

Rabbi Steve Segar's Rosh Hashanah Message 5767

Our Lives as Sacred Text

I'd like to begin my Rosh Hashanah reflection with two teachings from the Chassidic tradition:

The first is a story told about the famous Chassidic rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi who is most well known as the founder of the Chabad Lubavitch movement in the late 18th century. But long before he had achieved that status, he was a bright and promising yeshiva student. He became interested in what was then the radical revivalist movement of Hasidism and decided to seek out its leader, Rabbi Dov Bear, the maggid of Mezerich, who had himself been the leading disciple of Hasidism's founder, the Ba'al Shem Tov. One day, Shneur Zalman was challenged by a more traditional colleague about his intention to study with the Maggid. This colleague asked Shneur Zalman why he was not instead going to study with Rabbi Elijah the gaon or genius of Vilna who was widely believed to be the most illustrious Torah scholar of the generation. Shneur Zalman responded that in Vilna, he could learn how to study Torah, but that with the Maggid, he could actually learn how to become a Torah scroll.

The second teaching comes from another important Hasidic master, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib of Ger, best known as the author of the work *S'fat Emet*, the language of truth. He stated that, "all the sections of the Torah that tell of the holy ancestors are there to show how Torah was made out of their actions. The task of human beings is to make this clear, to show how every deed takes place through the life energy of God, for the human being is God's partner in the act of Creation."

Now, what in the world do these teachings, as interesting as they may be, have to do with the holiday of Rosh Hashanah or the Days of Awe in general? I actually believe they have quite a lot to do with why we are here today, and I invite you take a look with me now at how that might be so.

Our tradition clearly teaches us that this period of the Jewish year is a time for us to critically assess our lives, to attempt to redress any pain we have caused others both intentionally and inadvertently, and to reorient ourselves toward our most meaningful goals and values. But there is a second dimension of meaning to the Days of Awe that goes beyond this accounting of the soul and to illustrate it, I would actually like to draw on an image from the world of business and non-profit administration.

When managers are preparing their budgets for the upcoming fiscal year, they are frequently asked to draw a distinction between budget items that are primarily dedicated to the continuation of day to day operations one on hand, and other budget items which are there for the explicit purpose of building greater capacity within the business or organization on the other. Each of these budgetary areas are critical in their own way and successful organizations are careful to attend to both of them. Similarly, during the Days of Awe, we have two parallel tasks.

The first is to maintain and refine our "day to day operations" by correcting our missteps and mistakes and attempting to refocus on those parts of our lives which our most important to us. But the second, and often neglected task, is to use this time to build our spiritual capacity, to work on reaching for a deeper level of understanding both of our own lives and of Life with a capital L. How we go about doing this is the big question.

I believe that the two Hasidic teachings with which we began are important for us to hear at this time of the year precisely because they provide us with the basis of a model for how to think about building our spiritual capacity. Together they represent the rather radical notion that the boundaries of Torah can expand beyond scripture and interpretation to include the stories of our own lives. They carry the message that each one of us is a Torah scroll in human form though we may not necessarily recognize it. They chart a path towards a deepening of soul that involves attending to our own our lives as we live them from moment to moment and day to day as sacred narratives unto themselves, imbued with every bit as much holiness as the ancient scroll of our people.

If recognizing that our lives are sacred narratives is the first step, the next one involves developing an approach to reading and exploring them. Luckily we are members of a community that has thousands of years of practice to draw on as we advance toward this challenging yet vital task. In good Reconstructionist fashion, I'd like now to take a look at the evolution of our people's perspective on the nature of sacred narrative, and in the process, to see what we might learn from each stage of that evolution about how to mine our own narratives for the treasures buried within them.

Therefore, we begin with the most ancient layer of our tradition which is also our people's core sacred narrative: What can we learn from the Torah itself about the nature of Torah? The Torah, in contrast to almost all Jewish literature that came after it, makes no pretense about being straight forward, even blunt in the way it communicates its truths. A second characteristic is its embrace of the messiness of life and its lack of concern over smoothing out the rough edges of a story or a personality. The biblical characters whom we were taught as children to emulate as heroes turn out to be human and fallible with both moments of greatness and moments of weakness.

It is the same Abraham who negotiates with God, trying to prevent the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah who also willingly sends his wife Sarah into Pharaoh's harem for fear of his own safety. It is the same Rebecca who demonstrates her immense capacity for kindness and wisdom upon meeting Abraham's servant who also falls prey to the lures of parental favoritism to such an extent that she initiates a plot with her younger son Jacob to deceive the man who is her husband and his father.

What I think we can learn from these characteristics of the Torah is that the path to a holy life does not lie in some pristine problem-free future, but it is found right here and now within our complex, contradictory and sometimes painful daily lives. And the goal is not to wait until we are in some highly evolved spiritual state before we begin to think of our lives as being infused with sacredness. We can only begin from where we find ourselves in this moment, with our strengths and our weaknesses, with our joys and our sorrows, but it is exactly this moment that has holiness as an essential element. That is one thing we can learn from the Torah.

Our next stop on the timeline of Jewish civilization is the Rabbinic era. While the Torah itself is not smooth or tidy, it does not claim in any way to be subtle or intricate. In fact we read just last week in the Torah portion of Nitzavim the statement that the Torah is "not hidden from us and not distant, neither is it in heaven, rather it is very near to us, in our mouths and in our hearts." The implication of these words seems to be that whatever we understand Torah to be, it is clear and accessible.

How differently the ancient rabbis viewed the content of the Torah. They were, before anything else, close readers of text par excellence, and this dedication to careful study led them to find meaning hidden within very subtle textual nuances and patterns that someone reading purely for the sake of content or plot development would almost certainly miss. They also saw the Torah as a single unified document so that any one part of it could be used to shed light on any other part even when there is no obvious connection between them.

For example, in the Joseph story the rabbis notice that in the scene which pictures Joseph's brothers preparing to take his life, none of the dialogue mentions Joseph by name. He is referred to simply as "him" on nine occasions and once as "the dreamer." Only Judah, when he tries to convince the others not to go through with their plans, calls Joseph, "our brother."

The rabbis see even in this small a detail, a hint, built into the very fabric of the story, about the extent to which the brothers have distanced themselves emotionally and psychologically from Joseph. They are also at pains to point out the links between this story and later developments in the story of the Jewish people. They note with approval that it is Judah, the brother who is to become the ancestor of King David and eventually the messiah, who takes it upon himself to intervene on Joseph's behalf.

Similarly in our own lives there are patterns and nuances that exist and that affect us, but to which we may be quite oblivious. Often we are focused exclusively on the drama that moves the plot of our lives forward, and we neglect, or forget, to pay attention to the subtle habits of language, thought and action that course through our experience at every moment. The rabbinic approach to sacred text teaches us the importance of becoming close readers of our own stories. A first step in this direction is simply to notice when in our lives we tend to go on automatic pilot.

Making a conscious choice to pay attention to the parts of our lives that are most habitual can yield important insights into the dynamics that drive our personal narratives. Some of these habits may be quite benign while others may have

consistently negative impact upon us or others to whom we're connected. But as we become more familiar with them, we begin to see the structure of our narrative in new and helpful ways. We may even come to understand how seemingly disparate parts of our lives actually cohere quite powerfully with one another. And this awareness give us more freedom to influence the direction our story will take as we move into the future.

Our final stop on our tour through Jewish civilization is the medieval period and the contributions of the Jewish mystics to our understanding of the nature of sacred text. These students of Kabbalah evolved a perspective on the Torah which assumed that it, in its entirety, was actually a secret code that described, for those who have eyes to see, the hidden spiritual dynamics that underlie all of creation and that operate within God as well.

This perspective so changed their view of Torah that they could make the bold claim that if all the Torah is, is a collection of mere stories and ordinary words, than they could certainly write a better one.

The meaning that the mystics uncover within the Torah is, like that of the rabbis, not obvious to the casual reader, but the level of hiddenness is of a completely different order. In their formulations, our tradition reached its peak in developing the idea that there is much more to the Torah than meets the eye. There is in fact a veritable universe hidden within the holy letters that is every bit as mysterious and expansive as the universe that exists outside of them.

From the mystics then also we can learn some important things about exploring our own stories. The first point is learning to embrace the fundamental mystery that lies at the center of each one of us. Even as we strive to put the puzzle of our life together in the spirit of the rabbis, we remember with humility that this is a project that can never ultimately be completed. We can always go deeper.

A second teaching involves cultivating the awareness that everything we say and do, and perhaps even what we think has ripple effects in the world in ways that we are completely unable to trace. I think the medieval mystics would have looked approvingly upon the modern development of chaos theory and the fact that a butterfly flapping its wings on the other side of the planet can contribute to our rainy Rosh Hashanah weather.

And they would tell us, that if we pay attention, there are moments when we can catch a glimpse of these subtle paths of causation. When serendipitous events conspire to remind us of the links that exist between our own sacred narrative and those of other individuals as well as the great collective narratives of our people, our species and the cosmos itself. May all of us in the coming year discover an increased capacity to understand the complexity and the mystery that are the building blocks of all of our lives, and may this in turn lead to a greater degree of choice and intentionality in the positive unfolding of our own stories and the story of our world.

Shannah tovah umutkah!

Rabbi Steve