

High Holy Days 5783/2022  
Rosh Hashanah Shacharit  
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Temple B'nai Chaim

## L'dor Vador - The Sacred Word and Why our Stories Matter

Growing up, I absolutely loved visiting my extended family every summer in Pittsburgh and listening to stories about what it was like for my parents, mostly my mother, growing up with all their family close by. I delighted in the stories at our Thanksgiving and Pesach tables of holiday gatherings from years gone by. I begged my Grandma Whitman, my father's mother, to tell me about what it was like when she grew up and peppered my Grandma Gellman, my mother's mother, with endless questions about this aunt or that cousin, trying my best to keep all the relations and connections straight in my head. My maternal Grandmother would throw a big birthday party for herself almost every July, and family came from all over to be together and celebrate our matriarch. It was wonderfully grand, and I remember lingering at the main table to drink in as much of the family history as I could. Years later, I still get confused and am always grateful for my mother's miraculous ability to repeatedly explain the various and sometimes confusing relations.

We recently observed my Grandma Gellman's 12<sup>th</sup> yahrzeit, and I couldn't help but reflect on those wonderful lost years – on how she insisted on doing whatever she could to bring our family together, on the almost impossible example she set about the importance of family staying connected and being there for each other regardless of past difficulties, about tradition and respect, about honoring and strengthening the bonds of love in an ever-growing family, and especially, about telling our stories – keeping them alive for all the generations to come. *(Sing – L'dor vador, nagid godlecha, l'dor vador we protect this chain. From generation to generation, l'dor vador these lips will praise Your name).* Often when we read or hear this text, we think of it in the larger context of the (capital J) Jewish people writ large – of the commandment in Torah to pass down our history to our children just as I reference in the Torah passing ceremony during our B'nai Mitzvah services at TBC. But what of all the millions of individual stories that make up “The Real Story of the Jewish people?” Stories of resilience and survival, stories of love and hope, stories of dreams fulfilled and lost, travel and planting and change – the legacy of families that is formed and found in the stories we tell, the memories we share, the traditions we pass on that keep cherished times alive – the common threads that weave us together as a people, that make up the fabric of our humanity.

In Judaism, our stories define our very existence as Am Yisrael. Our foundational text, the Torah, is one giant story – a blueprint if you will for the way we as Jews are meant to move forward through the world and why. And it didn't start as a scroll. Long before the Torah was

written down on parchment, it was passed orally from one person to another. In Pirkei Avot we learn that Moses received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly. Hillel and Shammai, two of our great Sages, received the oral tradition from them; our Sacred Stories became the foundation of our canon by word of mouth. The Sacred Word wields wisdom and guidance, power and possibility, comfort and encouragement. Unfortunately, we all know too well that although our Torah may provide us with a blueprint for how to move through our world, and even though that guide's origins are drawn from the Sacred Word, today our word – that is, the words of many among us – has somehow lost all connection to the sacred. Too often what we read or hear or even speak is rooted in judgement and condemnation, anger and hate, or even in the desire to dominate and silence. Words have become weapons, carelessly tossed about as if there is no consequence. Psalm 34 teaches, *“Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from deceitful speech,”* yet all one needs to do is to read the daily headlines, glance at a Twitter feed for 5 minutes, or turn on broadcast news, to be assaulted by intolerant hate or fear-driven vitriol. A seemingly unquenchable thirst to be right, to dominate and to maintain power at all costs is increasingly silencing the sacredness of our words. I personally have found the constant barrage so upsetting and discouraging, that I have silenced nearly all headline notifications on my phone and choose to stay current on news and events only through printed media, and only at times I choose. Somehow, I feel this gives me just a little say in what I allow into my consciousness. I cannot help but wonder what either of my grandmothers would think of it all.

Which brings me to the question, what is our responsibility as Jews to respond, to uphold the sanctity of communication – to restore voice if you will to the sacred and lift up the cries of those who are being silenced, othered, and left unable to share their holy stories – whose sacred words have been cut off? This silencing is happening more and more across our country and around the globe, and whether it is out of fear or a desire to maintain power, because of ignorance, hate or something else, make no mistake, it is not okay, and the frequency of examples are increasing. Whether the victims be immigrants at our southern border fleeing persecution and violence in a desperate search for a better life, individuals who can become pregnant suddenly losing agency over their bodies and the right to make choices about their reproductive care, black and brown skinned citizens of this country being denied easy access to voting places and water while standing in line, or any other number of injustice occurring on a daily basis, as a Jew, I feel commanded to raise my own voice and do something about it. Perhaps you share my outrage? Are you too feeling pulled to act in some way. Our ancient and recent stories alike compel us to do so.

*Isaiah* urges us, “Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.” In *Psalms* we read, “Give justice to the weak and the

fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.” *Jeremiah* entreats us, “Thus says Adonai: Do justice and righteousness and deliver from the hand of the oppressor one who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.” And *Proverbs* reminds us, “Whoever oppresses a poor person insults their Maker, but one who is generous to the needy honors Adonai.” And in *Proverbs* we are told, “To do righteousness and justice is preferred by God above sacrifice” In the Haftarah we will read on Yom Kippur from *Isaiah*, God asks us, “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?”

The prophets of Israel were perhaps the greatest champions of social justice in the history of our world. And although they constantly stress the importance of pursuing justice, the Torah itself is replete with similar lessons. In Genesis, our father Abraham challenges God to practice justice saying, “That be far from You to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked... shall the Judge of all the earth not do justly?” And you will certainly recognize the commandment from Deuteronomy 16:20, “*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof* – Justice, justice you shall pursue!” The pursuit of a just society, the idea of giving voice to the voiceless is one of the most fundamental concepts of Judaism, and the ever-increasing silencing of the minority voice in today’s world makes it even more urgent. We are not helpless. We can bring the sacred word back into the conversation, and in fact, we are commanded to do so. Rarely are words in Torah repeated, and when they are, as in the verse I just read, it is generally to teach us something new or stress the importance of a concept – in this case, the supreme import of demanding and applying even-handed justice to all. Rabbenu Bachya ben Asher, a 13th Century Torah commentator, stresses, “justice whether to your profit or loss, whether in word or action, whether to Jew or non-Jew.” And crucially, in the verse from Deuteronomy, we are commanded to *pursue* justice rather than to wait for the right situation or opportunity to present itself. Rather, we are to actively seek opportunities to practice and restore justice. And we can do this by raising our voices, by telling our stories and those of others around us who may not have access to the same audiences as we do. Why should those who may have held power in the past and who are now in the minority have the right to silence large swaths of the population simply because they wish to remain in power, or because they are afraid of what change or shifting leadership might bring?

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Horowitz, the Bostoner Rebbe, reminds us that our 400 years of Egyptian exile, including 210 years of actual slavery, was critical in molding our national personality into one of compassion and concern for humanity, informed by the realization that we have a vital role to play in the world. Because as Jews we have known the distress of slaves and the

loneliness of strangers, it is not enough to react only when we see wrongs committed. Rather, we are to seek out those wrongs and practice empathic justice by projecting ourselves into the souls of those who are silenced and victimized and make their plight our own. In other words, we must wake up, bring ourselves fully present, actively listen to their stories and share them. The words and stories of those who have been silenced are just as sacred as yours and mine.

So, whether we are sitting around the table sharing family stories of ancestors' victories over oppression, immigration and survival, or we are marching in the protest crowd raising our own voices in support of those who need us, as Jews we bear an obligation and a commandedness to speak out and speak up – to tell our stories and to honor the sacred word in our conversations and our actions. I am certain that if either of my grandmothers were alive today, they would be horrified to see in this country the unabashed thirst for power, the irrational fear and hatred, the outrageous gall of those who think they know what is best for me to do with my own body or for whom you should vote; which neighborhoods are ensured safe drinking water or access to quality education; what bathrooms our children can use or which sports teams they are allowed to compete for; and what books are banned in our schools or which version of history our teachers are permitted to share with their students... all this has led to the systemic silencing of so many. The silencing of women, of LGBTQ+ individuals – particularly those who are young – black and brown skinned members of our communities, and those who live in poverty. And I believe they would implore me to raise my voice and do something about it. As we entreat God on Yom Kippur, "*Shema Koleinu* – Hear our Voice!" So, I ask you now, will you please all join your voices and those of your children and friends and other family with mine as we begin 5783 – "A Year of Healing and Repair – A Time for Action." This truly is a time for sacred action – for the return of the sacred word to our discourse; may our words and our actions serve to empower those who have been silenced and lift up their voices and their sacred stories alongside our own.

Kein y'hi ratzon... may it be God's will....