

Telling Our Stories *Yom Kippur 5767*

In the haftarah that we read a little earlier, the prophet Isaiah rails against a whole assortment of injustices: the oppression of workers, violence, neglect of the poor and needy. Isaiah's words are a call to awareness, to addressing the wrongs of a society that is failing its own members. But how do we become moved to action, today, in response to the critical issues that face us as a society? Reading the words of an ancient prophet is inspiring, but it's not enough. What is the path to not only becoming aware of injustice, but wanting to do something about it?

If I asked all of you to think about your earliest memory of injustice, your moment of becoming aware that oppression exists in the world, I'm sure I'd hear as many different stories as there are people in this room. For myself, I can think of a number of powerful moments, beginning perhaps with learning about the Holocaust in Hebrew School in 5th grade. But there is one other particular moment that has stayed with me to this day:

I went to middle school in Washington, D.C. When I was in 8th grade, my Social Studies teacher took my class to a Congressional hearing on reparations for survivors of the Wounded Knee massacre of 1890. There in 1975 in a room on Capitol Hill, a handful of elderly Sioux Indians told stories of watching their families being gunned down in front of them by members of the U.S. 7th Cavalry. I will never forget listening to a 90 year-old man telling how, as a four year-old, he crawled over the dead bodies of his parents after the shooting had stopped.

After this experience, I decided to do my 8th grade research paper on the events at Wounded Knee. After poring through government documents that my father got for me as well as Indian accounts of what had happened, I discovered some things that were new to my 13 year-old mind. I discovered that what we know as "history" depends on who is doing the telling. And I also learned that sometimes our government lies.

I am telling you all this because I think it says something about how we learn about justice and injustice. We don't learn them as abstract concepts, as big ideas on a page in a book. We learn about oppression, we become aware of injustice and the need to respond to injustice, from the stories we experience and the stories we hear. For some of us, we become aware from our personal encounters with discrimination, with poverty, with abuse. For others of us, we learn from our involvement with the freedom struggles of other communities, from the impact of their stories on our own hearts and souls.

Most of you know that we are members of the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, a group comprised of congregations and other membership organizations that does community organizing on local and state-wide issues. What you may not know is that the organizing strategy employed by GBIO and groups like it around the country is based on the telling of stories. People are brought together—in pairs, in small groups—and encouraged to tell stories of struggle from their own lives. A number of things happen when people come together in this way—whether it's people from the same congregation, or people meeting together across communities.

First, relationship happens. I've had the experience, through GBIO, of sitting down with someone I've never seen before—a member of a Presbyterian church, or of a Haitian Seventh Day Adventist Temple—and I hear something real and important about their life, and they hear something about mine. But even more powerfully sometimes, the telling of stories leads to real relationship with people we think we already know. There are people we sit next to in synagogue, people we schmooze with in the hallway at Hebrew School, or who we work with us on a committee—people we've talked to, shared ideas and opinions with, attended one another's life cycle events. But when we start sharing our stories, we learn that sometimes these same people are dealing with things that were invisible to us; we learn about complexities and depth that we were barely aware of. We learn that when we break through the silence and begin to tell our stories, we become connected in an entirely new way to one another.

Second, we realize that even though, to some extent, our stories are unique, there are issues and challenges that many of us share. This past spring, we did a series of small group conversations at Dorshei Tzedek, in a variety of settings, in which 60 members took part. In those conversations, people were asked to tell a personal story that had public implications. This could be a story about themselves or their family, or about something they had encountered in their work or community life. From these conversations, we heard a lot of commonality: shared concerns about caring for elderly and infirm parents; concerns about job stability and financial strains; concerns about how to adequately educate and care for our children; concerns about enormous social pressures to maintain a lifestyle that is both environmentally destructive as well as personally overwhelming; concerns about caring for our own and our family's mental and physical health; concerns about the turmoil and disruption caused by divorce.

This coming together to share our stories—the relationships that develop, the common threads that emerge—are in service to a larger goal. These shared conversations are not therapy, are not support groups. This kind of relational organizing is about building relationships in order to build power, and about uncovering shared stories in order to identify issues that we can then act upon. This is where justice and injustice come into the picture.

The 90 year-old man in that congressional hearing room in 1975 was not telling his story so that he would feel better, or so that someone would help him. He was telling his story so that the U.S. government would be forced to acknowledge the wrong that had been done in its name and then take action to right that wrong. In the same way, when we gather to tell our stories, we are taking the first step on a journey towards naming that which is wrong, that which is unjust or out of whack. We need to break the silence which surrounds so much of our lives if we want to understand what is wrong, and we need to do that silence-breaking with others in such a way that can we can then take action together.

The silence around our stories can be overwhelming. I was deeply moved when I heard some of what people were sharing in small groups one Friday night last spring as part of this campaign, when I realized that people were publicly sharing parts of their lives that have never been spoken in the context of the congregation. There is silence because there is shame, and a curtain of confidentiality around aspects of our lives that we have been told are personal and private. By remaining silent we remain isolated, convinced either that our problems are ours alone, or that

we should be able to take care of ourselves and our households through some combination of our own wit and resources.

Silence is a hallmark of oppression. The feeling that an obstacle I am facing is somehow particular to me and my situation keeps me from looking for deeper causes and cuts me off from potential allies. Silence around money and class, silence around sexuality, silence around Jewish identity, silence around mental illness and other disabilities—all of these silences cut us off from one another and keep us from seeing clearly the issues that we are all facing. Perhaps this is why the prophet Isaiah calls out—“raise up your voice like a shofar!” Breaking our silence is essential if we’re to get to the bottom of things and figure way out together.

As Jews, we have particular issues with silence. Many Jews after World War II were unable or unwilling to speak of their traumas during the Holocaust. For many in this room and in the Jewish community in general, the fear caused by the Holocaust generated massive silence around Jewish identity, a submerging of visible signs of Jewish ethnicity and religious practice in the decades that followed the war. Stereotypes about Jewish wealth and power cause many of us to feel discomfort around our material success, to feel vaguely guilty or anxious about being a “rich Jew.” Those same stereotypes make those of us who aren’t well off feel ashamed and invisible. The lingering effect of 2,000 years of anti-Semitism—the basic message of which is that Jews should disappear—leads to its own kind of silence. We don’t want to be too noticeable, too visible, too pushy, too loud—and those other Jews who are too pushy and loud make us uncomfortable.

There is another kind of silence we’re challenging when we tell our stories, a very important kind of silence. This is the silence that surrounds the very real struggles of middle class America. Every day, we’re bombarded by tales of enormous suffering—whether flood victims in New Orleans or refugees from war-torn countries or African-American teenagers being killed in Roxbury and Dorchester. Compared to those kinds of traumas, that problems that surface when we tell our stories might seem trivial. When compared to most of the rest of the world, the majority of us in this room seem so privileged – we have college and graduate degrees, we have a roof over our heads, food on the table, shoes on our feet, the security of American citizenship. Yes, we all have *tsuris*—but who doesn’t? What stories can we tell that will help repair the world, bring real justice to those who need it?

Yet this is precisely the power of telling our stories. So much of what was shared in our house meetings point to much deeper problems in our society—problems that don’t just affect those who are poor and on the margins. Why in the Boston area does it take a household income of hundreds of thousands of dollars to own a house and adequately care for one’s children and parents? Why are Americans, on average, working 500 more hours per year than they did 30 years ago? Why are most Americans working harder but earning less? Why do we seem to have no time, no space to breath, to enjoy our friends, our families, our lives? Why are we and our kids struggling with depression and anxiety when we seem, in so many ways, to be so blessed?

These questions aren’t just personal or private questions; they’re social questions. They are questions that point to the way our society and our economy are structured. They’re questions about what kinds of work are available, and where that work is located, and what kinds of work

get what kinds of pay. They're about the things our government wants to pay for, and the things our government refuses to pay for. They're about the values that our society exalts, and the pressures on us to embrace those values. They are social questions, and they demand a collective response.

The power of telling our stories as part of GBIO is that we can also begin to see connections to stories told by people in very different situations than our own. Parents in Newton, in Watertown, in Somerville, in Jamaica Plain, in Roxbury, all fear for the well-being of their children. What are the underlying issues that connect the violence plaguing youth in inner-city Boston to the anxiety and depression, the drinking and drugs, plaguing youth in the suburbs? People in Mattapan and people in Newton Highlands are struggling to adequately care for aging parents—what are the underlying social and political issues that make it so difficult for upper-income as well as working class people to feel able to care for their parents in the ways they deserve? Why does it seem sometimes like the only way to obtain social services is to either be extremely poor or extremely well off? There is a public story that underlies all of these personal challenges.

The one thing I hear about perhaps more than anything else from folks at Dorshei Tzedek are time pressures—the relentless pressures of trying to balance paid work with raising a family and maintaining any sort of community connections. People experience these pressures as profoundly personal, stemming partly from choices made and partly from economic necessity. But all of these pressures have a larger, social context. The places we live, the places we work, are not set up to accommodate the realities of family life. A steady decline in wages over the past 30 years for all but the richest Americans means that most middle-class households either need two working adults, or one adult who works hours that equal two jobs. The technology that's supposed to make our lives easier in fact means that most of us are pacing our lives not according to the natural rhythms that once defined time, but according to the nanoseconds that govern our computers. This is a communal story, a public story, with personal implications.

By breaking the silence around our stories, we're taking the first step towards acknowledging that perhaps we can do something if we act together. We are breaking through the myth of individualism, the myth of self-sufficiency, myths that isolate us from one another and that obscure the underlying reality of our lives. In telling our stories, we began to make space for new thinking, new ways of understanding not just the problems we face, but the solutions that might be possible.

When the prophet Isaiah spoke out to his community, his criticisms and his words of hope resonated within a master narrative that he and his listeners knew well. This was the narrative of covenant. Isaiah was reminding the Israelite community that it was in a covenantal relationship with God and with one another, a covenantal relationship that demanded something from them beyond ritual obligations. Under the terms of that covenant, the poor and powerless had to be cared for; community members were responsible for one another; workers had to be treated fairly and the elderly given respect. Isaiah wasn't calling for a revolution or a new society; he was calling for the leaders of the community to uphold an ancient covenantal ideal that had been discarded.

Part of the shame and the silence that make it difficult to tell our stories is because the truth of our lives flies in the face of the master narrative that we are being told as Americans. That narrative centers around the idea of the “ownership society.” In the ownership society, people should be able to take care of themselves. With a little opportunity and a lot of hard work, every adult—or at least, every man—should be able to take care of himself and his family. When an individual hits a bump in the road, a circle of voluntary community should be waiting to help out. In the myth of the ownership society, economic distress means personal failure. In the ownership society, no one owes anything to anyone outside of their immediate circle of family and friends. There is no room in this narrative for companies that abruptly shut down or move, and leave loyal workers high and dry; no room for people who work more than full time and still can’t earn enough to pay a mortgage; no room for catastrophic health bills and personal bankruptcy and aging parents halfway across the country with no one to care for them. It is a narrative mask for greed and inequality. We are in desperate need of a different narrative, a different model for our society.

So for me, the words of Isaiah are not just about caring for the poor and the hungry. They are a call to reclaim the covenantal ideal. In a covenantal community, *everyone* is bound by communal obligations, and everyone is due the support of the community. There is nothing and no one—not private property, not “the market,” not any public figure or political leader—who stands above or beyond the covenantal demands of *tzedeq*—equality and justice—and *chesed*—care and lovingkindness. In the Biblical ethos of covenant, a community is judged not by the achievements of the richest and most privileged individuals, but by the treatment of its least powerful members. In a covenantal society, the individual is responsible to the community, and the community is responsible for all of its individual members. Implicit in the idea of covenant is an understanding that self-sufficiency is a myth. We are all parts of a web of relationship and responsibility that binds us inextricably to others in our community and our society. It is blasphemous, in the words of the Torah, to claim that our own might, our own power, has gotten us whatever wealth we might enjoy. We are radically dependent on one another, and on the Godly power that works through the natural world and through other human beings.

So, how do we reclaim the legacy of covenant, this powerful tradition that we carry as Jews? How do we construct a counter-narrative to frame our personal stories, so that we hear them not as a depressing array of problems, but as a challenge that motivates us to action?

One very basic thing we can do is to take seriously the notion of our own congregation as a covenantal community. This doesn’t have to be as overwhelming as perhaps it first sounds. There are many ways in which we already function as such a community. We come together and share resources in order to support our school and to give our children a Jewish education. We show up to celebrate one another’s *simchas* and to comfort and support one another at times of illness and death. We should appreciate that which we already do, and commit to doing all of it even better. A bar mitzvah is not a private family affair; a shivah minyan is not an invitation-only event. It’s a covenantal obligation to rejoice with one another at important life cycle moments, and it’s a covenantal obligation to make a meal for someone who is ill or to comfort a mourner. And like any covenantal obligation, there are blessings to be had in the giving, and blessings to be had in the receiving.

Moving outwards from our own congregation, I also believe that our membership in GBIO is a covenantal commitment. It signals our willingness to take action alongside people whose struggles are not exactly ours, and to call on them to stand with us, when we are in need. Our participation in GBIO gives us the opportunity to build real relationships with people who have different views than us on some important issues—for example, gay marriage—so that when moments of real conflict and tension arise, we can sit down with them and have honest—and possibly transformative—conversations.

I honestly believe that our ability to make covenantal community work on the local level is an important and necessary first step towards rebuilding the covenantal foundations of our country, of this very flawed democracy that we live in. We need to know and to experience both the possibilities and the limits of local community so that we can organize and demand covenantal commitments on the state and federal level. We have to be ready to rebuild the torn social fabric of our society from the ground up. No one is going to do it for us.

I'd like to end where the prophet Isaiah ended, with a word about Shabbat. Did you think it strange, as you spoke these words a little earlier, that after all this railing about injustice, the haftarah ends with a call to observe Shabbat? What's the connection?

The Sabbath day is called an *ot*, a sign of the covenant, between God and the Israelites. A popular saying goes, "More than Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews." Shabbat is both a transformative and a preserving practice. Think about a traditional Jewish community. The Shabbat restrictions on travel mean that Jews have to live near one another—close enough to walk to shul and to one another's homes for Shabbat meals. Shabbat is the Jewish answer to suburban sprawl; it's the weekly antidote to the tyranny of schedules and to the insides of our cars. If we observe a traditional Shabbat, we have 25 hours every week of liberation from the clock, from the speed-up of the internet, from the incessant messages to buy and consume, from the oppression of work that demands our time and our attention 24/7. Observance of Shabbat is meant to turn us toward one another, and to turn us inward, to ourselves, every week, no matter what.

I don't imagine we'll become a traditionally Shabbat observant community, and I'm not calling for that here. But I would like you to take seriously what it would mean for our congregation—and for your own life—if more people in the community made Shabbat more real in their lives. As Dorshei Tzedek grows, we need times besides High Holydays when we see one another, when we sing and meditate and schmooze over Kiddush together. Shabbat morning could be that time, if more of us would make the commitment to come on a regular basis.

I hear people say they don't know as many people at the congregation any more—what would happen if more of us invited one another over to our homes for a Shabbat meal, for Friday night dinner or Shabbat lunch, or took long walks together on Shabbat afternoon? We say we want community, but how many of us are willing to make the actual practice of community a priority in our lives? Shabbat is a gift in that regard: a structure of time and of practice to build community. Shabbat is the opportunity to discuss Torah and how it connects to our lives, to tell our stories over dinner, to give our kids an experience of family and friends that doesn't involve

screens or money or things, the opportunity to simply sit together in shul and sing and reflect and be in the presence of others.

Isaiah told his community: Honor the covenant, treat one another with respect and honor, and see the blessings that will unfold for you. “Then shall your light burst forth like the dawn, your waters of healing will soon flourish...Then you will call and Adonai will answer, you will cry out, and God will respond, ‘Here I am.’” May we, too, heed this call to covenant, may we be blessed with the patience and courage to respond to the demands of *tzedek* and *hesed*. And may we have the ability to move our community, our society, our country, just one small step further on the road to repair. *Shanah tovah*.

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