

Rosh Hashanah Morning

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Once upon a time in the Land of Israel, as it suffered under the sword of Roman rule, the famous Rabbi Akiva gathered his students in a time of great danger. The Romans had outlawed the study of Torah and the raising of disciples on pain of death, so this meeting was quite risky. The students pleaded with Rabbi Akiva to end these classes and to cease teaching Torah, lest the Romans capture and execute him. Akiva answered them with this story:

There once was a fox that came to a river looking for fish to eat. The clever beast had a plan to capture his prey. He spoke to the fish, warning them of the nets that awaited them around the river's bend. "Come out of the water and onto my back," the fox enticed, "and I'll take you past the fisherman's traps." The fish thought about it and declined the not-so-kind offer. "Danger seems to await us," the fish responded. "If we go with you, out of our life-giving waters, we will certainly die or be eaten. But if we continue on our way, we will at least have a chance to live."

"The same is true for the Jew," Rabbi Akiva taught. "Our life-giving waters are Torah, and if we leave that way of life, we will certainly perish. But if we stay the course, despite the risks and dangers, at least we will live our truest selves and still have a chance."

Stories are perhaps one of the most powerful pillars of our culture. They provide a glimpse into our past, carry critical values into the future, and provide engaging and inspiring ways to speak across the centuries.

What makes this meta-story-within-a-story like the one I just shared so memorable and effective? It's a simple tale, yet subtly compelling. It reminds us of the darker moments of our history while affirming the commitment that enabled us to survive. And it offers us the strength, resilience, and faith needed in our current moment to face our own challenges and threats.

We human beings are hard-wired for stories. I recall that iconic line from a famous Western: "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." And as one of the most ancient of peoples, the power of timeless tales has been a key to our success and survival. If we were to just recount events in history, or offer a boring list of values and virtues, these messages would die out within one or two generations. But to fix the past and weave core principles into an enthralling narrative ensures that the message will live on...even across the millennia.

Stories as allegory—using symbols and metaphor to diffuse what is difficult—help us to confront painful and controversial subjects. From Aesop's fables teaching basic morals, through Animal Farm revealing the consequences of political extremism, to the Maus series presenting the Holocaust through the

Cat and Dog dynamic--the story form has been the most enduring and effective means for even the most trying ideas to pass *l'dor vador*.

We are living through a particularly perilous time in our nation's history. We are more polarized than we've been in a century. We demonize opponents rather than debate issues. And we are lonelier and more isolated from one another than we've been for a long time.

Pundits, politicians, and sociologists cite many causes. Chief amongst them is social media and our phones, which sequester us in bubbles of self, empower the most extreme voices to find and reinforce one another, and skew our perspective and hold on reality in ways that render truth and goodness and right to be in the eye of the beholder rather than the foundations of a common heritage.

But what we lack most in this trying time is a shared story—a consensus of civic ideals that bind us as a nation regardless of our differences and debates, our policies and our parties. Or more precisely, we have forgotten the shared story that once wrapped all of us in a garment of history and destiny.

While I've spoken about this subject over the years, the current need to discover a shared story has risen to become one of the direst threats to our more perfect union. And it is particularly painful that we've reached this point as we celebrate the 250th anniversary of our country's independence. Over more than two and a half centuries, despite the waxing and waning of a sense of national unity, the classic American story provided a shared inheritance that mended the fraying edges of this blessed experiment in democracy.

It is a simple yet sacred story: Of a nation born in a battle for freedom against tyranny—a nation espousing the loftiest of liberal values to secure property, safeguard individual rights, and offer opportunity for all to flourish and live. At times it was more an ideal to pursue than a reality to revel in. And yet this American story has been our north star, guiding our collective conscience when we've strayed into the darkness, affirming us in realizing our best selves.

As we mark this 250th year since our founding, our loss of this shared story could portend the unraveling of our nation. In the scope of human history, empires come and go, often in far less time. But if we could recapture the Great American Epic, we might pull ourselves back from the brink of dissolution to embrace a renewed oneness.

So how did our national story come to be? Much of the process is typical of peoples throughout history who seek to bind many individuals within a singular identity. In the mid-20th century, so much of our American history and culture was forged and influenced by Jewish historians, movie moguls, and literary giants. For the children of the immigrant generation, their story of America was one of rescue and refuge, of hope and promise and opportunity. In classrooms, movie theaters, and on best seller lists, these Jewish "influencers"—the OGs before there was a word for it—gave America a profound pride in its

past, indelible images of heroism and valor, and melodies to ensure that we were all singing from the same Great American Songbook.

But in recent years, the sacred myth that united us as a country has come under scrutiny and criticism—as all myths do. This one dimensional account neglected the voices and experiences of those excluded from the historical record. Communities of color and women in particular were read back into the American saga, sparking a vigorous debate that called into question not merely the value of the story we’ve told ourselves, but even if such a singular story is possible.

Johann Neem, a history professor at Western Washington University, sought to identify these strains of our story in a lecture to his colleagues that, not surprisingly, was the subject of much rancor. Professor Neem tracked three current versions of our story.

The first is one that, unfortunately, is fairly dominant in academia: It is the “post-American” approach--in which our nation was founded upon and is sustained by African slavery and native genocide-- and is thus irredeemably marked by Original Sin. It is a dark and depressing story, leaving little room for repair or reconciliation, hope or healing. Any success or achievement is tainted by our fallen founding.

The second strain—a reaction to the first—is widely influential amongst those currently in power: It is the “hyper-American” story, in which freedom, prosperity, heroism, initiative, innovation and sacrifice most genuinely and exclusively reflect who we are. Slavery, inequality, discrimination, and violence are but secondary and isolated exceptions to this record, and to focus on them is to undermine our faith in the nation.

Between these two strains lies what Neem calls “mainstream American history,” reflecting what most of us understand as our common heritage. It affirms the great good that America symbolizes and has achieved, while confronting our sins and inspiring the ongoing pursuit of justice and equality. It is our most indelible and authentic story, with reverence for the past and regard for a better future forged through struggle. It is what the historian Jill Lepore terms a “new Americanism, as tough-minded and open-hearted as the nation at its best.”

So, can these three story strains be reconciled? Or is there a larger legend to encompass us? Perhaps an answer lies in Jewish tradition and history. Our faith and our community have been defined by story for more than 3000 years. For Jews, narratives are more than mere culture or folklore or even edutainment. Our story is at the very heart of our identity.

You know the story well: A small people on the margins of civilization possessed a radical view of one God in relationship with humanity. We were commanded to cherish each life as precious and to join with God as partners in

the unfolding of Creation. And we are bound by covenant to realize God's vision for the world.

We endured slavery and annihilation—emerging even stronger through redemption and resilience, empowered by the promise of land and sovereignty, inspired by a teaching that became sacred for most of Western Civilization. The spread and impact of this message is disproportionate to our numbers, and we've been hated for it. And yet, we are here, bearers of God's light and love, striving to be worthy of that demand and that responsibility.

This message is most brilliantly reflected at Passover--the ultimate affirmation of freedom and human rights that grew from our history and faith. It has served as a powerful and inspiring ethos for countless other communities. We use the Haggadah—the retelling of the story--within a seder--an ordered meal using symbols that bring the story to life. And we are obligated not only to *tell* this story. We must role play and relive it—*b'chol dor vador chayav adam lir'ot et atzmo k'ilu hu yatza mimitzrayim*—in every generation each person is obligated to see themselves as if they personally left Egypt.

The great modern historian Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi observed “If Herodotus was the father of history, the fathers of meaning in history were the Jews.” For our story resonates and amplifies through the generations to people and faiths beyond our small tribe, because we infuse history and hope with memory and meaning.

Our story—its content and its form—is more than a tribal tale. It is the superpower of our survival. *For when we had no land, we had our story. When we had no place to live or to worship, we had our story. Even when we had no physical Sefer Torah, no book to read and to share and to love, we had our story.*

And when they sought to destroy and to erase us, to make real their noxious vision of a world without Jews, *we had our story...*and that story bore us upon eagle's wings toward a promised land.

Some say that the Sabbath—the notion that we should rest and reflect and renew ourselves each week—is our people's greatest gift to human civilization. I would argue that it is the power of a single, shared story—the power of divinity distilled into words—the infusion of language with morality and holiness—the inspiring record of the world's oldest people wrestling with both God and humanity. *This* is our greatest offering to the nations around us. *This* is the heart and the hope and the healing that is most needed now in our country and in our world. *This* is what will bind this nation and this world in common cause on a common path toward the common good.

The Jewish story is not for everyone. That's not what I am suggesting. But rather, the striving to tell and to write and to preserve a national story is the glue that binds the many into one, forging diversity of opinion into unanimity of purpose, myriad desires into a single dream. Our Tanach—our Bible—contains the good, the bad, and the ugly—our moral and spiritual triumphs as well as our

limitations, our failures and our sins. But in its very completeness it instills a wholeness within us, a holiness between us, and a home to encompass us.

But first, we must reclaim the power of story within our own community. As with the notion of *machloket l'shem shamayim*—civil debate for higher purpose—we Jews must resist the divisive habits of the wider culture and hold fast again to that which defines us: The ability to disagree without demonizing—to argue without alienating—and to see in our shared story the many qualities that connect us more closely than cleave us.

If we can do this for ourselves and our community, then perhaps we can truly become that *Or L'goyim*—that light unto this nation and all nations—forging a narrative of love for one another as we love ourselves—respecting the dignity of others as a birthright and a responsibility—and heeding this call from God, etched into words, crafted into stories that move hearts, enlighten minds, and empower hands.

A story about stories: When the great Chasidic master, Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, feared for the safety of the Jewish people when threatened by tragedy, he would go to a special place in the forest. There, he would light a sacred fire, offer a fervent prayer, and ask for a *nes*—a miracle to save the Jews from danger. The holiness of the fire and the power of the place and prayer did, indeed, bring about a miracle, averting the tragedy.

Later, when the Baal Shem Tov's disciple, the Maggid of Mezrich, turned to heaven in the face of the perils of his moment, he went to the same place in the forest. There, he implored God: "*Ribbono shel Ha-Olam--Sovereign of the Universe—I do not know how to light the fire, but I can still recite the prayer.*" And again, a miracle saved the people.

And later still, when Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sasov, a disciple of the Maggid of Mezrich, went into the forest to save his people, he implored, "*I do not know how to light the fire, and I do not know the prayer, but I can find the place, and this must be sufficient.*" Once again, a miracle sustained the people.

And when it was the turn of Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn, the great grandson of the Maggid of Mezrich who was named after the Baal Shem Tov, to seek the rescue of his people, he sat in his armchair, holding his head in his hands, and said to God: "*I am unable to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, and I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story. I pray it will be enough. And it was.*"

May the story of our people, the story of our nation, bear out that ancient motto embraced by the Founders of our country: *E Pluribus Unum*—out of the many, One. One nation, one people, one humanity—all under One God—all moving forward together into an unknown—but we pray—a blessed future. Amen.