

Geulas Yisrael #86 Bo

Tell the Story

Moshe Taragin

Hashem always prefers human partners for the process of historical redemption. The entire premise of the book of Shir Hashirm implies that history is a duet, between Hashem and His people who jointly reshape history. It is precisely this partnership, its immense challenge, and the steep price it sometimes demands from us, which causes Hashem to love us so deeply. Historical vision courses through the pages of Shir Hashirim and imbues the sefer with romance and passion. Hashem desires historical partners.

This was true in the first redemption of history and has been true ever since. Sadly, the Jews of Egypt were so dispirited by oppressive slavery and crushing brutality that they were rendered completely impassive. Addressing the slaves, Moshe sketched a vision of a brighter future, but their imaginations were too tightly shuttered to wrap their heads around that dazzling future. Too overwhelmed with work and too mired in sorrow they could barely breathe, let alone imagine a better tomorrow. *שְׁמַעוּ רֹחַ מְעוֹבָדִים וְרוּחַ מְעוֹבָדִים קָשָׁה*. At this point, the nation goes quiet: no prayers, no rebellion, and no activism. Hashem lacked a partner.

As redemption gathers momentum though, something must be done to awaken our dormant imaginations and to galvanize us as partners in our own redemption. Eventually, on the night of the actual Exodus, our spirit was revived by the iconic ceremonies and rituals of the first seder in history. However, a few months before, as the final makkot ebb to a close, Hashem wanted to awaken our spirit and beckon us as active participants in our own redemption. What could possibly arouse our slumbering imaginations?

Story Tellers

In the introductory verses of Bo we were informed that we would, one day, retell the story of Exodus to our grandchildren. *וְלִמְעַן תִּסְפָּרוּ בְּאָזְנֵי בְנֵי וּבְנֵי-בְנֵי אֶת אֲשֶׁר הִתְעַלְלִיתִי בְּמִצְרָיִם וְאֶת-אֶתְנִי אֲשֶׁר-שִׁמַּתִּי בָּם וַיְדַעְתֶּם כִּי-אֲנִי יְקֹוֹק*. Somehow, the expectation of “storytelling” rouses our depressed spirit, and propels us into redemptive mode. Narrating the

story of slavery and redemption fired up our vision and stirred our inspiration.

Telling a story is a *mentality*, not just an exercise. When people sense that their personal lives are part of a 'larger story', imaginations are transformed. Generally, stories are told about epic events with consequential outcomes; stories rarely speak of common or humdrum moments of daily life. By viewing our lives as part of a larger story we realize the import of our behavior and the magnitude of our decisions. Living life as part of a story lends consequence to otherwise bare experiences.

Retelling this dramatic story of slavery and redemption transformed the hollow lives of slaves into the historic lives of free men. Slaves exist in perpetual "survival mode" barren of any larger meaning. The notion of retelling their story to future generations, conferred meaning and historical sweep to the lives of newly minted fathers and grandfathers. Slaves cannot imagine family and future, but free men are able to ponder the future and envision their heritage.

Viewing our individual lives as a "story" liberated our crushed spirits, unlocked our shuttered imaginations, and activated us as partners in redemption. Hearing that we would bear grandchildren, provided a horizon of hope that something grand loomed beyond the stony pyramids and the hot sands of the desert.

The knowledge that our lives belong to a larger story infuses us with purpose and vision. Knowing that our decisions will ripple through future generations lends deeper meanings to otherwise empty lives.

A Sad Story

Many modern Jews have become less attuned to the larger Jewish story. The story of Jewish exile is a mixed narrative of tragedy and triumph. Facing incalculable odds, we didn't just survive but thrived. Not only did we thrive, but we steered humanity toward monotheism, morality, and to a more civil and just social order. Yet, we also faced endless hatred and discrimination, and, to many, the past two thousand years of Jewish history are more depressing and tragic than they are remarkable. As the modern Jewish world has become more prosperous, politically secure,

and economically affluent, it has become more challenging for comfortable some to relate to the struggles of past Jewish history.

In the past, Jews lived under more dire circumstances and this compromised state created an immediate alliance with past generations. Hatred and violence felt eerily similar to the past "chapters" of the Jewish story, and we felt as if we were living alongside the past. Thankfully, much the world has turned friendlier toward Jews, but this improvement has made it difficult for some to deeply identify with our larger historical story.

Additionally, the horrors of the Holocaust brought our story to a screeching halt. During this horrific nightmare, so much of the European Jewish life we had built over centuries was demolished. Occurring toward the conclusion of Jewish exile, the Holocaust cast an ugly pale over that entire experience. The darkness of the Holocaust obscured the past, hampering our ability to look back at exile, appreciate both its sadness as well as its glory, and identify with the long march of Jewish history. For many Jews, the grief and frustration of the Holocaust created a historical disconnect.

Unfortunately, detachment from Jewish history is risking a crisis of Jewish identity. Stories provide us with belonging, anchor us to tradition and brace Jewish identity. Jewish identity disconnected from Jewish history can be very rickety.

Baruch hashem our generation is witnessing a surge in Torah study and advances in ritual halachik practice. Yet we are also experiencing a decline in our sensitivity to Jewish history. Religious fervor rises and dips and assembling religious identity solely upon religious practice is a risky proposition. Stories often last longer than religious devotion.

The Land of Our Story

Daily life in Israel is more permeated by our national story. For two-thousand years, the book of the Jewish history was sealed. Prophecy ended and Jews became sidelined as the victims of history. With our return to our land and to the front stage of history, our book has been reopened.

Seven years ago we faced a wave of Arab terror which included several drive-by shootings and as well as random stabbing attacks. Two of the first victims of this violence were the son and daughter-in-law of Chanah Henkin, a pioneer of women's Torah education in Israel. I visited her for shiva in her cramped apartment in Yerushalayim. At one point a group of American students entered this small shiva setting accompanied by their teacher. It was obvious that they did not know the bereaved mother, nor did she know them. This was just a courtesy shiva visit.

Looking to break the ice, Mrs. Henkin asked the students how many books of Tanach there were. A student answered that there were twenty-four books, to which Mrs. Henkin responded that this number was actually inaccurate. Traditionally there *were only* 24 books, but *currently* there was a 25th book being written about the Jewish people. This book contained the story of our people returning to their homeland and struggling against world opposition to lay claim to it and fully settle it. She said her children who had been murdered were included in that book.

We are all writing the final chapters of our long story. These chapters describe the final frames of history and the struggle of our people to resettle their ancient homeland. Write strong and brave. This story will be retold for centuries by our grandchildren and their grandchildren. Once again, we have become story tellers. Write strong and write brave, the future is listening.