

Telling our stories

Two weeks ago, I stood in Chesed Shel Emeth cemetery in St. Louis, the cemetery that made national news last spring when 150 headstones were overturned in an act of vandalism. I visited the graves of Grandma Essie and Grandpa Max, of my great grandfather Charles who died in the great flu epidemic of 1917, and of my great-great grandmother Mary who died in 1894 on August 9- the day I would be born, 65 years later. Standing in that consecrated place, I could revisit the stories of their lives, and indeed of the Jewish community.

We are a people of stories. Each of us has our family stories. And we have our collective stories. This past year we have added to the story of Temple Beth Torah, that little group of families that began 79 years ago in a dairy as Ventura County Jewish Council, then moved to a Coca Cola bottling plant at 500 Channel Dr., and arrived at Foothill and Kimball 54 years ago. We added a new piece to that story with the renovation of our building and a major capital campaign, like the one undertaken in 1984 to build this very sanctuary. The story of the details, the thoughtfulness, and the wonderful camaraderie of the congregants leading this project, now becomes part of our special story.

But our Jewish story is about more than this moment. Indeed, the reason we are together on this night of Rosh Hashanah is so that we can begin to re-tell a story that begins with the world's creation, which tradition says happened on this very night, 5,778 years ago. The world was created, humankind was created six days later. Our best storyteller is the Torah, telling us about visionary people like Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, Moses and Miriam. Each time we pick up our prayer book we visit again the narrative of our people. We speak the words and ideals of our Talmudic rabbis, who fashioned our prayers. They turned to God asking for health in their families, for prosperity in their businesses, for abundance in their fields. We will hear their highest vision of a society that cares for the poor, that is honorable in financial matters, that protects the rights of others through judicious laws, and that strives to be close to God by acting in holy ways.

The story of our people is a 4,000- year history, that winds through Middle Eastern lands, Christian kingdoms, the land of Israel. We share a history of

prosperity in Spain-- as well as expulsion. Great academies of learning in Poland-- as well as annihilation. Political involvement in the age of Enlightenment that saw our forbearers active as communists, socialists, anarchists, Zionists, hasids and secularists. 360 years ago, Jews arrived on the shores of North America and begin to build synagogues. Our story has grown to be that of almost 6 million American Jews but as diverse in our backgrounds, religiosity, political beliefs, and family structures as can be imagined.

But in that diversity, there are common stories that unite most of us. Every other year, when I take our teens to Washington, D.C., we visit the U.S. Holocaust Museum. We walk through a wooden-slat boxcar, a relic and reminder of the millions of our people packaged like animals and sent to be exterminated. There is nothing but anguish for me, in watching our children stand in that boxcar, absorbing the incomprehensible. And there is our common story as we stand in Israel, as members of this Temple did 8 years ago, with three generations reading Torah on a Thursday morning by the Kotel. That is our story of redemption, belonging, and a people coming home. As Jews, wherever we live, we have a common story that inclines us to speak out for justice throughout the world and stand up against racism and inequality. This is part of our story.

Sometimes our stories are too painful to tell. For 20 years after the Holocaust, few books were written by survivors- Anne Frank's diary was perhaps the exception. The Jewish world was too traumatized to talk about it, think about it, explore it, re-live it. This was especially true in Israel: put it behind us and survive. Only in the 1960s could we begin to process the enormity of what happened to 6 million Jews over 12 years in central and eastern Europe.

And if society can choose when and how to tell a story, then society can also take a role in ignoring stories. When I grew up, the American history I learned touched on slavery in the Revolutionary War period as the "slaves, rum, cotton" triangle; and because I grew up in St. Louis, I learned about the Missouri Compromise- that Missouri would be admitted to the Union in 1820 as a slave state if Maine was admitted as a free state. And then there was the Civil War of 1861, and the Civil rights era of the 1960s and MLK. And that was the story of black people in America.

And then, about ten years ago, I went to the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati. What I found standing in the lobby devastated me. It was a slave pen, 2 story, 20 feet by 30 feet, from 1830. Found fully standing in Kentucky, it had been transported and placed in the lobby of the museum. As I walked around I imagined, that within this wooden hut, men and women and children of African origin had been chained and shackled, and kept, to be sold to slave owners. The pain of standing in the presence of such evil history touched me in exactly the same way I felt when I walked through the railroad car at the Holocaust museum. In these wooden boards were the stories of destroyed lives- Jewish and African.

In the 21st century, I have noticed, museums and learning centers have opened to tell the African-American story. Where once there was silence there are now Civil Rights museums in Atlanta, and Birmingham; the Rosa Parks Museum dedicated to the bus boycott in Montgomery. As a kid, walking through the Old Courthouse in St. Louis, there was a poster about Dred Scott, the slave who sued for his freedom and lost in 1857 at the Supreme Court. Now, the hallways and old courtroom are dedicated to telling the story about blacks in St. Louis, and the history of local slavery. The old courtroom tells the courageous story of Dred and Harriett Scott, and Peter Blow's family, the white owners who fought for more than a decade for Dred and Harriet Scott's freedom. Outside the courthouse stands a new bronze statue of the Scotts.

Why was this not here when I was growing up? I think for the same reason that it is only in 2017 that the National Museum of African American History & Culture has opened on the National Mall. I used to wonder why, a block off the National Mall, there was a Museum to a Holocaust that took place on foreign soil, and finally a Museum of the Native American, but no museum about African American history. I think the answer is one that Jews, among all people, can personally understand. We who castigate countries like Austria and Hungary, who do not accept nor teach their role in the Holocaust and the extermination of their Jews, know that it is the exceptional country that faces their racism and admits their immorality. It has taken a long time to build a national museum that talks about the African American experience- it's pain and its many accomplishments.

Are we finally able to talk insightfully about how and where racism continues to impact our society?

Perhaps this is the moment when America is ready to understand the African American community of today, by understanding the African American story of yesterday. And perhaps, just as Jews took 20 years to give voice to our holocaust, it has taken African Americans time to give voice to the impact of the horror of having the selling and abusing of their ancestors be at the center of a thriving international economy for almost 500 years that flourished in over half the world. Walking through the Holocaust museum in Washington, D.C., I am always struck at how packed the museum is with *not just us*, but people of every race and nationality. Those who are packing the new National Museum of African American History & Culture are, too, of all backgrounds and races, and they are queuing up at 6 a.m. and waiting months to get highly coveted tickets. Maybe it is time to understand their narrative, with new ears and eyes.

We are a people of stories. We know the power of telling stories- it's what we do tonight, as we open our machzors, it's what we do when we sit down with our haggadahs every Pesach. We tell our story to our children- and to the non-Jews who we proudly invite to sit at the table with us. Now, it's our turn to be the guest at other's tables. We can't be afraid to hear the story of black Americans.... or the struggles of Dreamers and undocumented families living and working among us. We can't be afraid to hear the fear of Syrian refugees, or the plight of the Rohingas in Myanmar. Their stories do not threaten us, they call upon us for compassion. When we become listeners, we begin to fulfill the most primary commandment we have as Jews, to see others as *b'tzelem Elohim*, robed in the image of God.

May this year ahead be one where we proudly share our Jewish history with our children and grandchildren, and those who need to know the Jewish narrative. And may it be a year where we become willing listeners so that we might respond with fuller understanding... just as Judaism calls us to do.

L'shana tova.