

**“God Loves Stories”**

A Story, as told by Elie Wiesel:

When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer." And again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: "I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to G-d: "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient." And it was sufficient.

G-d made man because He loves stories.

So begins Elie Wiesel's famous book, "Gates of the Forest." And who better than the master storyteller himself to teach us the power of stories? For Wiesel, his stories were testimony to the tremendous evil and goodness that resides within humanity. They served a transcendent moral purpose.

We lost him in July, but his stories are ours forever. Wiesel was both the storyteller and moral authority of our modern age. Stories, he taught us, have the power to root us, define us, give us a sense of past and future.

Each of us here has a story – a narrative passed down to us from our parents and grandparents, our aunts and uncles – instilled in us by our Jewish heritage. Once we have our story, it stirs us to powerful action one way or the other. So, in that respect, stories can also be dangerous, and critically dangerous when they provoke knife attacks, violent shootings, suicide bombings, or even war.

In fact, I believe this is the dynamic we are seeing unfold in our world today, as our narratives across the globe are colliding. Our stories are emboldening extremism, protectionism, hostility and fear. They are dividing us and polarizing our country and our world.

Last year, I spoke at Yom Kippur about the Iran Deal and the dangerous disconnect opening up between the United States and Israel. I talked about how the stories of our two countries, which used to be parallel, are diverging. Well, over the last year this divergence has only accelerated.

Despite receiving a generous military aid package from the United States, the Israeli government doesn't understand why America has let Russia step up its military involvement in Syria, allowed Assad to cross its red line of chemical weapons, and permitted such chaos to develop in Syria that Hezbollah, thanks to Russia, now has the capacity to rain 1200 missiles a day on Israel in a future war.

And I would suggest to you, the reason is, that everyone has their own story.

For Israel, this is the story. America is an ally, but now, more than ever, an ally with its own agenda. America wants to further the Israeli Palestinian dialogue, but the consensus in Israel is that there is no Palestinian partner for peace who is willing to recognize Israel's right to exist as a Jewish State. And, as the only democratic country in a hostile neighborhood of Sunni and Shia extremism, Israel's story is one of victims and villains, with Israel cast prominently as the victim.

As for the Palestinians and Hezbollah, they certainly have their narrative. I don't need to go into the details of their story – we know it well, and see it featured across our college campuses. Military occupation, continued settlement expansion, closing off of Gaza, and much more. At the end of the day for the Palestinians, as well, their story is one of victims and villains.

The United States, of course, has its own narrative. We are trying now to extricate our military from the Middle East. At the same time, Russia is wreaking carnage in Syria, quite possibly with the insidious calculation to flood Europe with refugees and create divisions and weakness there, which is exactly what we see playing out! We Americans see ourselves as victims – ISIS inspired terrorism is directly assaulting our hometowns, and our only option is to become policemen of the world, a role we don't want and likely could not achieve. Our story is one of victims and villains.

So here we are, all of us living in the same reality, but none us has the same story. We each have our own version of victims and villains. And, as I said

before, our stories matter. Our stories shape the foreign policy of mighty nations, they inspire lone actors to act, sometimes for good and sometimes with devastating consequences.

And did you think for a moment that I wasn't going to comment on our presidential election? Clearly, the soap opera of our candidates is more than any of us can handle. So I'll leave that analysis to Fox, CNN, and I guess the National Enquirer at this point! But what I do want to address, is the dramatic and disturbing polarization we're all feeling in this election. As so many have already observed, this election has become a tale of two Americas.

For many in the Trump base, their story begins with disillusionment with government, a yearning to return to the old America, a desire to close down our borders, to restore law and order and, yes, for what I hope is a small minority, it has brought out their latent racism and xenophobia. In their story, they are the victims, and the villains are politicians who choke the economy with regulations and taxes, who infringe on civil liberties, and send jobs overseas.

For many on the left, they see a different villain – Wall Street and the wealthy – but they are themselves victims nonetheless. Among them are the millennials, who see their horizons shrinking and opportunity disappearing, for whom Bernie Sanders painted a hopeful agenda for change – with, among other things, free college tuition and accessible health care.

Disenfranchised millennials on the left, a disenfranchised Trump base on the right. And now, our country's soul is torn wide open – no longer one story, but two completely different versions of who we are as a nation.

Finally, there's a very similar story, catalyzed by the shocking Brexit vote this summer, that's also tearing Europe apart. With something like a million Syrian refugees flooding into Europe, Europe is grappling with its own victim verses villain narrative.

Our world is in crisis, and we each have our story as to why. We are disenfranchised by the other, terrorized by the other, occupied by the other, threatened by the other, racially profiled by the other, overregulated and overtaxed by the other, deprived of our liberties, clean air, health insurance, or free trade by the other. We are all victims of the other.

This is where our stories have led us in 2016 – to a tale of victims and villains, to giving up on Middle East peace, to Brexit, to the most rancorous and undignified presidential election in our lifetimes. We are entrenched in our stories and on a collision course with the “other.”

What do we do in this situation? Where is the brake pedal? Where is the steering wheel to avoid this spinning, slow motion car wreck ahead?

Tal Becker, a veteran Israeli peace negotiator, warns us: "When two victims meet, each is trapped in his own story and can't see the other side. The only metric of success is seeing the villain capitulate. Success is measured not by achievement, but by whether we can bring the other down."

Obviously, this is not a strategy for either justice or peace. So what do we do? I would say that we begin by checking our moral compasses and asking whether these are really our stories? Maybe we have miscast and mischaracterized our narratives as consolation for our frustration and failure. Maybe it's also the case that this not where our stories end, but only where they begin. Maybe our real stories are deeper, more human, more moral, more elevating.

And maybe, there is one story that we can all still share, that can take our country and our world forward, even with all our challenges and misfortune. As Elie Wiesel so wisely taught us:

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to G-d: "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient."

So, here's a story for us. It's the story of Johnson Ferry Baptist Church in Marietta, Georgia. They have put their politics aside, along with over 1,000 other politically right leaning Southern Baptist churches across the country, who have each adopted a Syrian Refugee family. Johnson Ferry Baptist Church rented and furnished an apartment, is taking family members to doctor's appointments, tutoring children in their schoolwork, and teaching everyone in their adopted family English, beginning with sticky notes that cover and name every possible surface in the apartment.

Dr. Russell Moore, a leader in the national Southern Baptist Convention, explained the radical political move of their church this way:

It's not unusual that we have politicians timid in the face of fear. But the task of the church is a different one. The church is called to see the image of God in all people and to minister Christ's presence to all people. That's what churches are doing."

Which is why is a construction manager in Marietta, Georgia is teaching English to a family of Syrian Refugees. Because his church gave him a story with a

moral imperative – “to see the image of God in all people and to minister Christ’s presence to all people.”

And this is where our controls are found – the brakes, the steering wheel of planet earth and human civilization. We need to dig deep, beneath the topsoil of fear, of victimhood, of the reactive political and personal instinct to turn inward and take care of our own. Because none of that is our real story.

Here is our real American story:

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights...*

And here is Israel’s real story:

*The state of Israel ...will be based on the precepts of liberty, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel.*

And here is our Jewish story:

*You know the heart of the stranger, having yourself been strangers in the land of Egypt.*

*Justice, justice shall you pursue.*

*What is hateful to you, do not do to another.*

These are our stories – the embers that Elie Wiesel salvaged from the ashes of our darkest and most horrific tales. He once wrote that: “The opposite of love is *not* hate, it is indifference.” He taught us that indifference, failure to act toward another with compassion, is the greatest crime of humanity. Our stories may begin with slavery in Egypt or in the death camps of the Holocaust, but they don’t end there. Our stories, to be true, have to point us to a higher place. They have to bring us together and not rend us apart.

As Rabbi Donniel Hartman, president of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, recently wrote to his fellow Israelis:

*...another path stands before us – instead of perpetually arming ourselves with the tools to justify why it is ‘their fault,’ ...our leadership must lead by stating, restating, and restating yet again, a commitment to peace and a willingness to cease all actions which undermine the ability of one day achieving this peace.*

The fact is, we know that sometimes war is necessary, that sometimes increased security of a country’s borders, or even around a synagogue, can be necessary. But my message to you on this Yom Kippur is that our story doesn’t end with

fears and factions, victims and villains. Our story ends with the Prophet Micah that, "One day all shall sit under their vine and under their fig tree, and none shall make them afraid."

On these *Yamim Noraim*, these Fearful Days, I say to you that we cannot be labeled by fear, or conduct diplomacy from fear, or ignore suffering out of fear, or break apart over fear, or govern, or even vote from fear. For, this is not our story and it must not animate our belief or actions. Our story, in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, is that, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

This Yom Kippur, the shofar declares that peace and justice *are* still possible, and we Jews never lose hope. That is our *real* story!

And "God made man because He loves stories."