

Storytelling

I love stories. I listen to them all the time. I've got 11 storytelling podcasts on my phone right now that I listen to on a regular basis. I listen to these stories when I'm driving alone in the car. I listen to them when I'm folding laundry. I listen to them when I'm emailing many of you in my office.

What I love so much about stories is that they bring us in to the writer's or protagonist's life. We get to experience someone else's world. And when the stories are gripping, any one of our emotions can be aroused. Our hearts may beat out of our chests. Our eyes might dilate. They might tear. A sudden eruption of laughter may take hold of us. We actually get to, metaphorically, wear someone else's shoes.

Hearing another person's story might also allow us to learn more about ourselves. Memories can be uncovered. Discoveries made. Revelations revealed.

There is even science behind the power of sharing stories. A team of scientists at Princeton University had a woman tell a personal story while in an MRI scanner. They monitored the woman's brain activity as she told her story to a group of volunteers. These volunteers also had their brains scanned as they listened.

Dr. Joshua Gowin, in *Psychology Today*, explained the results. "When she had activity in her insula, an emotional brain region, the listeners did too. When her frontal cortex lit up, so did theirs. By simply telling a story, the woman could plant ideas, thoughts and emotions into the listeners' brains. When you tell a story to a friend, you can transfer experiences directly to their brain. They feel what you feel. They empathize...When you hear a good story, you develop empathy with the teller because you experience the events for yourself."¹ In other words, sharing stories connects people to each other.

My love for storytelling was made into a Beth Israel event in May. With the help of our Program Team, we hosted "Beit Cafe." It was a memorable evening at the Mount Baker Theatre. The food, drinks and ambiance were all great. The theme of the Beit Cafe was Jewish storytelling. In the spirit of *The Moth*, a live, on-stage show, 10 congregants each shared a personal story that had some Jewish content. One person spoke about serving in the U.S. Army as Jew and getting out of serious trouble when caught outside after curfew by explaining he was celebrating some hard to pronounce Jewish holiday. Another spoke about dancing to Tzena Tzena in the Catskills as a young girl. And one person talked about working as a doctor in Crown Heights at the time of the 1991 riot following the car accident involving Rabbi Menachem Schneerson.

¹ Gowin, Joshua, Ph.D. "Why Sharing Stories Brings People Together." *Psychology Today*. 06 June 2011.

Their storytelling let us in to their lives. Barriers were lowered. We plan on hosting another storytelling Beit Cafe later this year. I hope you will come. If creating a stronger sense of community is what we all want, then I think there is no better way to do this than to hear each other share stories.

Now, I am going to share two stories. Both stories touch on themes related to the High Holy Days. I thought each of these might help us get in the right frame of mind for thinking about what's possible this season. The first is a brief conversation between a former prison inmate, Oshea Israel, and Mary Johnson, the mother of the man he killed. I first heard it on the StoryCorps podcast.

Mary: You and I met at Stillwater prison. I wanted to know if you were still in the same mindset of what I remember from court. I wanted to go over and hurt you but you were not that 16-year-old. You were a grown man. I shared with you about my son

Oshea: And he became human to me. When I met you, it was like, ok, this guy is real. And then when it was time to go you broke down and started shedding tears. The initial thing to do was just try to hold you up as best I can. Just hug you as I would my own mother.

Mary: After you left the room I began to say it. "I just hugged the man who murdered my son." And I instantly knew that all that anger and animosity was stuff I had in my heart for 12 years for you, I knew it was over. That I had totally forgiven you

Oshea: As far as receiving forgiveness from you, sometimes I still don't know how to take it because I haven't totally forgiven myself yet. It's something that I'm learning from you.

Mary: I treat you as I would treat my son. Our relationship is beyond belief. We live next-door to one another.

Oshea: Yeah. So you can see what I'm doing first hand. We actually bump into each other all the time leaving in and out of the house. Our conversations, they come from "Boy, how come you haven't called over to check on me in a couple of days?" I find those things funny because its a relationship with a mother for real.

Mary: Well, my natural son is no longer here. I didn't see him graduate and now you're going to college and I'll have the opportunity to see you graduate. I didn't see him get married. Hopefully one day I'll get to experience that with you.

Oshea: Just to hear you say those things and be in my life in the manner in which you are is my motivation. It motivates me to make sure that I stay on the right path. You still believe in me. And the fact that you can do it despite how much pain I caused you is amazing.

Mary: I know it's not an easy thing. You know, be able to share our story together, so I admire that you can do this.

Oshea: I love you lady.

Mary: I love you too, son.

Sometimes we don't need the words of sages and rabbis to teach us what's possible. Oftentimes, it's the words of strangers that open our eyes and hearts the most.

However, this next story is from a collection of the early Hasidic masters some 300 years ago. It all started with the first Hasidic Rabbi, Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer, known as the Baal Shem Tov, the Master of the Good Name. This is a story about a shofar and what God truly wants from us on the holiest days of the year.

The Baal Shem Tov had spent many years looking for the perfect shofar. Knowing how very important the sound of the shofar was on the High Holy Days, he was desperate to find one which was worthy of the task. A shofar which would make a sound which could not be ignored—a sound which would stir the very hearts and souls of his Hasidim, his disciples.

He found many shofarot which were quite wonderful, indeed. There was one which emitted a sound as pure, pristine, and as haunting as the finest French horn ever made. There was another which could bring forth a blast so loud, so deep, so resonant that it would cause people to catch their breath, and to knock the hat off of a man at 20 yards. He found any number of shofarot which would have satisfied any of us. But not him. He had no complaints about their sound, you understand. It was just... well, he couldn't exactly say. They were each missing...something. Something which couldn't be put into words. Something inexpressible. But, something essential. He despaired of ever finding his true shofar.

Then one night, the Baal Shem Tov had a dream. He dreamt he was walking deep in a forest, alone. Walking and walking, seemingly away from nothing, and towards nothing, the Baal Shem Tov finally came to a clearing, and in the middle of the clearing, standing by itself, was a single tree. This tree grew out of the earth without branches, a lone, thin trunk, twisting and curving as it grew into the shape of a giant shofar. Suddenly he was surrounded by all of his disciples, arrayed on the edge of the clearing. One by one he called them forth, asking them to make a sound on the shofar. None of them could get the shofar to make a single, solitary sound. And then, there was only one disciple left: Reb Wolf Kitzes. Kitzes came forward, inhaled, and blew on the shofar. And out of that shofar came a sound such as none had ever heard before. A deep, sustained blast, like a voice deep from the earth itself. The disciples dropped to the ground, faces planted downward in fear and awe as the Baal Shem Tov watched in wonder. Kitzes blew only that one note, but it was enough. That note never died; it simply rose up to heaven.

The Baal Shem Tov awoke, the sound of that great shofar still echoing in his ears, and he was filled with a mix of joy and sadness. Joy because he'd finally found what he had been looking for—he found the shofar which made a sound purer than sound. Sadness, because he knew there was no such shofar in this world, only in his dreams.

Undaunted, he decided to teach Reb Wolf Kitzes to make the best, to make the most perfect, to make the most sacred sound a person could possibly make on a shofar, in this world. He didn't only teach him the notes of the required blasts for Rosh Hashana. He also taught him the secret meanings of each sound. He taught him how God had taken the horns from the ram at the binding of Isaac, and fashioned two shofarot. One of them had been sounded at Mount Sinai, to announce the giving of the Torah. One was waiting to be sounded, to announce the Messiah. He taught him what our sages have taught—that in ancient times, the shofar was used to begin a war, and that's why we use it on Rosh Hashanah. Today, he taught, we are at war—with ourselves. We are at war with our sins. He taught him everything he knew about the shofar, including many things no one else had known, before or since.

Every day, Kitzes would come for another lesson, and would eagerly write down the great teachings of his rabbi. He was so excited, so grateful to have this chance to delve into these great mysteries with his teacher. Every day, he would leave the lessons, go home and study his notes. And then, when he felt he truly understood them, he would meditate on their meanings, until he felt the lessons flowing through him, and then he would sound the shofar. And, every day, the sound that came forth was unlike any he had heard before. Every day, the sound came closer and closer to that sound which only been heard once before, in a dream.

And then, it was Rosh Hashanah. Eagerly, Kitzes woke up in the morning, got dressed, grabbed his shofar, and reached for his notes. But, they were nowhere to be found. He tore apart his room—he looked in every corner, emptied out every drawer, turned over the bed, tore through his closet, all to no avail. Hovering between panic and desolation, Kitzes sank to the floor and realized that it was even worse than he thought. It wasn't just that he lost the notes—he had lost the teaching. He couldn't remember a single thing that his rabbi had taught him. It was as if some mysterious force had come in while he slept, taken his notes and stolen his memory. He couldn't remember which sounds to make. He couldn't remember the secret meanings which had been entrusted to him. He couldn't remember the beautiful sound that had come out of the shofar, when those meanings flooded through him. He couldn't even remember why we sound the shofar on Rosh Hashanah.

Lost, utterly lost, Kitzes made his way to synagogue. Sitting in the back, desperately hoping that something would come back to him, some flash of insight, some spark of teaching, he waited for the shofar service like a prisoner listening for footsteps in the hall. And when he heard some footsteps, he looked up and saw his master, his teacher, the Baal Shem Tov, standing over him.

“Reb Kitzes. It's time.”

“Rabbi—I...I can't.”

The Baal Shem Tov smiled his gentle, knowing smile. “Reb Kitzes. It's time.”

“Rabbi—I...”

“Shhh... of course you can.”

Reb Kitzes stood up, bitter tears welling up in his eyes, his throat closed up, his knees shaking so badly, he was sure they couldn't carry him all the way to the lectern. He made his way, barely, lifted his shofar—his beautiful, elegant, utterly ordinary shofar—to his lips, and with a mind empty of all the great teachings shared with him by his master, he blew forth a sound which filled the room. It filled the room with the echoes of itself, even as it continued to pour forth out of the shofar. It filled the room with sound which blasted the pretense out of men's hearts, and the jealousy out of women's souls. It filled the room with sound which not only rose up to heaven, but carried with it every prayer uttered in that room that day. For a moment, a moment which seemed to last for eternity, everyone knew that heaven and earth had been brought together in one place.

Later that day, after sundown, when services had long been over, and everyone had gone home, Reb Kitzes sat with the Baal Shem Tov in a dark, quiet room, and poured out his soul to him. He told him of his forgetfulness, of his panic, of his utter despair. And he confessed that he had no earthly idea how he had made that sound.

“My son,” the Baal Shem Tov said to Wolf Kitzes, “in the palace of the king, there are many chambers, and each one has a lock of its own. But there is a master key, which can open any lock, any door. When God hears a moment of true honesty, of true sincerity, nothing can stand in its way. Today, you laid your fear on the altar, and you gave God your broken heart. There is no prayer which God desires more.”²

Shanah Tovah.

² Story shared by Rabbi Jason Rosenberg