

## **Telling A New Story**

Rosh Hashanah 5785- 2024

We are storytelling animals. Tens of thousands of years ago, our ancestors etched records of hunts and herd movements into cave walls. Thousands of years ago, they came up with communal myths that became the basis of tribal religions, myths that we recorded in scrolls and still read today.

In the book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Yuval Noah Hariri writes that storytelling made our species. Stories set us apart, gave us an advantage over other early human species. Because we could tell stories, we were able to form large groups with common identities. Common stories allowed us to cooperate better and thus become the best hunters and the most sophisticated thinkers and the rulers of the planet.

Stories are our lifeblood. As humans, we are evolutionarily wired to respond to them, to live by them. Stories have gotten us where we are as a species. For better, and for worse. Stories have inspired us to scale mountains, and to descend into war.

**Stories are our destiny, but they are also an opportunity. Because we can change our stories. They are putty in our hands. Like God creating Adam from clay, we can pinch and pull at our stories to create new selves, new relationships, new nations. We, too, can tell new stories about ourselves, and in so doing, we can create a new destiny.**

We are storytelling animals. We tell stories to make sense of what's happening around us. I tripped because there was a stick in the road.

Because I am tired today. Because I'm naturally clumsy. She didn't call me back because she was busy. Because she is forgetful. Because she doesn't love me. They are poor because they have bad luck. Because they are lazy. Because they are oppressed. We are strong because we have the best weapons. Because God is on our side. Because we stand together as one.

Our minds create stories out of the data points and sensations they perceive. We live out these stories, often unconsciously. But in order to get where we want to go we have to know where we are going. We have to take a step back and look at the narrative that is being told in our minds. Buddhist meditation teacher Andrea Martin wrote, "When you step aside and let go of your story, you create a space. The space between your story and your life is the place where you discover the deeper nature of human life."

Stories have made us. Yet sometimes our stories do not serve us. As children we draw, dance, sing, climb, run. But then we grow up and, unless we are told repeatedly that we are good at something, we tell ourselves that we aren't good, and shouldn't do those things. And so we draw only when doodling, sing only when others sing louder around us, dance only when we think no one is watching. We are told that boys don't cry, that girls aren't as good at math, that adults don't enjoy cartoons, that all Jews love gefilte fish. Our stories place artificial limits on who we are and can be. But they don't have to. Because we can tell a new story.

This year my grandfather Arthur Siegel passed away. He was born in the Bronx, the son of immigrants without great means. A gifted child, he skipped grades in elementary school and went on to attend City College

in New York at age 16, and then the University Pennsylvania school of dentistry. My grandmother, Carol Maller, was a hygienist on the wards at the UPenn Navy Hospital. They fell in love and set up a home together in Long Island, where Arthur ran his own dental practice out of his home, with my grandmother as the hygienist. They had two children, my father Evan and my aunt Cherie.

Their story was all set up to be a classic 1950s successful white couple's story; a breadwinning father and homemaking mother with two sweet children and a white picket fence. But then my grandfather's arthritis, which appeared already in his 20s, progressed further, causing him great pain and freezing his finger and elbow joints by the time he was in his 40s. Without dexterity in his hands, my grandfather had to close his dental practice.

Imagine you're my grandmother. As a young woman you were expected to find a good husband and raise children at home. You did that, carefully fitting yourself into the storyline, until it shattered. Imagine you're my grandfather. You worked all your young life toward a particular career and livelihood, then as soon as you attain it, you lose it. Now you have a choice: you can cling to the old story, struggling in the thwarted reality of typical gender roles, or you can step into a new story.

My grandparents chose to step into a new story. My grandmother, a feminine soul who could be found regularly at beauty parlors, began to sell World Book Encyclopedias and was so successful that she moved up in the ranks until she was a regional manager. My grandfather, a tall and imposing man, became a homemaker, finding new meaning in raising his children as he cooked unusual dinners and built intricate models for the kids' school projects. He devised ingenious tools to mitigate his

disability, and remained independent for his whole life. My grandmother, outgoing and ambitious, worked happily for the rest of her life, and my grandfather, quiet and cerebral, enjoyed studying history and photography at home. Rather than keeping up the facade of a story that no longer worked, my grandparents flipped the script and found fulfillment.

We all have the ability to live a new story. We can tell ourselves that we can't dance, that we shouldn't dance, and we will live stiffly. We can allow our circumstances to dictate the details of our story. Or we can rewrite a story in which adults dance just for fun, and we can make up our own moves as we respond to the rhythms of life.

The Jewish people was founded with the telling of a new story. God told Abraham, Go forth from your home, from your native land to a new land that I will show you and I will bless you and make you a great nation.

Abraham believed that story. He believed it so fiercely that, according to the midrash, he smashed his family's idols, the protagonists of their stories for generations. And then he and Sarah crossed over the river into a new land, creating the *Ivriim*, the Hebrews, those who crossover.

Stories can spur growth or stymie it, not only for individuals, but for whole communities. Our company is in trouble, they say, and so it is. Our nation is under attack, they tell us, so we feel threatened. Our religion is shrinking, they report, and so we feel small. These stories don't just define reality, they create reality. When they hear a company is in trouble, people divest. When they hear our nation is under attack, people become suspicious and unkind, even violent. When they hear religion is shrinking, people stay home from church and shul.

We at Beth El are not immune to the story about religion today, about American Judaism today, about the Conservative movement today, about the Harrisburg Jewish community today. We have heard the story that these are shrinking and dying. Hearing this story we become afraid, we begin to grieve our loss before asking whether this story is true, or whether it will remain true. I'm here to say today, this story of a shrinking and dying American Conservative Judaism, of a shrinking and dying Beth El Temple, is not the whole truth, and it need not be our destiny. We are part of the Jewish people, a people that has learned to tell a new story time and again, across the boundaries of country, culture and time.

American Jews are poised to tell a new story. The American Jewish story I grew up with was triumphant. We were the successful immigrants, once barred from clubs and universities, now at the top echelons of society. They tried to kill us, but now they are gone, and we make movies about them.

But today the tone of our story has changed. As the postmodern era leads people away from religion, we look around and see the numbers in our synagogues dwindling, our schools shrinking, our camps struggling. And we have begun to tell ourselves a story of decline. There are articles, polls, and reports to shore up this story. You've heard of them. The facts and statistics that send alarm bells ringing throughout Jewish America. It's not that this story is a lie. It's that this story doesn't serve us. And we don't have to tell it.

We can tell ourselves that our Conservative movement is shrinking and dying, and spend time grieving our memories. Or we can tell a story in

which the face of Judaism is changing, in which new ways of engaging are being devised every year, every day, in which the Judaism of the next generation may be unrecognizable to us. In this story we stand in a moment of opportunity, in a moment of what if? Where anything can happen, and new Jewish dreams might come true.

We can shake off the stories that weigh us down. We can cross over, turn the page, and write a new one.

Today I want to tell you a new story about Beth El Temple. Our community is thriving. We have new members joining every year and becoming active. If you've joined Beth El in the last two years, please stand up.

We have more children in our Gesher School and more young families attending services, with giggling children running up and down the halls at kiddush. We have a new Jewish Outreach Coordinator and are in touch with more of our members than ever. We have a revitalized Mitzvah Corps and are supporting those who are ill and grieving in our community more than before. We are putting our name out there and are attracting new attention and interest all the time.

To capture and capitalize on this growing energy, I have created an initiative called the Watering Hole. The Watering Hole is a new way of gathering, a new way of telling our story at Beth El. Like a watering hole in the African plains where all kinds of species come to refresh themselves, Torah and Jewish community are a vital resource that bring different kinds of people together around a common cause. At the watering hole, individual animals can find their common tribe while also sharing a body of water with other creatures.

The Watering Hole at Beth El is a system of affinity groups in which people can find their “tribe,” other people with whom they share a particular identity or interest, while connecting to Torah and the larger Jewish community.

There are already several groups gathering around Beth El’s watering hole. Our Primetimers, Young Beth El and Mensches in the Middle are gathering people in similar stages of life. A few weeks ago forty Primetimers celebrated Jimmy Sudhalter’s 84th birthday at the pizza grille. A few months ago I texted the Young Beth El whatsapp group on a Wednesday and ended up with 15 people for a Shabbat potluck at my house for dinner on Friday. This is how we can gather.

Our hiking group and mah jong players and social action group gather people who enjoy similar activities. A few Sundays ago the Mahjong players had their first annual tournament organized by Judie Wolnek. Many of the players were people Judie had taught to play in the last year or so, and many more are now learning with Judie. And the Sunday before that the hiking group hiked up Mount Patrick to an Ashram, featuring beautiful views, ancient paleolithic fossils, and a guestbook in which we found the names of other Beth El members who had been there years before. This is how we can gather.

We have also held Shabbatot honoring particular identities: Veteran Shabbat, Disability Shabbat, Pride Shabbat, and Pet Shabbat with our beloved animal family barking along to lecha dodi. This, too, is how we can gather.

Watering Hole groups are all lay-led with support from our staff. Groups decide how and where and when they want to meet, and Beth El clergy and staff help collaborate, calendar and share tips and strategies. The new story of our gathering is democratic, bottom up, not top down.

In our old story, Beth El was more centralized. Clergy and staff would plan programs and services and publicize them through our newsletter or email blasts. This method was more streamlined but it did not offer as much variety. As a result, large portions of our membership were not engaged, our leadership pipeline often ran dry, and we did not meet many new faces.

The story of the Watering Hole is more decentralized. At an African watering hole, animals access water in different ways. Elephants suck up water with their trunks, monkeys scoop it in their hands, giraffes have to squat and bend low to lap it up. So too, we each have our own ways of accessing Torah and Jewish community. Some of us want to study, others want to sing. Some want to get together to hike while others want to eat. Well, almost all of us here at Beth El want to eat. But the point is, the Watering Hole system allows each of us to access the deep well of Torah and the nourishing water of Jewish community in the way that fits us best. It also demands that each of us come to the well, show up, and create our own access points.

Change is hard, telling a new story is hard. But staying stuck in the old story isn't great either. Stuck stories can frustrate us, but we have the ability to move on to a new, adaptable, stronger and brighter story. For ourselves and our community.



In your program today there is a list of groups and their leaders. Downstairs there are also little colorful contact cards for each group that you can take home. Take a look and see, what tribe do you belong to? What story do you want to be a part of? Reach out to any group to join. If there's some way of connecting that you don't see, please let us know, we'd love to help you create that group.

We are storytelling animals. Stories tell us who we are, and how we function. If we are stuck we can use stories to our advantage, like my grandparents did, like Abraham did. With a new story, we can rewrite the course of our personal and collective history. Where are you stuck in your life? How could you benefit from writing a new story? And how will you help Beth El and our broader Jewish community write a new story?

On these days of awe, let us open the book of life, the storybooks in our minds, and take some time to examine the narratives we've been telling ourselves. Let's see how they read. Do we like them? If we don't, just turn the page. There's still time to write a new one.