

Relational Judaism

Rosh Hashana Morning 5774

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The other day I cried on Facebook. Now that's a bit of an embarrassing admission. I tend not to be very demonstrative – although my children tell me I laugh too loudly in the movie theatre. But I don't cry easily. Ok, "It's a Wonderful Life" does get me every time. Seriously, Zuzu's petals? Sigh. But that's an exception.

This time, though – I kind of lost it. It was a simple YouTube video, forwarded by a fellow rabbi on Facebook. It is not dramatic – in fact, throughout the almost 6 minute animation, not much happens. But it left me a teary mess.

The very short film, called "Danny and Annie"¹ is from StoryCorps – the national project created to inspire people to record each other's stories. The film of Danny and Annie Perasa's self-narrated story was animated and put on the web in 2010. It has been viewed over 2 million times.

"Danny and Annie" tells the true story of an elderly couple, in their own words, who found each other late in life and remained married for 27 years. Over the course of two recordings separated by several years, they tell of love and devotion. Danny, voice crackling through a thick Brooklyn accent describes his daily love letter to his bride, which might even include a weather report. Annie, quiet and composed tells how he checks in every year on the anniversary of their engagement to make sure she hasn't changed her mind. "It's like a beautiful song coming out of a busted old radio" he says "its nice of you to keep it around the house." In 2006, Danny is diagnosed with a fast growing terminal cancer. Their second StoryCorps recording describes his hope for her to find happiness after he's gone – and her decision to walk alone behind his casket. "I walked in with you alone, I'll walk out with you alone" she says.

Their story was broadcast on National Public Radio, the same day that Danny died. Annie has received thousands of condolence letters from listeners. She reads one every day in place of the love letters she used to find from her husband.

In many ways, their story is an ordinary story – two people who maintain a loving relationship in sickness and in health until parted by death. It is extraordinary, though, because it is their's.

¹ "Danny and Annie" from StoryCorps - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNfvuJr9164>

We Jews are a people of stories. Our Torah, the core of Jewish learning, is filled with stories. Not just a book of laws and morality, not just a statement of G-d's revelation and relationship with the people Israel. The Torah is our foundational story. It tells us who we are, where we came from, what we stand for. The characters Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah – Moses, Aaron, Miriam and all their families are richly drawn. They make terrible mistakes and remarkable acts of greatness. They are kind and angry, forthright and manipulative, compassionate and callous. They are human like we are human. Their stories are our stories.

We are a people of stories. Our moral teachings are often told in *midrashim* – the rabbinic mode of storytelling. Some of you know how much I love telling stories. You may have seen me on Sunday mornings expounding to the entire religious school – first graders to fifth – from the rich body of Jewish tales. Rabbi Joseph and I do the same with preschoolers and with teens and for our “Shir Shabbat” and “Shabbat on the Plaza” services. Everyone, I find, loves a good story.

Like so many cultures, storytelling is the Jewish way of passing on morals lessons and cultural ideas. For a “people of the book” we certainly like to talk! And tell a good tale. I can preach the Talmudic injunctions regarding *tzedaka* but it's nothing compared to the *maise* of the rabbi who gives a poor beggar his wife's ring when she's away. Distressed, she berates him for not knowing how valuable it is. The rabbi chases down the beggar, not to take back the ring – but to inform him to get a good price for it!²

I can preach about the importance of community - the Mishnaic injunction in which Hillel commands “Do not separate yourself from the community³” - but nothing illustrates the ideal like the story of the occupant of a small rowboat who tells his worried fellow passenger to ignore that he is drilling a hole in the floorboards beneath him. “After all” he says “I'm only drilling on my half of the boat.”⁴

But it is not just the legends of our people which are profound. There is a secret: we all have a story to tell. In fact, we are filled with stories. Our lives, our loves, our passions, our mistakes – these are stories profound, meaningful, rich. And we rarely tell them.

If Danny and Annie were members of our synagogue, would I have ever known about the simple daily act of writing a love letter? Would you? They might have sat right beside us. We might even have exchanged pleasantries when we walked into the sanctuary this evening. “How are you? How's the family? Summer sure went by quickly, didn't it?” But we would not have known them. Only because Danny and Annie decided to record their story, only because StoryCorps chose to broadcast it – and eventually make it into a short animated film – only because the media gave their ordinary lives a

² Louis I. Newman, *The Hasidic Anthology*

³ *Avot* 2:5

⁴ Seymour Rossel, *The Essential Jewish Stories*

forum, do we know their story. And I cried. I cried in part because there are so many stories none of us know.

Think about your own story. Think about your own passion. What got Danny up in the morning was his commitment to write a love letter to his wife. What gets you up in the morning? What do you care about so much that it gives your life meaning? In a little while, I am going to give you the chance to share it.

Sociologists tell us that we are a disconnected society – that one of our great modern sorrows is loneliness. This seems odd in our hyper-connected world, but perhaps that is part of the symptom. Once we lived in small communities of association, deep family connections where everyone knew each other's stories and business. Now we live in a world of virtual contact and casual connection. I am a fairly active Facebook user, and it is wonderful to keep up with my far-flung friends and colleagues. I even get the occasional insight or link to an article I would not have known about, or see a short film that touches my heart. But like most users, I quickly scroll past any post longer than a paragraph or two. Facebook and other social media sites encourage us to look for quantity of contact, not quality. We can have many Facebook friends and yet very few real friends. Real friends know our stories, real friends share our intimacies. Real friends challenge us when we lose faith in ourselves. With our increasingly busy lives and our increasingly shallow connections we often feel unknown. Alone.

At the same time, our society encourages a deep skepticism of institutions and traditions that used to give our lives meaning and structure. We almost reflexively reject inherited truths, principals of lasting meaning in favor of our own intuition about what is "right." We are passionate in our sense of justice – we just recognize that in our complicated world it is sometimes hard to know that path, or to feel that our actions can be meaningful. We strive to do the right thing, but we feel ineffective. We are lonely in our sense of inaction.

And we are skeptical about the role of G-d in our lives. If we think about divinity or holiness at all, it is often with some anger at what has not been, where we have felt absence. We are lonely even for G-d.

And you thought I hadn't noticed.

In fact, we all have. Judaism, like many modern religious communities, has been looking within – asking if we are doing enough. We envision synagogues as centers of community, as places where we forge deep and lasting relationships with each other. Where clergy are involved in congregant's lives, offering guidance in times of trouble, walking with us in times of sorrow, dancing with us in times of joy. We envision a Judaism of deep relationship and relevance, countering and speaking to our skepticism and inspiring us to find meaning. We envision a Judaism that hears our passions and unites us to expand our abilities as a community to effect the desperately need changes in our broken world.

We envision a Judaism in which G-d is felt in our interaction with others. We envision a Judaism of Relationships. Or, as the scholars are calling it: Relational Judaism⁵.

Many years ago, when we were students at Hebrew Union College in New York, Ida Rae and I were part of a small cohort which began to imagine a different kind of synagogue community. The pilot program we began and eventually implemented in our early careers was called "Synagogue 2000." The idea was to work on what was needed by the year 2000. It has now gone on long enough that the program is called "Synagogue 3000" which sounds really ambitious to me. This project was founded by two rabbis and scholars: our teacher at HUC in New York, Dr. Lawrence Hoffman and Dr. Ron Wolfson of American Jewish University in Los Angeles. It was here that we began to explore ways to make synagogues more friendly, warm and welcoming. Where we spoke of barriers to entry or challenges to participation. Synagogue 2000 did much to lift the best practices around the country and challenged congregations to do better. Long before we came to Portland these practices had begun here at Congregation Beth Israel, and we have done our best over these past few years to make them even more prominent. We are proud of our work and know we can do better. Our Temple board of Trustees has continuously supported the changes that have been necessary and our Temple is continuing to thrive.

But it is not enough.

A new understanding of the needs of our times has emerged over the past several years. That of Relational Judaism. Rabbi Joseph is steeped in this philosophy and practice and she is helping us bring it to fruition. Based on well-established principles of Community Organizing, Relational Judaism recognizes the need of our time to not only feel connected, but to be connected. To recognize that a community of shared values, a community of relationships, a community of passion can do wondrous things for its participants and for the world.

This is what a Relational Judaism can be – a way of connecting to our values and bring profound meaning to our lives. A way to connect with others who share the same or different passions, and whose relationship we treasure. A way of connecting with a Divine Presence which can help us understand the meaning of what it is to be human.

I guess I like little goals.

So here is the vision: This synagogue, our synagogue, not as a place to attend and watch, but a place to experience. This synagogue, our synagogue, as an opportunity to create deep and meaningful relationships – with others around us and with a holy presence we may have trouble defining but which inspires us to act with passion and compassion. This synagogue, our synagogue, as a community

⁵ Wolfson, Dr. Ron "Relational Judaism: Using the Power of Relationships to Transform the Jewish Community" (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013).

where our own story is shared, where we are known and valued and where our values link together to create change.

Synagogues around the country are enacting this vision. From Emanu-El in San Francisco, which created neighborhood based caring communities, to Kehilat Hadar in New York which has helped to found over 70 independent prayer groups around the US. These congregations have been transformed from a place that people occasionally attend to a home of rich connections and meaningful action. To a place where G-d can touch our lives and make us believe again. Every community does it differently. We will find our own way.

I want to base our Temple experience on two concepts of “presence” found in the Torah. “Hineini” and “Panim el-Panim.”

“Hineini” is a term which occurs 22 times in the Torah, 178 times in all the Hebrew bible. It means simply “Here I am,” although it carries with it an additional meaning of “Behold!” “Hineini” – Behold, I am here! I am fully present and ready to listen. Abraham said it, in the Torah reading we just heard, when G-d called to him. G-d said it when making a covenant with Noah. We rarely say it. Think of a moment when you were really present, really listening to another without the distractions of “oh no, what am I supposed to say next?” or “how long is this conversation going to take before I have to get to my next appointment?” I suspect it doesn’t happen often. Torah teaches us to be fully present to another, to stop and say: “Hineini!” I am here and listening to you.

“Panim el-Panim” is a phrase which is much rarer in the Torah – it appears only 3 times. It means “Face to Face.” It describes the remarkable relationship Moses had with G-d – a direct “face to face” encounter as one has with a friend. And perhaps with a friend, when we hear their story, face them with integrity and openness, the Divine Presence is also in that encounter. “Panim el-Panim” means to really “see” another person, to know the Holy Spark placed within each human being.

The synagogue is a place to learn these Torah traits of relationship. “Hineini” – to be present for another. “Panim el-Panim” to openly encounter another. To hear and be heard, to know and to be known. This is Relational Judaism. And I want you to be a part of it.

The normal way of proceeding with a vision is to announce a program. Synagogues, Federations, Jewish institutions: we are good at programs. Here at Temple, we are really good at programs. And I share with you the pride in what we accomplish. Our clergy team, our professional staff, our lay leaders work tirelessly to create programs of the highest quality. We won’t stop. But we also won’t end there. For too long, Jewish organizations have created programs that attract hundreds or thousands. But those people often leave as lonely as they arrived. There was no connection, no relation built in those hours. The question we need to ask is: “Did we engage each person in significant relationship with Jews and Judaism through their participation?”

This is what gets me up in the morning. The possibility that I can touch a life, engage with another person and make things better. I am passionate about helping people. It is in my family history and it is what gives my life meaning. It was this realization which led me to change careers and become a rabbi. Knowing my story changed my life.

Judaism is a religion and a peoplehood of connection. But it is not a passive relationship, it is one of obligation. We owe it to the Jewish people, we owe to our community, we owe it to you to be more engaged. It takes courage and an open heart. Are you ready?

Remember before I asked you to think of what it is that get you up in the morning? What is the passion that drives you? I want to hear the answer to that question. But right now, I want you to tell someone else. So. Stand up. No, really. Find someone you don't know either in front or behind you. Not the person you came here with. Introduce yourself. And tell them a tiny but significant piece of your story: what is it that gets you up in the morning? What is your passion that makes your life meaningful?

PAUSE

Come back. Did you learn something? In that quick example, did you make the beginnings of a connection?

This is the core of Relational Judaism: our ability to be present, our willingness to encounter another. My responsibility is to give us opportunities for connection. It will be in small gatherings in people's homes, in a committee or Board meeting, in one-on-one sessions - even in a Rosh Hashanah sermon. Your responsibility is to take those opportunities; to be courageous and open. So I am asking this of you. Be present. Face another. Share your story. Our people are millennia old; find your story in ours. Our congregation is a hundred and fifty-five years old; link your story with ours. Listen to the heart of another person, share your story and share your passion. Let's not wait for StoryCorps to give us a "Danny and Annie" – our stories can be shared right here. I may not be emotionally demonstrative – but I know what touches our lives, what relieves our loneliness, what opens us to G-d. Through our stories, through our willingness to listen and share, we help to create a Relational Judaism which enhances, deepens, brings meaning to our lives. Be boldly present and generously face another. You will find meaning. You will find connection. You will find the Divine presence – the Holy Sparks hidden in another – touching and reaching the Holy Spark hidden in you. You might even cry. And you will not be alone.