

The Light of A Good Story

I don't know if you've noticed, with the arrival of September came all things Pumpkin spice, and Pumpkin Spice means it is supposed to be Fall. And oh yes, that means all things Halloween have emerged. So much so that Josie, my 7 year old daughter, asked me while I was driving just a few days ago, "Momma is it true that there are really really Christian people and really really **really** Jewish people that don't celebrate Halloween? That don't get to eat candy and dress up? That is so sad!" I of course, keeping an eye on the road I responded, "Yes, Josie there are some people who do not dress up and trick or treat for Halloween, but there are **also** Jewish people who dress up for Halloween like you." She said, "No, mom, I mean REALLY Jewish people." I said, "Josie you are really Jewish." "No, mom I mean the really Jewish people like, the ones we see on the street walking on Saturday mornings."

As you might imagine it was nearly impossible to keep the deep sigh inaudible. Even the rabbi's kid doesn't think she is as Jewish as the folks who wear black coats, have curls and beards, and walk to services on Shabbat and holidays. I thankfully have many years to work on this myth with her, but I also know that she by far is not the only one who believes, "I am less of a Jew than those who identify as Hasidic or Orthodox." She like many have assumed that certainly a Reform Jew is not as Jewish as a Hasidic Jew.

Since you are sitting here this evening, you must know that you are choosing to be Jewish, religious even. You are choosing to own your religious identity. Or you are choosing to support the religion of your spouse, friend or family member.

What is fascinating in itself is that the early Hassidic Jews were actually the opposite of orthodox; they were the earliest reformers if you will.¹ In his book, *Souls on Fire*, Elie Weisel shares that the Hasidic movement grew from Jews who felt that Judaism was being weighed down and strangulated, by too many strictures, *pilpul* details, strict observances, and way too much heady text. For Hasids, Judaism had become the stronghold of only the learned, ostracizing all others. As Reform Jews we should be able to relate to the founders of Hasidism.

So, what did these early Hasidic rabbis do to deepen individual connections to Judaism, to help ignite the fire, the Jewish passion, within each soul? Make Judaism accessible?

They elevated the prayer experience through two methods. First with things like *nigunim*- prayers without words. These are the the bim bams, the yi diddi di-diddi di di's, the cherri berri berri's and all of the lai lai's. For they understood that prayer, filled with words engages our minds first and not necessarily our hearts. These new wordless melodies would start by grabbing our hearts, getting our fingers and toes tapping, bodies swaying, moving our souls, then eventually moving our minds, only then would prayer fully engage the entirety of the individual.

Just as we have tried to do this evening with the elevated music of the High Holy Days and the driving beat of the band. We hope at the start of the Holy Day season to stir and

¹ Thoughts regarding Hasidism and early story telling drawn from a sermon given by Rabbi Jason Rosenberg.

prepare our hearts, so that our minds will be ready for the difficult prayer liturgy that lies ahead for us.

The Hasidic founders also believed in the power of story. As Rabbi Jason Rosenberg explains, “One of the great gifts which these people gave to the Jewish world was a rekindled connection with the idea that a teaching can sometimes be better contained in a tale than in a lecture. That a legend or a fable can contain in it a spark, one which simply can’t be found in the greatest sermon on the same topic.”

We innately understand this. The kids in the school look forward each week to a story from the rabbi. And, so too for adults. When I tell a story on Friday night, I inevitably get comment after comment, not just the week I told the story but for many weeks to come.

Professor, Theologian, and Minister Dr. Stephen Crites of blessed memory, wrote in his famous essay “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” “Stories, and the symbolic worlds they project, are not like monuments that men behold, but like dwelling places. (SLOW) **People live in them.**” (p. 295)²

So, I share a story about the founder of the Hasidic movement, the Baal Shem Tov, as recorded by Elie Wiesel.³ Hundreds of years ago, in the earliest days of the 18th century, deep in the Carpathian mountains, in what is now the Ukraine, lived a Rabbi who changed our world.⁴ Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer, known as the Baal Shem Tov – the master of a good name. The Baal Shem Tov was believed by his disciples to be so great, so learned, so holy, that he could do wonders here on earth. He worked miracles. Among the legends told of him, was that when he sensed great danger, he would go to a secret place in the forest, light a special fire and say a special prayer. And then, without fail, his people would be saved from danger. This worked until the Baal Shem Tov died. Now what for the Jewish people? When the next crisis loomed, his disciple, the Maggid of Mezeritch, had to solve it. He went to that same, secret place, of which his teacher graciously passed on to him, and said, “Master of the Universe, I don’t know how to light the special fire of my teacher, but I do know his prayer. Please, let that be good enough.” And, it was.

When the Maggid passed away, the task was left to his student, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov. And so at the next time of crisis, Rabbi Moshe Leib went to that same place and said, “Master of the Universe, I don’t know the prayer of my teacher, and I don’t know the fire of his teacher. But, I stand in the place where they stood, and I beg for your mercy. Please, let that be good enough.” And, it was.

Well, the time came, when the Maggid was no longer alive. And so Israel of Rizhyn, the Maggid’s disciple, was left to handle the crisis. The story goes that when danger loomed for his people, Israel would sit in his chair, and sigh the deepest of sighs. He would bow his head and

² “The Narrative Quality of Experience” Stephen Crites, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. Vol. 39, No. 3 (Sep., 1971), pp. 291-311 Oxford University Press

³ *Les Portes de la Foret – The Gates of the Forest*, by Elie Weisel.

⁴ Original story found in Elie Wiesel’s novel, *Les Portes de la Foret- The Gates of the Forest*. Excerpted from a retelling in Rabbi Jason Rosenberg’s sermon.

say, “Master of the Universe, I know **not** where my teacher stood, nor how his teacher prayed, **nor** how his teacher kindled the fire. All I know is HOW TO TELL THEIR STORY. Please let that be good enough.” And, it was. And, it always was.

Thus, the recounting of the story **is** in itself a prayer. A prayer acceptable to God.

From this story Elie Wiesel concludes, “God made man because he loves stories.”⁵ One has to wonder if Wiesel meant “he” with a lowercase “h” meaning humankind loves stories, or “he” with a capital “H” meaning God loves stories. In either case, we know that stories are a very good thing, and they teach our souls.

The Hasidic founders concluded that prayer is prayer whether it is fixed words on the page, or the *nigunim*- wordless melodies accompanied by the rhythms of our hearts. And, prayer is prayer whether it is the formal chanting of the words or the recounting of a good story.

This year, as REAL Jews, we should be inspired by those first reformers, our Hasidic ancestors, as we sing many tunes, and I hope tell many stories. In 5776, I encourage us to dig deep into our own personal stories uncovering our hidden stories and writing new ones.

And during the ten days of repentance, we are required to visit our inner selves, to check in with the person we have been, and set a course for the person we want to be. And it is also a season where we come face to face with our mortality. So as we observe Rosh Hashanah, the celebration of God’s creation of the world, I will ask of us as men and women, to be inspired by one aspect of the story of creation. There are two stories of creation found in our Torah. Both in Genesis, the first in chapter one and the second in chapter two. They differ in several small ways, including how the first human being, Adam, was created.

The first Adam, from chapter one, God creates to rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock and over all the earth. God creates Adam in His image, God created him male and female, and God blessed them. But in Genesis chapter two, God creates humankind because, “...there was not a man to till the ground.” Therefore, God formed Adam from the dust of the earth breathing into his nostrils the breath of life...and God planted a Garden and took Adam and placed him in the Garden of Eden to serve and to keep it. (SLOWLY) These two stories straight from our Torah, give Adam two seemingly different purposes.

David Brooks in his book “The Road to Character” offers up two metaphors for these Adams. Adam One is all about resume virtues, while Adam Two is about eulogy virtues.⁶ We should see Adam One as the resume builder, career oriented, ambitious, wanting to produce, discover, rule over everything, and accomplishing all that is possible. He sets out to master new skills making an individual marketable, appearing externally successful.

⁵ Preface to *Les Portes de la Foret – The Gates of the Forest*.

⁶Material about character, the Adam dichotomy and character drawn from Rabbi Stephen Einstein’s High Holy Day Sermon posted in September of 2015.

While Adam Two, the second Adam, was created from the dust of the earth, and has deep awareness that he will be returning to the earth as dust. This Adam is also you and me. Adam two's focus is on eulogy virtues, not resume builders. The deeper more meaningful virtues. Things like whether we are kind, honest, and faithful; relationship builders or destroyers; whether we are compassionate and humble; or haughty and unkind. This Adam is working on his **soul** traits, finding the best balance, and growing each and every day.

We have both of these Adams within us. Adam One, the outer majestic one proving his successes to the world. As we live in a world begging us to build our resumes, to achieve more and to prove ourselves. We have the Adam Two, the inner directed and more humble approach to the world. As we are at the start of the New Year, we are in a place to dig deeper. To direct our souls in a manner that we will be proud of in our ultimate story, in our own eulogies.

For sure we will be challenged by the dichotomy of Adam One and Adam Two, but it is our job to find a way to steady the scales, not allowing Adam One to dominate Adam Two. Ask, the person we were last year a person we are proud of, who do we want to be in the coming year? What eulogy virtues shall we set in place now, before we get overwhelmed by the external pulls.

Remember, *L'chol Eish Yesh Shem* – each of us has a name given by the world around us, but also given by our actions, by our deeds, by our words, and by our values.

And so, I leave us with one last story this evening.

The story told of a nobleman who was very concerned about his legacy. What would remain after his eulogy was given. He lived in a small mountain village in Europe many centuries ago, and he wanted to make sure that his legacy would live long forward with the people of his town. So he spent a great deal of time contemplating his dilemma, and at last, decided to build a synagogue. In the course of his planning, he decided that no one would see the plans for the building until it was finished. As you can imagine the construction took quite a long time – much longer than he anticipated.

But at long last, the project was completed. The townspeople were excited and curious about what they would find upon entering their new synagogue. When the people came for the first time they marveled at the synagogue's magnificence. No one could ever remember so beautiful a synagogue anywhere in the world. Stained glass, ornate *bimah*, wooden rafters, elegant rugs, an ark so carefully carved, a silver *menorah*, a gilded and sparkling eternal light. A sacred space so grand.

After a few minutes the compliments, the oohs and the ahhs, slowly gave way to quiet murmurings, complaints, and hushed whispers. The nobleman noticed the change in the conversation, noticed the whispers behind the hands. He began to slowly smile. As he sat back with a small grin on his face, he finally said, "I think I hear some murmuring, some dissent. Do you not like the space?" No one responded. A young boy said, "Seems like you are missing something."

The nobleman responded, “Torah- check, menorah- check, ark-check, seats- check, lectern-check, stained glass-check, all the things I asked for are here.”

More murmuring, and finally, a brave woman raised her voice and said simply, “Where are the lamps? What will provide the lighting?”

The proud nobleman pointed to brackets, which were strategically placed all along the walls throughout the synagogue. He then gave each family a lamp as he explained, “Whenever you come to the synagogue, I want you to bring your lamp, and light it. But, each time you are not here,” he said, “a part of the synagogue will be dark. This lamp will remind you that whenever you are absent, some part of God’s house will be dark. Your community is **relying** on you for light.”

PASS OUT GLOW STICKS

This evening I pass out a small symbol of light to you. (PAUSE) Each of you, each individual in this room, is the light that makes up our community, our community of Temple Beth Hillel. We shine the brightest and most colorful when you are here.

Carry this light from this space home with you as you enter 5776. This evening we hope it stirs you to look deep within, push back the curtains, shine the light on your Adam One that lives in the external world, and on your Adam Two, your inner workings. Be like the Baal Shem Tov – our earliest story teller who earned his name that translates to “master of a good name”.

TURN OUT LIGHTS AND HAVE GLOW STICKS GLOWING

On one of the holiest days of the year, our collective light shines brightly. In the days, weeks, and months ahead, how bright or how dark it is inside of **these** walls depends solely on each one of us, and how bright our collective light is in the world outside of these doors is also solely based on each one of us. Let our lights shine forth as we become masters of our good name.

PLEASE RISE AS WE BLESS ONE ANOTHER WITH LECHI LACH