

The Stories of Our Lives
Erev Rosh Hashanah, 2008
Rabbi Laura Geller

Some years ago on Rosh Hashanah I imagined that each of us wore a special kind of microphone, not one that picked up our voices, but rather one that amplified our thoughts. I imagined what each of you were thinking, what memories of holy days past floated through your minds. This year I know your thoughts better, because when we invited our members to send me a story of a moment when the High Holy Days were particularly meaningful, lots of you did. We hoped that sharing these stories, which we did by e-mail every day during Elul, would help you open a door into the High Holy Days by encouraging you to reflect on the meaning that you bring to this sacred season, as well as deepening our sense of a shared community at Temple Emanuel. The stories are in this booklet, which will be on your seats tomorrow; you can even read them during services – just not during the sermon!

Our stories are keys... keys to unlocking the doors of a meaningful life. There are other keys, of course, and over the next ten days, Rabbi Aaron and I will be exploring some of those keys with you, including the mixture of anxiety and hope that we all feel about what is happening in the economy. But try to let that go tonight, and listen instead to the stories we shared... and notice what stories are awakened in you.

When you read about Carey's mother's kugel, which Carey makes for the daughter who never knew her grandmother, what do you remember? That recipe box, with her mother's deteriorating handwriting marking the progression of her illness; do you picture a recipe box in your own kitchen? What memories came flooding back to you when you read Taly's story about the Yom Kippur War? Do you remember where you were, what you felt, your concern and anxiety for Israel? When Rita described her new shoes, did you remember a particular holiday outfit, a new suit or maybe a beautiful ribbon? Or Norma's, about watching a new generation of Temple Emanuel children grow up in the family choir where she sang for so many years with her late husband. Or Judy's story about noticing how the experience of going to synagogue on the High Holidays changes as you get older, and that you now do things that when you were a child only grown-ups did. And now, how you notice that you too are really a grown-up...

What was touched in you by Hannah's story about the yahrzeit candle that linked her father to his family who died in the Holocaust, and now links her to him, or Shelly's story about her late mother's

missing prayer book dropping mysteriously from the seat in front of her? Or Sue's about her children coming home to chant Torah, or Toni's about linking one generation to another? Did Roy's sharing the story of his ethical will make you think of writing your own, about what you really want your children and grandchildren to learn from the story of your life?

What is it about stories? Why do these stories move us so? I know they did... because I received more e-mails about these reflections than about anything else we've ever done. Many people wrote that when they come to synagogue tonight they will look at the congregation a little differently, because even if they don't know who told which story, they do know that everyone here has a story – many stories – stories of connections, stories of loss, stories of broken hearts, stories about people who changed their lives. One person wrote: "Everyone has stories, just like I do, and that makes me feel connected and compassionate. It actually opens my heart."

So what is it about stories? Christina Baldwin, in her book *Storycatchers* helps us understand when she writes: "Every person is born into life as a blank page - and every person leaves life as a full book. Our lives are our story, and our story is our life. Story is the narrative thread of our experience - not what literally happens, but what we make out of what happens, what we tell each other and what we remember. This narrative determines much of what we do with the time given us between the opening of the blank page the day we are born and the closing of the book the day we die."

I think of that whenever I go to the cemetery for an unveiling. Surrounded by family and a few close friends, we lift off the covering from the gravestone and read a name with a few words of description: "beloved grandfather, or mother, or son, or daughter." And then we read the dates: birth, death. What we don't read is what is most important: the dash¹ that is in between. That dash is the story of a life, what that person did between the opening of that blank page and the closing of the book.

The story metaphor pervades this High Holy Day season. Our prayers describe God as opening two great books, the Book of Life and the Book of Death. That image is meant to challenge us. If we take it seriously, but not literally, we understand that it is not God who is writing, it is us! The God I believe in doesn't decide who will live and who will die; the God I believe in created a world where matter decays, viruses exist, accidents happen, people die. To tell the story of God writing in the books of life and death is to tell the story of the truth that our time on earth is limited, and that this life is the only chance we get to get it right. We are writing the next chapter of our story. In this year, will we be awake and alive, or will we merely exist,

depressed, passive, bored, stuck in old patterns? The stories we tell determine who we believe we are... and Rosh Hashanah gives us the chance to reconsider the stories we have been telling about ourselves, and maybe even to consider new story lines which can open us up, unblock stuck places, and suggest new possibilities.

Our stories are part of the larger Jewish story. The Torah portions we read are stories of people like us. Why these stories? You would think that because Rosh Hashanah is understood to be the birthday of the world, we should read the account of the creation of the universe. But instead, we read stories of families, of Sarah giving birth to her longed-for son, of sibling rivalry, of Abraham being willing to sacrifice what he loves most.

Why tell and retell these stories year after year? Maybe because we live in families too, and listening to the stories of Sarah and Isaac, of Hagar and Ishmael, of Abraham and the angel, helps us to better understand our own stories. How many times have I, like Hagar, felt trapped. I resonate with her story – wandering in the desert, unsure of my direction, vision clouded by fear, afraid I can't protect the people I love. Her story challenges me to reach out to them, to grow stronger through that connection, and then to open my eyes. Perhaps a solution is right there in front of me as it was for her, a solution that was there all the time, but I just didn't see clearly. Abraham's story is also mine, silence between a parent and child, a conversation that needs to happen but doesn't. And that ram, that ram caught in the thicket was already there. Abraham simply needed to look up. Sometimes so do I.

If we found Sarah's grave, what would her tombstone say? Beloved mother of Isaac, wife of Abraham, birth date and death date (127 years later) and a dash in between. That dash, the story she wrote with her life, her choices, her responses to the challenges she faced.

The New Year is the time to look at the Book of Life that you have been writing, to review the photo album to search for "the people and places you have loved and learned from, and for those moments in the past - many of them half-forgotten - through which you can glimpse the sacredness of your own journey." (Frederick Buechner, page 210.)

What is it about stories? It is not only about finding personal meaning, nor just about linking us to the larger Jewish narrative; it is also about creating community. Robert Putnam, author of the acclaimed book *Bowling Alone* in which he describes the United States as a nation in which we have become increasingly disconnected from one another and in which our social structures have disintegrated, has coauthored a new book, *Better Together*. In it, he examines how

people across the country are inventing new forms of activism and community renewal, often beginning with telling their own stories and transforming private pain into a shared vision of collective action. He describes how "I" stories, the stories I tell about myself, lead to empathy and compassion in my listener, and so begin to build trust. The commonalities that we hear in an "I" story, leads to "we" stories. Reframing my individual story into a collective tale creates community and can lead to action.

We are learning that here at Temple Emanuel, through Hineni and One LA, our own stories about concern about older people that we love have led to political action around nursing home reform, and our concern about finding well-trained workers for our businesses has led to changes in the vocational training programs offered by the LAUSD adult education department. Our "I" stories have connected us to the "I" stories of Latino workers who couldn't find good jobs, and the "we" story that emerged has changed people's lives, giving some of those workers the skills to make a difference in our companies. "We tell our own stories and through our stories we redefine who 'we' are," Putnam writes, and it is really true. We are learning the same thing, as parents of teenagers in our congregation have begun to tell each other stories about their concerns about their own kids, and together we are beginning to tell stories about how we might change some of the pressures which dominate the experience of our children.

So what is it with stories? They are transformative on three levels. First, how we make our experience into story determines how we live our personal lives. Second, what we emphasize and retell in our collective story makes us into a community. And third, what we preserve in the larger human story determines what we believe is possible in the world. (*Storycatchers*, Baldwin p. xii-xiii)

Yes, on this day we can imagine God opening that big book... with pages filled with our past and an empty page for each of us for the year ahead. Each year, we not only have the opportunity to write the next chapter; we also have the opportunity to revise our previous pages. We can't change the facts, but we can change our interpretation of them; we can change our perspective on them; we can change our story about them.

And as we look around this synagogue, and see all the people who shared their stories, as we really listen to each other, we understand that we are a community, a sacred community, with our stories as part of the larger Jewish story. It is ultimately a story about hope and about the possibility of change. We are writing that Book, our own, our community's and our world's.

"Something is happening in the power and practice of story: In the midst of overwhelming noise and distraction, the voice of story is

calling us to remember our true selves." (Baldwin *Storycatchers* p. xiv)

So what is your story about this year? What questions will help you tell it? Might the question be: Who is a person whom you think about at this season who really influenced your life? Or is the question: What old story line in your life do you want to redraft – about being hurt, about being frightened, about being powerless? Or is your question: What do you want to be the legacy that you leave behind to those who come after you? Or perhaps, simply, what gives you hope for the New Year?

I conclude with a famous Chassidic story: When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the misfortune would be averted. Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion to intercede with heaven, 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 am still able to say the prayer," and again the miracle would be accomplished. Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people, 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." And it was sufficient. Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn 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; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient." And it was sufficient.

Stories are a key that opens doors... ours... and God's.

1 The idea of the dash comes from a poem by Linda Ellis , printed in Vol. 31 #4 of *the American Rabbi*