

Judaism as Storytelling

Mishael Zion, Parashat Bo 5679

Exodus Chapter 10: Opening to Parashat Bo

Then God said to Moses, 'Go to Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his officials, in order that I may show these signs of mine among them, **and that you may tell your children** and grandchildren how I have made fools of the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them—so that you may know that I am the Lord.'

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה :
בֹּא אֶל פַּרְעֹה כִּי אֲנִי הִכְבַּדְתִּי אֶת לְבוֹ וְאֶת לֵב עֲבָדָיו לְמַעַן שְׂתִי אֶתְתִּי אֱלֹה בְּקִרְבּוֹ .
וּלְמַעַן תִּסְפֹּר בְּאָזְנֵי בְנֶיךָ וּבֶן בְּנֶיךָ אֶת אֲשֶׁר הִתְעַלְלִיתִי בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֶת אֶתְתִּי אֲשֶׁר שְׂמַתִּי בָם
וַיִּדְעֶתֶם כִּי אֲנִי ה' .

What matters in life is not what happens to you but what you remember and how you tell it.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Living to Tell the Tale*

When a day passes, it is no longer there. What remains of it? Nothing more than a story. If stories weren't told or books weren't written, humans would live like the beasts, only for the day.

Reb Zebulun said, "Today we live, but by tomorrow today will be a story. The whole world, all human life, is one long story."

Children are as puzzled by passing time as grownups. What happens to a day once it is gone? Where are all our yesterdays with their joys and sorrows? Literature helps us remember the past with its many moods. To the storyteller yesterday is still here as are the years and the decades gone by.

In stories time does not vanish. Neither do people and animals. For the writer and his readers, all creatures go on living forever. What happened long ago is still present.

I.B. Singer, Nobel prize laureate, Yiddish literature, from Preface to *Zlateh the Goat*, 1966

A novel does not assert anything; a novel searches and poses questions. I invent stories, confront one with another, and by this means I ask questions. **The stupidity of people comes from having an answer for everything.** The wisdom of the novel comes from having a question for everything...

The novelist teaches the reader to comprehend the world as a question. There is wisdom and tolerance in that attitude. In a world built on sacrosanct certainties the novel is dead. The totalitarian world, is a world of answers rather than questions. There, the novel has no place.

In any case, it seems to me that all over the world people nowadays prefer to judge rather than to understand, to answer rather than ask, so that the voice of the novel can hardly be heard over the noisy foolishness of human certainties.

Milan Kundera, Novelist and Anti-Communist Activist, Czech Rep. From *Afterword: A Talk with the Author* an interview by Philip Roth reprinted in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Penguin, 1981, page 237

No Future without a Past

"A self-made man is as likely as a self-laid egg" - Mark Twain

Parents transmit a knowledge of reality outside the child's experience. The father and mother must provide frames of reference rooted in the memories and the history of the covenantal community of Israel... The parent is a story-teller who narrates a world the children never knew.

A primary source for evil according to Jewish tradition is the loss of memory. Those who do not build upon their memory and who are frightened and ashamed of their past may manifest hostility towards others because their sense of worth and dignity is derived only by manipulation and control of others.

The poor people who prevail through difficult struggles to attain wealth, and then block out the memory of their past become harsh taskmasters. **"Self-made men"** can be sensitive to others only when they are unashamed to talk about their former destitution. If they cannot bear the thought of their former poverty, they will act with cruelty to those who remind them of their former degradation.

In recalling Egypt, the Jews are exhorted to remember that they were once slaves. Rather than deny it, they are to incorporate that slavery into their consciousness. Thus, love the stranger because you too were outcasts in Egypt; have regard for the poor because you too were once servants; care for the oppressed because you too were persecuted; aid the crushed because you know what it means to face extermination; **be cautious with power because you have suffered the perversions of another's might.**

The role of parents is to develop in the identity of the child a sense of history, a temporal consciousness, **an empathy for a whole world of experience that was not theirs.**

Whether these memories are relevant and meaningful, and how the child will live by them, are different issues. The mother's and father's task is not to decide how the children will use their memories. Their obligation is to see to it that the child does not enter into the future without a past.

Judaism imposes a vital task on the parents: to tell the children their people's story. What the child does with this past, no parent can decree. **Parents provide their children with luggage.** Whether the child will open up the suitcases and use their contents is beyond the reach of parents. They have no right to enter the child's future. Parents must aim at instilling memories that haunt the child an entire lifetime; their bequest is a weight of generations, an awareness that one's biography began with Abraham and Sarah.

David Hartman

"Memory and Values," Leader's Guide: A Different Night, p. 75