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Congregation Agudas Achim
Kol Nidre 5778
“The Stories That We Weave”

One of the most challenging classes I ever took was my 10th grade honors chemistry class with Mr. Flores. This class consumed a huge amount of my time, helped forge a deep friendship with a woman who I still consider to be a close confidante to this day, and while I learned many great life lessons and skills from Mr. Flores, I’m not sure how useful the planned curriculum was almost 20 years later as the primary things I recall are how valuable hard work and persistence can be to accomplishing one’s goals and nothing really about chemistry itself.

As part of my larger education from that class, one evening that year, on one of my multiple nightly phone calls between me and my lab partner, in our attempts to complete our homework assignment, my friend shared the following quote she had come upon: “The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.” The universe is made of stories, not atoms.

With the utmost respect and reverence for science and technology, in that moment – and truly for the rest of the year, this quote by Muriel Rukeyser, was a reassuring reminder that what we were doing was not the be all end all of our 15 year old existences – that there was more to life than figuring out our problem set, and that our drama, music and English classes were just as important as our STEM classes (which were not known by such an acronym at the time).

This quote has stayed with me for 20 years, and it was only this past week, that I learned a bit behind the story of this quote: Rukeyser, as it turns out, was Jewish, and a well-respected poet, who wrote extensively about her experience of Judaism. This past Shabbat, I serendipitously came across a poem of hers that is actually included in our new siddurim as an additional reflection offered during Friday night services – a wonderful reminder that no matter how familiar we may become with our prayer books, with the stories of our people, that there are always new things to discover, new stories that may yet unfold, and new connections to the old stories which we hold dear.

This quote has been floating in my mind quite a bit the past few weeks, as I’ve been thinking a lot about the stories we tell ourselves: whether they are stories about how something occurred, stories about how we anticipate something being perceived by someone else, stories about how others felt in a particular moment, stories about who we are and why we do what we do. Some of these stories may even be true.

On Yom Kippur, we tell several stories: The morning Torah reading tells of the scapegoat ritual the priests performed. The haftarah tells of the type of fast that God desires on this day. The Avodah Service is a story meant to take the place of a ritual which we can no longer perform now that the Temple is no longer standing – a reminder that sometimes the stories are all we have. The Martyrology service shares the stories of personal sacrifice our people have made for their beliefs. The story of Jonah reminds us that we can try to tell ourselves that we are an unimportant character in the story of our lives, that we can run away from our responsibilities, but that that does not actually make these responsibilities go away.

Each of these stories is rich and complex. For tonight, we're going to focus on the story of Jonah – on how the stories we tell ourselves about our own lives impact us and those around us. God tells Jonah to go with great haste to the city of Nineveh and “proclaim judgment upon them, for their wickedness has come before God.”

Now, I don't know about you, but it is not totally clear to me what this verse means. Proclaim judgment upon them for their wickedness has come before God. The Hebrew is a bit awkward “*u'krah aleha*” (1:2) – literally, “call upon them,” perhaps akin to “call them out.” The fact that the translations all vary a bit, highlights that this phrase, this part of the story, is open to interpretation.

So what is the story that Jonah tells himself to justify his actions? As you may remember, Jonah does not make his way to Nineveh with haste. He does the opposite, boarding a ship to another city, trying to flee from God and the mission he was sent on. This leads to a great storm at sea, with Jonah telling the others to throw him overboard in order to make the storm cease, and then Jonah famously getting swallowed by a large fish. (And yes we may have been told a story where he was in a whale, but since we are discussing the stories that we tell ourselves, that is not actually a literal translation of the Hebrew.)

Now, running away from God may sound futile to us, but before we judge Jonah too harshly, how many of us have also created stories to rationalize our behavior? How many of us have convinced ourselves that if we ignore a problem that it will go away on its own? If we have a relationship that is in need of significant repair, how often have we told ourselves that we don't really need that person in our lives - not because we actually think we'd be better off without them (which can sometimes be true) but rather because we are unwilling or unable to imagine how that repair would occur? How many of us have psyched ourselves out of performing well or caused ourselves anxiety because we have prophesized of a less-than-ideal future, one that includes us failing or suffering in some capacity?

Though not a wise nor logical decision, perhaps we can at least sympathize with the fact that Jonah creates stories to help him interpret and cope with a challenging situation, which ultimately influences how he then acts.

Sometimes, particularly when we were children, we may have told ourselves (and our parents, teachers, babysitters) stories about “who started it”: Who was the first to say the mean thing, the first to hit, the first to prioritize their self-interest ahead of what was fair. I would guess that these stories were of the variety where the other child started it. And yet, statistically speaking, that simply could not be true 100% of the time. As adults, we continue to encounter similar issues – but with much higher stakes than when we were young. The question is, do we continue to respond in similar ways, or are we able to tell different versions of the story, or at least to acknowledge that there might be more than one accurate version of the story?

Sometimes, the stories we tell ourselves have personally significant consequences, like when we tell ourselves stories about our health, or the health of a loved one because coming to terms with the possible consequences is more than we think we can handle. A childhood friend of mine,

who has been quite public in sharing her story, has spent the majority of this year fighting Stage IV colon cancer. She is in her mid-30s and was otherwise quite healthy – having 2 children of her own and then serving as a surrogate of twins for a couple unable to have their own children. As she prepared to be a surrogate for yet another couple, she coincidentally began observing blood when she went to the bathroom. She was all set to ignore these symptoms, to tell herself that it was not a big deal. (Because who wants to tell stories involving unpleasant bathroom experiences and who wants the main story of their day to be the one where you're on the phone for hours with the insurance company because they don't think you need the test that your doctor wants to order?). Thankfully, with the help of another friend, she came to the conclusion that this was not something that she actually wanted to ignore. Telling herself that the symptoms didn't matter, rather than learning more about them, wouldn't change reality – it would only alter the options she would be able to pursue.

And once diagnosed with this devastating disease, she decided that the story she wanted to tell and be told, was one of hope, of love, of honesty, of advocacy. She is raising awareness (and funds) about an illness that is extremely treatable when caught early, devastating when metastasized, and is particularly challenging when found in young people who tend not to have any symptoms until the disease is quite progressed. She has moved forward because she has decided that the middle of the story matters as much as the end and that she wants an active role in writing it. And because of her sharing her story, many others are changing the course of their lives – opting to get tested when they wouldn't have otherwise, sharing on social media with others that they are getting tested so that others may be proactive as well, and taking a *carpe diem* approach in honor of this friend's zest for life.

My friend has found amazing strength in community that has allowed her to move forward, despite the many difficulties it involves. So how does Jonah eventually move forward? How does he decide that he is co-creating the story of his life? Why is it that despite these initially unproductive stories and responses, we tell the story of Jonah on Yom Kippur? Once Jonah is in the belly of the large fish, he prays to God. Jonah, in his moment of distress, recognizes that *m'shamerim havlei shav, chasdam ya'azovu* – “those who guard falsehoods, forsake their own well-being, the kindness that God has for them” (2:9).

Guarding falsehoods, though tempting because it often includes guarding our egos, guarding our dreams, guarding the version of the world we'd prefer to live in, does not actually save us. Instead, it sets us up for disappointment at best and destruction at worst. Not preparing for the challenges does not mean they won't still be there, at best it delays the inevitable and at worst, compounds the challenges and decreases our ability to cope and be successful once we meet these challenges head on.

Additionally, guarding falsehoods may be tempting because it includes guarding the way we view ourselves as blameless, as victims, or because it allows ourselves to shore up against the perceived enemy. But what if these stories prevent us from taking responsibility, making changes, making *teshuvah*, actually listening to the person before us and being open to them, surprising us by responding with their best self? In these instances, the walls we build seeking to protect ourselves may actually prevent us from seeing the promised land.

Once Jonah is released from the belly of the fish, God once again tells him to go to Nineveh and proclaim what God tells him to do. This time, however, Jonah does not create stories as to what will come next. Even as a prophet, he seems to realize that there may be pieces to the story that he does not know and making assumptions may be less than helpful. And so, though the message that God has him relate to the people is indeed not a positive one, it is also filled with information – that the city would be overthrown in 40 days. And since knowledge is power, having this information allows the king of Nineveh and its citizens to change their ways in order to change the course of history.

No one knows exactly what Jonah told himself when God first approached him that prevented him from going to Nineveh right away. He might have told himself that he was not worthy of delivering such a message. He might have told himself that if he didn't go to Nineveh and the people weren't warned that nothing bad could then befall them. He might have told himself that if he were to go, that the people would revolt against him and great harm would come to him. The final chapter of the book of Jonah seems to imply that he might have told himself that he needn't bother going on this mission because God is compassionate and would never actually destroy God's creatures - so why go through all the trouble to begin with?

But it seems that after his first interaction with God, Jonah never considers telling himself that if he didn't go, that harm would come to him or that harm would in fact come to the people. It is only after careful consideration that he is able to consider other perspectives, different stories – ones where he is good enough, ones where he has faith in others (in the people of Nineveh), ones where he does not assume how God will respond, that he is able to tell the story where the outcome is not predetermined.

So often, we are like Jonah – telling ourselves stories with pre-written endings when the reality is that the ending is in fact unknown, and if we changed the lens through which we viewed the situation, we might perceive an entirely different story. As my friend has taught me this year, sometimes it doesn't matter if we know what the end of the story will be – for the middle of the story can be just as important, if not more interesting, and may in both small and large ways, actually impact the details of the ending. Yes, certain actions or inactions make particular outcomes more likely to happen. AND, until something has actually happened, there is still space for us to affect our realities.

The musical “Once on this Island,” by Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty (which appropriately is one of my friend's favorite shows) reflects on the many reasons why we tell stories. To paraphrase the concluding song:

“Life is why...
Pain is why...
Love is why...
Grief is why...
Hope is why...
Faith is why...
You are why...
We tell the story”

Stories “will help your heart remember and relive
It will help you feel the anger and the sorrow
And forgive

For all the ones we leave
And we believe
Our lives become
The stories that we weave”

Which stories will we choose to tell ourselves in 5778? Which stories will we choose to listen to? Which stories will help us move forward and forgive? How will these stories impact our actions and how can we remain open to holding multiple endings at once, as we did when reading the “choose your own adventure” stories of our youth? As Muriel Rukeyser reminds us, the world is made of stories – which types of worlds do we hope to create in this new year and which stories will we tell to help us see these creations come to fruition?

G'mar Hatimah Tovah.