

**D'var Torah for Yizkor  
5783**



*Every culture has its stories. The late Elie Wiesel once said, "God created man because God loves stories." Almost certainly, the tradition goes back to the days when our ancestors were hunter-gatherers telling stories around the campfire at night. We are the storytelling animal. The Israelites had not yet left Egypt, and yet already Moses was telling them how to tell the story. That is the extraordinary fact. Why so? Why this obsession with storytelling? The simplest answer is that we are the story we tell about ourselves. There is an intrinsic, perhaps necessary, link between narrative and identity. Cultures are shaped by the range of stories to which they give rise. Some of these have a special role in shaping the self-understanding of those who tell them. We call them master-narratives. They are about large, ongoing groups of people: the tribe, the nation, the civilization. They hold the group together horizontally across space and vertically across time, giving it a shared identity handed on across the generations.<sup>1</sup>*

With the above words, the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks describes the centrality of stories and storytelling in Judaism.

Before we even made it into the Promised Land, we were instructed by God to retell every year the story of the exodus from Egypt:

*"My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labor. Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our ancestors, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a*

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks: Why Storytelling Is Essential to Jews and Judaism.

*mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the first fruits of the soil that you, LORD, have given me."*

The above passage, which was recited in the first person by our ancestors when they brought the first fruits to the Temple in Jerusalem, became, once the Temple was destroyed, the central text of the Passover Haggadah and the staging of our collective memory.

Again in the words of Rabbi Sacks: *"Identity is not just a matter of who my parents were. It is also a matter of what they remembered and handed on to me. Personal identity is shaped by individual memory. Group identity is formed by collective memory...You can delegate history to computers, looking it up when you need it. But you cannot delegate memory. Memory is inherently personal. It is what makes us who we are."*<sup>2</sup>

So let me tell you about memory and about stories. We are all shaped and sustained by stories, not only collectively as a people, but as individuals as well.

Let me begin with a story shared by Rabbi Alfredo Borodowski, the first presenter in our last Elul series, Getting Ready for the High Holy Days. For those who were not able to attend his inspiring presentation, here are a few words about Rabbi Borodowski.

In June 2013, the Mamaroneck police arrested Rabbi Alfredo Borodowski for impersonating a police officer. Rabbi Borodowski was hospitalized and diagnosed with bipolar disorder. In the ensuing months, he needed to deal with the consequences of his actions, both on a personal and professional level.

Rabbi Borodowski shared with us, how in a moment of despair while locked in the psychiatric ward, he was *saved* by a Talmudic story he remembered. While contemplating the value of his own life, he was able to recall a discussion between Hillel and Shammai on the worthiness of humankind. The conclusion of that discussion, *"It would have been preferable had man not been created than to have*

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<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks: History and Memory, in: Covenant and Conversation. Maggid Books. 2019.

*been created. However, now that he has been created, he should examine his actions that he has performed and seek to correct them,*<sup>3</sup> was able to free Rabbi Borodowski from the dark place where he was and helped him move towards a brighter place where he was able to correct his actions.

Rabbi Borodowski was sustained by a story because that story was there for him to find it. We are made by the stories shared with us, by the texts we learned, and we are sustained by the memories passed to us by previous generations.

As Rabbi Borodowski put it so eloquently: we need to be able to weave the Torah we learn and the prayers we recite week after week into the fabric of who we are. If the Torah we learned and the prayers we pray cannot sustain us when we are in a psychiatric ward, or sitting in anguish by the bed of our sick child, or grieving the passing of our loved ones, then we got the wrong Torah and the wrong prayers.

A few years ago, I wrote a list of my 10 favorite prayers. I still have the list and occasionally I revise it to make sure it is still relevant. These are the prayers that particularly connect me with God and give me strength in time of need. While I will be happy to share my list with you, each of us should work on our own list. While you sit in shul and go through the countless pages of the siddur, the machzor, and the Chumash, see if any of the words you read and pray speaks to you, to your soul. These are the living words of prayer and Torah that might sustain you in time of need as they did sustain Rabbi Borodowski.

Foundational Torah stories and meaningful prayers can shape us and sustain us both individually, and collectively as a people, but they are not the only stories and the only words of inspiration we carry with us.

We are all made of other stories as well. We are made of the stories we experienced ourselves, stories that happened to us, and we are made of the stories that happened to others, stories we keep collecting through life and which slowly become an intrinsic part of who we are. We are made of stories of success and we are made of stories of failure. We are made of stories we remember, and we are made of stories we have forgotten, but which our souls deep within us still

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<sup>3</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 13b

remember. Many of us carry the scars of our stories on the outside for all to see, and many others prefer to pretend they don't have scars.

Indeed, we are, all of us, the sum of our stories.

Finally, we are made by the stories our parents told us, and by the memory of the lessons they imparted to us throughout our lives.

As I am about to remember my parents, let me share with you a story and a lesson my father taught me, perhaps without thinking too much about it.

When I was sixteen years old I moved to Israel and finished my high school studies at a boarding school north of Tel Aviv. My parents agreed that I would go ahead and they would follow me, something that didn't happen at the end. In any event, I stayed in Israel for a year and a half, by myself, finished high school, and returned to Argentina. My father had given me access to a bank account he had opened in Israel for me to use in the event of an emergency. My parents didn't have then the same means we have today to control the balance of the account and I, being young, unsupervised, all by myself in a boarding school, squandered a big part of my parents' savings. When I came back home my father confronted me about the money and I could tell he was very upset. However, he didn't scold me or raise his voice (although he knew very well how to do it). Instead he looked at me in the eyes and said, "What is done, is done. You can of course live at home, where you will have food to eat and a bed to sleep. However, this is all you will get. If you wish to go out with your friends, to the movies, to buy something for yourself, or to take a vacation, you will have to work." I tried to protest, but my father was firm and a few days later I was working at my first job as a librarian assistant. That job, which didn't pay too much, gave way to a different one, and then to another one, but since we had that conversation I never stopped working. This is a story on how my father, being firm and unwavering, taught me the value of honest work and the importance of taking responsibility for my actions.

This is one story, one among many stories that shaped me into who I am and sustained me through life and I know all of you can recall similar stories that made you into who you are.

A beloved congregant told me that his father was prone to share with his family, a variety of witty phrases, sayings mostly created by him, which encapsulated the wisdom he had accumulated through life. After his father passed away, while reminiscing during shivah, my congregant and his family decided to try to remember all these witty sayings and write them down in a booklet, first for their own use and then to pass them down to the next generation. An average of once a week this beloved congregant tells me: *as my father used to say...* and shares a witty proverb of his father. My congregant also remembers many stories of his father, but somehow these witty aphorisms are the landmarks that guide his life.

What are the lessons from your parents that sustain you? What are the memories that carry you through life? I am not talking about things we remember from our parents or grandparents, like the food we enjoyed, or the jokes they told, or the pictures and documents they left behind. These are also important. I am talking about the few foundational stories, the selected memories, and the unique lessons, that made you into who you are today.

Yizkor is a special opportunity to recall these foundational stories we all have within us. Yizkor is also a unique opportunity to try to connect deeper with the foundational stories of our people, which are the framework of our individual stories. You don't have to end in a psychiatric ward to know that there is plenty of wisdom in Jewish texts, plenty of inspiration in Jewish prayers.

Finally, Yizkor is perhaps the best opportunity to ponder what will be the foundational stories, the memories, and the lessons we will pass to the next generation. Those who come after us have the need to be shaped by stories, the same way we are shaped by the stories of those who preceded us in life.<sup>4</sup>

As we remember those who walk the earth no longer, we pledge to attune our lives to the important stories of their lives and to the lessons and memories that had sustained us and will continue to sustain us for many years to come. At this sacred

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<sup>4</sup> Sam Bahn, whose sister Cheryl Dockser had just passed away, told me that his nephew asked his mother, hours before her passing, what will be your legacy, mom? To which she replied, you are my legacy!

moment we also undertake to live meaningful lives, with meaningful stories to pass on to those who come after us.

May the memories of those we remember today be for a blessing, and may Hashem bless each of you and your loved ones with a year of meaningful stories and shared memories, with a year of compassion and kindness, with a year of health and joy, with a good and sweet year.