassment and stammering in fear, he apologized.

"No matter!" responded the gracious host. "You are no doubt exhausted from your journey. Perhaps tomorrow you will share your stories with us!"

But the same thing happened at Shabbat lunch and again at supper. Just as he was about to begin one of his favorite stories, his mind went blank. Embarrassed, frustrated, and fearing the wealthy man's disappointment, the Hasid decided it best that he sneak away.

As he was slipping out of the palace that night, he was met at the door by his host. "I beg your forgiveness, sir," the startled Hasid pleaded. "I spent years with the Ba'al Shem Tov. I know hundreds of his tales, I have recited them for years, but for some reason I can remember none of them."

"Not one?" begged the man, suddenly distressed. "You were with the Ba'al Shem for so many years. Can't you remember even one moment of your master's life?"

"Only one remains with me," the Hasid replied. "Not a story, but a memory of a time when I was young and first began to follow the master. I was with him on Shabbat. He was distant and gloomy but would tell none of us why. As soon as Shabbat was over, he ordered us into his wagon, and we began a long trip. By morning we had entered a town notorious for its vicious

attacks on its Jews. And this was the worst of days to visit, Easter Sunday, when the Christian hatred of Jews was at its very greatest. We entered the town and found the entire Jewish quarter boarded up. No one would open a door to take us in. Finally we found our way to the synagogue's attic.

"In this town there was a bishop famous for his fierce hatred of the Jews. Every Easter the bishop would preach to the town, whipping the Christians into a vicious frenzy that they would let loose on the poor Jews. On that Easter Sunday morning the master ordered me to do the strangest thing: 'Go to the Cathedral,' he told me, 'and tell the bishop that the holy Ba'al Shem is ready to see him.'

'I protested. Master, 'I said, 'how can I go to such a place! They'll kill me! I trembled in fear.

But the master insisted, and so I went. The Christians looked at me in wonder as I ascended the pulpit to deliver the message. When I told the bishop that the holy Ba'al Shem was ready to see him, he turned, left the cathedral, and accompanied me to the synagogue.

"I don't know what happened next. The master and the bishop spent an hour in private conversation. Then the bishop emerged and returned to his pulpit in the cathedral. All I know is that there was no riot and no killing that year. The bishop sent the crowd home and declared the Jewish community under his protection. After that, I heard he disappeared and was never seen again."

At that the Hasid turned his gaze upon his host, who was weeping.

"Thank you, dear brother, thank you," he stammered. `You have no idea what you've done for me tonight. Thank you." He embraced the Hasid as he continued to weep.

At last, he composed himself and explained: "Dear brother, I was that bishop. I was the one who sent the mobs to kill and plunder the Jews of the town. But months before that Easter, I was haunted by strange dreams. I was told that on Easter a holy stranger would come to release me from my nightmares. It was I you summoned that morning to appear before the holy Ba'al Shem.

"In that hour he revealed to me my own secret. I had been born a Jew. I had been stolen from my mother before I could know her and was raised in the Church. I was taught to hate the Jews and to spread that hatred. I rose up in the world, from a poor orphan to the bishop of the region.

"But then the dreams came, and in them were visions of the hell that awaited me. I pleaded with your master: Was there no way for me to repent these terrible sins? And he showed me my only chance: To study Torah and live as a Jew, to open my doors to the poor and the homeless and use all my resources to support the helpless and the abandoned. That I promised to do.'

"I begged him: `Master, how can I know if my repentance has been accepted? And he told me: When one of my disciples comes to you, one who remembers none of his own stories but tells you your story. When you hear your own story, only then will you know that your repentance has been accepted and you are again with God.'

"Tonight, dear brother, you have brought me my story."⁶

Peninah Schram writes:

"There is comfort and meaning in stories, there is wisdom and power in stories. There is identification and safety in stories, there is healing and friendship in stories, there is the personal and the universal in stories. There is a shared experience between the story teller and the story listener."⁷

Each one of us has a unique story to tell. And we must tell it. Because sharing stories changes lives. It changes the life of the storyteller, and it changes the lives of the listeners. When the wealthy Jewish man heard the Hasid tell him his own story, his teshuva was complete because examining our own story allows us to learn and grow. And when the Ba'al Shem Tov's student told this story aloud, his act brought healing and wholeness to this individual, and in turn to the world.

The sharing of stories ensures that our lives have indeed mattered in this world. Sharing stories is our unique way of teaching others. The worldwide Jewish community, thanks primarily to Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation, has done a fantastic job capturing on film the stories of survivors of the Shoah. These stories of resistance, endurance, and survival are shared with Jewish and non-Jewish students alike. And the reasons behind this are clear: these stories have much to teach us; these stories

⁶ Feinstein, *Capturing the Moon*, 117-120.

⁷ Shared by Rabbi Holly Cohn

affect the way we each look at the world around us; these stories ensure that the horrific experiences of these people were not in vain; and the preservation of these stories allows them to continue teaching and inspiring generations well beyond each storyteller's years on this earth.

Telling our stories is easier than it sounds: you just have to figure out where to start. In 2003, a project many of you have likely heard of called "Story Corps" began collecting stories from the lives of ordinary Americans. Using a recording booth that was initially set up in New York's Grand Central station, tens of thousands of ordinary citizens were given the opportunity to share some of the stories of their lives. Each recording was given to the storyteller, many have been played on NPR, and all were preserved in the Library of Congress. Story Corps's mission is "to honor and celebrate one another's lives through listening." But why start a project like this at all? Story Corps director & founder Dave Isay explains: "If we take the time to listen, we'll find wisdom, wonder, and poetry in the lives and stories of the people all around us," and, we will be assured, "that our lives have mattered and we won't ever be forgotten."⁸

So again, sharing and listening to stories helps us learn and grow and helps ensure that our lives have meaning. For these two reasons alone, the sharing of stories is inextricably connected to Yom Kippur, as we all know

⁸ Isay, *Listening as an Act of Love*, Introduction

that personal growth and the discovery of the deeper meaning of our lives is precisely what this day is all about.

On Yom Kippur we create an atmosphere in which we are very much aware of our own mortality. As we imagine what life might be like after we are gone, we are compelled to think about what stories we have shared with our loved ones, and which ones have we left out? Just how much do others know about your life? What do you want them to know? Whose version of your story do you want them to tell—yours or theirs? And what will your legacy be when you are gone?

We do not have to be at a certain age or stage in life to share these stories, and they do not have to be intricate or complicated. It is often the simple stories that reveal the most both to ourselves, and to others, about who we are and what we value.

After facing death on Yom Kippur, we turn towards Sukkot and we attempt to re-construct our lives. This year, as we make this transition, I challenge you to begin re-constructing the stories of your life. Each one of us is made up by the stories we have collected along the paths of our life. Your first love. Your childhood memories. Your moments of joy and your moments of pain. Your greatest adventures. Your proudest accomplishments. The days

you will always remember, and the moments you wish you could forget. These moments, these memories, these stories: these are who you are. These are the things that brought you to this moment in your life. And these are the stories that will affect the paths your life, and the lives of those with whom you choose to share them.

There is no one right way to tell your stories. Some people start with life changing events. Some start with their childhood and their family growing up. Some focus on work. Others focus on important relationships in their lives. Some people use pictures to help jog their memories. These stories can be written, recorded, or videotaped. They can be shared with people now, or stored away for a future time. No matter the medium, you owe it to yourselves, to your children, to your family and to your friends, to share and save your stories. What stories do you wish you had heard from that beloved family member or friend who is no longer with you?

This Yom Kippur, as we ask God to seal us in the Book of Life, let us remember that ultimately the story is ours to be written and ours to be told. God doesn't mind sharing the pen. After all, God created humanity because God loves stories.