

The Stories We Tell  
Yom Kippur 5779/2018  
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As we gather this Yom Kippur in the wake of Hurricane Florence, we are overwhelmed and our hearts are breaking for those who have died and their families, for the devastation of whole towns and communities. Some of us may have family and friends who are struggling from the hurricane's impacts. Most of us, thankfully, have been spared the worst. It is too early to know the impact that the storm will have on each of us, and on our community. But already we are e-mailing, texting, calling, posting to social media – telling stories about what is happening.

Last night, I spoke about opportunities to help – about ways that each of us can act to respond to some of the damage that Florence has done. This morning, briefly, I'd like to talk about the ways in which the stories we tell shape our sense of ourselves in the world, and our capacity for action.

Stories have power for us as individuals, as a community and within human society. Some stories we tell are about what we are going through right now; others are history, or myth, or mythic history. Like all other peoples, we Jews are storytellers: We were strangers in the land of Egypt and then God took us out to Freedom with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. A small band of Maccabees can defeat a mighty army. One brave woman can confront a king, unmask a villain and save her people. In telling these stories every year, we both internalize and transmit the values that are most important to us.

As a species, it may be our capacity for storytelling that differentiates humans from all of the other creatures on the Earth. This is Noah Hariri's argument in his book *Sapiens, an expansive history of our species*. He writes:

The real difference between us and chimpanzees...the mysterious glue that enables millions of humans to cooperate effectively...is made of stories, not genes. We cooperate effectively with strangers because we believe in things like gods, nations, money and human rights. Yet none of these things exists outside the stories that people invent and tell one another.

The human capacity to believe in such stories and to act on them together, Hariri says, gives us power: We cooperate, for instance, when we exchange pieces of paper and metal -- money -- for goods and services; but the paper and metal have no intrinsic value. They work only because of our shared story about what they symbolize. Hariri continues

there are ... no nations, no money and no human rights—except in the common imagination of human beings.... Only Sapiens can believe such stories, and this is why we rule the world.

Professor Hariri opens our eyes to the power of stories in human history. On Yom Kippur we focus on the role of stories in our own, individual lives.

We all have narratives about who we are – our strengths and weaknesses, our character and our capacity to change. I'm lousy at listening; I'm just stubborn; I've got to do it this way because that's all I know. Each of these is a story. We tell them in the present tense, and treat them as if they are not only fact now but will continue to be true in the future.

Yet the Ashamnu and Al chet prayers -- the heart of the confessional prayers that we chant countless times on Yom Kippur -- are written in the past tense regarding what we have done....We have sinned, we have transgressed, we have acted stubbornly and perversely. They implicitly acknowledge that the future is still to be written. And indeed, we pray again and again that we be able to write ourselves into the book of life. We search for the ways that the pen is in our own hands to create a new narrative. We know we can't erase what we have done or control what the future will hold, but we seek out ways to respond to life's challenges and opportunities that bring meaning and blessing.

Yom Kippur calls on us not just to be aware of the stories we tell about our own lives, but the stories we recite in our minds about other people. We can only truly forgive someone if we are willing to let our story about them evolve. We have to let go of the recitation of our grievances, and open ourselves to their capacity to feel regret, grow, change and seek forgiveness. In the words of one of my mentors, Rabbi Lenny Gordon, we must value the potential of the relationship over our own anger.

In this light, it seems so appropriate that as the hour draws late on this sacred day and we grow both weak and strong from our fasts, we read the Book of Jonah. At its most basic, Jonah is about a man who has a story he wants to tell about himself: he wants to be the man whose predictions come true. God commands him to warn the city of Nineveh that their evil ways will cause God to destroy them. Jonah flees from this mission not because he worries about God's wrath or the anger of the Ninevites, but because he fears that the people will repent, and God will forgive them, and then he'll look foolish for having told them they'd be destroyed. But as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out, a prophet's job not to predict the future; it's to provide a warning. A fortuneteller succeeds when his predictions come to pass; a prophet succeeds if people listen to the message and change their behavior. Jonah is one of the most successful prophets in our tradition: He preaches a warning, and the people repent and live. But he thinks he's a failure because he wants to be a fortuneteller. Jonah cannot recognize his capacity to do great good, and so he runs from the chance to do it, and does not even appreciate it after he has done it.

Jonah might have made different choices -- and avoided that big fish -- if he had been able to tell a different story about the world and his role in it.

So on this Yom Kippur, let us open ourselves to new narratives about ourselves and others. Let us seek and find faith in our capacity to grow and change, and may we greet others' turning toward us asking for forgiveness, or for assistance, with compassion. In

the wake of Hurricane Florence, may we reach out to other people, providing material and emotional support. Let that, too, be part of the story we tell about this time.

May we find and bring hope, renewal and blessing in the New Year. Gut Yon Tov to everyone. For those who are able, may it be an easy fast, G'mar chatimah tovah. RJ