Temple Rodef Shalom

The Power of Narrative

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Sermon for Rosh Hashanah 5769
September 30, 2008

Nearly 20 years ago an event took place in Dharamsala, India that made Jewish history. A group of rabbis were asked to spend a week with the Dalai Lama. This great leader had invited the rabbis to meet with him because he felt that there was a connection between the experience of the Jewish people and the experience of his people, the Tibetan Buddhists. Both had been driven from their homeland. Both knew exile. We Jews had lived outside of the land of Israel from the year 70 to 1948 – a very long time and we have survived. The Dalai Lama and his people had been in exile since 1959 when the Chinese Army put down an insurrection in Tibet, destroying monasteries and driving many Buddhist monks and scholars into hiding. Now in exile, they too want and need to survive.

With great clarity I remember reading about this meeting. For the entire week the Dalai Lama and his fellow Tibetan Buddhists leaders, listened to lectures about our Jewish history, our tradition and our rituals. They shared meals, songs and joined in worship. One insight made a lasting impression on me. At the end of the week, the Dalai Lama explained: "In our dialogue with rabbis and Jewish scholars, the Tibetan people have learned about the secrets of Jewish spiritual survival in exile: one such secret lies in the Passover Seder." The Dalai Lama was intrigued by this ritual. He was enamored by the concept of our Haggadah. "Yes. Always remind," he said, "telling <one's story> strikes at the heart of how to sustain one's culture and tradition. This is the Jewish secret…of spiritual survival in exile."

When the Dalai Lama identified the Passover Seder as intrinsic to our survival, he zeroed in on the value of story telling and on the power of narrative. He understood how a story, or a sacred myth, could strengthen, guide, unite and inspire a people. You might call the Haggadah our Master Story – our most central corporate myth. While reading it we not only describe what happened in real or mythic time, we relive the experience ourselves. We put ourselves in Egypt with our ancestors and experience the weight of their oppression and the joy of their freedom. We join generations of our people and proclaim as they did: "Arami Ovade Avi – my father was a wandering Aramean and he went down to Egypt…was enslaved…but God saved us and brought us to our land." This is not only the story we tell, it is the story we own. We've heard it. We've remembered it. We've lived it and embraced it and now, having become a part of it, we are telling it again.

The Haggadah does even more really. This is not just a tale, or a myth, this narrative looms much larger. By putting ourselves within this pursuit of justice and experiencing Divine redemption, we create for ourselves what the philosopher Charles Taylor would call: Moral Space. A domain within our very core where the questions of what is right and what is wrong can be answered. Moral space is the intellectual and emotional place we go to clarify our purpose in this world. This is where our sense of self is most richly nurtured. For our people, this is where we find the foundation from which we build and strengthen our identity.

I imagine that this truth resonates with many of you. Passover is after all the most widely

observed Jewish Holiday. The story and its rituals have a special allure. Each family has its own traditions and customs – but few of us would miss the chance to gather around the Seder table, to participate in our greatest family myth and reconnect with our shared moral space.

Stories matter. Narratives, grand and marginal, have the power to strengthen our sense of self. They respond to our fundamental questions about family, our essential goodness, suffering, our quest for meaning and our relationship with God. I know that this is true on the most micro level of our lives as well. Every family loves to tell its stories. Every family has a wealth of family lore that is told and re-told. Isn't true that when Great Uncle Max starts to tell the tale of coming to America, everyone gathers around – especially the children. And even though we've all heard this story dozens of times, we love it and we listen again and again. That ever present question of "why are we here" is tucked into his tale. When Cousin Reva starts in on the saga of her twins and their miraculous recovery from mumps, everyone rolls their eyes – but we listen and remember that story and retell it when someone else is facing illness. The hope we all search for is folded into this story. We so love the sacred myths of our families!! They place us on a continuum with the past; they ground us in something greater than ourselves and provide us with meaningful answers to questions that clarify our goals for the future.

Just last month our nation witnessed the importance of personal narratives. Both the Democratic and Republican Conventions peppered their gatherings with stories about the lives of their leaders. Videos played every night at both conventions – Sarah Palin, Joe Bidden and of course John McCain and Barak Obama. We watched them all on the big screen – their childhoods, their awkward teen years and their transformative experiences. We heard the voices of their parents and their friends. Through their personal narratives we were given a glimpse of their deeper selves; we were shown the place in which they find their moral space and from where they build their identities. For many, hearing these stories strengthened their connection not only to the individual on the screen but to the party that person serves. As the Dalai Lama said: "telling <one's story> strikes at the heart of how to sustain one's culture."

It seems clear to me that there are many narratives that run through our lives. Like tributaries of a larger river, they sometimes cross, sometimes drift off on their own and sometimes even dry up. There is our Jewish Master Story, there are our family stories, and then there are national narratives – including the great American narrative that continues to be written this year before our very eyes. We have a role in all of these wonderful stories and as we interact with them and add to them, we strengthen them and they strengthen us.

Now, I want to pose a problem to you, a concern that follows from this exploration of the power of narratives. If stories are central to survival and if Judaism has a wonderful Master Story and plenty of other great stories, why is our survival in question? We are a shrinking people; our numbers are decreasing each year. Studies after study show this and we've known it for a long time. Despite the large number of people in this sanctuary, our future is neither secured nor clear. The question of 'why be Jewish' hovers over our people like a heavy rain cloud waiting for a down pour. Even those of us here may question how Judaism can play a more central role in our sense of identity and purpose. Does the Dalai Lama know that our community is getting smaller each year? Perhaps we should tell him; perhaps our secret to spiritual survival in exile isn't working any more. It's a scary thought. I am worried and I imagine many of you are as well.

Let me put your minds to rest on one level at least, I do think we, Jews, still know the secret of spiritual survival; and as the Dalai Lama so aptly observed, it is in the power of narrative. Why then do we face the question of our survival? Let me give you one possible response.

I believe that our Master Story has lost some of its power in our lives. A lot has happened to our people over its thousands of years in existence. The fundamental experience of the Jew has changed from generation to generation. We've grown; expanded our views; asked different questions. I suspect that our master story hasn't grown along with us.

Consider this bit of history: After the destruction of the Temple, and our exile from our homeland, during all those years when we were an oppressed nation, the story of the Exodus spoke to us. It told us a tale that gave us hope for our own lives. It invited us to experience, if only for one night, true freedom. But then, something wonderful happened. In the late 1700's Jews, who lived mostly in Europe, were emancipated. We were given our autonomy, our freedom. We were invited to become Germans and Brits. The outside forces that had kept us confined to one identity had stepped aside. Can you imagine how different if feels to sit around the Seder table and create a picture of freedom when you are in a ghetto, as compared to reading that same story in the midst of a cosmopolitan city where you work and study? After emancipation our Master Story no longer had the power it once had.

But narratives are, I still believe at the core of our being. And so. as the Passover story lost some of its pull, and its foundation for our moral space was no longer large enough, a new narrative came into being. This new narrative had to reflect the experience of those generations of Jews who lived after the emancipation. Some of them experienced equality – but as we know, only briefly. Others never were able to truly take advantage of the new European openness. It turned out that emancipation wasn't all we had hoped it would be. Anti-Semitism, pogroms, exile still loomed large. Many of these Jews left their big cities and small villages. They were under attack and Judaism was too. The experience of these Jews was unique, the questions they faced were different and so they had to add a new story that would respond to their situation and secure their identity under new circumstances. I would call their new narrative, essentially: Fiddler on the Roof.

We all know the story of Fiddler! It's an emotional tale that captures the experience of many of our own grandparents and great grandparents. For my parent's generation Fiddler was a compelling saga that provided the Jews of their day with a purpose. To save our people of course! After Kristalnacht and Auschwitz there was an answer to the question of their role here in America. Clearly it was to rebuild the Jewish people, to invest in Jewish institutions and organizations and to support the establishment of the State of Israel. Their moral space spread out before them and Tevye was standing right in the middle of it.

Fiddler, like Passover, played a major role in securing our identity for a long time. But I would suggest that this narrative too has lost some of its power. For our ancestors in Russia and elsewhere, the challenge was to survive amidst difficult living conditions and brutal pogroms. By stark contrast we are living Tevye's dream ten fold. When he sang "If I were a rich man" he would never have imagined what that might mean - not only chicken every Friday night, but steak and sea bass any night; mini-vans, on-line catalogues, and travel around the world. For us, the challenge is not to survive as Jews but to maintain some connection to Judaism amidst the many wonderful and compelling alternatives that compete for our time.

Our experience here in Virginia is no longer that of Tevye's children and grandchildren. For many of us, and certainly for our children, that story is no longer entirely our story. Some of us may still feel connected to this tale. We love the nostalgia of it. But, in truth it no longer carries the strength needed to propel us into our moral space and guide us as we move forward as Jews. It doesn't answer those most critical questions: What does Judaism mean to me? How am I tied to this tradition? What is my obligation to its future? Without a story, we lack a purpose, a unique character, an identity that tells us not only why we are here, but why we should stay here.

Today, Rosh Hashanah is the perfect day for us to consider the power of narratives, their future and ours. There is a metaphoric book opened before us – Sefer Chayim, The Book of Life. It is thick with the stories of our people's past and those of our own individual lives. Every person here owns this story book. Every person here is written in it. Jews by birth, Jews by choice, members linked to Judaism through our partners – we have all chosen to be part of this story. And every person here is responsible for insuring that when the next generation opens this book there are meaningful stories – old and new – for them to read and tell. Today is the day for us to re-connect to the master stories of the past; to find our own voices and experiences in those stories, and to add on new meaningful narratives that speak to and strengthen us. Our future depends on it, for as the Dalai Lama said; "Telling one's story is the secret to one's spiritual survival."

Have you ever heard the story of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise who wanted to create an "American Judaism?" In the 1870s, on Rosh Hashanah, he shared his somewhat radical vision of a new Judaism. After his sermon, he was punched in the face on the bema by the president of the congregation. Can you imagine how it might have felt to be in that congregation? Might you have been excited by his words or horrified? This is a story is about imagining new religious models, its about change and courage. It is our story because Isaac Mayer Wise is the father of American Reform Judaism.

Have you heard the story of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Maurice Eisendrath? They marched with Torah scrolls in their arms along side Martin Luther King Jr. Maybe you've seen the famous black and white picture of them? Whenever I see it, I feel so proud of our people. I'm inspired by the fact that it was their Judaism that compelled them to pursue social justice. That story has become part of me. I take it with me every time I have the honor of carrying the Torah myself

Here's a story you might know... Once, a long time ago, a group of families started a new congregation in Northern Virginia and called it Rodef Shalom. After a number of years of success there was a great debate during which the members couldn't agree about buying the land where they would build their Temple. Because there wasn't consensus, the leadership of the congregation did not go forward with the purchase. But, 9 families somehow knew in their heart of hearts that buying the land was the right thing to do. They could imagine us here today although they probably weren't expecting we'd be 1400 families strong. They knew we had something to offer the greater community but they probably didn't know that would include a senior living center next door called Chesterbrook Residences. They knew we would help to support those in need with something like our soup caravan, but they probably couldn't have pictured the many grants we give out through our Fund for the Community.

9 families bought this very land on their own and held it for us – yes, for me and for all of you, until the vision of those courageous and insightful people was embraced by others. 3 of those visionary families are still here watching their dream flourish. And their story is now our story. We can not only tell it, but we are a part of it. Their vision is our vision. Their courage to invest in and perpetuate Judaism can be our courage. Those people are standing at the center of our moral space and we can see our selves standing next to them.

Telling this story of the journey of our congregation is not so different than the telling and re-telling of the story of Passover. "Arami Oved Avi…My ancestor was a wandering Aramean, and here is how I got to the land I have now possess". Nor is it so different than the narrative of Fiddler who told the story of his journey to a new land. Our voices can be heard in all of these tales. Our voices need to be heard in new tales as well as we and future generations try to navigate our own journeys on the primordial Jewish map.

Stories are powerful. Narratives are critical to our survival. Myths, grand and marginal, real and imagined, matter. Consider this final legend:

When the Baal Shem Tov saw the survival of the Jews threatened, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and a miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted. Later, when his disciple, the Maggid of Mezritch, faced a similar challenge, he would go to the same place in the forest and say "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I still can say the prayer." and again, a miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted. Still later, Rabbi Moishe Leib of Sassov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say," I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished and the people survived. Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rhizin to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God. "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer, and I can not even find the place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story, and this must be sufficient. And it was sufficient and his people survived.

The secret of survival lies in the power of narrative. We are a people of stories, not only of the past, but of the present and future as well. Individually and collectively, we must tell our tales, find our meaning, define our moral space, engage our generation, inspire our children and secure our identity and Judaism for the future. The newest Jewish narrative is not yet fully written, but we are writing it. The newest Jewish narrative has not yet been told – starting today – we must tell it.