



## IT'S TIME TO TELL A NEW STORY

Shabbat Shemini 5778 – April 13, 2018

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*Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions*, tells the story of thousands of unaccompanied Mexican and Central American children arriving in the United States without papers. All had the same plan: surrender to law enforcement and hope to be granted asylum and permission to stay in the country. Once taken into custody, the children were interviewed by volunteers, like Valeria Luiselli (the author of the book) who were required to follow a script of *40 questions* to determine if the children would qualify for refugee status, or, be deported without trial.

As part of the story, Luiselli shares her own family's experience driving through Arizona towards the border with Mexico. They agree ahead of time not to mention Luiselli's research as the reason for their trip. Luiselli is a Mexican immigrant with only a green card. Her husband and 2 children are citizens. If anyone asks, the parents are writers researching material for a Western. When a border policeman does stop them, his only comment (while returning the passports) reflects a mixture of incredulity and derision: "So you came all the way down here for the *inspiration*?"

Luiselli writes, "We know better than to contradict anyone who carries a badge and a gun, so we just say, "yes sir." Because -- how do you explain that it is never inspiration that drives you to tell a story, **but rather a combination of anger and clarity**? How do you say: No, we do not find inspiration here, but we find a country that is as beautiful as it is broken, and we are somehow now part of it, so we are also broken with it, and feel ashamed, confused and sometimes hopeless, and are trying to figure out how to do something about all that."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Valeria Luiselli, *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions* <https://www.amazon.com/Tell-Me-How-Ends-Questions/dp/1566894956>

*Anger and clarity:* It's not the way most of think about our inspiration for story-telling. I tell stories all the time about my twins and it rarely comes from a place of anger.

So, let's be more specific: What motivates us to tell a story that is unpopular? What motivates us to tell a story that does not match up with what everyone else is saying? What drives us to uncomfortable places, to unseat a story that has been told for generations, but, perhaps, can no longer be told. What pushes us to break down all that we have built up – years of investment in understanding certain truths about the world in which we live – when we realize the story is no longer true and representative of our experiences?

Perhaps now we can agree. To tell that kind of story, you need some anger and a bit of clarity.

### **Rescuing stories of heroism**

This week we marked Yom Hashoah – Holocaust Remembrance Day – an opportunity to honor, remember and mourn the deaths of 6 million Jews. The full name of the day is actually 'Yom Hashoah Ve-Hagevurah', literally 'The Day of Remembrance of the Holocaust and Heroism.'

The full name reflects how Israel has shifted in how it chooses to tell the story of those who died during the Shoah. For many years, language about Holocaust victims and survivors focused on extreme acts of heroism, like the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, or extreme cases of submission, such as they went to the gas chambers like sheep to the slaughter.

Yet, as our beloved teacher, Dr. Rachel Korazim, taught us this language was very painful for survivors. It was hard for survivors, like her mother, who lived in Israel after the war, to hear judgment from fellow kibbutzniks who asked, "why didn't you leave sooner?" or "why didn't you fight back?"

Over time, the Israeli government made a deliberate choice to change how children were taught in schools. Informed and influenced by educators, community organizers and spiritual leaders, all of whom spoke with *anger and clarity*, the government invited the ever-growing, changing and maturing population of Israel to consider anew how they might tell the story of the Shoah.

Could heroism could be defined by active resistance and passive resistance? Might we look again at the parent or grandparent who walked stoically to the gas chamber, hand in hand with their children, offering strength and assurance during their final moments together? What do we say of the rabbi who refused the Nazis command to eat pork in front of his community, who then was forced to eat sand, and died a slow and painful death? Are these not acts of Heroism? Are these not moments worthy of remembrance and honor?

What does it take to change a national story whose definition of heroism rendered invisible the heroic moments of compassion, integrity, and faith? *Anger and clarity*. Amidst the pain and heartbreak, people found their voice and began to say aloud, “I know there is a different way to tell this story.”

“Let me begin to tell it.”

### **What does it mean to be “Kosher”?**

This week’s portion, Parashat Shemini, introduces the rules of Kashrut: What we can and cannot eat. For many of us, this section sparks curiosity, but not necessarily fear. While there is no standardization of practice, or even an expectation of observance, Reform Jews have found a common language to describe shared practices:

- I don’t eat pork and shellfish.
- I don’t mix milk and meat.
- I eat non-kosher out, but my home has 2 sets of dishes.
- I make an exception when travelling internationally.
- Organic and local is my version of Kashrut.

On this Shabbat, I’m not asking us to be (re)inspired by a verse about boiling a kid in its mother’s milk. I’m asking all of us to call back Luiselli’s language of anger and clarity, and to reconsider telling a new version of an old story:

- What do we consider “kosher” in today’s society? What is fit or appropriate to be consumed?
- What makes you *angry* about food production, distribution and consumption today: Environmental degradation? Worker’s rights? Animal welfare? Equal access to food? The demonization of those receiving benefits through SNAP (The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program)?
- And what *clearly* needs to change in the way we talk and act around food?

Maybe it’s time to tell a new story about Kashrut.

Rabbi Dalia Marx suggests new guidelines to reflect our changing relationship to food, animals and the environment. It’s not just about cleft hooves and cud, or fins and scales:

Suggested Guidelines of Essential Kashrut<sup>2</sup>

- **Social justice:** “Share your bread with the hungry” (Isaiah 58:7)

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<sup>2</sup> <https://reformjudaism.org/sh%E2%80%99mini-thoughts-kashrut>

- **Nature's preservation:** You shall not destroy (according to Deuteronomy 20:19)
- **Fair treatment of animals:** "You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk" (Exodus 23:19, 34:26; Deuteronomy 14:21)
- **Fair employment:** "You shall not defraud your fellow... The wages of a laborer shall not remain with you until morning" (Leviticus 19:13)
- **Health:** "For your own sake, therefore, be most careful" (Deuteronomy 4:15)
- **Gratitude:** "Let all that breathes praise the Lord, Hallelujah" (Psalm 150:6)
- **Family:** "How good and how pleasant it is that brothers dwell together" (Psalm 133:1)
- **Community:** "And all the people went their way to eat and drink and send portions and make great merriment" (Nehemiah 8:12)
- **Enjoyment and pleasure:** "honey and milk are under your tongue" (Song of Songs 4:11)
- **Moderation:** "If you find honey, eat only what you need, lest surfeiting yourself, you throw it up" (Proverbs 25:16)

A lot of us have written off Kashrut based on the story we've told ourselves for years. Don't give up on this ancient practice of connecting food and holiness. As I said at the High Holy Days, "Engaged Jewish practice encourages curiosity. **It yields space for more questions than answers.** It allows for a practice of Kashrut or Shabbat or Prayer to be "for now" – as in, this is what is meaningful to me, or my family, for now; *if or when its meaning shifts, I'll be ready to notice that change and re-examine my practice.*"

On this Shabbat, take a moment to see if there's a new story to tell.

### **Hearts and Spades**

In 1949, Harvard psychologists conducted an experiment with undergraduates who were shown playing cards from a seemingly normal deck. The students were asked to name each one aloud. A few of the cards in the deck were purposefully mismatched: **a black 4 of hearts, a red 6 of spades.** Students repeatedly mislabeled the card claiming they saw a red 4 of hearts and a black 6 of spades. Later on, moving slower through the cards, they would argue the red 6 of spades was purple or brown, or at least rusty black.

Thomas Kuhn, one the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most influential historians of scientist, would use this study to name the challenge of change in the scientific community. As human beings, we don't know how to process disruptive information, and so we would sooner fit misinformation into our accepted and familiar paradigm than admit that there was a clear outlier.

In her book, *The Sixth Extinction*, Elizabeth Kolbert explains the impact of disruptive information on the scientific community: "Data that did not fit the

commonly accepted assumptions of a discipline would either be discounted or explained away for as long as possible. The more contradictions accumulated, the more convoluted the rationalizations became. But, finally, someone came along who *was willing to call a red spade a red spade*. Crisis led to insight, and the old framework gave way to a new one. This is how great scientific discoveries or, to use the term Kuhn made so popular, ‘paradigm shifts’ took place.”<sup>3</sup>

*Crisis led to insight, and the old framework gave way to the new.*

There are moments that shatter our paradigm, shifting us to see the world anew, even as we cling to the world we thought we knew: the death of a child, an unexpected diagnosis, betrayal.

Far too often though, we remain in place, ignoring the signals and signs that point to a different reality. We tell ourselves: *We are a city, state and nation committed to the values of freedom and equality for all* - with the exception of unequal pay, misogyny and pervasive sexual harassment; systemic racism and violence towards the black body; xenophobia and the targeting of immigrant communities.

Our natural inclination is to toss out or downplay what doesn’t fit into our world view, which makes it hard to initiate change both as the one agitating for change, and as the one who needs a new story to tell.

In this moment that demands re-examination, our practice of Torah study can help. Though we are a tradition that prides itself on fixed stories, passing them down through the generations, we are also a tradition based on close examination and re-evaluation of all that is familiar. We return to the same Torah stories each year with curiosity and openness, knowing that a new story might emerge from the old. We trust that wisdom and guidance, appropriate to this time and place, might be found.

Now, more than ever, using the lens of Torah study, we need the courage and capacity to examine our stories. We need to look carefully to see if the stories we are telling about our lives and our practices are meaningful and reflective of our values.

The same holds true for our city, state and nation – what are the stories we have collectively told for years that demand a new telling?

- The problem of homelessness in LA or the lack of affordable housing...Intractable. Unsolvable. (Sound familiar?) **Join us on Sunday, April 29 at 2:30 here at Isaiah**, and re-examine that story with community members and Councilmember Paul Koretz. In the wake of Measures M, H,

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<sup>3</sup> The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History, by Elizabeth Kolbert

HHH and new linkage fees, this is the moment we begin to tell a different story about access, affordability, compassion and dignity.

- And how long have we been telling ourselves a story about the stability of American democracy? We seem to have forgotten that democracy depends on each generation defending those rights and privileges lest they are taken away for some, if not all. Now is the time to reexamine and rewrite the story of your citizenship. Learn how to register new voters. Be curious and courageous and join us as we build relationships with local politicians.

May this Shabbat help you listen to the anger and clarity you have felt for some time. Perhaps to help you begin to tell a new story, a story that can be heard by others, and a story that might bring about change.

May this Shabbat usher in a *holy* crisis, one that can shake up tradition and paradigm, toss a deck of cards into the air, and begin a new chapter as to how we talk about our lives and the world in which we live.

What is the story that you want to tell? What is the story that you hope will be told?

Shabbat Shalom.