

The Stories We Choose to Tell

What is the story we choose to tell?

Jane Excell recounts hurrying down 3rd Avenue one evening on her way home. She saw an older woman shuffling up the street in the opposite direction, one gloved hand tightly clutching the lapels of a bulky coat. Jane noticed a leash trailing from her other hand and attached to an empty pet collar.

For the savvy New Yorker, there are numerous ways we might tell this story. We could say Jane witnessed an eccentric Manhattanite, or perhaps a piece of performance art about the feelings of belonging, or perhaps a person struggling with the death of a pet.

Jane dismissed the woman as eccentric and kept on her way. Sometimes the stories we tell, the conclusions we make, stop us from seeing the larger picture.

A block and a half later, Jane's eyes landed on something she didn't know she was looking for: a tiny white poodle with no leash and no collar that was wandering timidly among a crowd of people waiting for the light to change. And suddenly, she saw the story she had been ignoring.

Scooping the poodle into her arms, she began to run back up Third Avenue.

Near the next corner, Jane saw the woman again, her coat flapping open as she hurried down the street.

Her eyes were searching the sidewalk so frantically that she would have passed right by if Jane hadn't stopped her and held out her joyfully wriggling poodle.¹

The stories we choose to tell shape our path and purpose.

Every year on Rosh Hashanah, our tradition gives us two stories from the Torah to read. Today we encounter the tale of Abraham and Isaac climbing up Mt. Moriah together. Following God's command, Abraham prepares to sacrifice his son. At the climax of the narrative, knife in hand ready to deliver the sacrificial blow, Abraham hears the voice of an angel. And the angel tells him to stay his hand. *Vayisa Avraham et-einav* - and Abraham lifted up his eyes.² And in so doing, Abraham sees a ram caught in a nearby thicket, and discovers he can sacrifice something other than his own son. A new possibility that may have been there all along.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/28/nyregion/metropolitan-diary.html>

² Genesis 18:2

The second story is about Hagar, the Egyptian concubine of Abraham. Banished to the desert with her young son, Hagar wanders until her food and water run out, then lays her child under a bush and turns away, because she cannot bear to watch him die. She cries out in despair. And Hagar then hears the voice of an angel. *Vayifkach Elohim et-einehah* - then God opened her eyes.³ And at that instant she discovers a well in the wilderness and she and her son are saved. A new possibility that may have been there all along.

These are both stories of perception. Stories of God's role in our lives as helping us to widen the aperture of our awareness and perceive new possibility. And with this expanded sight, we may shape a new future. These are the stories of this new year for they urge us, personally and collectively, to reflect on the stories we choose to tell ourselves. As the next chapter of our Book of Life is written, are we telling stories of demise and decay? Are our stories stagnant and set? Are we willing to challenge our assumptions, to widen that aperture, to see the paths of possibility before us?

The Talmud offers its own value of perception, "Blessings are found, not in those things which can be weighed, measured, or counted, but in that which is hidden from the eye."⁴ That is, the concrete and the mundane, the expected world in which we travel, is not all there is. Like the ram in the thicket, the well of water, the lost white poodle, the blessings of this world often require us to widen our gaze and change our stories.

Daniel Kahneman elucidates the challenge of this in his seminal book, *Thinking Fast & Slow*. When marking his students' papers, Kahneman noticed an uncanny consistency in his students' exam results.

"I began to suspect that my grading exhibited a halo effect," he concluded. "The first question I scored had a disproportionate effect on the overall grade."

He found himself more willing to give the benefit of the doubt to vague or ambiguous statements from students who had performed better in the past.

Kahneman describes the halo effect as "exaggerated emotional coherence". Once we form an opinion about a person, we are prone to judge other aspects of their character in light of this initial belief. This is because we are hardwired to look for evidence that bolster stories we already have, rather than submit to the uncertainty admitted by new ideas.⁵

"Ideas are sticky," once we begin telling a story, "we are not likely to change our minds."⁶

³ Genesis 21:19

⁴ BT Ta'anit 8b.

⁵ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, p. 83.

⁶ Nassim Taleb, *The Black Swan*, p. 144.

What are the stories we tell ourselves? Are we the people of fragility and failure? Do we tell the tale of strength and resilience? Do we cling to the narrative of our own aging as our slow fade from relevancy?⁷

What are the stories we tell about others? Do their political beliefs come from idiocy, or perhaps from different lived experiences? Does another's indifference come from callousness or a simple lack of awareness? Do we attribute a neighbor's missteps to ill-will or ignorance?

This day, this season, beckons us to pause, to question our inherited notions of the Book of Life, and widen our gaze. To choose better stories that give us purpose and direction.

This is the 180th Rosh Hashanah of this beloved congregation. Over this time, the generations before us shifted from Orthodox to Conservative to Reform movements, evolving the CRS philosophies and practices to match the needs of our people. We moved from the lower east side to the upper east side and finally to the upper west side, as we centered our place of belonging in the heart of our community. Our attitudes about Hebrew, the land of Israel, the place of people based on gender, sexuality, physical and mental faculty changed. Our melodies, our fashion, even our oneg cookies evolved. In the midst of a thriving and vibrant community, we sometimes forget that in the midst of all these changes, prior generations feared we were on the brink of dissembling. Moving away from Orthodoxy, some worried we would lose Jewish ritual altogether. 70 years ago, Rabbi Louis Newman feared that the rise of intermarriage would mean the end of Jewish community. Instead, the American Jewish population grew 50%.⁸ 60 years ago, then-Cantor Gunter Hirschberg introduced a controversial new setting of Avinu Malkeinu by Max Janowski – today it is one of the most iconic melodies here at Rodeph Sholom and around the world. Reintroducing ritual objects like the kippah and tallit half a century ago was seen as the end of Jewish relevancy by some. But as we widen the view in these junctures of change, we see the blessing that remained hidden just beyond the horizon.

As we have before, we stand now before the shifting sands of American Judaism. So many of the structures, boundaries, and even purposes that gave American Jews definition and texture now face seismic upheavals. Rapidly declining religious participation, rising anti-Semitism, declining memberships to synagogues, deepening division surrounding American and Israeli politics all tell the story of decay.

It would be easy to let the American Jewish story stop there, particularly when fear can be such a powerful motivator for philanthropy.

But there is another story, one rarely given press by Jewish organizations. In 2020, the Pew Forum released another major study of our Diaspora. It showed the American Jewish population is growing at a faster rate than the overall American population. While synagogue

⁷ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/break-the-future/2018/07/17/want-to-change-your-life-change-your-narrative-heres-how/?sh=1c359ec91a9f>

⁸ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jewish-population-in-the-united-states-nationally>

affiliation has declined to 31%, a sense of Jewish pride has soared to 94% across generations. Jewish studies departments exist on nearly every major college campus. And, in what would have seemed impossible a generation ago, four Jews ran for president of the United States in the last election.

Change can be terrifying, even as it is inevitable. It is fascinating to see that the American Jewish fears of today are the very same ones preached about 70 years ago, 100 years ago, and 180 years ago. But as generations before us chose the story of opportunity rather than retreat, we may draw on their wisdom. It is even more fascinating to imagine what might be possible if we spent more time speaking of the astounding success of American Judaism thanks to the generations before us. What would happen if the community focused less on a self-defeating narrative of assimilation and more on engaging the 1.4 million people who identify as “Jewishly adjacent” and 2.8 million with Jewish ancestry but not connected to Judaism? What would happen if we listened to the one million Jews by Choice and an estimated one million of Jews of Color⁹ and centered them in the conversation of belonging? What if we learned what appealed to the millions more Americans seeking meaning and belonging, who might benefit from Judaism as a framework for life? What if we expanded the story of American Judaism to see that in the quakes and changes before us lies a new path of blessing waiting to be embraced?

There is a reason Judaism centers story as its sacred source. The stories we choose to tell shape our sense of place and purpose.

We stand at the threshold of this new year, reflecting on our Book of Life thus far. Through pandemic and plague, through loss and struggle, we notice the narratives in our hearts. And we are invited to lift our eyes, to see and imagine what is possible but hidden beyond the horizon before us. We notice the labels we’ve come to don like comfortable clothing – letting “authentic,” “old,” “tired,” and countless other inherited adjectives limit our vision and diminish our vitality. We notice the stories that seek to calcify us in former structures and failures, protecting us from stepping into the uncertainty of all that may come next. And we hear our tradition calling to us, to become authors of a better story.

In the words of Viktor Frankl:

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts, comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a [person] but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.¹⁰

⁹ https://jewsofcolorinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/BEYONDTHECOUNT.FINAL_.8.12.21.pdf; <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/2019-05-31/ty-article/jews-of-color-are-chronically-undercounted-researchers-find/0000017f-db4a-df9c-a17f-ff5a0c880000>

¹⁰ Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, p. 64.

What they could not have known in the moment is that in choosing the way of authorship, these givers not only offered hope, but sustained others long enough for liberation. That is the choice that parted seas and inspired Sinai, the choice that founded this congregation and beats within our hearts today. In the image of God, we are called to be authors of this Book of Life.

This is the question of this season: what is the story we choose to tell?