



## EMBRACING THE NARRATIVE ARC OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE

In an article for *The New Yorker* in 2007, Dr. Oliver Sacks, famed neurologist and author, described the case of Clive Wearing. In March of 1985, Clive Wearing, an eminent English musician and musicologist in his mid-forties, was struck by a brain infection affecting the parts of his brain concerned with memory. He was left with a memory span of only minutes — the most devastating case of amnesia ever recorded. But while Clive could not remember from episode to episode, he could experience life when he was living it in the present. He could engage in a conversation, tell jokes, and appreciate

a fine piece of music. But in the very next moment he would forget the whole experience. Clive could only live in the present, and because he had no memory that connected life's multiple episodes to each other, his life had no inner narrative.

While on the surface, Clive's condition appears *sui generis*, unrelated to our own life experiences, in fact the whole point of the Pesach story is to save us from becoming like Clive.

Take, for example, the way the Talmud (*Pesachim* 116a) instructs how to frame the story:

מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח. מאי בגנות? רב אומר: "מתחלה עובדי עבודה זרה היו אבותינו." [ושמואל] אומר: "עבדים היינו."

*It was taught in the mishna that the father begins his answer with disgrace and concludes with glory. The Gemara asks: What is the meaning of the term: With disgrace? Rav said that one should begin by saying: At first our forefathers were idol worshippers, before concluding with words of glory. And Shmuel said: The disgrace with which one should begin his answer is: We were slaves.*

**Translation from the William Davidson Talmud (Koren-Steinsaltz)**



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Rav and Shmuel disagree as to whether the focus of the story of redemption is on our spiritual or physical salvation, but both emphasize that the Haggadah is told over in a narrative form, with a clear historical arc. We tell the story by opening with the low moments in Jewish history so that the high points are amplified.

But the narrative arc extends beyond redemption from Egypt. The Seder concludes with the Hallel ha-Gadol, where we speak of a future time in which all people will glorify Hashem (“*nishmat kol chai*”), evil will be abolished (“*shefoch chamatcha*”), and Jerusalem fully rebuilt (“*le-shana habah b’Yerushalayim ha-benuyah*”).

Looking at the Haggadah as a whole unit, one can see that it begins at the dawn of Jewish history and ends with its final culmination. In this respect,

the Haggadah beckons us to find our place in the narrative. We live in a time somewhere between the redemption of Egypt and the full redemption of Hallel ha-Gadol.

Clive’s individual struggle is what Pesach addresses on a national level. The Haggadah ensures that we don’t just remember individual episodes, moments, or years, but that we remain tethered to the great unfolding narrative of the Jewish people. It is easy to feel sympathetic, even sorry, for Clive Wearing. Someone with only an episodic memory is living an incomplete and isolated life. But perhaps more than feeling sorry for Clive, we should feel sad because too many of us are living similar lives. We may not have episodic memories, but a life lived unmoored from the grander narrative of Jewish history is an episodic life. Our story does not

begin at birth, nor does it end after our passing. We are descendants and ancestors; a continuation of our parents, grandparents and generations previous as well as progenitors of generations hence. By placing ourselves within this broader context, we more readily understand that the purpose of our lives is to move history forward and bring us closer to the time of the end of the Seder.

The Haggadah awakens us from our episodic life and inserts each of us into the great narrative arc of the Jewish people, reminding us that our collective mission is to reach the time when we can all sing together *le-shana hazot b’Yerushalayim ha-benuyah*.

May that day come soon.

**CORE TORAH VALUES**

Yeshiva University is a unique ecosystem of educational institutions and resources that prepares the next generation of leaders with Jewish values and market-ready skills to achieve great success in their personal and professional lives, endowing them with both the will and wherewithal to transform the Jewish world and broader society for the better.

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TORAT EMET	TORAT CHAIM	TORAT ADAM	TORAT CHESED	TORAT ZION
אמת TRUTH	חיים LIFE	אדם INFINITE HUMAN WORTH	חסד COMPASSION	ציון REDEMPTION
<p>We believe in truth, and humanity's ability to discover it.</p> <p>The pursuit of truth has always been the driving force behind advances in human understanding, from Socrates' wanderings through the streets of Athens to the innovations of the Industrial Revolution. People of faith, who believe in a divine author of Creation, believe that the act of discovery is sacred, whether in the realm of philosophy, physics, economics or the study of the human mind.</p> <p>The Jewish people in particular affirm that beginning with the Revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai, God entrusted eternal teachings and values to us that we must cherish and study diligently above all else, for they represent the terms of the special covenant that God made with us. All people, regardless of their faith background, should value the accumulation of knowledge because it is the way to truth and a prerequisite to human growth.</p>	<p>We believe in bringing values to life.</p> <p>Jewish thought asserts that truth is made available to human beings not simply so they can marvel at it but also so that they can use it. Students studying literature, computer science, law, psychology or anything else are expected to take what they learn and implement it within their own lives as well as apply it to the real world around them.</p> <p>When people see a problem that needs addressing, their responsibility is to draw upon the truths they uncovered during their studies in finding a solution. They must live truth in the real world, not simply study it in the classroom.</p>	<p>We believe in the infinite worth of each and every human being.</p> <p>Judaic tradition first introduced to the world the radical proposition that each individual is created in the divine image and accordingly possesses incalculable worth and value.</p> <p>The unique talents and skills each individual possesses are a reflection of this divine image, and it is therefore a sacred task to hone and develop them. The vast expansive human diversity that results from this process is not a challenge but a blessing. Each of us has our own path to greatness.</p>	<p>We believe in the responsibility to reach out to others in compassion.</p> <p>Even as we recognize the opportunities of human diversity, Jewish tradition emphasizes the importance of common obligations. In particular, every human being is given the same responsibility to use his or her unique gifts in the service of others; to care for their fellow human beings; to reach out to them in thoughtfulness, kindness and sensitivity; and to form a connected community.</p>	<p>We believe that humanity's purpose is to transform our world for the better and move history forward.</p> <p>In Jewish thought, the concept of redemption represents the conviction that while we live in an imperfect world, we have a responsibility to strive toward its perfection. Regardless of a person's personal convictions about whether social perfection is attainable or even definable, it is the act of working toward it that gives our lives meaning and purpose. This common striving is an endeavor that brings all of humanity together.</p> <p>The Jewish people's task to build up the land of Israel into an inspiring model society represents this effort in microcosm. But it is part of a larger project that includes all of humankind. If the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice, then redemption represents our responsibility to work together in the service of God to move history forward.</p>