



Temple Rodef Shalom

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Finding our Place in the Story

It is Simchat Torah. The two boys are small enough to stand upright under the Torah scroll as the grownups unroll it over their heads. There is klezmer music playing. People are singing and dancing. As the grownups unroll the Torah, the children help to hold it with the tips of their fingers.

“What’s in here? What is all this writing?” asks the boy standing closest to me. I tell him that it is the story of the Jewish people. “Is my name in there?” he asks me. “What’s your name?” I ask him. “My name is Jacob!” I tell him that his name is in the scroll. Jacob’s friend asks: “Is my name in there?” “What’s your name?” I ask him. “My name is Max.” I tell Max that his name is in there, too.

Whatever our names, we all want to be part of something that is bigger than ourselves. Meaning comes from belonging to a story¹, one that started before we were born and that will exist after we die. We yearn to know that our life has a place in that story.²

As members of *Am Yisrael*—the People Israel—we belong to such a story.

Yet, we live in a time when connecting to a story can be challenging. As Americans, we are heirs to an on-going tension between community and individualism.

“Liberation from ossified community bonds,” writes Robert Putnam, “is a recurrent and honored theme in our culture.”³ We see this in the Pilgrims’ desire to escape the boundaries placed on religious expression in 17th century England. It is key to our founding fathers’ desire to break free from the yoke of imperial rule in order to govern themselves. We read it in the works of American 19th century authors and philosophers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote in an appropriately titled collection of essays called “Self Reliance”:

“No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it. A man is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition as if everything were titular and ephemeral but he.”⁴

“The myth of rugged individualism” is an ever-present part of the “American psyche.”⁵

¹ Yuval Harrari, as quote by Micah Goodman, Shalom Hartman Institute lecture, July 2019

² Ibid.

³ “Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community,” by Robert D. Putnam, p. 24. Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2000.

⁴ “Self Reliance and Other Essays,” by Ralph Waldo Emerson.

⁵ Ibid.

The idea of rugged individualism has contributed to a mindset that, because each one of us is unique, our goal in life should be to find that which is most exceptional in ourselves and spend our lives fulfilling it.

This emphasis on the individual is often coupled with a push to acquire things, fueling the notion that meaning comes from what belongs to us. Consumerism is there to whisper in our ear: “You know that vacuum you have in your soul? We know how to fill it and make you happy! You just have to own one more thing.”⁶

Our emphasis on individualism can lead us to value what David Brooks calls “resume virtues” as opposed to “eulogy virtues.” The former are qualities that we bring to our careers; the latter are what people speak about at our funerals.

Individualism encourages us to think that **we** are the story. Brooks writes about the importance of humility, and of how difficult it is to realize that it is not all about us:

“We live in the culture of the Big Me. The meritocracy wants you to promote yourself. Social media wants you to broadcast a highlight reel of your life. Your parents and teachers were always telling you how wonderful you were.”⁷

Brooks rails against the idea that “life is an autonomous journey,” during which “We master certain skills and experience adventures and certain challenges on our way to individual success.”⁸ Building character, he says, is about making connections with others. “Have you developed deep connections that hold you up in times of challenge and push you toward the good?”⁹

In his book “Lost Connections,” Johann Hari highlights the ways in which Western individualism may contribute to depression and anxiety, by prizing individual effort over connection with others. It is these connections, he writes, that provide us a path to a more meaningful life.

“The lives we’re being pressured and propagandized to live don’t meet our psychological needs—for connection, security, or togetherness....The real path to happiness...comes from dismantling our ego walls—from letting yourself flow into other people’s stories and letting their stories flow into yours....”¹⁰

Our people, and its story, are several thousand years old. Judaism and the Jewish People have survived when other ancient traditions are known only through buildings, temples, and monuments.

During a trip to Jordan fifteen years ago, my husband and I visited Petra, the ancient capital of the Nabateans. We rode donkeys several hundred feet up a small mountain. At the top was an altar where our guide told us that the Nabateans sacrificed animals to their gods, in a ritual similar to that in the Temple in Jerusalem. A few feet away from the altar was a pool in which the priest immersed before

⁶ Micah Goodman lecture, Shalom Hartman Institute, July 2019

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/12/opinion/sunday/david-brooks-the-moral-bucket-list.html>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression—and the Unexpected Solutions,” by Johann Hari, p. 182.

and after the sacrifice—a Nabatean mikvah. In the distance I could see Mt. Nebo, from which the Torah tells us Moses was able to see the Promised Land, although he was not allowed to enter it. As I stood at the top of the mountain, I marveled that our people had survived, while other ancient Near Eastern peoples like the Nabateans, similar in so many ways to the Israelites, did not.

We have survived because, instead of constructing the ephemeral, we built the eternal—a shared story that we could pass to our children and to their children.

The Torah tells us that, when the Israelites were about to be liberated from slavery in Egypt, Moses spoke to them—not of freedom—but of their responsibility to pass the memory of what they had experienced from one generation to the next.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says that “a people achieves immortality...by engraving their values on the hearts of their children, and they on theirs, and so on until the end of time.”¹¹ The Jewish People have done so by emphasizing the importance of family and education, an education that occurred through a conversation across the generations. Instead of physical edifices, the Jewish people “built houses of prayer and study. In place of stones they had words and teachings.”¹²

Judaism is a “countervoice”¹³ to the post-Enlightenment idea that we choose our identity, unencumbered by any cords connecting us to the past. Our story, from the time of Abraham, is one of being encumbered. The Torah is not just our individual genealogy but our story as a people. We are defined by the story of our shared past, which obligates us to be story tellers. It is in this story that we root our identity.¹⁴

This idea of encumbered-ness runs counter to the way many American Jews view Judaism: as part of what writer Sarah Hurwitz calls “the marketplace of ideas rather than an inherited obligation we must unquestioningly fulfill.”¹⁵ Hurwitz, who was born and raised Jewish, realized that she was selling Judaism short by calling herself an ethnic or cultural Jew. She realized that, in picking and choosing less than complete notions of what Judaism is, she was missing the “meaning, joy, and connection that Judaism and membership in the Jewish people can provide.”¹⁶

This meaning and joy and connection—our story—remind us that we share something as a people that is deeply meaningful. It reminds us that “we are in this together.”¹⁷ During this past year, which has been so painful and difficult for the American Jewish community, reminding ourselves that we are in this together has strengthened us. We see this in a renewed commitment to be part of our own synagogue community. Rather than keeping people away, the tragic events of the last year have inspired us to be together.

¹¹ “A Letter in the Scroll: Understanding our Jewish Identity and Exploring the Legacy of the World’s Oldest Religion,” by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, p. 34.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 42

¹⁴ Rabbi Donniel Hartman, lecture, Shalom Hartman Institute, July 2019.

¹⁵ “Here All Along: Finding Meaning, Spirituality, and a Deeper Connection to Life—In Judaism (After Finally Choosing to Look There),” by Sarah Hurwitz, p. xiii

¹⁶ Ibid., p. xxiv

¹⁷ “Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression—and the Unexpected Solutions,” by Johann Hari, p. 83

The Baal Shem Tov, who founded the Hassidic movement of Judaism in the 18th century, taught that the Jewish People is a living Torah scroll, and every Jew is one of its letters.¹⁸

I invite each of us to consider, on this Rosh Hashanah, what letters we will add to the scroll that is the story of our people.

Imagine that you are in a wonderful library¹⁹, with bookcases as far as you can see, from floor to ceiling. You have unlimited time. You can take any book you want from the shelves. In these books are the thoughts and ideas and stories of many people. As you read, you may become immersed in the world of the writer. You may pull other books by that writer from the shelves; you may move on to books by other authors. What you read is interesting.

These books represent the “contemporary secular culture of the West.”²⁰ What you read in these books shows you many different ways of living, but none exerts a “particular claim” on you.²¹

Suddenly, you come upon a book that is not like the rest. It catches your eye, because the name of your family is written on the binding. You open the book, and are captivated to see that it has many, many pages. They are written in several different languages, by many different people.

“You start reading it, and gradually you begin to understand what it is. It is the story each generation of your ancestors has told for the sake of the next, so that everyone born into this family can learn where they came from, what happened to them, what they lived for, and why. As you turn the pages, you reach the last, which carries no entry but a heading. It bears your name²².”

Imagine what you will write on this page. Perhaps you will write about new meanings and customs that you bring to ancient Jewish rituals, such as the Passover Seder. You may write about new layers of interpretation and understanding that you gleaned from deeply engaging with Jewish texts. Perhaps you will write about how an increased knowledge of Jewish ethics and values has helped you to be a better person. Take a moment to look at your page. Imagine what you might add to it in the coming year. How will you continue the story of those who came before you? What will you do in the coming year to add your letter to the Torah that is the story of our people?

“I am a Jew,” writes Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “because, being a child of my people, I have heard the call to add my chapter to its unfinished story. I am a stage on its journey, a connecting link between the generations. The dreams and hopes of my ancestors live on in me...²³ I am a letter in the scroll, not yet complete, written by my ancestors, whose past lives on in me.”²⁴

¹⁸ “A Letter in the Scroll: Understanding our Jewish Identity and Exploring the Legacy of the World’s Oldest Religion,” by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, p. 39

¹⁹ Adapted from *ibid*, pp. 42-44.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 43

²¹ *Ibid*.

²² *Ibid*.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 227

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 172

Whatever our name, may each of us, in this new year, find our place in the story.

כן יהי רצון

Kein y'hi ratzon