

## The Stories We Tell

A child enters the world naked and alone, but when all is as it should be, that vulnerability is short-lived. Within a few moments the baby is swaddled in a warm blanket and cradled in loving arms. Often a newborn is feeding at her mother's breast shortly after her arrival, guided by instinct and a basic primal need. It is one of life's many quiet miracles that a newborn can survive for months and months on nothing more than mother's milk. But then, as the child grows her diet expands to ensure she's receiving the nutrients she needs to thrive. A growing child needs more than just solids. Children need stories, for stories sustain them as surely as strained carrots.

As children grow the sustenance, the stories, change. You don't often see a seven-year-old eating baby food out of a jar, any more than you would see him curled up in a corner devouring a tattered copy of *Goodnight Moon*. (Though it's worth mentioning that, like the best wines, the best stories get better with age; there are passages of *Charlotte's Web* that will move me until I take my last breath). There comes a time when it's in our best interests and those of our children to begin telling them stories of our past, our heritage, stories of Jewish life as it has unfolded from the beginning.

Which stories? Where do you begin to explore a world that began over five thousand years ago? These are important questions, not only for those of us who have children, but for all of us. For all of us were once children, and many of us still are. By which I mean that like a child at birth, many of us are naked and vulnerable. We have not been fed the stories we need to sustain us. We have not digested the stories of our past to the point where they are written on our bones. We do not wear our history like a shawl that protects us from the elements. Most of us are unclothed. We are, to a great degree, orphans of history. We know little of our personal past and our collective history. And like a child who has been denied the basics of a well-balanced diet, we are the poorer for it. We have a responsibility — personally and collectively — to learn about our past. We owe it not only to ourselves and to our children, and our children's children. We owe it to our parents, and our parent's parents, and all those who came before us.

I'm confident I speak for many of you when I stand here and declare that I know precious little about the Jewish world I was born into. Those of you who are not Jewish but have committed yourselves to Jewish partners can hardly be faulted if your understanding of Jewish history is superficial. What about the rest of us? I am appalled at how little I know about a religion, a culture, a tradition I claim is such an important part of my life, and I suspect I'm not alone.

Those of you who attended last week's Rosh Hashanah service may recall a moment when we proclaimed: "May this new year, called five thousand seven hundred and ...." ...and many of us drew a blank. Anna Rae rescued us from collective embarrassment and reminded us that it is the year 5761. Let us return to that children's classic I mentioned a moment ago. Many of you are familiar with *Charlotte's Web*, and can most likely name the pig whom Charlotte befriends. Hands up if you can name the pig at the center of the story. For the record, it's Wilbur. Now I'd like to bring things a little closer to home. How many of you know the name of your mother's mother's mother? In other words, hands up if you can name your maternal great-grandmother.

That most of us are more familiar with a fictitious pig than our own flesh-and-blood speaks volumes. It should serve as a wake up call, a trumpet blast of biblical proportions to rouse ourselves into action. It's never too late to begin to explore your family's past and the history of Judaism. The two, in fact, are interwoven. There is a vocabulary of words we're familiar with, words that have become a shorthand for the Jewish experience over the past few hundred years. *Shtetl. Pogrom. Ghetto.* What do these words mean, beyond the antiseptic definitions we find in dictionaries? In order to invest these words with meaning we must try and apply them to people we know, directly or indirectly. The problem with the way we interpret history is that facts and figures often overshadow the faces of individuals whose lives were shaped by forces far beyond their grasp, individuals who we have a direct connection to, if we cared to begin exploring the links between who we are today, and those who have come before us.

I found a word like *pogrom* in my dictionary — right after pogo stick — defined as "an organized massacre of helpless people; specific: such a massacre of Jews." Who were these helpless people? Chances are many of us here today have relatives who were amongst those helpless people. We can speak of grandparents and great-grandparents who fled eastern Europe and boarded boats for long journeys over rough seas to new countries where they were determined to forge new lives. On the one hand, they often arrived with nothing: little or no English, a few suitcases and many fears. On the other hand, they carried a long and rich tradition that has brought us here today. Many of us have gathered here in east-end Toronto to celebrate the High Holidays in this new millennium because of our great-grandparents, relatives most of us cannot name. They were born in a different century, in a different land, speaking a different language. What is the same, the unbreakable thread that binds us to these people, is a commitment we have spelled out in our mission, a commitment to nurturing Jewish life.

"We used to be slaves," my six-year old daughter often proclaimed in the days following Passover this year, with a sense of awe and wonder that is the domain of children, a domain we slowly leave as we migrate toward adulthood. What is Passover but a marvelous, stirring opportunity to retell an ancient story and apply it to our modern lives? We used to be slaves, my daughter says, with a purity that suggests it happened only a short while ago. *We used to be slaves. We used to live on Fulton.* Through a child's eyes, time collapses like a tower of cards. And perhaps we should graft that perspective onto our own, and speak of the slavery we once know as if it happened recently. We used to be slaves. We were once immigrants. We were once barred — along with dogs — from public places.

We used to be. We were once. Once upon a time...The language of fairy tales. To talk about the past is to sometimes provoke impatience. That was then, this is now. Our bodies no longer carry the welts of slavery. Our broken English has long been mended. Anti-semitism, though a perpetual thorn in our side, is no longer institutionalized. Why dwell on the past when daily life presents its own challenges?

During last night's Kol Nidre service we heard that "atonement is the individual starting point for *tikkun olam*, healing the world." You don't have to look far to see the world is in a perpetual state of disrepair. We are all of this world, and what we make of it is largely our

own doing. The potential is there to make this a beautiful, if flawed, world. This week we buried a former prime minister. No matter what you thought of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, who among us would reject the notion of a just society?

In J.M. Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, a young peasant is brought before a magistrate for stealing chickens. Sentenced to serve in the army in a remote town, the peasant tries to desert after a month. He wanted to see his mother and sister again. "We cannot just do as we wish," the magistrate tells the peasant. "We are all subject to the law, which is greater than any of us...You think you know what is just and what is not. I understand. We all think we know." And then the magistrate thinks: "I had no doubt that at each moment each one of us, man, woman, child, perhaps even the poor old horse turning the mill-wheel, knew what was just: all creatures come into the world bringing with them the memory of justice. But we live in a world of laws," the magistrate tells the prisoner "a world of second-best...We are all fallen creatures. All we can do is uphold the laws, all of us, without allowing the memory of justice to fade." It is this memory of justice that we must strive to reclaim, individually and collectively. I was raised with the understanding that if you believe in Judaism you believe in justice. Justice for Jews, absolutely. And justice for all. If we inscribe the history of Judaism on our hearts then we can open our hearts to those in whose shoes we once stood: the enslaved, the shunned, the dispossessed.

You don't have to cast your eyes far to see injustice on both a huge scale and the small injustices we stumble across in the course of our daily lives. For incomprehensible injustice on a grand scale, try Sierra Leone. For the small injustices that whittle away at a person's self-esteem until there is little left, try the streets of Toronto, or any major city in Canada, where immigrants face a steady stream of prejudice. And that is where our past as Jews comes in. For we were once immigrants facing the isolation that only newcomers know. The challenge is to resist pigeonholing those with different accents or of a different colour into damaging stereotypes. Who among us has not, at one point, felt a cloud of prejudice shade our initial impressions about those we label as "others"? Prejudice is often wrapped in fear; what we don't understand we fear. In the history of Judaism, persecution is more than just a footnote; it is a string of successive, sorrowful chapters. Let that history of persecution become a bridge of understanding linking us with those who have also tasted the bitter waters of hatred.

To know our history as a way of extending an open hand to those who need it is both an honourable and necessary pursuit if we, as a Jewish community, are to contribute toward building a just and peaceful society. But immersing ourselves in history is also crucial for building a sense of self. History is the mortar we need to build a sense of identity. By learning why we do what we do, and why we have done it for thousands of years, to explore the roots of our rituals and traditions is to achieve a greater understanding of who we are. We are, to a greater or lesser degree, the sum of all that has come before us. We are not born on islands, separated by deep and wide channels of water. With the first breath we take we inherit the legacy of those who have come before us, and the responsibility of bequeathing our heritage to those who follow.

Those of us who live in interfaith households have the additional responsibility of recognizing the different histories our partners bring to the table and, wherever possible,

acknowledging the common threads that link different faiths. Those who arrived at Canada's doorstep at the turn of the last century sailed not only from eastern Europe but from around the world. Different boats, different stories but the same destination.

Many Jews, of course, would one day choose Israel as the land where they would start anew. This past week saw the front pages of newspapers stained with the spilled blood of Israelis and Palestinians. The history of the Middle East is exceedingly complex, a grey zone that we should resist dissecting into simplistic, tidy categories of good and evil, right and wrong, black hats and white hats. Israel's right to exist is beyond dispute and discussion. Equally, we do a disservice to ourselves if we reduce all Palestinians to murderous fanatics blinded by fury. They, too, have a history that deserves to be heard. And so while you sift through the literature on Israel's past and present in your struggle to understand how this young country finds itself on the brink of yet another war, make time for a few verses by a Palestinian poet.

It is in Israel where you will find Yad Vashem, the monument to the Holocaust. It is impossible to speak of Jewish history and not speak of the Holocaust. At the same time, I cannot possibly begin to honour the memory of those who perished in the time I have left. Indeed, is there every enough time? I believe the quest to comprehend what happened to Jews during the Second World War a timeless one. It defies complete understanding. At the same time, it demands contemplation. We have a responsibility to remember what happened, and to at least try and understand why. It's all too easy to become paralyzed by the wealth of material that has been written about the Holocaust. Where to begin?

Begin with a name. Better still, begin with six names, as a small gesture toward commemorating six million. Once you've learned the name of your great-grandmother - and all your great-grandparents, for that matter - take it upon yourselves to learn the name of six Jews who perished in the Holocaust simply because they were Jews. And it's worth remembering that in Nazi Germany, one Jewish grandparent was all it took to be considered Jewish. Learn six names and commit them to memory. Brand each name on your soul as surely as numbers were tattooed on wrists at Auschwitz. If you don't have a personal tie to the Holocaust — a parent, a grandparent, an aunt — you don't have to search far for a name to carry with you. If you're so inclined, reserve a few of those names for the 1.5 million children who were killed. Children like Mala Silberberg. Mala's picture was featured in a photo exhibition titled *We Were Children Just Like You*. She stands with a doll by her side, a stuffed animal by her feet. She has that trusting look that children so easily wear: open eyes, a raised, tilted head. When she was four years old she came face to face with Josef Mengele, who asked her to sing. Mengele was so moved by her voice that he gave young Mala a candy, then shot her through the head.

Commit those six names to memory, and say them aloud every time you read of the vile proclamations by those who deny the Holocaust ever happened. Hatred has led them to twist the truth, to reshape history as if it was so much clay that hardens into malodorous falsehoods. That the Holocaust defies explanation is not a license to distort it.

As the son of a Holocaust survivor from Poland, I can offer six names of those who died, names we say aloud each year at our family seders. There is a seventh name I keep close

at hand. Felix Druskiewicz was a good friend of my grandfather's, and a good man. At great risk to his own life he paid the woman in whose home my mother, aunt and grandparents hid for four months. His name has found a home in Israel as one of the Righteous Among the Nations. When I was in my early 20s I had the good fortune of meeting Felix Druskiewicz in Poland, and embracing him, for in saving my mother's life he gave me mine.

I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to visit Poland, the land of my mother's birth. Last week Nicky Weiss inspired many of us with her account of a family trip to Israel. She evoked a sense that to stand in Israel is to drink history out of a cup. Not all of us can visit Israel or the towns and villages in eastern Europe and elsewhere that our parents or our parents' parents called home. Still, there are no shortage of opportunities through which we can experience Jewish history with all our senses. There are books, of course, not to mention lectures, films, plays, paintings, sculptures, music, dances, exhibitions. There are legions of elderly Jews who are happy to talk, if only we were willing to listen. There are a myriad of ways to make history meaningful and relevant. There are, in other words, no excuses.

History is not only peopled by those who are no longer with us. We tend to forget that the moments inscribed in history were once firmly rooted in the here-and-now. And so it is with those of us who are gathered here today. In our own small way we are making history. We are here today under the wings of a group, a group that, like a child, was named shortly after its birth. Five years ago the Danforth Jewish Circle didn't exist. When we formed this community group we made history. History is not always wrapped in monumental achievements or cloaked in unspeakable acts. Sometimes, history is made quietly. The need to create a Jewish community in east-end Toronto that spoke to those of us living here, the need to connect spiritually and socially, these are the needs that gave birth to the Circle. And that need for community, that need to commune with each other and with God, that need is no less urgent than the need to bring a new life into this world. As we all said last week, "without community we are nothing." To borrow the title from a beloved children's story, we have made something from nothing. Where once there was no Danforth Jewish Circle now we are hundreds, sitting side by side, joined by history. As we celebrate our history we are making it. The question is not so much "How long will we last?" but "What will we do while we're here?" We will do what we have always done. We will recite prayers and sing songs that are thousands of years old. We will remind ourselves that Judaism can provide a sense of direction as we try and make our way through the unknown, the unexpected, the unpredictable. And we must not allow the memory of justice to fade.

I have never believed the oft-heard dictum that those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it. That tragedy of the world we live in is that we remember the past, and still allow it to repeat itself. In recent years, massacres on an unprecedented scale have taken place in countries like Rwanda. We watch, helplessly, from a world away. Once we were persecuted; let us speak out when others are being persecuted. Once we were immigrants; let us speak out when newcomers are trod upon. Once we were gassed and killed simply because of who we are; that the Holocaust was unique and unparalleled in its scope and execution should not preclude us from speaking out when others are rounded up and slaughtered like animals in the name of cleansing the world.

If we are going to speak out then it is incumbent upon us to know what we are speaking about. This year, give yourself the task of learning a little about our history, and I guarantee you will learn a little about yourself. You might even learn a lot. Don't be overwhelmed by all there is to digest. You have a lifetime of learning ahead of you. Begin with one page in one book about Jewish history. Once you've journeyed along that path, walk over to the path that runs beside it, a path marked with the footprints of family who have walked before us. In a children's book entitled *The Magic of Kol Nidre*, a grandfather offers his grandson his thoughts on why Kol Nidre is sung three times. The first time is for our ancestors, the second time is for us, and the third time is for the children yet to be born.

The lives we live today will be considered history tomorrow. Our future is our past. Fittingly, we call ourselves a circle. When you stand in a circle and turn in one direction, what's right ahead of you may in fact be far behind you. Remember that we all enter the world unclothed, waiting for history to be written upon us. One day, when you are ready, tell a child what you know. Your own child. A sister's child. The child of a friend or neighbour. Any child. Look that child in the eye and begin. Begin with that most simple of beginnings by saying, "Listen. I have a story to tell you."

Emil Sher

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