Almost a year ago today, a wise woman in this shule said something to me which changed the way I view myself. To be honest, I’ve never even told her that she had this impact on me. But last sukkot I was sitting in her sukkah and I told a story about how bad I am at sport. I finished the story by saying: I’m just not a very physical person. She turned to me and said; you know, sometimes we become the stories we tell about ourselves. And sometimes those stories aren’t even true.

Since this moment I have thought and learned about story telling. Not only the public story telling that we consume through books and media but also about private story telling. Those stories that are in our minds about what type of people we are.

Alain De Botton in his books “Religion for Atheists” and “the News: a user’s manual” comments that stories are how we teach values in society. Today we are obsessed with the news and are constantly checking for updates about what is happening in the world. But the tidal wave of information leaves us overwhelmed and unfeeling and powerless. He argues instead that the stories that are important cannot be constant and they can’t be “new”. Instead we need to hear these stories slowly and repeatedly. We need time to think about these stories in order to absorb their meaning. And that is what we do in shule each week and what we are doing in shule today. We tell the same stories slowly over and over again because they are important. And it is this deliberate repetition that gives them their power and enables us to internalise their messages.

The Hasidic world knows well the power and influence of stories. These Hasidic tales are sometimes dismissed as simple and formulaic. I say that this is not the case and the wise Elie Wiesel acknowledges their power and insights in his collection of Hasidic stories and histories. One of the stories that Wiesel compiled recounts how “when the great Baal Shem Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go to a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would like a fire, say a special prayer and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Maggid of Mezeritch 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, Moshe-Leib of Sassov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: ‘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 Israel of Rizhin to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: ‘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 tell the story, and this must be sufficient.’ And it was sufficient.”

In the same collection Wiesel recounts how Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, before he died, gave his disciple R’Natan an order to throw his notes into the fire. He wished for his writings to be destroyed because he wanted to preserve their essence. He said: make my tales into prayers; prayers and not relics.

In his book Sapiens, Yuval Noah Harari writes that “Sapiens rule the world, because we are the only animal that can cooperate flexibly in large numbers. We can create mass cooperation networks, in which thousands and millions of complete strangers work together towards common goals. One-on-one, even ten-on-ten, we humans are embarrassingly similar to chimpanzees. Any attempt to understand our unique role in the world by studying our brains, our bodies, or our family relations, is doomed to failure. The real difference between us and chimpanzees is the mysterious glue that enables millions of humans to cooperate effectively.

This mysterious glue is made of stories, not genes. We cooperate effectively with strangers because we believe in things like gods, nations, money and human rights. Yet none of these things exists outside the stories that people invent and tell one another.” He argues that “there are … no nations, no money and no human rights—except in the common imagination of human beings…. Only Sapiens can believe such stories and this is why we rule the world.”

Since sukkot last year I have thought about the stories that we tell about ourselves and whether or not they are true or even useful. Sometimes the stories we tell about ourselves are holding us back. We emphasis the stories that demonstrate how we are unworthy and undeserving. We go over and over in our minds the stories that confirm that “this is just how we are” – we always behaved in this way and there’s no changing.

However through changing the stories we tell about ourselves we can enact actual change into how behave and interact with the world. To this extent there is a value in not only thinking about what we don’t want to be but also about what type of person we do want to be. It is much more effective technique to quit smoking when you have another positive activity that you are seeking to fill your life with such as training towards running your first 5k.

It is not enough on this day to think about the sins we wish we didn’t commit and to regret our actions over the past year. It would also be insufficient for us to resolve today to stop being jealous, and to stop judging others, and to stop being greedy and selfish. We will fail if we merely take away actions without replacing them.

We must think positively about who we want to become. We want to be mindful and compassionate, we want to be patient and then we must start to tell new stories about ourselves, stories about how we diligently work towards being kind and capable.

It is at this point that I also want to add to the story that we tell about today and about what we are doing on Yom Kippur. Sometimes the stories that are told today can make us feel despondent and overwhelmed. Multiple times in the day we announce together our sins. Ashamnu, bagadnu…We tell the story of our failures. And we do this every year. Is there any point in thinking that we can change when we know that if we survive this next year we will be standing here again repenting over the same mistakes?

But the sombre nature of the day does not only need to be understood as an annual recounting of our failures.

The Talmud Yeushalmi attests to this; said Rabbi Abahu: The way of the world is that when one comes to be judged, one wears black clothes, and allows his beard to grow long and unkempt, concerned about the outcome of his case. This is not the case concerning the People of Israel. The Book of Life and Death are before us, who will live and who will die. And yet, we wear white, we wrap ourselves in white garments, we trim our beards and we believe that the Holy One, Blessed Be He, will act kindly towards us. (Rosh Hashanah 1:3)

There is hope and optimism that can be found in this day. The story that we tell every year in the afternoon is that of Yonah. Yonah is a man who seeks to avoid his task in assisting others to change. But the story is uplifting and empowering. The people of Nineveah listen to what Yonah has to say. They absorb his message and they change.

The message of Yom Kippur is not merely that we have sinned but also that we can be forgiven and that we can change.

Rabbeinu Yonah writes in his book Shaarei Teshuvah that “on holidays, we joyously partake in meals.  Bearing in mind, however, that on Yom Kippur we fast, the law was established that we eat sumptuously beforehand. As we approach Yom Kippur, we eat a hearty meal, full of optimism, belief and joy.” (*Sha’arei Teshuva,* Gate 4, Section 9)

Each year we dedicate this day to providing an accounting to ourselves and to God. It is true that we have failed. But we have also triumphed. If we focus only the stories of our unkindness and the hurt we have caused others we will fool ourselves into thinking that we cannot change. But this is not true. We must also give an accounting of the progress we have made in this past year, no matter how small.

Rav Kook writes in his commentary to the Mishna “that just as there is great value to the confession of sins… there is also great value to the confession of mitzvot (our positive deeds), which gladdens the heart and strengthens the holy paths of life!”

Rabbi Avi Weiss has taken this wisdom and collected it into a prayer and it is with this prayer that I will conclude:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| We have loved, We have blessed, We have grown, We have spoken positively. | אָהַבְנוּ, בֵּרַכְנוּ, גָּדַלְנוּ, דִּבַּרְנוּ יֹפִי |
| We have raised up, We have shown compassion, We have acted enthusiastically, We have been empathetic, We have cultivated truth. | הֶעֱלִינוּ, וְחַסְנוּ, זֵרַזְנוּ, חָמַלְנוּ, טִפַּחְנוּ אֱמֶת |
| We have given good advice, We have respected, We have learned, We have forgiven, We have comforted, We have been creative, We have stirred, We have been spiritual activists, We have been just, We have longed for Israel. | יָעַצְנוּ טוֺב, כִּבַּדְנוּ, לָמַדְנוּ, מָחַלְנוּ, נִחַמְנוּ, סָלַלְנוּ, עוֺרַרְנוּ, פָּעַלְנוּ, צָדַקְנוּ, קִוִּינוּ לָאָרֶץ |
| We have been merciful, We have given full effort, We have supported, We have contributed, We have repaired. | רִחַמְנוּ, שָׁקַדְנוּ, תָּמַכְנוּ, תָּרַמְנוּ, תִּקַּנּוּ |