

Telling Stories at Rosh Hashana: The Orality of Jewish Tradition

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Throughout Tanakh, there are indicators of the great importance placed on the senses in the Jewish tradition. The sacred texts refer to various textures, colors, fragrances, sounds and foods, appealing to each of the senses - and beyond. An example of the beyond we find in Shmot 20:15: After receiving the Ten Commandments, the Israelites 'see' or 'witness' thunder, forging the senses of seeing and hearing together for this powerful awe-inspiring experience.

All the Jewish holy days, too, involve the senses with the various rituals and ritual objects used to heighten the beauty of each yom tov. Just to give a few examples, there's the smell of the fragrant etrog and myrtle at Sukkot; the taste of wine at Pesach; the sight of the lighted Havdalah candle as Shabbat is ending; the taste of matza at Pesach; and the vocal sound of L'Chaim when a blessing over wine is recited. With all of the emphasis on the senses in our sacred texts and on our sacred days, perhaps we can call Jews the People of the Senses (in addition to being the People of the Census).

From the beginning, sound has been a significant sense emphasized both through specific sounds, such as the golden bells on the hem of the High Priest's robe (Shmot 28:34) and the orality exhibited in the dialogic exchanges in Torah and the dialogue of the rabbis in the Talmud.

Biblically, the world was created with the spoken word ("Blessed is He Who Spoke, and the world came into being - blessed is He. Blessed is He Who maintains creation; blessed is He Who speaks and does..."). At the time of the giving of the Written Law (*Torah shebikh'tav*), God also gave to Moshe the Oral Law (*Torah sheb'al peh*). During the centuries when the Talmud remained as the Unwritten Torah, teachers/scholars, called *Tannaim* (Aramaic for "repeater"), transmitted these teachings orally. Often referred to as "living books," these *Tannaim*, who lived in the first two centuries C.E., during the Talmudic period, served as an important link between the periods of the oral and the written texts. Written texts of the Oral law had been interdicted up to that time (Elman, 1994, p. 302). The Talmud was finally codified in 2nd-3rd C.E. From then to the present, the Jewish people have had a dynamic compenetration between text and the oral tradition. There is even a 'warning' in *Eruvin* 54a that one

should study with a loud [sounded] voice in order to retain the learning. Throughout the Torah, orality and the spoken word are reinforced by the repetition of the aural verbs ‘speak,’ ‘listen,’ ‘hear,’ and so on. In addition to the orality of the structure of these texts, there are clues throughout the Torah text that oral speech, especially dialogue, along with hearing/listening, are emphasized and valued.

Several selected examples from the Torah (English translations are adapted from Everett Fox’s *The Five Books of Moses*) highlight orality, with the dual emphasis on speaking and listening:

[Moshe] took the account of the covenant and read it in the ears of the people. They said: All that the Lord has spoken, we will do and we will hearken!

Shmot 24:7

וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה בְּאָזְנֵי הָעָם
וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָּל אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' נַעֲשֶׂה
וְנִשְׁמָע:
שמות פרשת משפטים כד:

While hearken (*v'nishma*) may mean “obey,” it also can mean “listen!” since the root is the same as *Shma* (hear or listen). Similarly, in Sefer Devarim, God speaks to Moshe and tells him:

if you hearken (tishma) to the voice of the Lord your God... It is not in the heavens, (for you) to say: Who will go up for us to the heavens and get it for us and have us hear it, that we may observe it? And it is not across the sea, (for you) to say: Who will cross for us, across the sea, and get it for us and have us hear it, that we may observe it? Rather, near to you is the word, exceedingly, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it

Devarim 30:10, 12-14

כִּי תִשְׁמַע בְּקוֹל ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוֹמֵר מִצְוֹתָיו וְחֻקֹּתָיו
הַפְּתוּכָה בְּסֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה הַזֶּה כִּי תָשׁוּב אֵל ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ
כָּל לְבָבְךָ וְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ: ... לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא
לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲלֶה לְנֹוֹ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וְיִקְחֶהָ לָּנוּ וְיִשְׁמַעְנוּ
אֹתָהּ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה: וְלֹא מֵעֵבֶר לַיָּם הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲבֹר
לָּנוּ אֵל עֵבֶר הַיָּם וְיִקְחֶהָ לָּנוּ וְיִשְׁמַעְנוּ אֹתָהּ
וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה: כִּי קְרוֹב אֵלֶיךָ הַדְּבָר מְאֹד בְּפִיךָ וּבְלִבְבְּךָ
לַעֲשׂוֹת:

דברים פרשת נצבים לי-יד

So Moshe spoke in the ears of the entire assembly of Israel the words of this song, until they were ended: Give ear, O heavens, that I may speak, hear (v'tishma), O earth, the utterance of my mouth. Let my teaching drip like rain, let my words flow like dew, like droplets on new-growth, like showers on grass.

Devarim 31:30; 32:1-2

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה בְּאָזְנֵי כָּל קְהַל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵת
דְּבָרֵי הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת עַד תִּמְּוּם: הֲאִזְנִינוּ
הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאִדְבַּרְהָ וְתִשְׁמַע הָאָרֶץ אִמְרֵי כִּי:
יַעֲרֹף כַּמָּטָר תִּזְלַח כַּטֶּל אִמְרֵתִי
כְּשִׁעִירִים עָלַי דְּשֵׁא וְכַרְבִּיבִים עָלַי עֵשׂוּב:
דברים פרשת וילך פרק לא

Focusing on Rosh Hashana, the sense of sound, specifically that of the shofar, is central to this High Holiday. That distinctive all-encompassing sound enters the heart and resounds deeply in the *neshamah*. As it says in Bamidbar 29:1, “... You shall observe it as a day when the horn is sounded.” In the *Unetaneh Tokef*, it is written, “The blast of the shofar calls out, and a small, quiet voice is heard.” Each of those calls brings forth from the shofar-blower almost-human sets of weeping and longing. It becomes a call to review our lives, remember those who brought us life and also those who had great influences on us, to reexamine our values and actions, to reflect on our assumptions, to renew our energies for mitzvot, and repent so that we may do *teshuvah* – to return to G-d as a more worthy person.

As we move through the Days of Awe it is a time to use our voices to better ourselves and renew our lives – above all, to use our spoken words. Walter Ong (1982) writes, “The spoken word is always an event, a movement in time, completely lacking in the thing-like repose of the written or printed word” (p. 33). He observes: “Sight isolates, sound incorporates...” (p. 72). There is no substitute for the dramatic

sound of the shofar and the sound of the human voice chanting prayers and also telling stories. It is the sound of the human voice that transmits learning and memory. It is through the voice, a person's exquisite musical instrument, that the words create technicolor worlds that remain long-lasting memories.

Stored memories are the key to life-review stories. We all have plenty of story-producing memories, once we retrieve them, activate them, and then keep them active by telling our stories. The legacies we inherited from our parents may come through only as we review their actions, way of life, and the stories told in the family.

In *A Celebration of American Family Folklore* (Pantheon Books, 1982), Wayne Dionne expresses the wish many of us have about listening and remembering the exchanged stories at family gatherings: "I remember my relatives talking and talking and talking, and yet as a kid, I didn't listen. I'd love to go back now and listen" (p. vii). Rosh Hashana, a time to sit around a table with people and talk, restores this focus on the oral tradition to tell and listen to our family stories. Storytelling is always a dynamic interactive experience, whether in the synagogue, in the classroom and in the home.

Along with the study of sacred texts, storytelling in the oral tradition can be a powerful tool in transmitting the faith, history, values and traditions of the Jewish People. While the written word is greatly revered and provides a rigid framework for the religion, the spoken word remains a key focus in Judaism and has always been treated with respect, as Mishlei 25:11 illustrates: "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver." "Apples of gold" may be the content of the word, its weight and value after generations of gathered wisdom, while "settings of silver" may be the verbal form and frame – much of which, in Judaism, has already been established for millennia.

The Jewish People has a rich oral tradition of personal and family stories, as well as sacred stories and traditional folktales. We need to retell all of these stories, to review the values our people lived by and to restore our balance in life so we can fulfill our potential and grow fully into our names. What better time to do this than at Rosh Hashana.

The first story we must start with, then, is that of our name and retrieve the story of who we were named after and why that name. Our name is the longest and shortest story we can tell. It reveals so much of who we become and what characteristics we grow to own. In three sources, *Kohelet Rabba* 7:3, *Tanhuma Vayakhel* 1, and in *Midrash Shmuel* 23, it says in essence that each of us has three names: the name given to us, the name others give us, and the name we give or make for ourselves. Our names are a blessing.

Rosh Hashana is closely connected to me because my name is found in the First Book of Samuel (I Samuel 1:1-2:10), the Haftorah read on the first day of Rosh Hashana. In this narrative, Elkanah has two wives, Peninnah and Hannah. This is the archetypal trio that mirrors the reading of Abraham with Sarah and Hagar that we read on the first of the two days (Bereshit 21:1-34). In the biblical story, Peninnah is the fertile wife who is not as loved as the barren wife Hannah. Peninnah is the vilified wife because she taunted Hannah for her barrenness and "vexed her sore" (I Shmuel 1:6). You might then say Peninnah was unkind, insensitive, and unjust to her "rival".

However, I have turned this dilemma over and over throughout the years trying to understand why my parents gave me the name Peninnah, even though it was my father's mother's name Perel. Why would they give me a name that I would not want to own or live up to – to be like Peninnah? I knew Peninnah

meant “pearl”. Suddenly, one day I realized that a pearl is created through an irritant, a grain of sand, serving as the catalyst to initiate the process of creating the pearl. Only then are the luminous layers added on one-by-one to form this precious jewel. If Peninnah, the irritant, had not taunted Hannah, Hannah would not have found her strength to pray even harder to God for a child with such *kavannah*, mouthing a prayer without sounded words and deep tears. Remember the priest thought Hannah a drunken woman. (It is said that Hannah’s weeping is reflected in the broken blasts of the shofar.) Because only then does God hear Hannah’s prayer and open her womb and she gives birth to Samuel. She becomes fruitful as a result of the creative catalytic force of Peninnah. That is a splendid legacy for me to continue so as to inspire and instill Jewish values and traditions through my stories. I have become Peninnah.

More recently I discovered the concept of a person’s *pasuk*, a verse in Tanakh that begins and ends with the first and last Hebrew letters of one’s name, and connects that person’s name with Torah. My son, Hazzan Mordechai Schram and his wife, Sonia Gordon-Walinsky, a Jewish artist/calligrapher (pasukart.com), researched a *pasuk* for me and chose Mishlei 31:26: “Her mouth is full of wisdom, her tongue with kindly teaching.” Sonia then created for me an artistic rendering of that *pasuk* with both Hebrew and English texts surrounding my name in Hebrew.

In the meditation, “*Elokai Netzor*” found at end of the *Amidah*, it is the tradition for a person to say their name *pasuk* before “*y’hi’yu l’ratzon imrei phi and oseh shalom.*” At the end of life, according to tradition, when a person reaches the Gates of Gan Eden, that person will be asked for his/her *pasuk*.

There is a story about Reb Zusya of Hannipol who felt he had failed because he was not a teacher like Moshe or a scholar like Akiva. When G-d saw Zusya so down-fallen, G-d says to him, “Zusya, in the World-to-Come, the angel at the gate will not ask you why you were not Moshe or why you were not Akiva. The angel will ask you only, ‘Were you Zusya?’” Each one of us, in reviewing the story of our lives, especially at Rosh Hashana, can anticipate how we would answer that question.

There are many folktales that focus on various themes and motifs explored on Rosh Hashana, such as “God wants the Heart” (*rakhmana lieba ba’ee*), *teshuva*/forgiveness, *selichot*, tears, *tzedakah*/charity, justice, trying to understand G-d’s ways. At the end of this article, I have compiled a selected bibliography of stories that incorporate these various themes of Rosh Hashana. There are also many biblical and Talmudic stories as well as *midrashim* about the various characters in the Torah readings for the two days. I also suggest several books that contain these types of stories. After all, *Bereishit* is a narrative filled with many relationships and the dynamics between people that we constantly wrestle with and that continue to connect to our lives.

All of our stories - personal and family stories, sacred stories and traditional tales – have enriched the lives of all people and created in us a need to continue the tradition of “planting” stories in the minds and hearts of our next generation. Taking a storytelling approach to life review makes our heritage and history vital because it gives context. When a generation can empathize with its ancestors’ feelings, share their ideas and sorrows, the lessons of their lives will live on. The Torah associates wisdom with the heart, not with the mind. So we must direct our stories to the heart, where truth and wisdom can be found by those who care to listen. There is always a time for telling stories, and there is always a story to fit the time. Storytelling not only reflects but perpetuates life. Rosh Hashana is that right time to tell stories, listen to stories and share our lives through stories.

STORIES FOR ROSH HASHANA

“Elijah’s Mysterious Ways” in Peninnah Schram’s *Tales of Elijah the Prophet*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, an Imprint of Rowman & Littlefield, 1991. pp. 3-6.

“Gates of Tears” in Peninnah Schram’s *Stories Within Stories: From the Jewish Oral Tradition*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, an Imprint of Rowman & Littlefield, 2000. pp. 49-50.

“A Question of Balance” in Peninnah Schram’s *Jewish Stories One Generation Tells Another*. . Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, an Imprint of Rowman & Littlefield, 1987. pp. 323-325.

“The Pomegranate Seed” in Peninnah Schram’s *The Hungry Clothes and Other Jewish Folktales*. NY: Sterling Publishing, 2008. pp. 25-29.

“If Not Still Higher” in Esther Hautzig’s *The Seven Good Years and other stories of I. L. Peretz*. Philadelphia: JPS, 1984. pp. 71-77.

“The Cottage of Candles” in Howard Schwartz’s *Gabriel’s Palace: Jewish Mystical Tales*. NY: Oxford University Press, 1993. pp. 124-126.

“The Seven Good Years” in Beatrice Weinreich’s *Yiddish Folktales*. (Translated by Leonard Wolf) NY: Pantheon, 1988. pp. 167-168.

“The Apple Tree’s Discovery” by Peninnah Schram and Rachayl Eckstein Davis in Peninnah Schram’s *Chosen Tales: Stories Told by Jewish Storytellers*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, an Imprint of Rowman & Littlefield, 1995. pp. 3-4. (To be published as an illustrated book by Kar-Ben/Lerner Publishing, January 2012.)

“The Journey of a Lost Princess” by Debra Gordon-Zaslow in Peninnah Schram’s *Chosen Tales: Stories Told by Jewish Storytellers*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, an Imprint of Rowman & Littlefield, 1995. pp. 126-131.

“The Most Precious Thing in the World” by Joan Sutton in Peninnah Schram’s *Chosen Tales: Stories Told by Jewish Storytellers*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, an Imprint of Rowman & Littlefield, 1995. pp. 371-375.

“The Samovar,” “The Shepherd,” and “Rabbi Eleazar and the Beggar” in Eric A. Kimmel’s *Days of Awe: Stories for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur*. NY: Viking, 1991.

“More Valuable Than Gold” in Daniel and Chana Sperber’s *Ten Best Jewish Children’s Stories*. Jerusalem, Israel: Pitspopany Press, 1995. pp. 28-29.

“Drawing the Wind: A Rosh Hashanah Tale” in Howard Schwartz’s *The Day the Rabbi Disappeared: Jewish Holiday Tales of Magic*. NY: Viking, 2000. pp. 15-21. Howard Schwartz’s “The Cottage of Candles: A Yom Kippur Tale” is also in this volume, pp. 22-27.

For more stories on the various themes of the High Holidays, such as Charity, Faith, Repentance, Prayer, etc., you will find references to stories, along with books where you can find these stories, in this excellent resource book: Elswit, Sharon Barcan. **The Jewish Story Finder: A Guide to 363 Tales Listing Subjects and Sources**. Foreword by Peninnah Schram. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2005.

BOOKS OF BIBLICAL-TALMUDIC-MIDRASHIC STORIES

Bialik, Hayim Nahman and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky. **The Book of Legends: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash.** Translated by William G. Braude. New York: Schocken Books, 1992

Bin Gorion, Micha Joseph. **Mimekor Yisrael: Classical Jewish Folktales.** Volume II. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1976.

Ginzberg, Louis. **The Legends of the Jews.** 7 Vols. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909-38.

Goldin, Barbara Diamond. **A Child's Book of Midrash: 52 Jewish Stories from the Sages.** Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1990

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Sperber, Daniel and Chana. **Ten Best Jewish Children's Stories.** Illustrated by Jeffrey Allon. Jerusalem, Israel: Pitspopany Press, 1995

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