

**REWRITING THE BOOKS OF OUR LIVES:
STORIES, MEMORIES AND YOM HAZIKARON**

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When I was 18 and a freshman in college, I took an Introduction to Psychology course, and the professor, Philip Holzman (z"l), began the first lecture with a slide of a baby. The next slide was of a toddler, and finally a slide of himself, an old man. [By the way, I checked on line to see how old he actually was in 1980, and it turns out the "old man" was 58 years old. Since I just turned 52, I have to say my perspective has changed a little].

It turns out that the slides of the baby and toddler were Professor Holzman as well. He showed us these slides because he wanted to ask us whether we thought there was any unity, any coherence between these seemingly different persons whose photographs were projected in front of us. Is there a "self" that is actually continuous over the course of our lives? This question is an old one. Plato himself in the *Symposium* notes that a person, although

he is called the same person, he never has the same constituents, but is always being renewed in some respects and experiencing loss in others, for instance, his hair, skin, bone, blood and his whole body. This applies not only to the body but also to the mind: attributes, character traits, beliefs, desires, pleasures, pains, fears—none of these ever remain the same in each of us, but some are emerging while others are being lost. Still more remarkable is the fact that our knowledge changes too, some items emerging, while others are lost, so we are not the same person as regards our knowledge . . ."¹

Said more succinctly in the lyrics of a rock song from the musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*: "With all the changes you've been through, it seems the stranger's always you."²

Are we really strangers to ourselves? If we were able to meet and talk to the person we were when we were 15, 20 or 30, would we even recognize ourselves? Would we have much in common with that younger self? I can tell you, that after wincing my way through some of the letters I wrote during my adolescence, I'm not sure how much time *I* would want to spend with myself today.

And yet, that adolescent girl *is* myself. How so? Is it because I/we have the same body, more or less (actually more). Is it because we have a "soul" either in the religious sense or in a secular sense-- "an invariant, timeless self"?³ Whatever it is, it is "an existential necessity" as Paul John Eakin says (p. 46) to see our lives and our selves as a cohesive unity. This is expressed brilliantly in the movie *The Beasts of the Southern Wild* when the protagonist named Hushpuppy, a 6 year old girl, runs away and finds herself on a boat with an old captain and dozens of chicken biscuit rappers at his feet, littered on the floor of the boat.

"I been eatin these [chicken biscuits] all my life," he tells her. I keep the wrappers in the boat cause they remind me of what I was when I ate each one. The smell makes me feel cohesive."

"I want to be cohesive," she tells him.

"I'm sure you will baby, no doubt in my mind."

How do we feel cohesive? For most of us, the way we feel that our lives and our selves are a unity, is to tell our stories—to take the memories we have of our lives and create a narrative. Whether we formally write a memoir or autobiography, whether we share our life stories with our children and grandchildren around the dinner

table, or whether we simply narrate to ourselves where we are and where we've been all along the journey, we live through our stories.

Today, on this day that is called in our tradition *Yom HaZikaron*, the Day of Remembrance, I want to talk about the way we shape our memories and our stories. During these Days of Awe, when we are remembering our past year and the events and people of our lives, and when we pray to be written in the metaphorical "Book of Life," *Sefer haHayyim*, I want to share some reflections about the way we write the Books of our Lives, so to speak. The way we create our stories of who we are and who we want to be.

According to USA Today more memoirs are published today than ever before, accounting for 12.5% of non-fiction deals.⁴ Memoirs such as *The Glass Castle* and *Eat Pray Love* are hugely popular. And in the digital age, with publishing more accessible to the non-professional writer, more and more people are writing their own memoirs for the pleasure of their family and friends.

Life stories are also popular on the radio. This past summer, I was one of about 1,000 people in the Tabernacle enjoying a live performance of the Moth Radio Hour, a highly acclaimed show on NPR where people share memories and stories. The prerequisite for telling a story on the Moth is that the story is true and that it is one's own story. That seems straightforward enough. Who knows the truth of our own memories and life stories better than we do? Those memories belong to us. Memoirs and autobiographies are by definition true. Yet it turns out that what a memory actually is, proves to be more complex than we assume.

Most of us tend to think of memories as being stored as if it were a file in a cabinet or a hard drive. The better our memories, we think, the more we can store, and the more easily we can retrieve. Neuroscientists, however, now understand that this is not the way memory works. Memories are not actually "originals" that are stored and retrieved, the way files are. Memories, rather, are rebuilt and recreated every time we remember.⁵ They are "self-referential"—that is to say, they say more about who we are in the present, as the "rememberer", than who we were in the past, as the remembered. As neuroscientist Israel Rosenfield says, "every context will alter the nature of what is recalled."⁶

Moreover, the more often we remember something, the further it is from what actually happened, because the memory has undergone that many more creative drafts, so to speak. The most accurate memories, says Israeli scientist Yadin Dudai on an episode of NPR's *Radio Lab*,⁷ are from people who, paradoxically, have had amnesia. As for the rest of us, the ones who haven't forgotten everything, our memories are a kind of creative fiction in the best sense. We are truly "authors" so to speak, of our lives. The memories we tell are *constructed*, and often constructed artfully, which is why they are so compelling.

If it is true that memories are really constructions, it is all the more true that the string of memories we shape into stories, the stories of our lives, are a kind of fiction. And thank God for that. Our lives as they really are probably wouldn't make good stories. As anthropologist Michael D. Jackson quotes Martin Amis's ironic observation, our real lives are "thinly plotted, largely themeless, sentimental The dialogue is poor, or at least . . . uneven. The twists are either predictable or sensationist. And it's always the same beginning; and the same ending . . ."⁸

Our *stories* about ourselves, on the other hand, are so engaging, and so important, because through them we both find meaning in our lives and establish a sense of agency, of control over a reality that, as described in the *Unetaneh Tokef*, is often beyond our control. "In stories, as in dreams," Jackson writes, "we take centre stage. . . . There is no denying that storytelling gives us a sense that though we do not exactly determine the course of our lives we at least have a hand in defining their meaning In telling a story, we renew our faith that the world is within our grasp" (pp. 15-17).

Up until now, I have described the importance of our individual stories for our sense of agency, control and ability to make meaning. But the reality is that many of our most important stories are created collectively through our relationships, our families, and our national or ethnic groups. Our collective stories are at least, if not

more, powerful as a way of understanding and making meaning. As Jackson quotes Simone Weil, “To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.”⁹

This rootedness, this being a part of a larger story, has been shown to be critical not only for us as adults but also for our children. This past March Bruce Feiler wrote an op-ed piece for the NYT entitled “The Stories that Bind Us.”¹⁰ In that article he asked, “What is the secret sauce that holds a family together? What are the ingredients that make some families effective, resilient, happy?” Over the course of a few years of research, he found that “[t]he single most important thing you can do for your family may be the simplest of all: develop a strong family narrative.”

Feiler learned from the research of Psychologists Sara Duke and Robyn Fivush, 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.” They developed what they called a “Do you know” scale that asked children to answer 20 questions, including “Do you know where your grandparents grew up? Do you know where your mom and dad went to high school? Do you know an illness or something really terrible that happened in your family? Do you know the story of your birth?” Positive answers to these questions “turned out to be the best single predictor of children’s emotional health and happiness.”

I would guess that the accuracy of these true stories and memories are less important than their meaning. Of course, they need to be truthful. They cannot, God forbid, be deceptions. But how many miles my mom actually walked to school in the snow should not be at issue here. I have a strong memory of a gigantic hill I schlepped up on my way home from Elementary school—evidence of my determination. Yet when I visited my hometown of Natick as an adult I was shocked to see the little slope that I had such big memories of. And the story of Galya’s birth is becoming more and more rosy over time. I can barely remember any pain at all. And that is the truth.

Our memories are not snapshots of original events but our creations. Yet every time we share our stories with our children or our friends, we are sharing ourselves. And what Feiler’s research showed, is that the family narratives that were the most meaningful, included both happy times and sad, easy times and difficult, triumphs and failures. Stories that pretended everything was just fine and always had been, or everything was terrible and always had been, were not helpful to the children or the family. Stories, however, that told of difficulties, and how they were weathered and survived were essential. We know that such stories give strength in different ways to different members of our families throughout our lives.

Just as family stories give us a sense of meaning, agency, faith, and rootedness, so do the stories of our larger groups—national, religious, ethnic or cultural. As Jews, we are unquestionably bound together by our stories. We just read today some of the founding stories of our faith, the stories of the triumphs and failures, successes and disappointments of our ancestors Abraham and Sarah. The clearest example, however, for the importance of stories is from the book of Exodus. Exodus recounts the founding story of our people Israel’s journey from slavery to freedom. At the same time, even as we hear the story, we are told to tell the story—to tell it to our children. “When your children ask you . . . you shall say . . .” (Ex. 12:26). These commandments to tell these stories to our children became the source of the Four Children in the Haggadah. Because stories are more about the present than the past, the Haggadah tells us that we need to tell our stories in a way that is meaningful to the present listeners—symbolized by the typology of “Wise, Wicked, Simple or the One who doesn’t know enough to ask”.

Haggadah literally means, “the telling”. In the Maggid section of the Haggadah, literally the “teller” section, is a Torah text about ritual story telling. It comes from Deuteronomy and is about the Israelites bringing their first fruits to the Temple. Every year every Israelite would bring their first fruits and recite the larger story of which each of them were a part. “My father was a fugitive Aramaen”, it begins. “He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and populous nation. The Egyptians dealt

harshly with us and oppressed us . . . We cried to the Lord . . . and the Lord heard our plea . . . and freed us from Egypt . . . He brought us to this place . . . wherefore I now bring the first fruits.” (Deut. 26:5-10).

Many modern readers of the Torah can't help but ask if these stories are "true". If "true" means a transparent copy of an original event, then they are not true. If our memories from last year are a construction of an event rather than a mirror of the original, we will need to assume that is the case of our stories from 2,500 to 3,000 years ago. Yet they are true in the sense that they are meaningful. They are our stories. They root us, just as our family stories do, giving us a sense of purpose, agency, resilience and faith. If we listen to the story of the Exodus with an eye to judging how close that came to the "original" event, you would be missing the point of the story, the point of any important story. As William James brilliantly said in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, we should not confuse the issue of origins with meaning. The text, he says, only need be "a true record of the inner experiences of great-souled persons wrestling with the crises of their fate."¹¹ I believe that is true of all of our stories.

I would venture, that if you could have put a camera to film what happened at Sinai, I don't mean Cecil B. Demille's camera, but a camera at the "original" Sinai event, the unedited footage, whatever it would be, would not come anywhere near the compelling nature or the deeper truth of the story that has emerged and *is emerging* through telling after telling, midrash after midrash, of our people and others, as we write and rewrite the story. The Talmud and the rabbinic literature itself convey this in a story about the Great Rabbi Akiva teaching the Torah of Moses, in a Yeshiva (BT Menachot 29b). Moses asks God from heaven if God can show him the great Rabbi Akiva on earth. Moses then magically finds himself in the back of Akiva's class listening in. He becomes dismayed, weak and disoriented. Moses is listening to a class on the Torah of Moses but doesn't understand a word Rabbi Akiva is talking about! How can that be? He, after all, was the one who was there? The answer is the story has evolved and has been written and rewritten by generation after generation. As Professor Jackson writes,

stories, like memories and dreams, are . . . authored and authorised dialogically and collaboratively in the course of sharing one's recollections with others. . . This is why one may no more recover the 'original' story than step into the same river twice. The fault is not with memory *per se*, but an effect of the transformations all experience undergoes as it is replayed, recited, reworked and reconstrued in the play of intersubjective life. (pp. 22-23)

On Rosh Hashanah, we have the opportunity to shape and re-shape, to tell and retell our stories. We take this opportunity as individuals, when we review the past year of our lives, engaging in what our tradition calls *Heshbon Hanefesh*, an accounting (or the story of) of our souls, our moral behavior of the past year. We take this opportunity as part of our families, as we come here remembering past family celebrations of the holiday, remembering those who are gone and enjoying those who continue to celebrate with us, sometimes children and grandchildren for whom this holiday is part of a future memory, an unfolding story. And we take this opportunity as part of the Jewish people, reading the stories of our ancestors Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Ishmael, Chana and Samuel. We feel ourselves a part of a larger story, and read our own lives into their stories, what Professor Susan Suleiman, calls "autobiographical reading."¹²

Perhaps the most powerful consequence of our memories and stories is that have the power to shape not only our understanding of our past, but also who we will be in the future. If Professor Jackson is correct that stories give us a sense of agency in a world where we control relatively little, how are we to use that sense of agency? We could tell ourselves stories that rationalize our past transgressions and poor choices, preventing real teshuvah or change. Or we could tell stories that help us honestly confront those choices, and help us to change. We could tell stories that create a uniformly rosy picture of our lives or a uniformly dismal one. They will all be constructions. Which construction we choose to author will be the difference between writing ourselves in the book of a life of integrity and growth, or the book of rationalizations, excuses, or despair.

We are very adept at authoring stories of rationalizations. The Talmud tells a gripping story about the famous Rabban Gamaliel that illustrates this. Rabban Gamaliel was the head of a famous Yeshiva who ruled with a very strict hand. After humiliating a student in front of the whole Yeshiva, all the students rebelled. They threw out Rabban Gamliel and put one of their own in charge. They did away with his rule that no one was allowed in the Yeshiva unless is “inside was like his outside.” When that rule was abolished, attendance at the Yeshiva multiplied exponentially. The Talmud describes Rabban Gamliel as confronting his actions and taking stock. “He was troubled by this,” the Talmud says, “saying, ‘perhaps I kept the Torah away from the people of Israel!’ with this rule.” The story goes on that Rabban Gamliel was then shown in a dream white pitchers filled with ashes, implying that the additional students were of little worth—they were pure on the outside but actually worthless on the inside. Rabban Gamliel’s dream was the story he told himself. Yet the Talmud continues, “there was no significance to this dream. It was only to appease his own mind.” (Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 27b-28a).

Undoubtedly, most of us have engaged in constructing stories of our lives and our actions that are “only to appease [our] own mind.” We have the power, however, to shape stories that deepen our integrity. This is part of the process of teshuvah, the Jewish term that means return and repentance. Rav Kook, one of the great Rabbis of the first half of the 20th century, taught that the highest form of Teshuvah is one that “transforms all the past sins into spiritual assets. From every error it derives noble lessons, and from every lowly fall it derives the inspiration for the climb to splendid heights.”¹³ We have the opportunity through teshuvah of understanding our past wrongs in a way that creates opportunities for growth and change. It means we have to confront them honestly, and understand them in a context that neither excuses nor brings us to despair. As Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz teaches, “even though the past is ‘fixed,’ repentance admits of an ascendancy over it, of the possibility of changing its significance in the context of the present and the future.”¹⁴ Teshuvah in this way, also functions as a narrative or story.

I began today by talking about the unity of self that we seek through the stories we tell of our lives. This unity is related to our process of Teshuvah. The Rav Kook explained that “[w]hen a person sins he has entered the world of fragmentation, and then every particular being stands by itself When he repents out of love there at once shines on him the light from the world of unity, where everything is integrated into one whole . . .” (p. 85).

I want to suggest that the unity of self for which we strive, the book of life we want to find ourselves in, can be sought on two levels. One level is the kind of stories we tell of our own lives individually and collectively. Those are the stories in which we are the protagonists. They are the stories that allow for Teshuvah. These stories, these memories, are not a mirror of events but an expression of who we are and who we want to be. We may tell these stories partly because we have limited control of events in our lives and because it is only through them that we have clear autonomy and agency. The consequence of this storytelling process however, is that it really can change our lives and the lives of others who join us in the telling. The process may be a response to limited agency and control we humans have, but engaging in it gives us in fact more agency, more ability to shape our lives.

The second level on which we can strive for unity, is the story that transcends our personal one and even our collective one. This is the story in which we are *not* at the center. We are *not* the only protagonists. The Book of Life of which we are not the authors. This story is that of a greater unity—call it a cosmic one or a divine one, of which we are a part-- the Book of Life where all our stories become one in the light of the grander unity. It is not about unity of self but unity of all. Certainly, on this day that celebrates the creation of the cosmos, we are mindful of that deeper story, and grateful to be a page within it.

On this *Yom HaZikaron*, this day of Remembrance, may we shape our memories to tell a life story of meaning and purpose. On this *Yom Hadin*, the Day of Judgment, may we have the courage to write our story of *Heshbon HaNefesh*, an accounting of our souls that allows for teshuvah, growth and change. On this Rosh

Hashanah, the day on which the cosmos emerged, may we have the privilege of relinquishing our authorship, even for just a brief moment, to feel the greater light of unity and allow ourselves to be written by the Holy One into the Book of Unity, the Book of Love, the Book of Life.

Shana Tova Tikatevu V'Tehatemu. May we all be written and inscribed in the Book of Life for another year.

¹ Plato, *The Symposium* (New York: Penguin, 2006), p. 56.

² From the song “Wicked Little Town Reprise.”

³ Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 20.

⁴ “Everybody has a story to tell, so memoirs sell,” Bob Minzesheimer in *USA Today*, 2/27/2008. http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/books/news/2008-02-27-memoirs_N.htm

⁵ *Radio Lab*, “Memory and Forgetting,” Season 3, Episode 4. <http://www.radiolab.org/story/91569-memory-and-forgetting/>

⁶ Quoted in Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories*, p. 19.

⁷ <http://www.radiolab.org/story/91569-memory-and-forgetting/>

⁸ Michael Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006), pp. 21-22.

⁹ Quoted in Jackson, *Politics of Storytelling*, p. 12.

¹⁰ http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/fashion/the-family-stories-that-bind-us-this-life.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

¹¹ William James, *Writings 1902-1910* (New York: Library of America, 1987), p. 14.

¹² Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Risking Who One Is: Encounters With Contemporary Art and Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 200.

¹³ *Abraham Isaac Kook: The Lights of Penitence, the Moral Principles, the Lights of Holiness, Essays, Letters, and Poems*, translation by Ben Zion Bokser (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 45.

¹⁴ Quoted in *Kol HaNeshamah: Mahzor Leyamim Nora'im* (Elkins Park, PA: The Reconstructionist Press, 1999), p. 8.