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Temple Reyim
Rosh Hashanah I
5774/2013

The Story of My Life

Lshanah tovah!

It is wonderful and completely humbling to be here, celebrating my first High Holidays with you. Last night as my family came together to light candles and say *kiddush*, we also recited: *Baruch atah Adonai eloheynu melekh haolam she'hechiyanu, v'kiyamanu, v'higiyanu lazman hazeh, Blessed are you Adonai, Source of the Universe, who has given us life, sustained us and enabled us to reach this day.* The blessing celebrates our first experiences, and reminds us there is always a chance to renew our days and how fortunate we are to be here.

My wife Sarah, and our children Elie and Mica and I are grateful for your warmth and generosity in welcoming us to the Reyim community.

I want to introduce myself this first Rosh Hashanah together by sharing a personal story.

I was raised in a small town outside of Portland, Maine. We lived in one house throughout most of my childhood. After my siblings and I grew up and moved away, my parents began to get the home in condition to sell; not a simple undertaking after thirty years. The process included the grueling work of removing clutter, sifting through rooms and rooms of artifacts that my brothers and sister and I collected and just couldn't bear to give up. As my father recently reminded me during my family's move into Newton, their lofts and attics still seem to be the places where all things we just can't part with come to live out their old age.

During their sifting process, my parents found a gem: an old notebook with stories handwritten in Hebrew. The Hebrew was hard to read, the handwriting just legible; but on the cover there was a clear, and simple title: *Ha'sipur shel hachayim sheli*: The Story of My Life, by Yonah Meyer Kantor.

Meyer Kantor was my grandfather, my mother's father. He and my grandmother, his wife Esther, lived nearby in Portland. They died three weeks apart, when I was 17. I was very close with my grandfather, and when asked to share my own story, in particular my decision to become a rabbi, I almost always begin by telling stories about him.

When Sarah and I struggled to decide whether we had the energy and passion for me to get through five years of intensive rabbinic study with two small children, together we thought about him, his life, what he fought for, what he endured, and the decision was much easier. He has always been a source of purpose and strength.

Like the notebook, my grandfather was a gem. He was born in the Pale Settlement, in the city of Stolin, Poland and raised in cheder, the traditional Orthodox school, with long days learning Torah and Talmud. Like so many Jewish boys and young men in the Pale, he was trained as a tailor. The life-style, songs, and folklore of *amkho sher un ayren* ("the simple people of the scissors and ironing board") was, in Yiddish literature, the expression of the joys and sufferings of Jewish workers. He knew this expression well, wore it in his thick hands.

I'm not sure the small coastal town where I grew up in Maine had ever experienced a person quite as Old World as my grandfather. He seemed perfectly normal to me; I couldn't quite understand why my friends would just nod repeatedly with puzzled wide eyes as he spoke to them. Apparently they did not speak the amalgam of old Polish, conversational Yiddish, literary Hebrew and English idioms he picked up, all spoken in a thick Eastern European accent.

Looking back, I think he was intentionally making fun, playing with us in the clever and mischievous way that would occasionally get him in trouble.

This was my grandfather at his best, warm and wise, ironic and sly. He always lived at the edges. Though from a traditional and observant Jewish home, he was drawn to socialist Zionism at a young age. He left his family in Stolin to come <u>alone</u> to pre-Israel Palestine in

the early 1930s when he was 24. His entire family stayed in Stolin and lost their lives in the Shoah.

He was devastated by the loss of his family, and, like so many survivors of the Shoah, the strength of his faith in God and in goodness was, for a long time, shattered. To my siblings and me, he was sweet, loving and protective. But he was also tormented, depressed and furious.

Almost unbearably, his wife, my grandmother, Esther, developed Alzheimers at a fairly young age. She lost her memory progressively over ten devastating years; a cruel irony, as memory was the one thing that tortured my grandfather more than her withering soul.

When we found my grandfather's journal, "*ha'sipur shel hachayim sheli,*" I asked if I could keep it with me. And though I wondered what he wrote and whether he had unlocked, or even edged open, the dark box of memories of his parents and brothers and sisters he kept silenced and secret, the journal stayed on my shelf for a while. With some trepidation, I finally decided to open it to read and begin the process of translation.

It turned out his journal was a writing project that he had undertaken as part of a class at the Hebrew Teachers College in Brookline, forerunner of Hebrew College in Newton where I studied for the rabbinate.

He began his story with the day he left Stolin. He briefly described his parents and siblings, but turned quickly to the sheer joy and anticipation aboard the ship traveling to Eretz Yisrael. "Everyone was singing," he wrote. "The melodies reached all the way up to the heavens."

There were a few references to the historical and social context of that time. He wrote about the *Sachnut*, the pre-state governmental agency for immigration and absorption. He wrote about the early years of the founding of the state, with its sharp existential duality: revelry in national independence and a sense of freedom and security - along with unrelenting fear and uncertainty.

But this was not the primary content of his journal.

In telling the narrative of his life, my grandfather wrote a love story.

"I came to a moshav in the Carmel called Bet Shlomo," he wrote. "There I met Esther Zimerman, a young woman who was eighteen and a half years-old, a young woman full of grace, delicate of heart, loved by all the men, and a lover of life. Everyone loved her. Sweetheart. She started to attract my love. She was like a magnet. A heart full of courage."

Then my favorite part: "I went to my mate, the one whom I love so very much. This was on Friday. Her mother and her sisters invited me to eat Shabbat meals with them. Esther gently gave me a warm kiss in my ear and said to me, "my sweet Meyer, I have a request of you. You don't have to do it – it's just if you want to. My mother asked me that perhaps, if you want, could you make *Kiddush*?" I said to Esther, "my love, I am happy to make *Kiddush*."

Given the assignment to tell the story of his life, my grandfather wrote a love story. He didn't write about grief and the loss he endured. He didn't write about the experience of leaving Israel and facing prejudice and the economic challenges of an immigrant in Europe and then the United States. He didn't write about the complete degeneration of memory, identity and language his wife suffered. He wrote a story about love.

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Although some of us certainly have, thank God many of us have not experienced the trauma or hardship that our parents or grandparents did in their countries of origin or as immigrants, living in another time and place. Our lives are filled with so much blessing.

But we have each felt the pain of growing apart from family and friends. We have suffered the loss of people we love. We have slowly become older while noticing how time seems to have passed us by. We have hurt people we love, and been hurt by them. These are the matters that keep us up at night.

As we come together during our High Holy Days, I wonder, can we sift through the experiences of pain and loneliness and find our love story? Can that love story inspire us to be kind and patient and generous? And can we uplift that story so it becomes the narrative against which we set our religious and spiritual lives?

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There is an ancient *midrash* (Lev. R. 29:3), or interpretive rabbinic story, that depicts an image of God sitting on a throne of judgment on Rosh Hashanah. Rabbis and poets composing Hebrew liturgy throughout history picked up on the image and it is a primary motif in High Holiday prayer and poetry. In the *midrash*, R. Yehudah son of Nachman cites a verse from the book of Pslams (47), which says, "*Elohim* has gone up with a *truah*, *Adonai* with the voice of the shofar." We recited this verse just before blowing shofar this morning.

It's a fascinating and puzzling verse. First, why are there two names for God? Second, where has God gone up to precisely?

We first notice that there are two names of God used in this verse: *Elohim* and the unsayable *Yud Heh Vav Heh*, which we pronounce as *Adonai*. R. Yehudah son of Nachman draws on a rabbinic tradition that different names convey different aspects of God's Being. The name *Elohim* represents God's power of *din,* or judgment – this is attribute of the Divine that brings justice, accountability and strict consequence. The name *Yud Heh Vav Heh,* or *Adonai*, represents the Divine power of *rachamim*, of overflowing mercy and compassion. Mapping that tradition onto the verse, R. Yehuda bar Nachman, re-reads the verse to say: with the *truah*, meaning the sound of the shofar, *Elohim*, the Divine aspect of Justice and Rebuke went up, making space for *Adonai*, the Divine aspect of overflowing compassion.

On Rosh Hashanah, the *midrash* goes, God is sitting on God's throne of Judgment and Justice, about to judge the world strictly and harshly. But when we blow the shofar, God gets up from the throne of Judgment and Justice and moves to the throne of Compassion and Mercy, where God then judges the world.

Ready to write the story of the world for the coming year through the lens of stricture and judgment, God hears us blow the shofar, and is moved to write a love story.

The *midrash* became widely cited in rabbinic literature because it is such an enduring and endearing tale of the possibility for a transformed spirit.

During our High Holidays, hearing the shofar calls us to search for our love story; to get up from our seat of critical or negative judgment of others and make space for kindness and compassion. If we can see others from that seat, we may be able to begin a path towards reconciliation and healing of broken relationships.

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Hearing the shofar, however, is just a call of awakening – it is a beginning, meant to shake us up and out of our rhythms, towards a new or renewed consciousness. To stay on our seat of compassion in a sustained way, we need to develop spiritual practices and rituals so that kindness and compassion are not dependent on bursts of inspiration and love alone, but are present, available and accessible to us.

One of the great innovators of spiritual practice in our tradition was Rebbe Nachman. Rebbe Nachman was the great grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, the spiritual founder of Hasidism. Rebbe Nachman was born in Mezbish in the Ukraine, and later moved to Bratslav and then Uman, where he died. He was a teacher and spiritual leader, influenced by the esotericism of the mystical tradition but was also down to earth in his teachings, preaching a life of simplicity, and joy.

In his greatest collection of teachings, Reb Nachman writes about finding the goodness and kindness in people. He begins by introducing a verse from the book of psalms. The verse begins with the words "*od mi'at*", meaning just a little more. The verse is: "*od mi'at* - Just a little more – and the wicked shall not be; you will look at his place, and he won't be."

Rebbe Nachman reads the verse to say: even one who is thoroughly wicked, you must find in that person <u>just a little more</u> goodness, *od mi'at* - a grain of good, which must still be in

that person. For how is it possible that there is not yet a little good in that person? How is it possible that that person has not done some mitzvah, or some good thing ever?

If you can find in that person just a little more good, you can elevate that person's spirit, lifting him or her up from a spiritual place of guilt to a place of merit – then you can look at where the wickedness was, and it won't be there. "Just a little more, and the wicked shall not be." We achieve this, he teaches, through a spiritual practice: *dan bkaf zachut.* Judge others favorably - in a way that inclines toward their merit.

This is terribly difficult to do. When a friend or loved one says something that feels unfair or insensitive, our first impulse is often to argue or blame. R. Nachman teaches, stay true to this spiritual practice; judge favorably, for so much of the time what was intended, on one hand, and what was understood, or assumed, on the other, are radically different. Find the goodness.

The hardest case may be when someone in our immediate community comments or acts in a way that truly injures us. Rebbe Nachman teaches: as hard as it is, know even here there are sparks of goodness. You can still see that person *b'tzelem Elohim*, as a reflection of the Divine.

Though far from perfect, I have tried to develop a practice of how to respond to someone who has done something I found hurtful. I try to keep in mind that that person is also vulnerable; that in our worst moments, we are so often expressing underlying pain. When I have done or said something I have regretted, upon reflection I almost always find it was an expression of my own vulnerability. We all share this experience.

Judge others in a way that inclines towards merit.

And Rebbe Nachman adds: *v'chen tzarich ha'adam limtzo gam b'atzmo*. A person must also find that same goodness with his or her self. Be generous and forgiving of yourself as well. Find your story of love.

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Finding our love story is not merely a search for the emotion or even the experience of love; it's how we search for meaning.

Victor Frankel was a Jewish Austrian psychiatrist and neurologist. He was a survivor of the Shoah and wrote a number of books, including one entitled Man's Search for Meaning. The heart of Frankel's work is a theory called logotherapy – he suggests that the primary human drive is not for pleasure but the pursuit for meaning.

He writes about the experience of love: "No one can become fully aware of the essence of another person unless he loves him. Through love one is able to see the essential traits and features in the beloved person and even more, he sees that which is the potential in him, which is not yet actualized but yet ought to be actualized. By his love he enables the beloved person to actualize these potentialities. By making him aware of what he can be, he makes these potentialities comes true."

Locating the points of goodness in oneself and others and helping to activate them with support, encouragement, and patience - this is both the great challenge to the human spirit and the essence of a meaningful life.
One of our most central prayers today is called the *unetanah tokef*: On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, who will live and who will die, who in the fullness of years, and who before.

As we contemplate the harrowing uncertainty ahead, unaware of who will live or die this year, writing an autobiography of love may be what we can do to endure the severity of that uncertainty.

In ancient times, our sages wrote that what averted the severity of the Divine decree and what merited being written into the book of life was *teshuvah, tzedakah and tefila*, repentance, acts of generosity and righteousness, and fervent prayer. We still recite these prayers, and still aspire to these deeds, but we no longer claim that these acts will change what <u>happens to us</u>; but rather that they have the capacity to <u>change us</u>. Spiritual practice won't change what happens, but will help us to celebrate and to endure.

My grandfather wrote his journal, entitled *ha'sipur shel ha'chayim sheli,* "the story of my life." He wrote about a loving kindness that dwelled within his toughened depressed soul; in doing so, he wrote himself into the *sefer chayim*, not the book of life necessarily but the book of living; his identity with that love story sustained him.

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I have been here at Temple Reyim only two short months. We don't know each other very well yet. But in the years to come, we will. I hope as a community we can see the points of goodness in one another and lift them up; bringing our unique potential to life.

One of the ways to begin is to share the richness of our personal stories. This will be an area of focus this coming year.

After our holidays, we will begin a Temple Reyim legacy memoir-ing project in which we will share stories of our lives: reflection on a moment we are immensely proud of; a memory of a joyful, loving experience; or something we might do differently, if we could.

We'll help each other to endure experiences of pain and tell our love stories. Those stories have the potential to define us – they can soften our edges and help us be more kind, patient and generous.

This will always be our work together.

During these High Holy Days, may all those whom we have loved be sources of strength and purpose, blessing and renewal.
May we find our love story;
and may we write ourselves into the book of life. *L'shanah tovah!*