

*The Stories We Choose to Tell*  
*Rabbi Claudia Kreiman*  
*Kol Nidre 5784*

A few days ago, my kid's school bus broke down. It happened before 7am and, within minutes, the Brookline Bus WhatsApp group was in full steam. One ding after the other, non stop. I almost could not keep up with all the messages. Very quickly, parents needed a Plan B to get our kids to school. We started scrambling to carpool. Everyone's morning plan to get to work on time — or maybe to squeeze in a yoga class — was no longer happening.

All of us were understandably annoyed. But you know what I noticed? The messages in the WhatsApp group were not expressions of frustration or agitation. The messages were about figuring out how to help each other so that all our kids could get to school. Those who were driving, took more kids with them. People kept asking about each student – Does Miriam have a ride? Does Reuben have a ride? – to make sure every single kid was able to get to school. This was the second time in two weeks that the bus had broken down. But instead of just kvetching, we chose to care for each other. We chose to help.

I have been thinking a lot about the way we tell stories — stories about ourselves, about our communities, and about each other. Stories that are good and stories that are challenging. What do we choose to share, and what do we choose to withhold?

The American Jewish poet Muriel Rukeyser (z"l) wrote “The universe is made of stories, not atoms.”<sup>1</sup> Why stories? Because stories contain \*everything\* — history and context, events and outcomes, good and bad, the expected and the unexpected. Stories allow us to make meaning of our lives. But how we tell stories — and what we choose to say — requires a particular mindset.

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<sup>1</sup> The Speed of Darkness, by Muriel Rukeyser <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56287/the-speed-of-darkness>

When I think about the stories we tell, I focus on how we choose to lift up our voices, and to show up in the world. What are the narratives we develop to shape the reality we experience? Or guide us in the choices we make?

Earlier this year, CJP launched a campaign<sup>2</sup> where they invited people to share their stories of antisemitism to shed light on the pervasive antisemitism we face. My first reaction and thought was, why? What do we gain from collecting detailed stories of antisemitism in this form? I understand the rationale, given the history of Jewish persecution, the bigotry Jews continue to face today and the rise in antisemitism that we are experiencing, especially in our country.

As CJP reports, Jews make up only 2.4% of the U.S. population but we are the target of 55% of all religious hate crimes. However, the majority of incidents go unreported and this campaign tries to bring to light the stories that are not reported.

Clearly, we need to fight anti-semitism — no question. But I am struggling with how we do that most effectively. Is the collection of stories the best way to fight antisemitism? Are there other ways?

The reason why I am struggling is because, even though in my own personal story and experience I am no stranger to acts of antisemitism, I am mostly immersed in a different kind of story. A story of love for Judaism and the Jewish people, not a story about the hatred of Jews.

Part of my work as a rabbi — which has been true from the very beginning — is mentoring and accompanying candidates for conversion through their journey. Over my 21 years in the rabbinate, I have had the privilege to convert so many people to Judaism, each with their own story.

During the past two years, those numbers have grown. Last year, I worked with 10 candidates. And this coming year, I expect a similar number. More and more people

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.facejewishhate.org/>

are seeking conversion to Judaism — not only at TBZ, but definitely at TBZ. I am in awe of each and every person who comes to me and shares with me the story of their journey about why they want to become Jewish.

Most of the people I am working with toward conversion are not on this journey because they are planning to marry someone Jewish. Usually, they have encountered Judaism at some point in their lives, all on their own. And as spiritual seekers, they have found a home in Jewish tradition. Even those who are converting to get married, are also, in my experience, on their own spiritual journey to become part of a community; the community that their partner belongs to.

I never stop being in awe of their stories and on the day of the conversion itself, I am always in tears and moved by the ritual of immersing in the mikveh, to mark this transition.

Perhaps my admiration comes from the fact that my life as a Jew today is not very different from my life as a Jew when I was a kid. My spiritual journey, though I think and hope has deepened or grown or changed, over the years, circles around my own same tradition, with the same teachings of my childhood. So, I have a hard time imagining what it means to be on a spiritual journey with such a radical shift. And I am in awe.

Rabbi Josh Feigelson, the CEO of the Institute of Jewish Spirituality<sup>3</sup> and my weekly *hevrutah* partner, wrote a D'var Torah this year, following a conversation the two of us had on the topic of conversion.

He wrote: “If I were to rent a billboard on a major expressway to promote Jewish life, what would it say? There are, in fact, campaigns currently doing just this, and their messages tend to focus on fighting antisemitism — either with earnest statements against hate or with snarky comments seemingly designed to shock. While I wish only the best for the folks behind these campaigns, I would try something different. If, in

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.jewishspirituality.org/>

fact, we're attracting more people to Judaism and Jewish life than we have in a very long time, then it might be time to put those stories on billboards: stories of people who have experienced the spiritual depth of Jewish life and chosen to join the Jewish people because of it. What an amazing way to share light—not only with the world, but also with other Jews! How affirming, how inspiring, how uplifting”<sup>4</sup>

And truthfully, this is not only about the stories of those joining the Jewish people, but about the many people joining our community. I have to say, I can't really keep up with our growth here at TBZ. We have grown to nearly 500 households, and I am just in awe of the many people who are eager to be part of a meaningful and intentional community. I do not take that for granted.

So, following Josh's thinking... What if the campaign that we would promote on a giant billboard was one of sharing your stories? Of people who experience spiritual depth, meaningful connections, joyful Jewish ritual, joyous celebrations, meaningful acts of loving kindness and social justice, deep connection and support during times of challenges in Jewish community? What if those were the stories to collect?

The comedian Sarah Silverman in a segment on the Daily Show<sup>5</sup> had a funny piece (if you like her comedy) where she went out to the streets of New York City to interview people. She began saying: “There has been a lot of antisemitism in the news lately, so I am hitting the street for a little pro-semitism”. And then she goes on, asking people what they like about the Jews....

In her very peculiar way (and for what is worth, I don't find her very funny), she changes the story, instead of asking what is the hatred story that we want to tell, she asks what is the love story. She transforms the conversation.

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<https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/balak-5783-the-stories-we-tell-ourselves/?fbclid=IwAR2YqPhc6Klt4zpA2nb19SejT-m0xUJpWg-BjHZWioYINyEWU-X9-Hi-Kzc>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ab3XIrzx21w>

The possibility of transforming a story, the story we tell, about ourselves and others, is perhaps at the center of what this season is. Yom Kippur is the celebration of transformation, of seeing things differently, of showing up differently, or responding to what we face in a different way than we did before.

In the Talmud, in the tractate of Yoma, the one dedicated to Yom Kippur, we learn about the power of Teshuva, the work of repentance.

In Yoma we read:

אָמַר רִישׁ לָקִישׁ: גְּדוּלַּהּ תְּשׁוּבָה שְׂדוּנֹת נַעֲשׂוֹת לוֹ כְּשִׁגְגוֹת

Reish Lakish said: Great is repentance, as the penitent's intentional sins are counted as unwitting transgressions<sup>6</sup>

Reish Lakish, says something pretty radical here, *teshuva* has the capacity to transform that which we did intentionally to become something, we didn't mean to. Though the act itself cannot be changed, as it happened and it was done, the shift of it is in the intentionality of it.

Reish Lakish goes even further with this teaching and says:

גְּדוּלַּהּ תְּשׁוּבָה שְׂדוּנֹת נַעֲשׂוֹת לוֹ כְּזָכוֹת

Great is repentance, as one's intentional sins are counted as merits,

Reish Lakish is talking about how actually we have the capacity to alter the story of the very same acts; what we might have viewed as a missed opportunity becomes a source of blessing. The word *Teshuva*, which we translate as repentance, can also mean to turn around and what Reish Lakish says, is that we have the power to turn around our stories, and that which we experience to potentially become a blessing, a merit.

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<sup>6</sup> Babilonyan Talmud Yoma 86b

The stories we tell, or how we choose to tell a story or show up and respond to what life brings with it, changes the way we face our lives, the small and the big.

Do I focus on every negative aspect of my life? Do I focus on my failures? Do I focus myself on the suffering around me? Or am I able to see the blessings?

Rabbi Rami Shapiro writes: “The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves determine the quality of the selves we imagine we are.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, you are what you tell yourself you are, and you create your reality by telling yourself stories. What you focus on, you become. Your subconscious mind creates your reality, and your narrative becomes your beliefs. So to change your life, you have to rewrite these stories.

My teacher and mentor Rabbi Marcelo Bronstein, teaches that this is also part of the work of mindfulness. It is the capacity to differentiate between thoughts and narratives. In his words “the thoughts feed the narratives and it is in this differentiation where we have a choice. We are free to say ‘I’m not going to feed *that* narrative with thoughts.’ We get to choose what guides our responses, our stories”<sup>8</sup>

I am not inviting us to deny reality, suffering, the bad things that happen around us, and to us, personally or collectively, or deny antisemitism, or hatred of any form, and only focus on the good things, but the invitation is one to believe that we have the capacity to transform our response, that we can hold suffering and pain, and find in it, generosity and possibility.

In my experience, when we dwell in our own suffering it is harder to find a path forward.

Days when we fast, in our tradition, are days we restrain ourselves from food, drinking and all kinds of diversion so we can focus on the day itself. Now, we have a choice, we can think of Yom Kippur as a day of absence, of lacking, or we can think of Yom Kippur as a day of opportunity, a day when we transcend all the needs, and become

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<sup>7</sup> Hasidic Tales, Annotated and Explained by Rabbi Rami Shapiro

<sup>8</sup> As shared with me in a conversation with him

like angels for a day to be present, in the here and now, so we can transform and shift our lives, our actions and the way we face what life brings with it.

Tisha B'av - the 9th day of Av, on the other hand, the other full day fast in our tradition, though it looks in its appearance like Yom Kippur, is not a day of transformation, but a day of dwelling in the destruction. On that day, our fast is a recognition of the brokenness, and the possibility of change only comes after. But our fast today, and our process of *teshuvah* is a process of choice. A choice for what we do when we encounter calamity, hatred and suffering. How do we recognize the potential in it and the possibility of shifting the story?

As a former potter, my favorite piyut that we will sing shortly is *Ki Hine Kachomer*: “Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are we in Your hand, God.” This piyut suggests that we, as humans, are really just lumps of clay that God molds and shapes into being. This idea is for me, humbling and comforting but today, I want to flip the script. I want to suggest that we have the power to mold our own lumps of clay – our own stories – to inhabit the world differently. And to live our lives more fully.

The celebration of today is not only a celebration of *teshuvah*, in the sense of repentance or return, but of the possibility to choose how we respond, how we show up, not only when it feels easy, but especially when it feels hard.

Last month, as many of you know, we were “swatted” here at TBZ during Kabbalat Shabbat. For those who don't know, it means that a call was made to the police saying there was a bomb at TBZ. These calls are done to scare people, and while streaming live, those who make the call get to “watch” the interruption. The police came immediately, and asked us to evacuate. We did so calmly and continued our joyful Kabbalat Shabbat Service outside. These swatting events which began in the gaming world have been happening more in the Jewish community. Over the summer, ADL reported that at least 49 threats were made against synagogues, and unfortunately there were a few more during Rosh Hashanah. Before the swatting event happened at TBZ, we were trained in how to respond. And for the High Holidays, we have taken all the possible precautions. We have been in touch with law enforcement and we are prepared in all ways possible and have a plan if this were to happen again.

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In the email I sent to the community<sup>9</sup> about this incident in August, after I explained what happened, I added:

But the story I want to share with you is one of generosity, community, and joy! As disturbing and upsetting as all of this was, there was so much joy and generosity surrounding us:

One member took the children aside for some games, while I explained what was happening to the adults.

Another member ran to get pizzas for the kids, who were really hungry.

Another couple had their dinner with them (we were supposed to have a picnic dinner at TBZ) and spread it on the ground to share with anyone who was hungry. They also brought me something to drink as they realized I was running up and down the street.

A resident of 1550 Beacon Street brought people in to use the restroom. And several 1550 residents invited us to come into their community room if we needed.

Someone who was watching on YouTube drove to TBZ to check if we were ok, if we needed something, and to offer support.

Someone offered to drive people home if they needed to leave before they could reach their cars.

One (fun) person gave piggy-back rides to the kids, who were having a great time.

And all, all of us, sang together, shared gratitude together, and turned what could have been a scary situation into one of joy, generosity, love, and intentional community.

I received so many responses to my email, thanking me for my response. I actually felt overwhelmed by the overflowing expressions of generosity and care. Perhaps because we are so used to focusing on fear, suffering, and pain — not only as Jews, but in

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<sup>9</sup>

[https://myemail.constantcontact.com/TBZ-s-Community--Generosity-and-Joy--Security-Update.html?soid=1103345541161&aid=ol\\_ZD4PkXT8](https://myemail.constantcontact.com/TBZ-s-Community--Generosity-and-Joy--Security-Update.html?soid=1103345541161&aid=ol_ZD4PkXT8)



general. We kvetch a lot. We complain more than we practice gratitude. We see the bad, more than we see the good, we criticize more than we compliment.

My email to the community ended with the words:

This is the message I want to leave you with: there are people in the world who think that they can scare us and disrupt our services. Our answer is, no. We keep going, we keep singing, we keep praying, we keep choosing a life of values and Torah, one that is dedicated to the teaching that every human being was created in the image of God. Shabbat morning we had a wonderful, very well attended service, with the celebration of three people who joined the Jewish people this past week. We had a joyful Shabbat together. That is what we will keep doing.

The tactic I want to propose to fight hatred in all its forms, is one that lifts up the stories of generosity, of connection, of possibility, of potential, of joy even as we hold pain. The tactic I want to offer to face the world in its brokenness is the reminder that we, each one of us, is capable of molding our realities for good, for blessing.

Last Yom Kippur I spoke about *Emunah*<sup>10</sup>, which I translated as trust: *Emunah*, as the capacity to hold the brokenness and the hope at the same time. To accept that which cannot be fixed, that which hurts, that which bleeds, that which breaks our heart and at the same time hold onto our strength and capacity to make this world better, not because we can fix everything but because it is through us that God manifests in the world. The stories we tell, the choices we make on how we tell our stories are a testament of our *emunah*, our trust and faith.

The bus that we ride in life will break, often and again. The experience we will have as individuals and as collectives will hurt. Our hearts will break. The path we envisioned will be full of stumbling blocks. There will be new challenges to overcome; new choices to make; and new stories to tell.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.tbzbrookline.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Kol-Nidre.pdf>

My hope and prayer this Yom Kippur is that we choose to see the good that can emerge from a failed plan, a broken bus, a false alarm and even a painful reality. I pray that we have the courage to write and tell stories with a new lens. And may we honor the goodness and generosity that reflects the very best of who we can become.

*G'mar Tov & Shana Tova.*

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