



Rosh Hashanah Morning – 5767

HOW WILL WE TELL OUR STORY?

After this congregation elected me to become senior rabbi, reporters from different newspapers asked me to tell the “the story of my life.” It was an interesting exercise, because in telling a life story, you have to think about what to leave in, and what to leave out. You have to ask yourself: What’s most significant about my past? What is better left unsaid? Which experiences brought me to the place I am today?

All of us, when we tell the stories of our lives, try to make sense of them, to identify the patterns of our past and the pathways to our present. When we tell our stories, we say: this is who I am. That’s what I tried to do as I talked with reporters.

Most of them were primarily interested in my religious journey. They wanted me to answer the question: how did a nice Lutheran girl from eastern Washington state end up as a rabbi in Croton-on-Hudson, NY?” To them, my life represented an “unusual journey of faith.” The “strangeness” of that journey intrigued the reporters with whom I spoke.

But I could have told my story a different way -- and it would have still been true.

I actually experienced my own religious journey not as something strange, but as something natural. Had I emphasized the natural part of my journey, I would have told the story a different way -- something like this:

My parents raised me in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, the most conservative branch of Lutheranism. The church taught me that I had to believe a certain way. If I didn’t believe, I was doomed to eternal torment.

However, my circumstances prevented me from having the ability to believe without question. I grew up in a family of five brothers, four of them older than me. So I learned not to believe everything people told me –because my older brothers –misled me on a regular basis. I developed a healthy skepticism, and that skepticism prevented me from believing some of the things that my church demanded I believe.

At the same time, my Lutheran religious education exposed me to the Hebrew Scriptures – what I used to call “the Old Testament.” I encountered the many heroes of our texts: Abraham, Deborah, Joseph, Queen Esther, King Solomon -- and I loved these stories.

After my mother's death, our family lost its spiritual center. My tenuous connection to the church began to unravel, and by the age of thirteen, I no longer considered myself a Lutheran. In college, after reading Marx and Freud, I rejected religion altogether.

While in college, I made Jewish friends. They introduced me to Jewish culture, which I embraced. I loved the food, the music, the humor. So, it's no great surprise that I married a Jewish man and agreed to raise a Jewish child. This is how I discovered Judaism, which, from the beginning, felt like home. All my old friends were there: Abraham and Deborah, Joseph, Queen Esther and King Solomon!

So my eventual conversion represented a formalization of something I already felt in my heart. Even becoming a rabbi seemed natural. Today I am sometimes surprised when I remember that I haven't always been Jewish.

I had a choice about how I told the story of my life. I couldn't change the basic facts, but I did have the power to shape my story— to tell it the way I wanted to tell it; to illuminate my present by the way I spoke of my past.

As a wise friend of mine once said: there are many ways to tell the stories of our lives, and all of them can be true.

In my case, my religious path IS unusual. I cannot explain exactly how I came to be here. But at the same time, my BEING here –seems completely natural. So both stories are true.

We Jews also have stories to tell – stories from the past that shape how we experience the present. This morning, we read one such story: the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his beloved son, Isaac.

Here is the story as told in our Torah:

As a test of Abraham's obedience, God asks him to take his son and journey to the land of Moriah – once there, Abraham was to slaughter Isaac according to the ritual of sacrifice. God asked Abraham to turn his son to ashes.

Abraham doesn't say a word of protest.

The next morning, he begins his journey with Isaac to the place of sacrifice.

After traveling three days, they arrive –and Abraham takes wood, the stone for making a fire, and the slaughtering knife. Isaac asks his father: "Here are the firestone and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham replies: "God will see to the lamb for the burnt offering."

At the place of sacrifice, Abraham builds an altar, arranges the wood for the fire, binds his son, Isaac, and places Isaac on top of the wood upon God's altar. Then Abraham picks up the knife to slay his son.

At the last possible moment, an angel calls to him, and stops the sacrifice.

Abraham passes the test. The angel says to him: *“Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your beloved son.”*

Abraham then notices a ram, caught in a thicket nearby –This ram becomes the burnt offering and his son, Isaac, lives.

Abraham gets a special blessing for being willing to sacrifice his son. The angel tells him: *“Because you have done this and not withheld your son, your favored one, I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes.”*

Abraham passes the test –and he is rewarded for his obedience.

What’s the lesson of this story as the Torah tells it? That we must have unwavering, unquestioning obedience to God’s word, whatever the command. If we show such faith, we will be rewarded. That’s the lesson.

If this lesson makes you uncomfortable – good! You are not the first to feel this way. It made the rabbis of 2,000 years ago uncomfortable as well.

The early rabbis lived in a world different from the one in which the writers of the Torah lived, a world in which more and more people rejected animal sacrifice as a means of connection to God. And child sacrifice? Unthinkable.

But the rabbis inherited this story of Abraham and Isaac, and they considered it sacred. They couldn’t just ignore it, and they couldn’t change its basic facts.

But they could change the way they told the story. And they did.

The story as told by the rabbis differs significantly from the story we read this morning. In their re-telling, the rabbis addressed questions like:

- What would motivate God to do such a thing?
- What was Isaac feeling? Did he want to be sacrificed?
- Was Abraham really so stoic about God’s terrible request?

With their changes, the rabbis humanized the story, softened it. Abraham weeps as he complies; Isaac becomes a willing sacrifice. And God has a reason for the test.

The rabbis changed the story in order to convey a message different from the one emphasized by the Biblical writers.

The story changed again and again over the centuries, each generation reacting to and re-telling it.

Imagine, for a moment, that the story hadn’t changed over the centuries. We would be left with the message found in the original version: the message that

blind faith is worth even more than the life of a child. We would learn that it is a worthy thing to sacrifice your child for a larger purpose –especially if you believe your “larger purpose” has the stamp of Divine Approval.

This message could be construed to support those parents who rejoice when their children become suicide bombers – parents who raise their children to be “martyrs” --to spill more blood in an already bloody world.

In a recent edition of *The New Yorker*¹, Jeffrey Goldberg describes the following scene in his “Letter from Gaza.”

As we sat in Abu Hussein’s living room, he pulled his son, Hussein, close to him. Hussein is a spirited ninth grader whose passion, he told me, is drawing. “I want him to finish his studies, but if he happens to die, I don’t have a problem,” his father said, “so long as he dies as a martyr, and on the condition that he takes Jews with him when he dies. I will be happy if he dies this way.”

Hussein ran out of the room, and came back with a photograph of himself. “This is my martyr picture,” he said, handing it to me. In the photograph, he wore khaki shirt and pants and held an AK-47. “If I die, this is the photo that will appear on the martyr posters in Gaza.” All of his schoolmates have a “martyr photo,” he said, “So when we get killed we’ll have the best posters.”

“Islam is winning,” his father said....”We’re happy to sacrifice our families to win this battle.”

Hussein said, “I’m his only son, and he wants me to die!” Then he laughed, and put his arm around his father.

If our story of Abraham and Isaac had not changed over the centuries, would we rejoice today at the thought of sacrificing our children for the sake of our religion?

But our story did change. We changed it. We changed it because THIS IS NOT WHO WE ARE.

Because we change the way we tell our stories, we can draw a completely different message from the original tale of Abraham and Isaac.

One example: in 1956, the Israeli writer S. Yizhar, placed the following words in the mouth of a battling soldier during Israel’s War of Independence:

*Who created such a bloody world?
And you can’t live without giving life or taking life....
I hate Abraham who goes to sacrifice Isaac.
What right has he over Isaac –
Let him sacrifice himself!
I hate the God who sent him to sacrifice
And besieged him....*

¹ September 11, 2006

*I hate that Isaac is nothing but an experiment
Between Abraham and his God.
The self-sanctification of the God
Through the sacrifice of Isaac – I hate that too –
Why do the sons need to die for?*

If we aren't willing to change the way we tell our story, we become prisoners of our own narratives. We get so stuck in our story that we lose the power to change – we are frozen because we have come to believe that there is only ONE way to tell our story.

The story of our Jewish people can also be told in different ways.

It can be told as a story of endless oppression, of enemies arising in every generation, culminating in the horrors of the Holocaust – a story of terrible suffering ready to be unleashed on us once more.

This is the story told by Israel's prime minister in the days of this summer's conflict between Israel and Hezbollah. In a speech to the world, he linked the conflict to the Holocaust, saying:

"Today I am serving as the voice of six million bombarded Israeli citizens who serve as the voice of six million murdered Jews who were melted down to dust and ashes by savages in Europe....Never again will we wait for bombs that never came to hit the gas chambers. Never again will we wait for salvation that never arrives."

This story of our people's persecution over the generations and of the millions murdered by the Nazis is a true story. But it is not the only way our story can be told.

Our story can be told as one of renewal and resilience, of our flourishing in times of difficulty. We Jews survived for two thousand years without a homeland. And we accomplished great things.

Our people became insightful teachers of Torah, like Rashi and Maimonides. Great philosophers like Spinoza. Brilliant thinkers like Sigmund Freud, and Albert Einstein. We won Nobel prizes, worked for civil rights, for justice. We lived our mandate to be "a light unto the nations."

Our young nation, Israel, has flourished -- despite adversity. In the years since her birth, Israel has opened her arms to welcome Jews from around the world, and has fashioned a lasting peace with two of her neighbors, Egypt and Jordan. And today, Israelis continue to live in freedom, strongly defended, and enjoying the allegiance of the most powerful nation in the world.

And across all of Europe, Jewish life emerges once again. In Dresden, a progressive seminary recently ordained three rabbis, a nationally-televised event which Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel hailed as a "day of recognition and

joy.” And in Poland, a small, but growing number of courageous people are choosing to convert to Judaism, drawn by the beauty and the meaning of our teachings and our traditions.

When we tell the story of our people, which story will we tell today? Do we tell of a persecuted people under constant threat from enemies? This is a true story.

Or do we tell the story of a resilient people, a strong people, a people that endures, thrives, and gives many gifts to our world. This story is also true.

Which story do we emphasize today?

Our answer will influence our actions in the present, and ultimately determine the future we will inherit. If we dwell on our persecution, our weakness and our vulnerability, we will act out of fear. If we dwell on our resiliency, our strength and our endurance, we will act out of hope.

This year, I recognize ever more strongly that both stories of our people are true. But I choose to emphasize the story of our strength and our resilience.

In this new year, I pray for the courage to overcome fear; I pray for the insight to act with hope. I pray for the strength to “seek peace and pursue it.”

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