

Rosh Hashanah 5774
“Being All In”
Beth Zemsky

In my work I give a lot of speeches and keynotes, and I have to say this has given me way more agita than anything I’ve ever done. So I want to just follow Ray’s advice for a moment, that he gave us last night about those of us who have the privilege of being up on the bima to take a moment to take this all in, and to be all in in the moment with you here. I’m just filled as I start today with so much gratitude. I’m so grateful for the rabbis, and for the wisdom that they bring to all of us—not only what they say, but their presence. To Wendy for the incredible music that she has created and shared with us, to Marlys and the choir: for someone who is melodically challenged, the way you bring music into this service allows my spirit to soar in a way I did not think was possible. To Eric and Emma and Sam and to all the musicians: the way that you complicate the prayers and bring layers of complexity to all of that experience, I’m just so grateful for. It allows me to be present with all of you in this moment in a way I would not be otherwise.

I also want to send a special thank you this morning. Wendy sent a special request last night for people to help with accessibility: for Jane and Judy and Barbara and others who showed up to practice radical hospitality and make sure that all of our community can be here, I’m very grateful to you as well.

So, the title of my talk—which you all don’t know, so I could have made up something else—is actually “Being All In.” And my gratitude as I start today is one of the ways that I’m trying to express that and live that in the moment. So what I want to start with is really by talking about stories.

Stories are powerful. They describe, prescribe, and create our realities. We have personal stories: those we create ourselves, and those that are created about us. We have narratives and stories that many of us learned in this past year are central to the power of social movements and social change. Many of us this year experienced this year the power of telling our stories of love and commitment, and how those stories in the marriage campaigns changed hearts and minds, and our political reality.

We have organizational stories, congregational stories, community stories. We have stories of living; we have stories of survival. Some of them are incredibly short but convey a lot. For example, the story that’s part of the generic Jewish holiday card—you know the one, the one that’s appropriate for every holiday other than Yom Kippur: we were oppressed, we survived, let’s eat. That is a quintessential Jewish story. Some of them are larger and capture other essential truths. From the perspective of literature, traditionally short stories are intended to delight and instruct. The modern story was intended to produce a singular

effect, often one of irony, as the protagonist learns something about themselves. The postmodern story, of course, deconstructs all of that in the telling itself.

Our novels are longer stories that follow a developmental arc. Judaism is a tradition of stories that encompass all of those literary traditions. Torah, like our stories about ourselves and our community, is a collection of short stories tied together in a developmental fashion. Each parashah builds on the others, and each year as we read through the cycle, the stories develop, layer upon each other, as we layer and deepen understanding of our text and of ourselves.

So I want to say something here about today's Torah portion. While we often read the Binding of Isaac on Rosh Hashanah morning, this year we read Genesis 21, the story of Abraham's banishing of Hagar and Ishmael at Sarah's insistence. While last night Rabbi Latz focused on Abraham and Sarah's courage in practicing radical hospitality, this is a very, very different kind of story. It's the story of people feeling bound by expectations, limiting their options, and not imagining alternatives for their future. What God ultimately provides for Hagar and her son after Abraham banishes them from the desert is the severing of a relationship. What is the meaning of the story? Why do we read it on Rosh Hashanah? What is the lesson we are to take for today, for Middle Eastern turmoil? For our own lives, for our own community? How would it have been different if the **Abraham** of this story showed up as the **Abe** of the story that Rabbi Latz told last night?

How might Abe have sent off and let go of Hagar and Ishmael to a new future with the overwhelming love that would have potentially disrupted the usual ways of behaving, an overwhelming love that would have opened up new options for future relationships? The future relationship of Abraham and Sarah—I can only imagine what the scene might have been in that tent that night after Ishmael went off to the desert. Between Abraham and Isaac, knowing what their connection cost others. Between Isaac and Ishmael and all of their descendants. One can argue we are still experiencing the fallout of the severing of these relationships today, in Gaza, the West Bank, Syria, and many other places in the Middle East.

And what about Abraham and his own conscience? What is the difference, I asked myself, between severing and letting go? Letting go of past relationships, past choices, and moving with commitment and kavannah, with intention, into a different future for ourselves and for those with whom we are connected? How do we stay in—all in—a place of overwhelming love in the midst of conflict, pain, and loss? And I wonder, why tell these stories at all?

Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, the Baal Shem Tov, was the founder of Hasidism. He brought new energy to Eastern European Judaism; he also revived storytelling. One of the ways he and the rebbes who followed him attracted people to the new movement was by storytelling. There's even a "mini-theology" of storytelling, just like there is a theology of prayer.

But what made Hasidic storytelling different, for Jews—because we’ve always told stories, with our hands, over and over again?

The answer is that Hasidism vigorously encouraged storytelling, moving it from the periphery to the center of Jewish practice. Rebbes praised it as a mitzvah, a spiritual practice; they reflected on it deeply and taught about its significance. Not only did rebbes tell stories, they instructed their followers do likewise. So telling and listening to stories became popular as never before. According to Hasidic teaching, storytelling is a holy activity equal to prayer or to studying Torah.

So this morning, I want to share a Hasidic story with you. You can decide whether this instructs, delights, or has a singular effect. The story is entitled “Stuffed Derma” by Yossi Gordon, and it goes like this:

The Kaiser of Austria came to visit the Czar of Russia. A state dinner with all the trimmings was being served. One of the items on the menu was kishke, otherwise known as stuffed derma, or kishka. Real kishke is nothing like the "kishke" that is available at your local delicatessen. Real kishke is actually the intestines of the animal stuffed with flour and oil and all sorts of spices.

One of my most cherished Rosh Hashanah memories is going to my grandmother’s house in Flushing, where the fish were swimming in the bathtub before she made gefilte fish. She and my aunts would banish us from the kitchen so we did not actually see what that *kishke* was being stuffed into. I have to say, now in my 50s, after thirty years of being a vegetarian, I can still taste that *kishke*.

Kishke was served and the Kaiser loved it. He asked the Czar to send his cooks the recipe. The Czar graciously promised to do so. After the Kaiser's departure the Russian (Jewish) cooks wrote down the recipe and sent it via diplomatic mail to the Kaiser's chefs.

The day finally came when the Kaiser was informed that he would be served kishke. He sat down hungrily. Out came a tray. Phew! Did it stink! The Kaiser took off the cover from his plate and took a bite. He immediately spat out the piece and ordered the tray removed and the kishke thrown away.

A letter of official protest was immediately dispatched to the Czar. How dare he send a recipe for such a vile concoction! The Czar received the protest letter and summoned his cooking staff and demanded an explanation.

Initially, the imperial kitchen staff was perplexed & scared. They did not want to incur the Czar’s wrath. They went over the recipe and could not find the problem. After quite some time and in a moment

of inspiration, one of the staff exclaimed incredulously, "Of course! We told him how to stuff and spice the kishke, but we never realized that we needed to tell him to clean it out before he stuffs it!"

This story is a parable for teshuvah, the repentance, turning, and returning which is key to these holidays.

Often times we make firm resolutions for the future as we near the upcoming Days of Awe. As Rosh Hashanah approaches, we begin to think more and more about ways to improve. The above story teaches us that, indeed, good deeds and good intentions are important.

However, resolutions are best when prefaced by an honest taking stock in order to correct any areas in our behavior that need fixing. Otherwise even with all of the spices (good intentions) in the world, a person may remain a stinking kishke.

So, I return to today's Torah portion and asked myself these questions again.

What is the meaning of this story? Why do we read it on Rosh Hashanah? What is the lesson, the singular effect, we are to take from it today?

And particularly, the key question that echoes for me personally was, What is the difference between **severing connections** and **letting go of past choices**, past relationships, and moving with commitment towards a different future together?

So, now a bit of my story.

Towards the end of July, I meet with Rabbi Latz to begin planning this sermon. He asked me how my summer was going. To catch him up I told him my story. In typical Rabbi Latz fashion, he responded, "Well, there you go—there's your sermon."

Of course, I then groaned.

So, just pieces of my story. This is Rosh Hashanah, after all—not a therapy session.

Since the 1990s, my central narrative—my central story for my life, has been one of grief and loss. My 30s were hard. I was working as an activist, a paid community organizer—a professional lesbian, if you will. It was a job. In the LGBT community at the onset and the height of deaths from HIV/AIDS, I watched many of my age peers, my friends, and indeed my twin brother died of HIV/AIDS in the 1990s.

Marge Piercy says, once an age peer dies, youth is gone forever. I experienced the 90s not only as a part of a generation of loss, I also had the unique

experience—perhaps not unique in the world, but unique in my circle—of not only losing these people but also losing a part of my identity. I was no longer a twin; I was half a twin.

Part of that narrative was, then how do I survive? I know many of us in our own families, those who have histories from the Holocaust, from the *Shoah*, have a similar experience. Why is it that we survived when so many others did not? How do we deal with survivor's guilt? How do we live our own life without necessarily feeling that we have to live an exemplary life, for two, or for three, or four, or an entire generation that did not survive? Yet how do we carry on their stories and their lives in a way in which they are still living through our actions?

So that was some of my challenge in the 90s and for a number of years later. And then, a few years later, my father died of pancreatic cancer. My brother Bob's 23rd yahrzeit is this week. My father was diagnosed with cancer on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. This time of year I'm usually acutely aware that for me these relationships felt severed very prematurely.

[this part was not recorded—must have been switching blank CDs.]

Your notes:

Grief felt physical, in my body, everything hurt.
Time, therapy, and cycling (AIDS Rides) heals

Then five years ago, life does what life does, and handed me an unexpected turn, another severing. I experienced the loss of a significant relationship at same time as I was making a huge professional shift. I lost my identity as a “professional lesbian,” and as a partner. I lost my home and financial stability.

These losses were external, but in a very significant way I felt lost in a way I never had before. So lost, I didn't even know how lost I was. I was not used to feeling lost. I thought I was done with grief, the old grief, and didn't want to get stuck in the new losses. I wanted to “get over it,” heal, “move on.” I wanted this be done quickly. I wanted to be able to be all back “in” my life.

And I wanted to be able to be completely available to be all “in” another intimate relationship. I wanted to will the process of transformation on my timetable. I wanted to make kishke without doing the necessary preparation...without literally letting go and cleaning up my insides before filling it with the new tasty stuff.

But of course, transformation doesn't happen that way.

It wasn't until last spring when Rabbi Latz did the honor of asking me to do this sermon, that I began to understand that preparing for Rosh Hashanah, for these High Holidays, was the perfect container for me to finally dig in and complete the

transformational work to be, finally, all in in my own life. So why is this the perfect container? Why do we call these the High Holy Days? Rosh Hashanah is one of the key holidays in a collection of holidays known as the Days of Awe. Judaism believes in the particularity of time, that certain times have special spiritual properties. The Days of Awe are meant to guide us on an ancient journey of transformation through which we “awaken our souls to ourselves.” The journey of transformation begins with the acknowledgment that we need to make it, that the journey of transformation itself is a spiritual necessity.

The Days of Awe begin with Tisha B’av – a commemoration of mourning for the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. On a spiritual level, it is a time when the constructs by which we live, like the walls of the Temple, fall away. Then we have Selichot – during which we take stock, release, and prepare ourselves, if you will, by examining our kishke. Which brings us to today Rosh Hashanah – the day the world was born, head of the year, the day of remembrance, the day on which we are called to do teshuvah.

What is teshuvah and why do we focus on it for ten days?

The ten days of teshuvah – are a proscribed period of turning and returning, during which we reflect on to what, specifically, we are being called.

It is a period when traditionally we are called to make peace with each other so that on Yom Kippur we can make peace with ourselves so that we can atone to God. The order of teshuvah is quite clear in the tradition. The Rabbis teach that the mitzvot that govern behavior between people take precedence over the mitzvot that govern relationships between people and God.

Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement—is when we rehearse our own death and take the measure of our lives.

Finally we come to Sukkot, and s’mores in the sukkah—the joyful conclusion to the journey during which we build a new house, a new vessel, that we literally inhabit, that is open and inviting to all.

The rituals of these holidays are intended to guide our process of teshuvah.

For example, during these Days of Awe there are 100 blasts of the shofar.

These blasts of the shofar call us back into awareness of ourselves, of our surroundings, and of time itself.

Rabbi Allen Lew notes that, “With each blast we are called to journey from birth to death and then back again to renewal.” With each blast, Rabbi Lew says, “Every heart needs to crack itself open.”

We need to crack ourselves open to move ...

From unconsciousness to consciousness

From self-deception to insight

From self-hatred to self-forgiveness

From anger to healing

From hard heartedness to broken heartedness to open heartedness

From isolation to a sense of intimate connection to all being

It is a journey to know our deepest desires and to obtain a glimpse of where they all came from.

As Rabbi Lew concludes, “It’s in the midst of the un-namable and ever becoming God, that this journey is a journey to learn our own divine name.”

Transformation doesn’t happen in the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The High Holidays are symbolic of a process going on all the time.

For me the journey of teshuvah has been, and will be for some time, in the words of Rabbi Lew, “To learn the infinite power of simply being present.” To simply being who I am, and who I am with all of you. To be able to say “Hineini”, here I am, to my loved ones, to my community, to my work in the world. To be able to be “all in” relationship in every way I can.

Hasidim praised and promoted storytelling because they appreciated its inspirational power. A person hearing a religious story may be impressed by its truth, but a tale about someone actually fulfilling the teaching can motivate the listener to action. That, say the Hasidim, is why the Torah itself is full of stories. One must not only draw out a story's lessons, but fulfill them in practice. One sign of sincerity is our persistence in staying with a story, until its lesson is fully absorbed and translated into practice.

As I pondered what I needed to do to prepare for these holidays, to dig deeper into my own lessons regarding how to move from severing to letting go, to be fully present, to be “all in” my life and my connections, I asked myself – what was going to make this process this time, different from the last time when I had thought I had done this?

Then I remembered one of the core teachings that I learned in college while I was in college and studying in Israel.

My Rabbi (Bernie Orr) taught that Judaism is not just a system of beliefs, but also of practices. The formula he offered was:

Belief/Ideology + Practice/Ritual = an ethical life—and that's our goal as Jews.

He taught that ideology without practice is dogma. He taught that practice, or ritual, without belief, was idolatry.

Another Rabbi offered that indeed the doing was more important than the believing. He said, "Do first. Understanding will come later."

One of things I was reminded of this summer is that rituals are means to bring our stories into practice.

Rabbi Lew says "The purpose of ritual is render the invisible visible."

One of the things I love about Judaism is that our rituals are so deep, so layered with meaning, and more accessible than I originally imagined.

In my process this summer, I did things that I'd never imagined I would do. One thing I did to move from the severing that occurred 5 years ago to fully letting go, was that I wrote & performed a get with my former partner that included a beautiful havdalah service in which we made a distinction by lighting two separate candles off the one braided candle, poured wine from the one cup into two separate cups, and then extinguished our separate flames in a way that released us both from our past hurts and open to what happens next in our individual lives.

With the assistance of Rabbi Latz, Rabbi Simon, Wendy, and my dear friend David, I designed and participated in a mikvah ceremony for the first time in my life during which I immersed 7 times:

- Twice for letting go of past hurts, healing, and forgiving
- Twice for deeply acknowledging gratitude for the joy, love, and beauty in my life and the world around me
- Twice for preparing for a future for myself, my relationships, and my commitment to work towards Tikkun Olam
- And finally, once as a reminder that I can **say** all of these things, but it is still up to me to **do them**.

The Mikvah was an extremely powerful ritual for me. I entered the waters with the lingering remnants of my story of loss, with the lingering bodily memory about being half a twin.

And emerged, symbolically reborn, for the first time (given I was born with another), as a whole, not a half.

As Rabbi Latz remarked at the time, now I have the opportunity to be wholly whole.

Indeed, I think this is the task the shofar calls us to do: to make the journey of teshuvah to be wholly whole, or wholly holy, to clean out our kishke, let go, and journey to being fully present and “all in.”

However, for me, and I suspect for all of us, no matter how consciously we do teshuvah, challenges remain.

Currently, my mother is very ill. A close friend, a member of my chosen family, is in hospice care. And, loving anew, which I am in the midst of doing, always entails risk and the potential of loss.

But, having transformed my core story from one of loss to one of being “all in” in life and connection, come what may, my experience of these events will potentially be very different. They already are.

Hasidic tradition teaches that all stories have a “so, nu”—therefore—a lesson for each person's religious behavior. Indeed, there are usually many “therefores” to any story.

I’ve shared with you my “so, nu--therefore.” I hope you that you are able to take whatever “therefores” exist for you personally from my story. However, I think there might also be a collective “therefore” upon which we might want to reflect.

This year, as a Shir Tikvah community, we engaged in an intentional, lengthy process, of reflecting, re-visioning, and re-imagining ourselves. We emerged with a new vision statement that included our consciously trying to be a holy community.

What would it take for each of us to act as part of a holy community? What would it take to be “all in” our connection with each other?

My partners in my consulting practice and I have a phrase that we put on the first PowerPoint slide for any presentation we do. It says, “Change is inevitable. Transformation is optional.”

What would it take for us to fully live into this vision of ourselves as a kehillah kedoshah, a holy community? How do we do the spiritual work with each other, not just to stuff the kishke with new ideas, but closely examine who we have been and what we want to clean out, let go of, as we move into a new collective future?

Change, growth, transformation is risky.

Can we learn from today's Torah portion not to be bound by limiting expectations, but instead creatively wrestle with our past as a people and a congregation, innovate new ways of being with each other, without severing from our past and the joys (and sorrows) of our collective histories?

I believe that our journey together to live into our new vision will take faith and belief in ourselves, belief in each other, and the intentional use of the rich rituals, such as storytelling, that Judaism provides for us.

Hasidism gave sacred storytelling the special status of a mitzvah. And it encouraged not only religious specialists—Rabbis and teachers—but ordinary people (like me), to tell stories, so that storytelling became a natural and integral part of a person's religious life. There is not much remarkable when Rabbis tell stories, but there is when a whole community begins telling stories, and knows why they are doing it.

I encourage us, this year, and into our collective future, to practice radical hospitality by looking deeply into each other's eyes and welcoming each of us to come to our kehillah k'doshah with our full story—not just our stories that we are “welcome” to bring, but are expected to keep in our back pockets, safely out of sight of making anyone else uncomfortable. But, rather, our stories told and lived out amongst us so that we are “all in” real relationship with each other.

Hasidim believe that stories can save.

A rebbe once said: "A person has to tell a tale in a way in which the telling itself saves."

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to tell my story in a way that saved me.

I look forward to participating in storytelling with you in a way that brings us all closer to teshuvah.