

Last May, David's uncle Syd Lieberman died. Syd was not young but not very old – 71 years of age. He had been battling lupus and a whole host of medical issues for many years. He was beloved to many – a devoted and talented high school English teacher at Evanston high school and a nationally known storyteller. He fell into storytelling accidentally, stumbling into a workshop early on in his teaching career and fell in love with the art form. He would travel around the country, around the world, to storytelling festivals, telling stories that he crafted. And the CD's of him telling his stories were a constant presence in our home from the time our children were young. When Matan was 3, he was obsessed with one of Syd's stories – the story of the wise shoemaker of Studena – and he would walk around the house, reciting the story with the same intonations and pauses and inflections that Syd used. Syd's vibrant stories permeated the fabric of our home.

At his memorial service this past spring, Syd's son, Zach – an artist and computer programmer – spoke of his father. He recalled:

*“I remember one time calling him from Switzerland. I was speaking at Davos Conference, and I was feeling so insecure, as if I had nothing to tell these fancy people, and I didn't belong. I had to talk at a dinner about language and I wasn't sure what to tell them about language. “The world needs stories,” he told me, “We are drowning in data, and we need people to weave stories. Tell them that.”*

The world needs stories. That line, that idea, stuck, and I have been thinking a great deal about stories since that morning. What are the stories that we tell, and why do we tell them? Which stories do we inherit and which are we able to craft, on our own?

How can stories lead us somewhere vitally important, on this day of Rosh Hashanah?

Stories fill our lives in a myriad of ways – stories we read to our children when they are young, stories we tell at family gatherings of ancestors and family history, stories we repeat to friends as ways of connecting our own lives to theirs. I can't count the number of times I have retold the stories of my children's births – to each of them every year on their birthdays and to friends, when they share with me their own transformative tales of becoming mothers.

In March of 2013, Bruce Feiler wrote an essay in the NYTimes entitled “The Stories that Bind Us.” In it, he spoke about a recent spate of research that focused on answering the question: what is the secret to creating resilient, happy families? The answer: cultivating a strong and coherent family story.

A psychologist at Emory University found that “the more children knew about their family’s history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem and the more successfully they believed their families functioned. The “Do You Know?” scale turned out to be the best single predictor of children’s emotional health and happiness.”

On an individual and a familial level, developing and nurturing a defining story has a deeply stabilizing and cohering power. It roots us. It makes us feel secure and safe. Our hold on the story of our past gives us the solidity we need to sculpt the narrative of our present and future. And the more we tell those stories, the more deeply embedded they become in our selves.

Every single day, we all craft our own stories. The act of personal storytelling is our reach towards greater intimacy and connection. The more we feel we know of others’ stories, and the more that they hear our own stories, the deeper the level of relationship. The stories we tell about ourselves are always a blend of fiction and non-fiction, creation and inheritance and the exact proportions of history and memory are constantly changing. The blend is always in flux. Each story we craft and tell about ourselves breathes life into one piece of our being. We are – we become- the stories we tell.

When we decide to share our story with someone else, we risk exposure, potential rejection, judgment, and the possibility that our story will not really be heard or accepted with love and compassion. It requires an opening and a leap.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in a dvar on parshat Ki Tavo last year, wrote movingly on the centrality of stories, for us as Jews. He writes:

*“Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has emphasized the importance of narrative to the moral life. “Man,” he writes, “is, in his actions and practice as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal.” It is through narratives that we begin to learn who we are and how we are called on to behave... To know who we are is in large part to understand of which story or stories we are a part.*

*The great questions – “Who are we?” “Why are we here?” “What is our task?” – are best answered by telling a story... This is fundamental to understanding why Torah is the kind of book it is: not a theological treatise or a metaphysical system but a series of interlinked stories extended over time. Judaism is less about truth as system than about truth as story. And we are part of that story. That is what it is to be a Jew.”*

Jews are a storytelling people, and as Rabbi Sacks says, the moral fabric of our identity – both individual and communal – rests on the stories of which we are a part. As a People, we turn and return continually to our story – Torah – to guide us, shape us, help us search for meaning and comfort.

Personally, I think that as humans, we are fairly good at telling our own stories. But the more difficult task is becoming a storyteller of other people’s stories.

How can we become the tellers of stories that are not our own and why should we? And how might this effort open us up to deeper *teshuvah* – return and reconnection?

*HaYom Harat Olam.* Today is the birthing day of the world. Or, as David Seidenberg translated the term, today is pregnant with eternity.

Rosh Hashanah is day that valorizes the universal over the particular. On this day, we step back and find the wider view. It is a day on which we need to shed our particular skin, our individual ego, our own defining story, and get a glimpse of the universal story – the story that is far bigger than any one of us. On Yom Kippur, we will zoom in and narrow our view to closely examine our individual nefashot. But not today. We are not prepared for that accounting until we get the big picture. The stories that eclipse our own.

And cultivating the ability to tell – not just listen to, but tell – the stories of others allows us to do just that.

When David's Uncle Syd chose a story topic, he then began his research process. Weeks, sometimes months of interviewing people, speaking to witnesses and relatives and workers who had some experience with the event he wanted to retell. He read all he could find and spoke to everyone who had some knowledge of the story. He knew well that he could not tell someone's story until he got into its skin and felt all of its textures and turns. This storytelling prep is what we might call the active cultivation of empathy.

Developing the capacity to tell someone else's story demands a personal *tzimtzum* – a contraction. Suddenly it's not about us anymore. To inhabit the other's narrative, we must step outside of ourselves and practice all of those hard-earned qualities that *teshuvah* is really about: compassion, empathy, humility.

It is means dusting off that *nekudah penimit* – that inner point within us – to clean off the dirt of our ego.

And *davka* when the stories of others' are troubling, upsetting, morally challenging, when we would rather turn away, those are the stories that most need telling.

Today and tomorrow, we will read sections of our Torah that were designated by the rabbis for Rosh Hashanah. In both cases, the stories are difficult. Today we re-encounter Sarah's vicious treatment of Hagar, born out of feelings of jealousy and insecurity. Tomorrow, we read of Avraham's unquestioning obedience to a horrific request from God and his seeming failure to protect the life of his child. On both days, our moral impulse may be to turn away. We may have very real difficulty weaving these stories into our own, reading our lives into the lives of Avraham and Sarah.

Dr. Maria Tatar, a professor of folklore and mythology at Harvard University, writes about the potent role of telling folktales, and *especially* troubling folktales, as many of the original ones are:

*"There's the great "once upon a time"... It tells us this is not the here and now. You can let your imagination run wild. You can go in places that you'd be scared to go otherwise. You can say things that you're afraid to talk about...and in mysterious ways you come to an understanding or a resolution..."There is transformative power in terror, and we count on stories to keep us from forgetting that"...And we have to face down those demons and figure out what they are, both the demons within and without. And I think the stories provide a platform for doing that."*

Telling and hearing stories that trouble our moral conscience can play an instrumental role in engaging with difficult possibilities. And maybe the story will allow us to look at those unbecoming pieces of ourselves with deeper honesty. To stop turning away and really look them in the face. And perhaps to listen to other people's stories without judgment, without ego clouding their clarity.

My own personal story is and has always been deeply and broadly Jewish. I grew up in an observant Jewish family. Went to Jewish day school, Jewish high school, Jewish camp, immersed in synagogue life, pursued Jewish studies in college and graduate school. True, I never attended rabbinical school, but admittedly, that was the original plan. There is very little in my story that is not purely Jewish. And the lives that David and I are crafting for our children – as much as we have the power to craft them – are not far from my own. The stories of our families, their great-great grandparents, are known and repeated to our children, and the stories of our Jewish People, writ large, are taught, studied, and discussed in their schools and camps. These central stories are very solid.

But lately, I have been feeling that they are perhaps too solid.

My kids can tell their own stories, but can they tell others?

A few weeks ago, on my regular ritual of running while listening to Krista Tippett, I tuned into the voice of John O'Donohue. O'Donohue, who passed away in 2008, was an Irish poet, philosopher and Catholic scholar. Maybe it was his lilting Irish brogue, or more likely, his profound and exquisite words, but my attention to mileage faded away, and upon returning home, I went directly to the library to look for his books.

In one of his books, entitled *Eternal Echoes*, he explores the human yearning to belong and speaks of the necessary but challenging oscillation between longing and belonging. His words are exquisite, so I will quote him. He says:

*“Like the tree that puts roots deep into the clay, each of us needs the anchor of belonging in order to bend with the storms and reach towards the light. Like the ocean that returns each time to the same shore, a sense of belonging liberates us to trust fully the rhythm of loss and longing; it also shelters us from the loneliness of life... There is a constant and vital tension between longing and belonging. Without the shelter of belonging, our longings would lack direction, focus and context; they would be aimless and haunted, constantly tugging the heart in a myriad of opposing directions... Belonging without longing would be empty and dead, a cold frame around emptiness... The arduous task of being a human is to balance longing and belonging so that they work with and against each other... The beauty of the mind is its circular form. Yet the circle of the mind is broken somewhere. This fracture is always open; it is the secret well from which all longing flows. All prayer, love, creativity and joy come from this source.”*

I love this image. Life as a circle with an opening, a fracture.

Belonging and longing. Belonging to the stories that we inherit, that we are given. Longing to craft our own stories as we go. As O’Donohue says, in this toggling between belonging and longing, we must find and sacralize the cracks in our stories. When our stories and our feelings of belonging are so secure, so solid and impenetrable, we may limit our vulnerability but we also close ourselves from these precious openings, openings that may be the very well of our souls, the seat of the deepest compassion.

With the sharing of information so omnipresent in our lives, we are all curators and purveyors of information, choosing to share certain stories, certain articles or blog posts or anecdotes from our lives or those of others, online, from a distance. But this sharing feels to me like the passing along of information, lacking the intimacy of attunement or involvement in the other on the opposite end of the story.

This is not the telling of others’ stories. It requires no risk, no obligation or real ownership of the people or the situation.

How might this look and feel different if we dedicated ourselves to becoming the tellers of others' stories? If we became as actively involved, committed and engaged in telling stories that are not our own as we are telling our own?

This, I believe, is the essential groundwork for teshuvah.

*Hayom Harat Olam.* Today is the birthing day of the whole world. Our particular story is one tiny fragment of the universal narrative of which we are privileged to be a part. And there is no shortage of other people's stories to tell. Pick a day, pick a moment, and if we are listening, stories are streaming around us, on the left and right, in back of us and in front of our eyes, calling to us. We have the chance to be the tellers of so many stories that need a louder voice, that need our commitment, our investment, our sense of obligation.

Why not explore that precious opening in our circle?

Why not become a storyteller for someone else today?