

Yom Kippur

September 28, 2020 | 10 Tishrei 5781

Congregation Rodeph Sholom

Rabbi Benjamin H. Spratt

Our Story

You wake up, in the same room in which you've sat, cried, and slept for the past six months. Your pajamas have been your go-to outfit, and you decide to continue the trend. You go to the kitchen, and prepare the same cup of coffee you've tasted every morning. You struggle to remember what day it is. Your eyes land on a stack of facemasks on the counter, and the context comes back in an instant. You ask yourself, "Is this really my story?"

If you channel Marie Kondo and focus only on that which sparks joy, turn to page 7.

If you choose ice cream therapy and grab a pint from the freezer, turn to page 13.

If you think some fresh air may help, turn to page 18.

You turn to page 18. You secure your facemask and step out onto the sidewalk. You see dozens of other people making the same choice and find solace seeing a world beyond your home. The horns blare, the garbage has piled up, and you take comfort in seeing the familiar. And then a cyclist speeds by, unmasked, and you make sure yours is in place. Your eyes catch the newsstand paper and see the murder of yet another unarmed person of color during an arrest. You hear parents arguing about distance learning.

If you decide to chase down the cyclist and tell her to put on a mask, turn to page 5.

If you choose to stop and read the paper and let your heart break open, turn to page 15.

If you opt to make like an ostrich and retreat home, turn back to page 1.

You turn to page 1. You wake up, in the same room in which you've sat, cried, and slept for the past six months. Your pajamas have been your go-to outfit, and you decide to continue the trend. You go to the kitchen, and prepare the same cup of coffee you've tasted every morning. You struggle to remember what day it is. Your eyes land on a stack of facemasks on the counter, and the context comes back in an instant. You ask yourself, "Is this really my story?"¹

Here we are. More than ever we feel the weight of this moment and the uncertainty of this time. In a season in which we appeal to God as the Author of the Book of Life, we question the meaning of this particular chapter. Some of us face unimaginable struggle, grieving without tangible support, facing isolation, grappling

with unemployment. Still others are protesting and anguishing over the suffering of others. We may ask ourselves, “Is this really my story?”

We expand our lens, and look to our city and nation. We see the disease of racism that remains in our country’s foundation. The disappearance of entire industries and devastating unemployment. Fire tornados and hurricanes, locust swarms and plague. Issues of biblical proportions seem to define this time. And we may ask ourselves, “Is this really our story?”

Generations after the destruction of the Temple, a group of rabbis journeyed to Jerusalem. They saw the ruins of the Temple, the former heart of the people and house of God. They witnessed a fox scurry out from its den made in the fallen sacred stone. The rabbis began to weep for the good old days as they saw how far things had fallen. All save one. Rabbi Akiva began to laugh. They asked, “How can you possibly find delight in this?! Look at the ruin before you!” He replied, “We always knew these stones must come down. In order to move forward, this had to first fall apart. Now we can begin.” And the rabbis, channeling the very liturgy of Yom Kippur, say “You have comforted us Akiva, you have comforted us.”ⁱⁱ

Over the course of 4 years, the smash hit *Hamilton* has broken record after record. From box office money to Tony nominations to albums sold to online streams. There has never been a show like *Hamilton*. Plenty can be said about its costumes, choreography, and lyrics. But it is its essential message that may be most powerful. In the words of A. O. Scott:

Hamilton is motivated, above all, by a faith in the self-correcting potential of the American experiment, by the old and noble idea that a usable past—and therefore a more perfect future—can be fashioned from a record that bristles with violence, injustice and contradiction. The optimism of this vision, filtered through a sensibility as generous as Miranda’s, is inspiring.

It’s also heartbreaking. One lesson that the past few years should have taught—or reconfirmed—is that there aren’t any good old days. We can’t go back to 1789 or 2016 or any other year to escape from the failures that plague us now. This four-year-old performance of *Hamilton*, viewed without nostalgia, feels more vital, more challenging than ever.

Its central questions—“Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?”—are staring us in the face. Its lyrics are an archive of encouragement and rebuke.ⁱⁱⁱ

We do danger to see mythic remembrance as our ointment to modern despair. For the nostalgic gaze tells the story of decline. And such a gaze may be even more inaccurate than we realize.

Dr. Rutger Brenman, a Dutch historian, notes that the annals of history and modern sociology paint a clear picture: the world, and the wellbeing of the average human, is getting rapidly better. Poverty, disease, murder,

and famine all are plummeting at a logarithmic rate. What is often lost in the immediacy of our experienced world is the broader lens of globe and history. Even in the span of just the past few decades, “extreme poverty, victims of war, child mortality, crime, famine, child labour, deaths in natural disasters, and the number of plane crashes have all plummeted.” In his words, “[w]e’re living in the richest, safest, healthiest era ever.”^{iv} Our story, the story of humanity, is more than this week and this year, but a grand arc that shows that overall human conditions are improving. “Whereas traditional history depicts the [times of] collapse...as ‘dark ages’ in which everything gets worse, modern scholars...see them more as a reprieve, in which the enslaved gain their freedom and culture flourishes.”^v

Some of us may be quick to gild the glory days, others may tear down the statues of former failure. But either path ruins the possibility of a usable past, a past that tells the story of how we have grown, and may continue to grow.

We may tell the story of founding fathers as saintly, visionary heroes or as racist slave owners. Or, instead, as complex leaders of both courage and fault, giving us the opportunity to be even better. Abraham, the great father to many nations, is also the one willing to abandon one son and sacrifice the other. We see Sarah’s laughter and Hannah’s prayer in the face of infertility. We see a global Jewish people made possible only by the destruction of the Temple. The stories we tell do *more* than shape what was. The stories we tell shape our future.

As Alan Lew reflects:

Then the walls of the great house that surrounds you crumble and fall. You tumble out onto a strange street, suddenly conscious of your estrangement and your homelessness.

A great horn sounds calling you to remembrance, but all you can remember is how much you’ve forgotten....you sit and try to remember who you are and where you are going...

When it all comes apart, we are given the opportunity to remember who we are. We lift our gaze to larger stories. Do we end the story with enslavement, or tell the tale of redemption that emerges? Do we frame only the rupture of the divorce, or also the return to self-respect? Do we weep only over the ruins of all that has come apart, or pray or sing or act as a courageous opening to something new?

What is our story? What is *my* story?

This season of *t’shuva* is one of return, not to glorify what was, but to give us the story of what might be. It is letting go of the dream of a better past,^{vi} and instead reaching towards the path of a better future. It is seeing that while we may not control the circumstance of our life, we are the ones who ascribe it meaning.

Will ours be the story of redemption or failure? Of hope or despair? Of change or of stagnancy? We, I, who have wept over the ruins of all that has come apart—is there also here the seeds of building a better future? Might I look back and feel called to shape a new story?

You wake up, in the same room in which you've sat, cried, and slept for the past six months.

And today, today you choose a different page.

ⁱ With gratitude to Carmen Maria Machado, who's exceptional memoir *In the Dream House*, uses a Choose Your Adventure story to illustrate how she remained trapped in an abusive relationship. I credit my son Jonah for raising a philosophical question about why choose your own adventure stories can be so scary, as it raised thought to the power of the medium and inspired reflection on Machado's work and this sermon.

ⁱⁱ Babylonian Talmud, Makkot 24b; the concluding words are "ניחמתנו עקיבא ניחמתנו"

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/30/movies/hamilton-review-disney-plus.html>

^{iv} The entire book *Humankind: A Hopeful History* (2020) by Dr. Rutger Bregman is an impressive articulation of how dramatic is the story of improvement to the global human condition, even as we face the looming crisis of climate change. See in particular pp. 13, 111. "Over the last several decades, extreme poverty, victims of war, child mortality, crime, famine, child labour, deaths in natural disasters, and the number of plane crashes have all plummeted. We're living in the richest, safest, healthiest era ever."

^v <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/may/12/humankind-a-hopeful-history-by-rutger-bregman-review>

^{vi} With gratitude to Jack Kornfeld, whose quote "forgiveness is giving up all hope for a better past" served as the inspiration behind this sermon. <https://jackkornfield.com/the-practice-of-forgiveness/>