

## **You are part of the story: *Telling our Jewish Story Today***

Rabbi Adam Stock Spilker – Rosh Hashanah 5784 – September 16, 2023

Mount Zion Temple, St. Paul, Minnesota

---

I imagine there may be one or two of you who saw Barbie and/or Oppenheimer this summer. You know, the movies featuring two maverick Jewish thinkers whose ideas helped shape the world.

Ruth Handler invented the Barbie doll and J. Robert Oppenheimer was the father of the Atomic Bomb. We were brought into their worlds. Radically different, of course. It was their stories that captivated us.

No surprise. Stories stick with us though we often forget the facts we hear.

Rabbis know that we can potentially give the same sermon every year (not that we would, mind you) but as long as we change the stories, no one will remember that they're hearing the same message.

And while I've already broken the fourth wall, let me say that some sermons are for the heart, some for the mind. While I hope this sermon touches you, it may appeal more to your intellect because I want to speak about our evolving Jewish story and how we will tell it into the future.

This is exactly what the Torah instructs us to do.

In the midst of the harrowing Exodus, Moses learns that God's intention of prolonging the drama of the plagues was **לְמַעַן תִּסְפֹּר בְּאָזְנֵי בִנְךָ וּבֶן-בִּנְךָ** *L'maan t'saper b'oznei vincha u'ven bincha* to "tell a story in the ears of your child and the child of your child." **לְמַעַן תִּסְפֹּר** Exodus 10:2. The point is to tell a story that will stick. A story that has lasting power and meaning. A story that motivates us to act from generation to generation.

In 1991, Rachel and I were in Marrakesh, one of the four imperial cities of Morocco. And I pause to say how heartsick I am about the devastation of the recent earthquake. I'll share more in my announcements about ways we can help.

We had just arrived after spending the night in Fez in the home of the son of one of the city's main imams, sleeping on the roof - but that is another story! There we were in Marrakesh, the middle of a town square filled with snake charmers, artisans, farmers, performers with monkeys. The sounds and smells were overwhelming, and there, in the center, was a crowd gathered around an old man. All ages. watched transfixed for half an hour. This man was telling a story, not reading, but telling. An oral tradition performed in a way that could help us imagine our ancestors telling the stories that eventually were written in the Torah. No one made a sound in that crowd around him as his voice lifted and lulled. His ancient skin aglow, leaning on a staff, possessed with a strength that seemed to come from the heavens. Every once in a while, though, the crowd would interrupt to correct the story! They all knew it...and wanted to hear it...and needed the storyteller to stay on script.

## למען תספר באזני בנך ובן-בנך

The purpose is to tell a story that has staying power throughout the generations.

The Torah story we tell during Rosh Hashanah is the *akedah*, the binding of Isaac. It is personal. It is dramatic. There is agony and despair. It is shocking. It is about an individual family, but also about our people's story. And it is completely enigmatic. It keeps the conversation going, from generation to generation.

The power of a story.

We are living in a time when our shared stories are fracturing. You know, the narratives we tell about ourselves that don't quite resonate in the same way anymore.

What was once central to our 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish story – immigrating to the *Goldeneh Medinah*, golden land of opportunity, starting with nothing and building economic security, facing the horror of the Shoah first in hushed voices and then with survivors in our midst recounting their stories, and feeling awe and pride in the miracle of the birth of Israel – these narratives no longer speak with the same immediacy. We are, as the futurist, Stephen Windmuller, a professor in our Reform movement seminary, puts it, feeling unsettled.<sup>1</sup> And that is an understatement. And this is more than as Jews. As Americans, we understand our formation as a nation with more awareness of the people on whose backs some prospered which opens debate about the implications for us. And, as Jews in our diverse makeup, not all of us, of course, came from Eastern Europe. Israel divides and challenges us even as it still inspires many, and we do not yet know what to make of the recent uptick of antisemitism.

There is great pride in Judaism among a majority of Jews, in our humor and culture, in Chanukah and Passover. Many synagogues, including Mount Zion, are thriving, thank God, and yet a large percentage of the Jewish community remains absent from our Jewish institutions. Unaffiliation rates are rising. More and more identify as “none” as not part of the Jewish community. How do we tell our story, or reshape it, in a way that is authentic and compelling for them? We have always been resilient as a people. We need to be so now.

The events of the 20th century completely reshaped our narrative for decades. We literally changed the Jewish calendar for the first time in millennia adding observances for Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Memorial Day, and Yom HaAtzmaut, Israel Independence Day. Some say Auschwitz was the theological equivalent of Sinai.<sup>2</sup>

But things are changing, and I am struggling with this as a rabbi. Last May for Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Memorial Day, not a single survivor was in attendance for the first time. We have only a few still living among us. I also listen to many talk about how Israel as a country seems to antagonize more than inspire and we educators endlessly reflect about how we are going to teach about Israel. And the youngest generations are distant from our immigrant stories and from tales of the Old Country.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/unsettled-in-america-analyzing-the-new-threats-to-the-jews-part-two/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hartman.org.il/auschwitz-or-sinai/>

Rabbi Talia Avnon-Beneviste<sup>3</sup> says that a story only begins when something is broken. She worked for the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv as the museum was purposefully demolished. She helped create, over the past decade, an entirely new museum of the Jewish people. She says:

Some of us were taught to think that a story begins with descriptions about the setting, but a story actually begins the moment that something smashes into pieces, collapses, or breaks. A beginning is never created from a subtle hint or gentle truth. A story begins by shattering reality and its defenses. When a great bridge bears the weight of pedestrians for years, no one asks what will happen if it collapses one day. The questions arise only after the bridge fails. Suddenly, everyone's asking questions: How will we reach our destination? Who will show us the way? Who will connect yesterday and tomorrow for us?<sup>4</sup>

Our people's earliest story about ourselves can be found in the 26<sup>th</sup> chapter of Deuteronomy. Every ancient Israelite knew the text by heart. You couldn't give your offering to the priests without knowing this story.<sup>5</sup> Our ancestors could recite:

My father was a wandering Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. We cried to יהוה, the God of our ancestors, and יהוה heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. יהוה freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents, bringing us to this place and giving us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

A remarkable story and our earliest liturgy. This was about their identity and it still speaks to us in many ways. But did you notice that it didn't even include Sinai and Torah? It was a story of leaving Egypt and finding home in *Eretz Yisrael*. That was the central concern at that time. It was not a glorious myth of beginning, of creation, but about ancestry and suffering and hope.

A thousand years after our ancestors first recited these words and repeated it faithfully generation after generation, the Romans destroyed the Temple and those who took the mantle of our story, the early rabbis, knew that it was broken. It didn't address their lives at that time. They chose, however, to use the same text as the basis of the Haggadah for Passover as a way to tell a new story. They creatively misread the Hebrew of the first line to no longer say: “My father was a wandering Aramean” but rather to say, “An Aramean destroyed my father.” Now the narrative, at the beginning of the exile, wasn't about a nomadic people having found home, but about a persecuted people seeking freedom and *eventually* a home.

---

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Talia Avnon-Benveniste is Director of the Israel Rabbinical Program at HUC-JIR's Taube Family Campus in Jerusalem. She was ordained after completing the Israel Rabbinical Program in 2009 and returned to HUC-JIR following her time as Director of the International School for Peoplehood Studies at Beit-Hatfutsot, the Museum of the Jewish People.

<sup>4</sup> <https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/how-does-story-begin-not-you-think>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.hartman.org.il/the-stories-we-tell-about-ourselves-video/>

“My father was a wandering Aramean” is about finding home. “An Aramean destroyed my father” is about self-preservation.

### למען תספר באזני בנך ובן-בנך

The purpose is to *adapt* a story that has staying power through the generations.

Yuval Noah Harari writes in his captivating book, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*: “Telling effective stories is not easy. The difficulty lies not in telling the story, but in convincing everyone else to believe it.” That is what gave Homo Sapiens the edge over Neanderthals and other humans in the Homo genus. We could create a narrative to help us imagine a sense of unity among a group. “The story in which you believe shapes the society that you create.”

At critical times of disruption in our history we have adapted our Jewish story. Rabbi Ed Feinstein points out that the Bible itself, the Torah, was written after we were exiled in Babylon after the destruction of the first Temple; the Talmud was written after the destruction of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple, Maimonides’ writing came after a philosophical crisis in Iberia, the Zohar book of mysticism arose after the Inquisition, Hasidic writing, in a completely new fairytale style, came after the Chelminitski massacres in Ukraine which were proportionally more devastating to our people than the Holocaust. We are truly the People of the Book.

### למען תספר באזני בנך ובן-בנך

Last February, I visited the new diaspora museum in Tel Aviv as part of a conference of Reform rabbis before our Mount Zion congregational Israel trip. Rabbi Avnon-Benevise spoke about the recently razed Diaspora Museum, Beit Hatfutsot. That demolished museum was built in 1978 based on the vision of Abba Kovner, hero of the Warsaw uprising in 1943 against the Nazis. Yizkor, memory, was the central message. His view was that all diaspora communities should be shown in memoriam in the museum. The museum started with visitors walking under a model of the Roman arch of Titus showing the destruction of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple and the beginning of exile. After viewing all the destroyed diaspora communities most recently in the Shoah, the visitors walked through a final arch into the reborn land of Israel.

When the Diaspora Museum was no longer attracting audiences in the late 90s, the writing was on the wall. The directors knew they had to start over and retell the story of the Jewish people and in a new way. They brought a diverse group of educators. It was clear that a reimagined story would be based on positivity, inclusion, and pluralism.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> FROM ANU website: “You’re invited to join a fascinating journey that portrays the story of the Jewish people through the generations and up to the present time. The Museum represents all parts of the Jewish people and highlights the creative works and cultural riches of a variety of communities in different periods of history. This story is about all of us and each and every one of us is part of it. Embark on a fascinating journey presenting the story of the Jewish people throughout history. The museum seeks to represent all Jewish people and to highlight their cultural creation and the flourishing of various Jewish communities throughout history.”

Ten years later, the new museum was no longer called the Diaspora Museum, Beit Hatfutzot, but rather the “We” museum. In Hebrew, *Anachnu*, or in short, Anu. The full name: “Anu: The Museum of the Jewish People.”<sup>7</sup> That was a seismic shift in narrative.

Today we recognize our diversity from the outset. We are Ashkenazi, Mizrachi, and Sephardic. We are Jews by birth, Jews by choice, Jews with first-hand experience of antisemitism, Jews who have gotten by without much experience of it; Jews who are inspired by Israel and Jews who are infuriated by Israel and Jews who are indifferent and most of us who feel both ways, strongly. We are Jews who have passed as white or are white. We are Jews of Color, Black Jews, Latino Jews. We are LGBTQ, we have disabilities that affect our lives, and we have many other identities. We are joined by many fellow travelers who are not Jewish but are fully supportive of the Jewish community, and we are part of families with people of multiple faiths and traditions.

While we are post-ethnic in many ways, and Ashkenazi stories of the “old country” are losing hold, there is a significant minority steeped in nostalgia and are reclaiming the shtetl. The return to the past has always been one move in finding grounding in one’s story. A group of young rabbinic students are re-adopting Ashkenazic pronunciation of Hebrew, *Yisgadal v’yiskadash*, which hasn’t been spoken on this bima since the early 1970s. Is this an important aspect of our new story or something that will fade?

What is clear is that Hollywood’s influence, despite our current prominence, is fading. Our numbers as Jews are surprisingly actually shrinking quickly in Tinseltown, as well as in universities, and in politics.<sup>8</sup> Orthodox Judaism is flourishing even as liberal Judaism thrives in some spaces and succumbs in others to the *nones*, those who profess no religious identity in particular. Many of us don’t observe Jewish practices and fewer are feeling guilty about this. Others are living fully observant and embodied Jewish lives.

Many commentators talk about how our current story is not working without offering something in its place.<sup>9</sup> I want to make a suggestion this Rosh Hashanah. As Amos Oz once wrote, we have inherited the furniture of our ancestors. Now we have to determine which pieces we put in the living room and which in the attic.

So, what is our people’s story?<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> **You MUST watch this video that the museum launched in 2013 as they explored our changing stories: [You are part of the story](#).** Then, as they opened in 2021, [this video describes the new ANU museum](#).

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/the-vanishing>

<sup>9</sup> Listen to this podcast which references Rabbi Benne Lappe’s “Crash Theory.” <https://www.judaismunbound.com/podcast/2016/3/7/episode-4-exodus>

<sup>10</sup> A slightly different question is what is the defining feature of Jewish life? I share this because the answers are so imaginative! James Kaplan says the defining feature of Jewish life are three things: “endangerment, argument, irony.” Shlomo Avineiri says, “Solidarity, culture, history and memory are the current ingredients of Jewish identity.” See more here: <https://www.jewishlives.org/4questions>

It seems to me that our diversity can be embraced by our ancient story that has withstood the test of time. It can incorporate the 20th century paradigm shifts within its meta-narrative. The Shoah and Israel will continue to be central to our narrative, but they are not our foundational stories of leaving Egypt, of standing at Sinai, of first entering *eretz Yisrael*.

It's an ancient story, an old song, and it is eternal.

Our ancestors were wandering Arameans and Arameans have sought to destroy our ancestors and today we are a diverse people with the weight of history and hardship **along with** the lightness of living values that have inspired millions.

In thinking about this moment in history, I believe our ancient-new story centers around three c's - covenant, civilization, and conversation.

Why **covenant**? Our story is not just about a people who happens to have survived millennia with culture, humor, and food. We have a set of values that are grounded in fundamental beliefs of right and wrong that we promise to uphold. We just need to renew the covenant as my teacher Rabbi Eugene Borowitz writes in his magnum opus, *Renewing the Covenant: a Theology for the Post-Modern Jew*. And we know that not all Jews have upheld our covenant. Look at the biblical prophets. When they spoke, they were talking to fellow Jews who were committing wrongs. The prophets called them to task to walk the path of doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God.

Why a **civilization**? We are more than a religion. Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan's book, *Judaism as a Civilization*, focused on the word civilization as the fundamental orientation of our story. His thinking has deeply influenced many streams of Judaism. We are a diverse group from many cultures but with a common origin and a common destiny. We have differing political perspectives and an opportunity to counter polarization by being in the same synagogue space and learning from each other. The two centers of Jewish life today are in Israel with 46% of our world Jewish population and America with 40%. Israel's existence and centrality to our story is a reality. The flowering of Jewish creative culture continues to emerge from Israel but so too in America. How we manage the relationship between the two centers of Jewish life will be a defining feature of our story in the coming decades.

Finally, why a **conversation**? This word is Rabbi Larry Hoffman's definition of Judaism. Rabbi Hoffman's Synagogue 2000 initiative reshaped Mount Zion in the late 90s and had a profound impact on my rabbinate personally. He suggests that we have had many civilizations over the centuries, and it is only the fact that there is an ongoing conversation that has traversed generations, continents, and cultures that is the heart of our story. The conversation engages all who wish to join. Our story is unfolding and is enriched around the kitchen table. We just need to speak it and act upon our core covenantal values. We all just need to keep the conversation going.

So here is a draft of our story:

We are part of an epic, ancient-new story of being freed from slavery in Egypt and standing at Sinai bound by a **covenant** that continues to be our moral compass. Our **civilization** emerged from the Fertile Crescent of the Ancient Near East and today flourishes primarily in Israel and America. We have faced persecution, but we endure, engaged in an ongoing **conversation** *l'dor vador*.

לְמַעַן תִּסְפָּר בְּאָזְנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּנֵי יִבְרָאֵל

The purpose is to *adapt* our ancient story in a way that speaks to our current moment and has staying power through the generations.

And this language of our story doesn't need to be adopted. Don't worry! We won't take another year on this like our recent strategic visioning process.

Perhaps it just needs to be agreed to by the Jewish people? That'll be easy.

This is a conversation not a test, so let's speak of it. Help build our community and deepen relationships by asking hard questions about our covenant and civilization. I want to be clear, as some of you whose opinions I sought can attest, this was not an easy sermon to write. But the more I read, thought, and talked with others about the essence of who we are, the more my framework of the three c's: covenant, civilization, and conversation worked for me:

We are part of an epic, ancient-new story of being freed from slavery in Egypt and standing at Sinai bound by a **covenant** that continues to be our moral compass. Our **civilization** emerged from the Fertile Crescent of the Ancient Near East and today flourishes primarily in Israel and America. We have faced persecution, but we endure, engaged in an ongoing **conversation** *l'dor vador*.

How fortunate are we to be part of this extraordinary time! I am so grateful. I hope you are too. We are all part of this story.

Our congregation felt so strongly about the importance of narrative, we put it right in our newly adopted Derech, path to the future. "We will inspire Jewish experiences, stories, and practices." That order is purposeful. Experiences, then stories, then practices.

In this coming year, may each of us have more experiences in and out of synagogue that will deepen and strengthen our Jewish story and our personal stories within it. Let's ask ourselves, what is at the core of our Jewish story? And may we repeat that essence to inspire practices to give our lives meaning, to help other people, and to create a worthwhile legacy.

Our Jewish story is truly epic, and it is not finished. Generations have come before us. Now it is upon us, *aleinu*, to shape and tell our ancient-new story.