

Interpreting the Map of Our Lives

High Holy Days 5769
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Ohr Shalom Synagogue

II. How Did We Get Here? Or **Telling My Story**

First Morning of Rosh HaShanah
Tuesday, September 30, 2008

Shana tovah. Boker tov. Review MAPS from Yesterday: **If the map don't agree with the ground, then the map is wrong.**

I want to begin this morning with a story. But I don't want to tell you a story, I want to know **YOUR** story. So take a minute, in your hand, and compose the story, the history, you would tell me. Where are you from? Family history? How did you get here? Where would you begin? What would you include? What would be the tone of your story?

I'll tell you why I am asking. Some of you may remember that Jennifer and I visited New York this past January. On one of the days we went down to the Lower East Side, to visit old Jewish New York. While I was whining about the cold, I heard a chuckle from behind me. I turned around and there was an older gentleman selling cheese from a cart.

He said to me in a thick, Eastern European accent: "I'm sorry, but compared to vere I am from, dis is like summers in Miami Beach."

He went on to tell me his story: about the shtetl he was from, the pogroms they faced, about his daughters. How the oldest, Tzeitl, refused a shidduch with the butcher to marry a simple tailor – Motel Kamzoyl – for love. Can you imagine, turning down the butcher because she loved the tailor? A butcher's wife never goes hungry. He told me about his daughter Hodel, and her marriage to a Perchik, a great revolutionary, and how they ran off to change the world. It was with real sadness when he told about how his Chava ran off to marry a soldier in the Czar's army (he even spat in the New York snow when he said "Czar").

He told me about the long boat ride to arrive at Amerikke, his struggles to support his family, to make sure his youngest children all received a good education and went to college.

Mostly, he told me about the love of his life, his Golde. How not only has she washed his clothes, cooked his meals, cleaned his house, given him children and milked his cows, but how she loves him.

He also mentioned that it has been a tough time making a go of it in New York. He wondered if it would spoil some vast eternal plan, if he were a wealthy man. Would you like to know what he told me he would do if here were a rich man?

You laugh. But I grew up convinced that my great-grandparents were dairy farmers from a little shtetl who looked just like Tevye and Golde. Turns out, they came mostly from big cities, like Bialystock. Go easy on me, I was a little kid when the movie came out.

But I don't think I am alone. *Fiddler on the Roof* touched a powerful nerve in the American Jewish community – who were our parents and grandparents? Where did we come from? What was our story?

The movie captured us – it also was nominated for eight Oscars, winning three. It did not win Best Picture of 1972. Anybody remember which movie did? (The French Connection)

Since then we, as an American Jewish community, have explored other variants of the American Jewish story – survivors who came after the war, Jews who emigrated to Mexico or South America before finding their way north to the United States, and others.

So these are some of the ways we tell our stories. But we, as Jews, have other, older ways.

At Pesach we say: עֲבָדִים הָיינוּ לְפַרְעֹה בְּמִצְרָיִם We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and then God brought us out.

We can go back even further: We tell the story of Abram, who would later become Abraham, and how God took him from Ur of the Chaldeans and brought him to the Land of Canaan.

We love telling the story of לֶךְ־לְךָ, God commanding Abraham to “Go” to the place that God intends for him.

But how we tell the story is significant. We tell the story of Abraham as if, out of the blue, God grabbed Abraham and moved him towards the land of Canaan. But the Bible tells the story a little bit differently.

Abraham was born in Ur of the Chaldeans, but it was his father who decided the family should move to Canaan. Long before God called out to Abraham, לֶךְ־לְךָ, Go!, Terach, Abraham’s father packed up the family and decided ללכת, to go to the land of Canaan.

We don’t know why Terach decided to make this move: better job opportunities, better schools, better weather, more stable housing market, perhaps God commanded him to go. We don’t know, the Torah doesn’t tell us. But it does tell us that he started the journey, made it as far as Charan, settled in Charan and eventually died there.

What happened? Did he get sick and unable to continue his journey? Did he receive a job offer in Charan he couldn’t refuse? Did his wife like the area? Did he find an additional wife who didn’t want to move away? Did God tell him to stay put? We don’t know. In telling us **OUR** story, Torah doesn’t feel that detail is significant enough, or germane.

But remember, Torah tells the journey of Abraham’s trek from Ur to Canaan differently than we usually do. When God calls out to Abraham to Go!, it is a command to finish the journey started by his father, to arrive at a destination that his father choose for him.

To be fair, Terach, Abraham’s father was never promised to be made him a great nation, or to have a multitude of children, or that he would be given an entire land, so God tells Abraham more than simply to continue his father’s journey. But in telling us our story, Torah tells us that part of Abraham’s story is continuing the journey begun by his father.

This is different than the way we tell Abraham's story. We stress how he breaks from the world of his father. You know the *midrash*, he smashes the idols, he doesn't go into the family business. But at least as it relates to his traveling from Ur to Canaan, Torah makes it explicit that the journey is a continuation of his father's trek.

And it makes a difference. How we tell the story, Abraham the revolutionary, or how the Torah tells the story, Abraham continuing his father's journey, creates a different image of Abraham and a different worldview of where we come from and who we are.

It is interesting to note, that the theme of children continuing the work of the parents can be seen in the next generation when Isaac re-digs the wells of his father Abraham.

Today we celebrate the anniversary of the creation of the world, and creation is another example in which how we tell our story reflects how we understand the world.

In the first creation story in Torah, Genesis 1, we tell the story of God who stands at a distance and commands the world to be created: Let there be light. This is a story in which God is unaffected by the creation. Never touches it. This is a world that is highly organized, well planned, logically constructed.

The second story of creation, beginning in Genesis 2, tells a very different story. Here God is directly involved in creation: forms humanity, directly, from the dust of the Earth, breathes life into its nostrils, plants a garden for it, and places it there. God empathically understands that Adam is lonely and goes about trying to fix it. Here God doesn't have the perfect plan or knowledge about how to do that, and it takes a couple of efforts before God gets it right.

This story creates a radically different understanding of the world and God. Here God is intimately involved. Here, God doesn't always get it right but God cares. Here relationship is giving primacy rather than perfection.

Two beautiful stories, two beautiful, but different understandings of the world in which we live. Again, how we tell the story fundamentally shifts how we understand God, the world, and therefore, our place within it.

One of my favorite chapters in the entire TaNaKh, the Hebrew Bible, is a chapter that rarely gets read – the last chapter of the Book of Joshua. We all know the outlines of the early history of our people: God chooses Abraham, we go down to Egypt, we are slaves in Egypt, after four hundred years of slavery, Moses led us out through God's power, including plagues and the splitting of the Red Sea, at Mount Sinai God gave us the Torah, forty years later Joshua leads us in to the Promised Land. Something like that?

Well, read Joshua 24, you have it, it is text number eight on the handout. It tells the exact same story, detail by detail, but it leaves out the covenant, the giving of Torah, through Moses at

Mount Sinai. Instead, the Torah, here called the Torah of God, is given through Joshua at Shechem.

Crazy. Our own TaNaKh, not the Samaritan's Bible, or somebody else's sacred literature, our own, gives us an alternate view of history – the covenant was made not through Moses but through Joshua, and Torah was given not at Sinai but in Shechem.

Understand, this is not the dominant view of the Hebrew Bible, and this is not the way Judaism tells the story. We have here a competing story, a competing history, that in the big picture lost out to the Moses/Sinai story, but it is still preserved within our Sacred Text.

Know this chapter. Know it is an old way of telling our story that is preserved and not forgotten.

So how do we tell our story?

Collectively, are we all the grandchildren of Tevye and Golde, immigrants from the Old World to the New, looking for freedom and opportunity for us and for all?

Is our story, as taught by many early Zionist historians, a long history of powerlessness and persecutions?

Have you seen the wonderful email about all Jewish holidays: They attacked us, we were saved, let's eat. Some see all of Jewish history this way.

Is our story one of being a "light unto the nations" as we learn from the prophet Isaiah?

Again, note carefully, that how we tell our story frames how we see ourselves, our lives, our responsibilities, and our future.

Now all of this is in the language of the collective, our story. But what is true on the macro level is equally true on the micro level.

I need to understand how I tell my story as a way of looking at my self-understanding.

During the years I worked at the Brandeis-Bardin Institute, I created and ran a series of free weekends for Newly Married Couples. Over a period of about four years, I hosted over three-hundred and thirty couples over a total of thirteen weekends – some of my favorite Shabbatonim ever.

During the weekend, we gave the couples the opportunity to tell each other their stories – how they met, fell in love, get engaged. It is a beautiful moment to watch newlyweds tell the story they have told a thousand times – all with joy. They have a ritual of how they tell it: who starts, when does the other person interrupt with corrections or a variant memory. They know what

is included and what is not. In our world, this is the closest we come to sacred, deep, ritualized story telling.

We then worked together to deconstruct both the story and the telling of the story to see what we learn about a couple, and especially what the couple can learn about themselves. The story and the act of telling it reflect whole worlds of meaning and self-understanding.

So this moves from the large collective down to the couple, but what about the level of the "I." What happens when we bring this down to "I" level?

What is my story? How do I understand my current location on the map? How did I get here? Am I a victim of my story or its shaper? Do I accept responsibility for how I got to here or do I assign blame? Am I proud or embarrassed?

We stand here at Rosh HaShanah, having completed the reflection of Elul, starting these ten awesome days, how have I gotten here? Where have I zigged when I should have zagged? Where have I pushed away when I should have held on tightly? Where have I chosen the safe, well lit path, rather than the road less travelled? And where the opposite?

We each stand here and struggle with telling our story in the active voice. I am not only a character in my story, I am the narrator, and the majority contributing writer.

Homework for this week, don't get started until after Yontiff, but beginning Wednesday night, write your story. Not your memoir, or your biography. The goal is not academic or to be complete. The goal is your story.

Last night we talked about figuring out where each one of us is on the map, now figure out how you got here.

When you have written your story, read over it. What is there? How do you see yourself in that story? What can you learn about your self through your tale?

Share your stories. See if your loved one can see you in your tale.

These are the days when we stand to be judged. This is the process through which we try to right our path, to refocus our direction, to realign ourselves on the journey that we inherit from our parents, to do Teshuvah, to return.

Last night we struggled to find where we are on the map, and now having done so, when you bump into Tevye and here the tales of the Dairy Man, are you ready to tell him your story, how you got here. Will you be able to tell him about Sunrise and Sunset, one season following another, laden with happiness and tears.

Shanah tovah.

