

Yizkor and the Power of Stories

Shemini Atzeret 5770

By Rabbi Mark B Greenspan

In the beginning there was a story. People would gather around the fire on chilly desert nights and they would listen attentively as a tribal elder spoke of wonders and mysteries; of the distant past and an unknown future. No matter how often the people heard these stories they never grew tired of them. And no matter what age you were these stories had meaning. These were the stories of their fathers and mothers. They tied them together as a family and as a tribe, and pointed them toward an unseen God who was their Creator and Redeemer. These stories not only told of wonder; they inspired wonder so that after listening to their stories, the people could hear the whisper of God no matter where they went.

Of course other people told stories, but their stories were different than ours. Our stories didn't focus on heroism and might feats of courage like the other nations of the world. Our ancestors spoke of simple people who struggled with life and searched for God. And our ancestors were not afraid to admit that their forefathers and foremothers made mistakes. Despite their failings our distant ancestors never stopped searching for God and they never stopped journeying toward a Promised Land.

And so the Torah was written. Eventually these stories were written down, coupled with ancient wisdom as well as the customs and traditions of our people. It became a source of endless discussion and debate. It was as if the stories which our elders told around the fire never ended. They expanded beyond the edge of the parchment on which they were written and their stories were even hidden between the letters and the words.

Our people began telling stories about the stories of the Torah called Midrash. But instead of gathering around the camp fire, parents and children gathered around the family hearth in thousands of homes in hundreds of lands and in dozens of languages. Teachers told their students stories in class rooms of the greatest and smallest schools. Even now, three thousand years later, we gather in synagogue on Shabbat and holidays to listen to stories as they were recorded in the Torah and in the other books of the Tanach. It's no wonder that our neighbors called us 'people of the book.'

A better name for the Jewish people might have been 'people of the story.' More than a religion of dogma and theology, Judaism is all about a story telling, sometimes referred to by scholars as Heilgeschichte, as sacred history. It is our stories that define us as a member of Israel and as individuals who have a unique relationship with God. And it is the stories we tell which help us learn how to live, what to strive for, and what to avoid in our daily lives.

Children understand this better than adults. They love stories. The most important learning they do is through the stories we tell them and the books that we read to them. Stories are an endless source of fascination. But they also offer comfort and insight to children when they are not yet sophisticated to understand the full depth of what these stories mean. Truthfully, story telling is one of the great pleasures of parenthood. Who hasn't enjoyed reading a book to their child or grandchild or telling them a story?

One of the books that I read to my children when they were growing up was, Joseph had a Little Overcoat by Simms Taback. It is the story of a shrewd little man who had an overcoat that he loved and wore everywhere. But as the coat grew old and tattered, Joseph couldn't bear to throw it out so he turned it into a jacket. And when the jacket was too worn to wear, he turned it into a vest, and then a necktie, and then a handkerchief, and then into a tiny button. And finally when Joseph lost the button, he wrote a book about his overcoat – showing that you can always make something out of nothing!

My kids loved this story. Each page had a cut out so that when you turned the page the next item of clothing showed through back to the original overcoat. In fact I read this book to my children so many times that it finally fell apart. So I decided to turn it into a sermon!

You can imagine how excited I was earlier this week when someone gave me a new copy of this book. Joseph Had a Little Overcoat was recently republished by an exciting called PJ Library, created by the Harold Grinspoon Foundation. The goal of PJ (as in pajamas) Library, is simple: if you want to create a sense of Jewish identity and a love of our tradition in Jewish homes, you have to encourage parents to read Jewish books to their children. The Grinspoon Foundation began picking out the best and loveliest Jewish children's books and CDs and republishing them along with notes for parent so that they could discuss the books with their children. These books are sent for free every month to families with children between six months and eight years old. It's an amazing undertaking. Not only is PJ library bringing Jewish heritage into homes but it is encouraging parents to do what all parent should be doing today –shutting off the TV and the computer for a little in order to spend quality time with their children. PJ library has been instituted in over a hundred communities across North America – and now it's coming to Long Island.

I decided to talk about PJ Library this morning as we prepare to recite Yizkor because Yizkor is really about telling stories. We come to the Yizkor service with our own stories. We remember parents and grandparents who were our first story tellers. We recite Yizkor for spouses with whom we created a narrative for children. Some of us here sadly remember spending precious hours with children and grandchildren reading and telling stories.

And when I meet with families before a funeral I ask them to tell me their stories. Despite the fact that they are grieving the loss of a dear loved one, their stories are often punctuated by laughter and love as they recall special moments and wonderful memories. Our lives are defined and shaped by the stories we tell – and the stories we are still composing out of the days and weeks and months that we have been allotted.

Who was it who said that life is not composed of the number of years we've been given but of special moments we live each day? Each day is a story – and if we've lived it well then someone, maybe a child, or a friend, or a niece, or a nephew, or a grandchild or a student will tell the story of that moment to someone else.

We who are here today to recite Yizkor have a responsibility not only to our loved ones but to our community. There will be no future if we do not work to insure that it is passed on – if we don't teach young families the importance of telling stories and making time to pass our narrative on from generation to generation. So I am coming to you with a request: I'd like to bring PJ library to our community but I need your help in making this happen. For every child who is signed up to receive a monthly book as part of this program there's a forty dollar charge to the community. The idea is not to go to the parents but to use this as a way of reaching out to the young families in our community and beyond by giving them a gift. I'd like to ask every person here today to sponsor at least one child.

By the way, if you have a grandchild living outside the New York Metropolitan area between the ages of six months and eight years and they live in a community that has PJ library, you can sign them up for this program by going to the website www.PJLibrary.org. But I'm asking you to do something more today – help me provide this program to the young families in our congregation and beyond. You can sponsor your own grandchild but help me sponsor a member of our congregation or our nursery school or the young Jewish family that lives in area that is not part of the greater Jewish community as well. I figure we have at least sixty families in our congregation who have children between birth and eight years old and each of those families know other families. But we need to do more. Why does Chabad need to be the only group doing 'Jewish outreach' in the larger Jewish community? I believe that if we work together we can bring the PJ Library to hundreds of young Jewish families in our area! I've already contacted the JCC and Temple Avodah about joining in this effort but I don't want to wait – I want OJC to be leaders in bringing PJ Library to our community.

Tomorrow we will tell the sad end of our story. As the people cross the Jordan River, Moses looks on from the top of Mount Nebo to the land he cannot enter. All alone and about to face his death he must have been frightened and uncertain. I would like to think that God comforted him in the last minutes of his life by telling him stories that lulled him to sleep for the last time. And then, having read of the death of Moses, the servant of the Lord, we will turn back to the beginning of the Torah and begin *Bereshit barah Elohim*, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." We waste no time – having finished our story we begin telling it all over again, for as the sage *Ben Bag Bag* said, *hafokh bah v'hafokh bah d'kola bah*; "Turn it over again and again for everything is in it. Scrutinize it, grow old with it and do not depart from it for there is no better portion in life than this!" And so the enterprise of story telling never ends in the life of a Jew!

Won't you help me reach out to our families in this meaningful way? We are, after all a community, and I cannot think of a better way for us to bring our heritage home to our youngest and most vulnerable families.

As we tell our stories, let us become a part of a great effort to pass on our precious heritage to others....

We join together now as we recite the Yizkor service...

[Link to Oceanside Jewish Center's PJ Library Website](#)

[Link to PJ Library](#)

Email Oceanside Jewish Center about PJ Library – pjlibrary@oceansidejewishcenter.org