

Story – Rosh Hashanah 5768

Rabbi Zoë Klein

“Where’s Papa going with that ax?”
That’s the opening line of what famous book...
Anyone know where it is from?
Right, *Charlotte’s Web*...
Terrific...
That’s t, double e, double r, double i double f...

“Happy families are all alike.
Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”
Which novel is that...
Anna Karenina, right. Tolstoy.

I’ve decided tonight instead of a sermon,
that we’ll just play
A **giant** game of literature trivia,
One against one hundred,
Or a thousand,
Or a couple thousand...

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...”
Yeah, of course, *Tale of Two Cities*...

Okay, raise your hand when you are certain what book this is:

“If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is *where I was born*, and what my *lousy childhood* was like, and how my parents were occupied-and-all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don’t feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.”
Catcher in the Rye, Salinger. Of course.

Let’s see,
Everyone knows that “Call Me Ishmael”
is how the **Book of Jonah** begins...

Alright, you know the game “Name that Tune,”
Where people have to name that tune in only five notes,
Or three notes,
Or one note...
The added challenge being that you have to name the song
With that one note
Played by a horrible hotel lounge band.
Half the musicians wishing they were *anywhere* else,
Miserable that this is their fate, dear God, to be a musician

Full of talent and passion
and to be reduced to playing on national television
only one note...

Speaking of *one note*,
Jeffrey, I need a note,
you know the sound when someone
gets something wrong in a game show?
I need that note...

Alright so you know the game...
Let's play "Name that Book" with the choir...
(Can you hear me, sometimes you can't hear me up here,)
Okay, choir,
Who thinks they can name this book in three words...
Who thinks they can name this book in two words?
Anyone brave enough to name it in one word?
Come to the Cantor's podium...
Okay. Ready?

In.

Yeah, right, so I can understand why you would say that, because it's Rosh Hashanah,
and I'm the rabbi and this is the Rosh Hashanah sermon, (believe it or not)
but...Jeffrey...

Okay I'm going to open it up to everyone:

In. The. Great. Green. Room... there was a telephone and a red balloon, and a picture of
the cow jumping over the moon.

Right. *Goodnight moon.*

How many of you can recite that whole book?
How many of you are *made* to recite the whole book
Again and again and again and again?

Tell me a story...

The power of personal narrative
Is softly becoming a national trend,
This past Saturday night for *Slichot*
We had former gang members speak to us
About repentance
And they spoke of Father Greg Boyle,
The founder of Homeboy Industries

And they said
Here we were on the streets, with our guns,
Or selling drugs,
And here was the priest on a bicycle,
Who wanted to hear our stories...
He'd lean over when he saw a kid
hiding in the bushes with an uzi,
And say, "Whatcha doing, hunting deer?"
He was *interested* in us.

The power of sharing one's story
Is being explored in medicine,
Some hospitals are starting to include
A synopsis of patients' stories
on the cover of their charts.
There are projects all over the country
Collecting the stories of homeless people,
About their lives before homelessness,
The path that led them there.

The power of personal narratives
Is being tested in prisons,
Workshops where inmates can tell about their lives,
The same is being done in mental health hospitals...

People are collecting refugee stories,
Cancer stories,
AIDS stories,
The everyday stories of our soldiers in Iraq...

And the difference it makes
When people have the opportunity to share
Is profound.

When Israel redesigned Yad vaShem,
Their holocaust museum,
They made a decision to center the exhibits around
personal stories

With the belief that
The stories of individuals
Deepened the understanding of what happened,
Contending with its vastness.
*It wasn't about counting to six million,
But delving into one.*

The director explained:
“Visitors will be encouraged to look each victim in the eye
and get to know him or her as closely as possible...”

Visitors might see
Bluma Wallach’s plain pair of glasses,
Which she had given to her young daughter Tula
For safe keeping
when she was sent to the showers
in Birkenau.
Tula held onto those glasses
Long after her mother was gassed,
For forty five years,
They represent a face,
An entire life...

Even in the Museum’s model of Auschwitz
the artist gave individual expression
to the 3,000 figures in the display.

The museum undertook
Incredible efforts
To identify the names of people in the photos,
uncover their stories,
and collect personal artifacts.
However since most of the Jews
Were murdered,
And their property confiscated
Or destroyed
Sometimes they’d have as little as
A bead...
Or a button...
To tell a story.

Sometimes only a button.
I remember seeing there a letter,
Thrown from a train,
A little scrap of torn paper on which it had been written,
“Please take care of my William,
I don’t know where he is...,”
There is such a deep and tragic story
in those few words.

...I wonder if when the contestant says
I can name that song in one note
If the musicians do in fact try

To put some kind of clairvoyant energy in that one note,
If the piece on the music stand is
Hey Jude,
if they try to think, “Take a sad song and make it better,”
like the psych student who believes in all things paranormal
stares intently at the shape on the card
trying to transmit that impression to their test subject,
“it’s a square, it’s a square, it’s a square,”
uuuuuum, triangle?
So that musician, getting ready for that one note...thinks,
“Hey Jude, Hey Jude, Hey Jude,” (play note)
Uuuuuuh, Hound Dog?

This summer a band
The White Stripes
Played a one note concert in Canada,
Hundreds of people came.
They played a single C sharp
And got back into their car
With their fans cheering and chanting
“One more note!”

*“Please take care of my William,
I don’t know where he is...”*

That’s one powerful note.

Hayim Nahman Bialik wrote a poem
Called *After I Die*,
He speaks of a harp as a metaphor for a man’s life,
And the one string
He never got around to playing...

“...All of her days this string moved,
mute she moved, mute she shook,
for her song, her beloved redeemer
she yearned, thirsted, grieved and longed
as a heart pines for its intended...”

The museum exhibit concludes
In the Hall of Names,
A giant domed room
Layered with wide shelves,
A quarter of them filled with thick volumes,
each page containing the brief life story
of an individual victim,

the empty shelves speaking
as loud as the ones filled.

We have an emphasis in Judaism
On witnessing,
The word witness is hidden
In the *shema* prayer,
Reminding us that we witnessed God at Mount Sinai,
That we continue to be God's witness,
And that we must also be witness
To the godliness
In each other.

Henry David Thoreau wrote:
*Most men lead lives of quiet desperation
and go to the grave with the song still in them.*

I think about those vacuous shelves
And wonder about our own community,
How much do we really know about each other,
How well have we been witness
To the godliness in one another.
We've heard each other speak,
But have we heard each other's song?
Have we been still enough,
Patient enough
To coax each other's stories,
Have we provided a space
That is welcoming and safe
To draw out that one note,
To persuade the hand to finally play
That string held mute and taut,
Desperate to be heard.

I think of the mourning families
Who have come to me
The day before the funeral
To share stories of the recently departed,
The weight of trying to sum up a life
In so little words,
Like trying explain a coastline
With a handful of sand.
Inquiries like "Tell me what he liked for breakfast"
Are little questions that are really little balconies
Overseeing sweeping views.

Story-telling is a defining aspect of Jewish life.
The Passover seder is all about
Sharing stories.

Storyteller Arthur Strimling
Described his stories as an imaginary pushcart
with **real vegetables** in it.

I love the idea that while a story might be
Constructed of such ethereal things
As memory and language and air,
There is something in it
That you can sink your teeth into,
There is something real,
Leafy, and nutritious
Inside.

Tell me a story...

This summer was a season of transitions,
Every one of your rabbis enters this High Holy Days
In a new position,
However the strength of a community
Lies not in us,
In your relationships with us,
But rather in your relationships with each other
The bonds you form all around the table,
Not just with the person
Carving the turkey.

There are 613 commandments in the Torah.
The 613th commandment is understood
To be that every Jew should write their own Torah.

Last year we embarked on a journey
To write our own torah together,
Filling in the letters of the scroll
With a scribe.

We learned that even for a Torah scribe,
it may take a year to complete a scroll.
How could each of us be commanded to write one?
The message is understood that
we are to imagine **our own lives** as sacred text.

Last year we filled in the letters of our Torah,
The sacred story of our people.
This year it is time to share *your* story.

We are initiating a series this year
Of Sacred Story sessions.
In the next day or two every congregant
Will receive in the mail
An invitation
To a Sacred Story Session,
A small gathering of people
Come together to share their stories.

Say yes to this invitation.

Don't ignore it.
Say yes.
In each Sacred Story Session
We will be asking a few guiding questions,
About your spiritual journey,
About what you have seen, experienced,
About what sparks your concern,
What drives your commitments,
The stories will be recorded.

Through our Sacred Story sessions
We will learn to listen to one another,
And in learning to listen to one another
We will grow into a **better, more thoughtful** community.
We will learn to have awe for each other's personal history.
Instead of saying, with attitude, "What's his story,"
We will learn to say, "Yes,
That person must have some story."
When we disagree we will learn
To consider each other's stories.

Think about one of the stories
Most of us know from the Torah,
How Isaac and Rebecca have twin boys,
Jacob and Esau. Isaac favors Esau
Which leads to all sorts of jealousies
And deception.
I read this story with people,
And everyone is quick to judge,
What awful parents!
What a terrible family!

But no one ever thinks about the
Other story everyone knows,
The biggest event in Isaac's life,
When his father marched him up a mountain,
Laid him on a homemade altar
And lifted a dagger
Intending to butcher him like a lamb.
No one thinks, "Ah, of course Isaac
Would favor Esau, the hunter,
Because he himself feels so weak,
So helpless. He admires Esau's strength,
And in Jacob he sees
What he hates about himself,
That thing that allowed his father and God
To sacrifice his soul,
Even if, in the end, his body survived..."

We are so quick to dismiss each other's stories
Even when **those very stories**
Contain the seeds of our understanding,
The key to our healing,
To our *redemption*.

When you know Isaac's father tried to kill him
You can start to unravel the knots that continue to bind him
So many decades after the ram took his place.

When we don't share our stories,
We perpetuate many myths.
In a family-oriented temple community
If we don't tell our stories,
We make it harder and harder for people
To talk about things
Like divorce,
Like infertility,
Like loneliness,
We might not realize how many others
Share our quiet desperation.

Anonymity is a sin...
(Except when it comes to large financial donations,
Then it is an elixir of immortal life...)
Anonymity leads to horrible things.
Six million is a number.
Bluma Wallach was a woman
Who wore glasses and had a daughter.

Anonymity leads to horrible things.
It was the Pharaoh who
According to the text, “knew not Joseph”
Who afflicted the Jews so harshly.
He did not know Joseph, was ignorant of his stories.
Part of the reason every Friday night we read the names of the American soldiers who
died that week in Iraq is to counter the anonymity of this war so far away.

There are so many people who are invisible to us,
The people who make our clothes,
If our labels instead of saying “Made in China”
Said “Made by Zhou Guoqiang, 14 years old, likes catching toads,”
it wouldn’t be so invisible.
(Zhou Guoqiang is was a real sweatshop worker, by the way,
I didn’t feel that this sermon would make sense
If I just made up a name...)
The people who farm our food...
I think about what the storyteller said,
That his stories are like imaginary pushcarts
With real vegetables in them.
When we shop
Sometimes I think we *allow ourselves* to believe
In imaginary people
Growing our real vegetables...
They are real people,
With stories.
Where does our electricity come from,
Where does the gas we pump into our cars come from.

One of the former gang members
Said in prison he read an article
In Time Magazine
About the very drug he had been selling,
The article spoke of a parent who
Killed her baby,
And he said to himself,
“Oh my God, *I* am a part of that story...”

When we allow people to be faceless,
Anonymous,
Storyless,
We allow ourselves to be heartless.

And it starts with ourselves.
Every one of our congregants will be invited
To a Sacred Story Session.

And while the purpose of these gatherings
Is about knowing one another more deeply,
It is far more than that.

You see, a decade or two ago,
Rabbis preached to communities
Of shared values.

I'm not saying we don't have shared values,
I'm saying we haven't listened to each other
Enough to know what those shared values are.

In the days of fire-and-brimstone rabbinics,
The model was top-down.
The rabbi cultivated the vision
And then rallied everyone to follow.
There is another model
Which is bottom-up,
Which begins with the congregants,
And "the rabbi acts as an actualizer –
The person to pull the people together
And empower them to realize their goals."¹

I want to tell you about Temple Israel in Boston
And their rabbi Jonah Pesner.
"Temple Israel... conducted
A relationship-building campaign
In which hundreds of its members talked to each other.
They shared their stories, their concerns,
And their vision for a more just world.
Leaders identified compelling justice issues
That were deeply and widely felt by members
Who then ratified an action strategy...
Out of those conversations,
and thousands like them in religious institutions
across Massachusetts,
came broad-based and powerful movements
for affordable housing, universal healthcare, equal marriage, and eldercare."²

Through the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization Rabbi Jonah Pesner chaired the task
force that successfully secured healthcare for more than half a million uninsured
residents.

¹ Dov Linzer

² Rabbi Jonah Pesner

Through sharing their stories,

Temple Israel of Boston

Discovered that so many of their congregants
had older parents in nursing homes
who were not being properly treated.

They then discovered a Haitian church,

Where many of *their* congregants

Were struggling with difficult labor conditions

In those same nursing homes.

Through one-on-one meetings with individuals in the two communities they uncovered their common self-interest. They were able to organize, successfully, against the nursing home administration for better working and living conditions.

Last year, the Union of Reform Judaism launched
what they call “Just Congregations,”
which is about **congregation based community organizing**,
appointing Rabbi Pesner as the director.

Just Congregations engages Reform Jewish synagogues to act powerfully and
successfully across lines of faith, class and race to address the root causes of economic
and social injustice. They nurture and train congregations to build deep relationships
within their own communities and then to foster authentic relationships with other
communities who share a vision of a world redeemed.

A few excerpts from Just Congregation’s mission:

Our synagogues are full of stories of struggles with elder care and the health care system, and the search for affordable, middle class housing. Similarly, our congregations contain talented leaders motivated by these stories to act for change. As our congregations look within ourselves, and to the world outside, we find problems that are impossible to change as individuals; problems that can only be solved through collective action.

Through building relationships, congregations are able to bring their collective power to successful action, resulting in systemic change that improves the lives of their members and the broader community.

A different kind of social action,

How? Because the congregation sets the agenda.

Who are we?

What are our concerns?

What is it that we feel most passionate about?

How many of us are struggling to raise children

While trying to take care of our parents as well,

How many are struggling to afford housing,

How many of us lose sleep over the safety of our streets,

Or the quality of the air,

Or the condition of public education...

What is it that we are willing to put our weight behind,

As a community?

I could tell you what I think we should do,

But I want to hear it from you.

When I tell my kids

Take a bath

And they say “why?”

I can say “Because I said so,”

But childhood ends

And we become opinionated,

Questioning, thick-headed adults

Who *know* what’s right

and who *care* about why

and are not satisfied with leaders

who tell us “**because.**”

We *want* to understand

and we *want* to participate,

and we *want* to have the chance

to make our case

and there is no people in **this world**

who are harder to lead

than the Jewish people,

every one of whom is a general,

and thank God for that because

when we put our collective mind to it –
whatever it is
there is no question
that we will get it done.

End of story.

But we have to get organized.

The key to community organizing is that relationships,
not issues come first.

In order to achieve its mission,
The Just Congregations Initiative
seeks to transform synagogues
to develop a three-fold culture of the pursuit of justice,
and those three parts are: leadership, relationships, and action.

First we have to develop leaders.
Leaders who know how to tell their stories in a compelling way.
We are designing a leadership development program
To launch in January.

Second, we have to build relationships
through intentional relationship-building campaigns,
creating networks of relationships,
in which synagogue members share their stories with each other.
This will begin with our Sacred Stories Sessions
And continue with one on one meetings.

And finally action, when we have strengthened our core enough
To gather for real social change.

**I don't want to stand here and talk with you about the sorry state of the world...
I want to share with you the strategy by which we are going to fix it.**

And the first step,
Believe it or not,
Is by sharing *your* story.
Your personal story.

I invited Rabbi Jonah Pesner
To officiate my installation
Because of his powerful success
In this area.
Because I want the torch that he carries
To ignite the hearts of our current
And future temple leaders.
Before the installation service,
Rabbi Pesner will spend the day

Offering trainings and one on ones
With our congregants.

Rabbi Pesner wrote recently in Shema magazine:

“I discovered a shared frustration with other rabbis and leaders at my congregations. The social network of caring was being frayed by the intense pressures of work and life on member families. And despite our *sincere desire* to fulfill the Jewish mandate to pursue justice, we engaged only a *slim portion* of our members. More disturbing, our best efforts were **superficial band-aids** on profound wounds of suffering. While we served hundreds at our soup kitchens, millions more slipped deeper into poverty. While we tutored a handful of children, public education skidded ever closer to collapse. While we built one house at a time, our streets were flooded by millions of homeless people.”

He added:

“The relational meetings not only set the community agenda, but they help strengthen relationships within the community and among its members. Through these meetings community members come to hear each other’s stories. And understand the source of deeply held values.”

Tell me a story.

About a congregation.

Which discovered its relational power.

And changed the world.

Tell me a story

About a congregation

Which understood

That the first step to empowerment

Is knowing each other.

Tell me a story

About a congregation

Which knew how to listen.

Tell me a story

About a congregation

that got organized.

Tell me a story about a congregation

that shared its stories,

discovered its commonalities,

reached out, grabbed hands

and made an impact.

Tell me a story

about a congregation

that understood

the lives of its members as sacred text...

and I'll tell you a story

that I want to hear again

and again and again.

“I had a little overcoat, much too old to sew...”

Does anyone know where that line comes from?

It's the opening line of a song,
Actually it's originally in Yiddish,
About a man who has an overcoat,
And when it gets tattered and worn he turns
It into a jacket,
And when that gets tattered and worn,
He turns it into a vest,
And when that gets tattered and worn
He turns it into a tie,
And when that gets tattered and worn
He turns it into a handkerchief
And when that gets tattered and worn
He turns it into a button.
And one day he loses the button.

He doesn't even have a button...

So what does he do?

He makes it into a song.

He makes it into a song.