

Drasha VaEra 5769—Telling the Story

We are in the midst of reviewing, if you'll forgive the idiom, the greatest story ever told. This story is in the bedrock of our souls—it is the foundation of who we are as a people and as a community. It ties us to our history and prefigures our future. It is the story of the exodus from Egypt—*יציאת מצרים*—*y'tzi'at mitzrayim*.

Last week, we began this story, meeting Moshe and his family, learning, as we imagine he did, of his call to rescue his people from the harsh treatment of the Egyptians. We learned of their pain, their bitterness, how being enslaved had crushed their spirit. We witnessed Moshe and Aharon going to Pharaoh, demanding that he let the people go. We heard Pharaoh's refusal.

This week, in Parashat VaEra, we hear more of Pharaoh's stubbornness, of his refusal to release *בני ישראל*—*b'nei yisrael*. We hear of God's familiar promise, to rescue the people with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. And we begin to experience the plagues, the awful, supernatural wonders with which God brought the people of Egypt to their knees, but which only served to harden Pharaoh's heart further.

The story is a familiar one, so we know what will happen next. In fact, we retell this story not only each year as we read the first few parashiyot of the book of Exodus, but each spring around the seder table, and each day in the words of our prayers. Some might say that this story is what it is to be Jewish, that this story defines us as a community. I am not denying that. The question is, why?

As I mentioned last Shabbat, I recently spent a week in study, meditation, and community with about 60 colleagues at what we fondly call, “Rabbi Camp.” Rabbi Camp, or RTI—Rabbinic Training Institute—is an incredible opportunity for rabbis to get back to our roots, reconnect with colleagues, with our love of Torah, and with ourselves. This year’s RTI was quite different than the 23 that had preceded it. This year, we collectively experienced a great and tragic loss when our teacher and colleague, Rabbi Alan Lew, passed away just a short time after arriving to join us for the week.

Rabbi Lew had been a cornerstone of RTI—a passionate participant and an inviting teacher. Before becoming a rabbi, which he came to as a second career, he spent 10 years studying Zen Buddhism, and later pioneered the use of meditation to enhance and enrich Jewish spiritual practice. His life touched many others, and his

Torah enlightened all who were privileged to learn from him. In his memory, I would like to share some of his Torah with us today. Rabbi Lew really understood stories, and his words, I believe, will help us better to understand why the story we encounter over these few weeks is so essential to us as Jews.

His teaching here¹ begins with a Hasidic story, a story of the Ba'al Shem Tov, who would go to a sacred place in the forest to meditate when misfortune threatened the Jews. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and a miracle would occur and avert the misfortune. When his disciple, the Maggid of Mezritch, also had occasion to intercede for his community, he would go to the same place in the forest, but he had not been taught how to light the fire, only how to say the prayer; yet still the miracle would be accomplished and the people saved. Each successive generation, the leader of the people would know less and less about how his predecessor had saved the people, until

...it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rhizin to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God. "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer, and I can not even find the

¹ Taken from Rabbi Lew's sermon, *The Healing Power of the Story*, which can be read in its entirety at the following website: http://www.bethsholomf.org/CBS/pages/page.phtml?page_id=239

place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story, and this must be sufficient.

And it was sufficient.

For God made man, because God loves stories.

Rabbi Lew continues:

What's interesting to me about this story, among other things, is that first of all, it's about a story. Story-telling was at the center of the Baal Shem's spiritual art. In fact, some of his best stories were about stories themselves.

Secondly, I find it interesting that the story seems to arise out of a sense of insufficiency -- out of our sense of limitation. We can't light the fire, we can't remember the prayer, we can't find the place of holiness in the forest of our soul anymore, but as long as we can tell the story, all this insufficiency becomes sufficient.

Failure, absence, insufficiency are often the most exquisite expression of a thing; nothing demonstrates the depth and the tenderness of love so much as a story of unrequited love.

Stories tell the message of the soul and the message of the soul is always about imperfection, loss, absence and yearning. It is through

these things that we come to know the soul. This is why imperfection is the root of all stories.

Stories are sacred. Stories are healing. Our stories tell us who we are, and that, of course, is the deepest healing of all.

We are a people of stories. We have always used stories to pass on the wisdom of our tradition. Our Bible is a multitude of stories, which taken together form a single story, and in Talmudic times, we re-interpreted this story with another collection of stories called the Midrash. And the Chasidic tradition, perhaps the most overtly spiritual movement in our long and deeply spiritual history, placed storytelling, with its tremendous power to convey the spiritual, at the center of its practice...

Everybody is a story. When I was a child, we sat around the kitchen table and told our stories. It is the way wisdom gets passed along...

Most of the stories we are told now are written by novelists and screenwriters. They have beginnings and endings; they are not real. The stories we tell each other have no beginning and end. They are a front row seat to real experience.

Real stories take time. We stopped telling stories when we started to lose that kind of time; pausing time, reflecting time, wondering time. Life rushes us along and few people are strong enough to stop on their own...

Most parents know the importance of telling their children their own story over and over again so that they come to know in the telling who they are and to whom they belong. At the kitchen table we do this for each other. Hidden in every story is the one story. And the more we listen, the clearer that story becomes. Our true identity, who we are, why we are here, what sustains us, is in this story. The stories at every kitchen table are about the same things; stories of owning, having and losing, stories...of power, of pain, of wounding, of courage, hope and healing of loneliness and of the end of loneliness. Of God.

In telling them we are telling each other the human story. Stories that touch us in the place of common humanness awaken us and weave us together as a family once again...

Most of us live unexamined lives, as Socrates correctly observed; most of us are so carried away and preoccupied by the rush of daily survival, that we live oblivious to the sacred shape of our life story.

And the thing about [our life] stories that [is] so striking [is] that although they [are] infinitely various, there [is] also a sense in which they [are] all the same... Every story [is] shaped by suffering -- in some the suffering came early and in some the suffering came late, and in some it came in the middle, but in every case, there [is] a great light beneath the suffering -- an abiding love -- stronger than the suffering, struggling to get out -- struggling to rise up from beneath the suffering and reach the surface of the world.

Rabbi Lew said a number of things that touch on why this story, the story of the exodus and what led up to it, is the one to which we turn time and time again. First and most obviously, this is our story, the story of how we came to be a people. When we tell it over and over in this way, we are reminded of this, and come to see ourselves in its telling. Telling and retelling our story ensures our connection to our past, helps us know from where we came.

Perhaps more challenging to examine is Rabbi Lew's insight that the stories that touch us most deeply are the ones that are "real," the ones that acknowledge imperfection, loss, absence, and yearning. The story we encounter in our parasha is one of the

suffering of בני ישראל—*b'nei yisrael*, enslaved and terrified that the God who finally remembered them would be unable to rescue them. It is one of strife, as Moshe and Pharaoh go back and forth, trading plagues and magic tricks, as Pharaoh repeatedly seems to acquiesce, only to rescind his promise to release the people. It is a story, even beyond the words of this week's Torah reading, without a "Hollywood ending," but one that, nevertheless, contains a great light, the promise of hope and redemption.

Rabbi Lew taught that "hidden in every story is the one story." By this he meant that our collective stories—the stories of our tradition, the stories of our lives—reveal the commonalities that unite us as a people, as a family. As we read this story—the one story—again this year, I would render his point a little differently: Hidden in the one story is every story. This, more than any other reason, is why we keep coming back to this story, because this story contains all of our stories. In the suffering of the Israelites we see our own challenges and obstacles. In the power of Moshe and his family to lead and save בני ישראל—*b'nei yisrael*, we see the potential of those we hold most dear. In its promise of hope and redemption, we see our greatest wishes for ourselves. This story isn't only about the

origins of our people, it is about us, here and now, in every moment. Each time we approach this story, we have the chance to get to know ourselves better through its telling. As we retell this story yet again, let us pause to listen to what it is telling us. As we listen to the words of this one story, **the** one story, may we see ourselves reflected in new and enlightening ways, and may its light help guide us as we continue to discover what our stories hold in store.