

VaYigash 2017

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 12/23/17

Perhaps the most open ended and engaging way to get to know someone better is to simply say, "Tell me your story..." But of course your own response to that person will never be quite the same when he or she asks the same of you. In part, we decide in every situation just how much of ourselves to share, and what parts of our story are appropriate for sharing with that individual who asks. Still, all of us indeed have a story to tell; a way that we explain to ourselves and to others how we became who we are right now. And so, as we approach the end of the year, I thought now would be a good time to reflect on our own, personal stories of the year gone by; to reflect on the stories we tell ourselves about who we are, what we have experienced this past year, and how we process all of that.

Psychologists call the story we tell about ourselves our "Narrative Identity." Your narrative identity is the internalized memoir you create for yourself - your own personal "myth" as it were. And like other myths, our narrative identity contains heroes who pushed us forward, and perhaps villains too, who held us back from living the life we hoped to have. And like all mythology, major events tend to dominate the plot because those are the kind of stuff we tend to remember. And yet, because it is all based on memory, our narrative identity is very much subject to interpretation. It's all in how we retell it. For one person, for example, a childhood experience like learning how to swim by being thrown into the water by a parent might be his way of explaining how he became the successful entrepreneur he is today, the kind of man who learns by taking risks. For another, that same experience might help to explain why she hates boats and does not trust authority figures. A third might leave the experience out of her story altogether, deeming the entire event unimportant in her overall Narrative Identity.

I read recently of a study by psychologist Dan Mc Adams, an expert on Narrative Identity who does his research at Northwestern University. He studies WHAT people remember about themselves, as well as HOW they choose to remember it. He discovered some rather interesting patterns of how people living meaningful lives understand and interpret their experiences. He found that people who are driven to contribute to society, who have a positive outlook on life, are more likely to tell redemptive stories about their lives, stories that transition from bad to good. On the other hand, people with a lower sense of self-esteem tend to remember stories of failure with little focus on redemption. And that all makes perfectly good sense to us. But here is the truly fascinating take away for me: What the research proves is that it is not so much the facts as the way we choose to tell the story that makes the difference in our overall outlook on life. One of the most important findings of this type of research is the idea that we can edit, revise, and interpret the stories we tell about our lives. The facts, the events don't change, but the way we look at them can. We can literally change our lives by reworking our Narrative Identities.

And I bring all of this to your attention, because one of the most insightful instances of this type of reediting, reinterpreting and revising one's personal story comes from this week's Torah portion. It is the classic example to turning a tragic story into one of redemption and personal fulfillment. I am speaking, of course, of the story of Joseph. He had been sold into slavery by his brothers. He had lost his freedom for thirteen years, and been separated from his family for twenty-two years. It would be understandable if he felt resentment toward his brothers and a

strong desire for revenge. Yet he rose above such feelings, and did so precisely by shifting his experiences into a different frame of mind. Here is what he says to his brothers when he first discloses his identity to them: "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for *Gd sent me* before you to preserve life ... *Gd sent me* before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So *it was not you who sent me here, but Gd.*" (Gen. 45:4-8). His is not a tale of suffering, of loss. He is not looking back in anger.

Further on this is what he says years later, after their father Jacob has died and the brothers fear that he may now take revenge: "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? *Though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good*, in order to preserve a numerous people, as He is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." (Gen. 50:19-21)

Joseph has reframed his entire past, he has successfully rewritten his Narrative Identity. He no longer sees himself as a man wronged by his brothers. He has come to see himself as a man charged with a life-saving mission by Gd. Everything that had happened to him was necessary so that he could achieve his purpose in life: to save an entire region from starvation during a famine, and to provide a safe haven for his family.

This single act of reworking his Narrative Identity allowed Joseph to live without a burning sense of anger and injustice. It enabled him to forgive his brothers and be reconciled with them. It transformed the negative energies of feelings about the past into a positive outlook on his future as well as that of his brothers.

And so I ask you now: What parts of your Narrative Identity would you like to address? What aspects of your own inner story of the year gone by would you like to retell? How would you like to be known - to yourself and others? We can't change what has happened but we can certainly recast our understanding of it. And I believe that growth and maturity make us better at this with each passing year. With each passing year we can come to a fuller appreciation of how we became the people we are today. And, at the same time, by finding the redemptive value in our life experiences, we can help to craft a better tomorrow, for ourselves and for those who share our worlds and are therefore most influenced by our emotions. Give them, and yourself, the gift of a better you. Happy New Year!