

## OUR STORIES ARE TODAY'S STORY

Rosh Hashanah Day 2: Sept. 22, 2017/5778

On Erev Rosh Hashanah, I talked about the fact that for a tradition such as ours, replete with Biblical and Rabbinic, Hassidic and neo-Hassidic legends and stories, which we share at almost every Shabbat and festival, there is a dearth of stories for the High Holy Days. As I suggested that evening, my conclusion as to why there is such a paucity of anecdotes and narratives on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is perhaps because there is not the same need for them -- that in fact, each of us, each of our unique histories, are the stories that are central to the High Holy Days.

Today I would like to expand upon this hypothesis. And I would ask that you think not just about the author of a tale but the person who is the reader too. How are we affected and how do we respond to the telling of a story and the content of the story itself? How do we, the central characters of the stories embedded in the High Holy Days, reveal ourselves to others and alternatively how do we hear, accept and understand these revelations.

In the introduction to his book on Hassidic tales – Rabbi Rami Shapiro, who I mentioned last day, suggests that the quality of our lives depends to a great degree on the kinds of stories we tell. He then goes on to assert that miserable people tend to tell stories of woe, and joyous people tend to tell stories of hope. Although Shapiro is talking about those who create and write stories, and not we who are telling our own stories, I think in all respects he is mistaken.

It is a much more complex set of actions -- and to equate the telling of a sad story to living a depressed life or its corollary, telling a happy story to living a fulfilled one, is to me quite ludicrous. There are profound nuances, and fine distinctions in the act of storytelling and the act of hearing a story.

To paraphrase novelist Elizabeth Strout, when you write a novel you get to rewrite it -- but when you live a life, that is the type of story that you can never rewrite again. You do not get a second chance to go back in time to share as both the transmitter of the story and the recipient.

And there, to quote Hamlet, there is the rub! Thus it is particularly this morning when this part of the second day service, our healing service, is an

oasis in time where we allow ourselves, indeed welcome, vulnerability, fear, anger, hope, all our experiences of illnesses and grief.

In the past number of years I have found myself in the position of being asked by families and by individuals to be present for them and to at times give what one person described to me as end of life solace. Sometimes I am asked to explain the Jewish perspectives on illness and suffering. Sometimes I am asked to share in the creation of a ritual of healing and hope and sometimes I am asked to plan with a dying individual the funeral or memorial, and sometimes I am asked just to listen.

These encounters are most private and intimate. People allow me not just into their homes but into the recesses of their souls.

And at one time, earlier on in what might be called, for lack of a better term, my pastoral work, I thought that I did understand the plight of people who are chronically or terminally ill. I was, to use the words just read earlier, not afraid to sit with the ugliness, the messiness, and the pain that is life; nor was I, am I, one to offer clichés for anything and certainly not to those who are ill or grieving.

But in truth, I have realized in the past couple of months particularly, that I have been deluding myself and that to cite the Socratic paradox, the only

thing I have learned is that **“I do know one thing; and that is that I know nothing”**.

In the face of the stories that have been shared with me, in the face of the humour, and the courage, the sorrow and the surrender, the battle and the confusion of so many who I have met, I have no answers. I have no magic potions of relief to offer. I have been more often than not, reduced to awe, silence and humility.

A couple of days ago I was walking in my neighbourhood and passed by a house that at one time an artist used as their studio. And outside the house in a box saying “free, take me,” there were about a dozen pottery tumblers. I wondered why they were being thrown out so I looked at each carefully and realized that, yes, they were not perfect, but they were to me exquisite. Each was a little bit off -- not quite oval, not quite round, the glaze and pattern non uniform and the colours uneven and irregular.

And I thought, “wow – I love these in all their imperfections --indeed because of their imperfections.” And then I suddenly realized that these pieces of clay represent us -- you and me. Imperfect, and flawed, but incredibly beautiful!

And maybe that is what healing is all about -- the giving of our stories to someone else and telling the truth of our stories with what Strout calls a “heart as open as the heart of God.”

Less than a year or so ago, I met with a woman whom for today I will call Hannah. She was in a hospice in palliative care. She knew of course that she was going to die. She had made decisions regarding how she wanted to die and had shared these with her family. But, she wanted to speak with a rabbi to get some answers to what her sister described to me as end of life questions.

Our first meeting was actually a kind of interview: was I the type of person she could trust, what was my background, what kind of theology did I have etc. etc? For whatever reasons, I passed the interview and she asked me to come back for a further talk. And when I came back the next day, she was very weak but still one could see her feistiness and she spoke and shared with me some things about her life and her philosophy and then she paused. She closed her eyes, and there was a minute or two of silence and then opening them she said, “You know, I am not really afraid of dying or of what does or does not come next, but I am so sad that I have no children and that no one will remember me when I am gone.” And I looked at her

and I said, "I don't mean to sound sappy, and I do hope you know I am being honest, but I will remember you."

And then I touched her arm and kissed her forehead and as I walked towards the door, she called to me and said, "What do you think happens after?" And I turned, and looked at her, shrugged my shoulders and said, "Damned if I know." And she laughed and said, "That's good, very good" and I left the room, and never saw her again. But, as you see, I do remember her.

And maybe, the wonderful paradox of life is that though in telling our stories we are naked in our openness and vulnerability, and though the recipient of our story is often awkward and impotent -- in fact these are the gifts of healing and of life. For on hearing you, I am forever changed -- as your story becomes a part of me, my story has been rewritten.

And when I am at the end of my story, when we are the end of our stories, you, who have heard my story, will keep it as part of yourself and all our stories will continue on and on in new storytellers and new stories.

This is healing. This is remembrance. In sharing together, through the cracks and imperfections and insecurities each of us feels, we are able to create by our communion a connection, a light that shines through. And as Leonard Cohen sings, "the heavens hear us and the healing comes."

Shana tova.