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**What is Your Story?**

by Rabbi Wesley Gardenswartz  
Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

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One fine day this summer, I was visiting my 90-year old mother in her continuous care community in Denver. I had a car, so I said to her, I'll take you anywhere you'd like to go. We could go to the Botanical Gardens, to a museum, to the movies, whatever you'd like. She thought for a moment, and then her eyes lit up. What I would really love to do is go back to our old house, to our old store, to our old shul, and to see them all one more time. These were places that belonged to my family's distant past that we had not been back to in more than 30 years.

I have been thinking about my mother's impulse, to revisit her past, to inhabit for a moment what once was and can be no more, and what that means not only for a person who is 90, but for all of us, at all ages and stages of our lives. All of us have the need to see our life as a story that matters, a story that has a dramatic arc, a story that goes somewhere and stands for something important.

The main prayer on the high holidays, *u'netaheh tokef*, tells us that our lives are a *sefer zichronot*, a book of deeds, a book of memories. But the problem is that those stories all have so much change. And loss. We all have that old house we no longer live in. How shall we understand our life story when we experience change and loss?

One of the heroes of the High Holidays, our father Abraham, teaches us to ask ourselves three questions.

The first has to do with place. What are the important *places* in your life? After all, Abraham's story famously begins with a *change of place*. *Lech lecha*. Go forth from your

native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. Abraham's life story cannot unfold unless he leaves Mesopotamia and moves to Israel.

What is *your place*? The resonance of place is deeper than the city we choose to live in.

This year I attended a full-day seminar at the Seminary on changes in Jewish family life. The most compelling part of the day was a panel discussion of people who shared stories of different complexities in their family lives. One speaker was a professor I had had at the Seminary.

When it was his time to speak, he shared a complexity that utterly stunned me. He said: I am an alcoholic. He shared his story of hitting rock bottom, and how his alcoholism threatened to cause him to lose all that he held dear, and how what saved him was Alcoholics Anonymous. AA was his place. Every week for over twenty years, a sacred spot in his weekly calendar has been his AA meeting. That place allowed him to give his gifts, to his family, and to his students at the Seminary.

What is *your place* that allows you to give *your gifts*? Perhaps the gym is your place to get healthy and stay healthy. Perhaps the daily minyan is your place to get spiritually grounded every day. Perhaps you have a get away that you go to a few times a year that recharges you that is your place. You have a studio that summons your creativity, you have a classroom that summons your love of teaching, you have a hospital that summons your gifts as a healer. Our first question in conceiving of our life as a story is: what are the *places* that make you you?

The second question Abraham teaches us to ask is: what is *the purpose* of our life? Abraham's purpose was laid out right at the outset: *ve'hyeh berakha*, you shall be a blessing. As descendants of Abraham, our purpose somehow has to involve our being a blessing. How do we do that?

I saw a beautiful response to this challenge when I was attending a Bible class with my mother in her continuous care community. We walk into the room, and there are a total of 18 students, including me. Fifteen of the 18 are in wheelchairs, two, my mother and another woman, use walkers. Many of the residents have oxygen machines. There are a lot of appliances around. And, when we get there, for the 10:30 class, there was no denying that a strong majority of the learners were sleeping in their wheelchairs. That was the context that the rabbi of Shalom Cares, Rabbi Steven Rubenstein, found when he walked into the room. Now how do you bring it on a day like that?

We're not rabbis at a continuous care community, but most of us have faced our version of this problem--a hard long slog of an ordinary day where it is easy to see it not going well. If we can figure out how to bring our best to that hard long slog of an ordinary day, we can figure out how to be a blessing.

Here is what Rabbi Rubenstein did. He shared that the topic of the class was *kavod Adonai*, the glory of God. His sleeping students were still sleeping. He shared passages from the Torah about the glory of God. His students were still sleeping. He shared passages from the Talmud. Still sleeping. He quote Heschel about the glory of God. Still sleeping. Lord, I thought to myself, how does he do it? How does he get up in the morning to teach students who are literally sleeping? And yet, through it all, he kept talking about the glory of God as if it were the most important topic in the world, and there was no place he would rather be than here, in Shalom Cares, teaching it.

And then he brought his full proof strategy for waking his learners up. He had a large screen set up where he could play a number of music videos whose main word was glory. He played a young Elvis Presley singing glory Halleluyah. He played a young Bruce Springsteen

singing Glory Days. He played the song Glory from Rent. He played Adele singing Glory, country singers like Johnny Cash singing Glory, and now they were all wide awake and alert.

And then Rabbi Rubenstein turns to the class and says: Kavod Adonai, the glory of God, is in you, and it is in here, among all of us, and it is in the world. Go out from here, and feel the glory of God.

That is being a blessing. Our purpose is to figure out how, when we are having a long hard slog of a day, how when we face our own version of obstacles and impediments and sleeping students in wheel chairs, we can figure out how to be a blessing.

What is *our place*?

What is *our purpose*?

And the third question Abraham inspires us to ask is: who are *the people* in our life, are we good with those people, how do we make our relationships even stronger? That is Abraham's story: how to make it right with Sarah, how to make it right with Hagar, how to make it right with Ishmael, how to make it right with Isaac. All hard. That is a crucial part of our life story: making it right with the people we love.

In the end, those people, those relationships, are what our life is all about. Which brings me back to that fine summer day when I took my mother back to her, and our, old life.

We went to our old house. The young woman who lives there was kind enough to let us in. However, she had four Doberman pinchers. The whole scene was a bit ironic, my Mom and me back in our old house with 4 dogs barking loudly, because my sibling and I had always wanted a dog, and my mom would never let us get one. All the barking kind of ruined the moment. We went to our old kosher grocery store, which is no longer a kosher grocery store. The building is now vacant. We peered through the window into an empty space. We went to the old

synagogue, but it was sold to an Orthodox yeshiva and was also being rehabbed and we couldn't go in. Our house was not our home, our store was not our store, our shul was not our shul. I could only think of the famous title of Thomas Wolfe's book You Can't Go Home Again.

And then, as we got back into the car to return to Shalom Cares, a bit wistful, my mother had one last request: she had a dear friend who was an old customer named Bernice, now in her 90s, a widow, who still lives in her old home. Could we call Bernice, let her know we are in the neighborhood, and see her? Mom, don't you think it's a little random, calling Bernice out of the blue, all these years later, in the middle of a summer day? Please call her, if she's in I'd like to see her. We called, Bernice was home, and she said she would love to see my Mom. We go to her house and park the car. My mother moves slowly, with her walker. Bernice opens the door and moves slowly, with her walker. These two old and dear friends push aside their walkers to embrace. Bernice, it is so good to see you. Rosyne, it is so good to see you. They sit down over a cup of coffee and catch up, two old friends separated by the ravages of time, but still connected at the heart.

In a world where so much changes, who are the people in our life whose love and friendship will *never* change?

Now here's the thing. When you look at the story of your life when you're my Mom's age, it's not about *changing* your life story. It's about being at peace with the life that has mostly been lived.

But if we are in the full bloom of our life, we can still make mid-course corrections to make sure that our life turns out to be the story we want it to be.

To catalyze your thinking here, I'd ask you after your break-fast to Google two paintings. The first is Norman Rockwell's Thanksgiving feast. The second is his painting called Ruby Bridges.

This summer I read a fascinating book about Norman Rockwell called American Mirror by Deborah Solomon. He became a professional painter/illustrator at the age of 19. From 19 to 69, Rockwell's paintings are overwhelmingly white. They are the happy white family sitting down to their Thanksgiving feast. The white doctor treating his white patients. The white barber cutting the hair of the cute white child.

And then, at the age of 69, he looked out at the world and asked, what is broken that needs fixing, and what can I do to help fix it? His answer, in the 60s, had to do with civil rights. A young girl named Ruby Bridges was the first African American to attend an all-white elementary school in New Orleans as a result of court-ordered desegregation. She had to be escorted by four federal marshals past angry and jeering hecklers. White parents withdrew their children from the school; only one teacher was willing to teach Ruby Bridges, who sat in a classroom alone, with no peers, with only the one teacher who would teach her. Rockwell became the artist of the civil rights movement. His Ruby Bridges shows a dignified and strong African American girl, escorted by four federal marshals, past a wall that contains an unspeakable racial epithet, past a wall that has KKK on it.

When the life story of Norman Rockwell was over, it now had a trajectory: the person who had painted happy white families sitting down to their Thanksgiving feast, at the age of 69, became a champion of civil rights, and he gave his prodigious talents to that worthy cause.

That was Norman Rockwell's trajectory. What about ours?

What changes do we need to start making *today* to place, to purpose, to people, to make sure that, when our life is lived, we will be able to look back at our life and say, yes. I have done my best to be a blessing. *Gemar chatimah tovah.*