

We all have moments when a thought suddenly occurs to us. We are often quite astonished and, at times horrified, that we have missed the obvious, when we see all of the pieces of a puzzle fall into place in one flash of insight. Such moments are accompanied by a variety of emotions.

We may be overjoyed when we finally make sense of seemingly unrelated or random facts and thoughts; become furious when we think we have been had and did not realize it; saddened by a truth never recognized before. It is moments like these that enable children to leave their immaturity behind as they enter an adult world with fewer illusions than their youth. Let me share one such example.

I recall one such moment from childhood when I was forced to confront myself and those whom I loved. It turned out to be a moment of growth, but it was, nevertheless, painful. I called this moment of insight "a loss of innocence."

In Israel each year at Purim, all the students put on a costume and the teachers tried to figure out who was who. The student who was not identified would get a prize. I was in the third grade. My heart just wanted to win. I remember going to this place with my mother to get a lion costume. I said: "I have the best costume in the world! No one is ever going to figure me out."

I was in the locker room at school putting my costume on for the contest. The kid next to me said: "Everybody's going to know who you are, Aryeh. You take one step, and it's going to be totally obvious who you are." Something clicked way inside of me. It was like my whole universe caved in.

For the first time, I realized everybody was pretending with me. Everybody was lying. My mother was lying, the teachers were lying and the kids at school were lying. They all pretended that nobody was going to figure out who I was. I had had polio. I limped. To me, polio was like wearing glasses. I couldn't see myself limping, so I never even dreamed of that as an issue. This all happened just five minutes before I was to walk out there.

When it was my turn, I stepped out on the field and walked in front of the teachers. I had this lion's mask on, and I cried...And with the mask on, I could just cry, and cry, and cry. I remember it like it was yesterday. I didn't feel badly because I limped; it was because people were lying to me, and it hurt. My whole world lied.

Think for a moment about what this story triggered in your mind. Did you recall a similar hurt? Perhaps your mind wandered to a moment of lost innocence when something you held to be sacred was swept away by a comment that accidentally slipped out. Perhaps you remembered seeing a

parent, a teacher or respected adult commit some petty or thoughtless act that made you realize that he was not the perfect human being you believed him to be. Or did you think of a person who whispered some secret or truth your family was trying to protect you or someone else from?

It is easier to recall how we first learned that we were lied to or protected from the truth, by hearing a story that triggers our memories, then it is to merely dredge up such an incident on command. We not only relate to such stories, but we identify their themes in our own lives. That is the power of stories.

For years, I had noticed how stories have great power to influence people. I have also found that metaphors can free people from their defenses, enabling them to consider what might have otherwise been unacceptable. That's because on the simplest level, all of us have experience with stories.

Stories constitute one of our earliest childhood experiences and we are thus favorably disposed to hearing them and being entertained by them. A story is just a story and need be nothing more, but often it is a great deal more.

I have found that good sound advice is not always useful because it assumes that people are rational about the concerns and issues of their lives. Most of us cannot be rational when it comes to emotional issues because something inside us – over which we have no control – takes over, and in an instant old angers surge, tempers flare, jealousies resurface, and hurts cause us to ache anew. This emotional baggage causes us to reject sound advice outright.

But a story that resonates deeply within us enables us to think about life's hurts and difficulties, just as many of us thought about our own moments of lost innocence when we listened to my story. But stories do more than enable us to think deeply about matters revealed through a flash of insight. They also provide a vehicle for healing.

To my mind, the most dramatic illustration of how tales can heal is the story of the rabbi whose grandfather had been a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Hassidic movement. He was asked to tell a story about the great master. "A story," he began, "must be told in such a way that it constitutes help itself." He said, "My grandfather was lame. Once they asked him to tell a story about his teacher. And he related how the holy Baal Shem Tov used to hop and dance while he prayed. My grandfather rose as he spoke, and he was so swept away with his story that he himself began to hop and dance to show how the master had done. From that hour he was cured of his lameness. That's the way to tell a story!" (Buler, 1947)

Wouldn't it be wonderful if every story had such a dramatic effect? However, most narratives and metaphors work in more subtle and indirect ways that are not always readily identifiable.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said: "Everything in creation has its appointed painter or poet and remains in bondage like the princess in the fairy tale, till its appropriate liberator comes to set it free. The story of the Sleeping Beauty is more than a fairy tale; it is an allegory on the life of every human being who fights his way through life.

The trick for the listener is to allow the hearing of the story to be liberating, to allow the release of something locked up inside.

Another major power inherent to narrative is its power to help the individual identify with the group. Our tradition is filled with examples. The story of the Exodus serves as a constant reminder that we, like our ancestors, are capable of realizing personal redemption from the things that enslave us.

Our tradition teaches us that each Jew is to consider himself as if he or she personally was released from Egyptian enslavement. Deuteronomy 6:23 says: "And he freed us from there in order to take us and give us the land that he swore to give our fathers."

The rabbis of the Talmud emphasized that the reference to "us" was not only to those who experienced the redemption from slavery, but their contemporaries and to all generations.

When we hear the Exodus story, we come to cherish our personal freedom, and we are filled with rage over the injustice of enslavement, just as Moses was when he stood before Pharaoh. And, just as Moses pleaded with God not to destroy the Israelites for the sin of building the Golden Calf, we too should intuit his compassion and make it our own.

When we listen to the description of the bread of affliction, are we moved to help the poor? What do the words, "we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt," speak to us about personal liberation? Do the words of the Haggadah inspire us to break the bonds of bondage or are they merely a nice tale of days gone by.

As an aside, the biblical text we read on Yom Kippur includes all generations, past, present, and future. When Moses addresses the Israelites as they receive the Law, God says: "I make the covenant...not with you alone, but both with those who are standing with us this day...and those who are not with us here this day." As with the Passover story, when we hear these words, we are drawn into the experience of receiving the Law, thus reinforcing the historical immediacy of our tradition.

Have you ever given much thought as to why the story of the binding of Isaac was chosen for the New Year, rather than the story of creation, which might seem like a more relevant choice for the New Year? According to Jewish tradition, the hearing of this story serves as a vehicle for individual redemption.

For some, listening to the story of the binding of Isaac, listening to the ram's horn is the equivalent to the redemptive act of sacrificing the sin offering – the ram which was given in substitute for the offering of Isaac. As one scholar put it:....."For the sake of Abraham's compliance with the Divine command of offering up Isaac, God would accept, hereafter, sacrifices of animals as an atonement for the people's sins. When Abraham asked, "What will happen if they will no longer be able to bring such sacrifices?" God replied, "Let them recite it before Me and it will be for Me like unto the sacrifice." (Gaster, 1928)

However, an individual need not gain a sense of personal redemption from hearing this legend; not everyone gains the same message. Remember that on the simplest level the story of Isaac is just a story and may not provide any flash of insight. Others come away with profound understanding.

Our ancestors developed a novel method of gleaning insights from the biblical narrative. The Hebrew word *Midrash* literally means an explanation. Originally, it was meant to explain difficulties, inconsistencies in the biblical text and to answer questions in stories we are familiar with.

Midrash became the rich literary playground of rabbis and scholars, a fanciful world where their minds run free as they derive new meaning for what is not readily apparent. By reading the biblical text along with the *Midrash*, be it ancient or modern, we can gain a flash of insight into our problems and concerns.

For example, Holocaust survivor Eli Wiesel asked why Isaac, the most tragic of the patriarchs, has a name which means laughter? Wiesel suggested, as the first survivor he had to teach us, the future survivors of Jewish history, that it is possible to suffer and despair an entire lifetime and still not give up the art of laughter.

For some, like Wiesel, thinking about the life of Isaac, reading *Midrash*, presents an opportunity, as do other stories, to gently guide lives in new directions. A parent listening might understand that the binding of Isaac signifies that parents do not murder their children even though they harbor the secret wish to do so at times. Others may gain a richer understanding of the need for children to separate from parents when they realize that at the end of this story the text says: "So Abraham returned home." No mention is made of Isaac returning with his father.

Some listeners who intuitively grasp a deeper meaning from the text may see a portent for Jewish history, with Jews frequently having a knife held at their throats.

A different historic prophesy is offered by Jayseth Guberman (1986), in a poem entitled, "*While Abraham was Binding Isaac.*"

While Abraham was binding Isaac to mount Mariah he was interrupted by
a knock at the door.

"Who could this be?" he thought.

"We don't even own a door," he cried.

So, he continued binding Isaac to the altar.

Again, a knock that could make the deaf hear. Abraham had to stop
and look for the door.

He yelled, "Leave me alone, I'm doing God's work!"

And returned to continue the Akedah. And again, a knock interrupted him,
and again, and again Abraham did not know what to do, whether to
laugh or to cry.

"And then he thought: "This will be the history of my children when we will
be doing our work or God's work.

There will always come a knock at the door to interrupt us, whether we
own a door or not."

And it came to pass, that the history of the Jews is the history of
interruptions.

Still others may intuit in the Akedah an overtly intense relationship
between parent and child in this story as illustrated by Mel Lazarus' comic strip
Momma, which features a rotund woman with big eyes, bushy hair and three
children. One strip featured a telephone conversation between Momma and son
Francis: "Listen, Francis," says Mamma, "I don't like the way you live. You
should...." "Momma," interrupts Francis, "I cannot hear you. We have a bad
connection." Momma continues, "I said you've got to change your lifestyle
and..."

"Huh?," says Francis, "Momma, we have a bad connection. Momma, our
connection, it's not good." Momma's eyes are bulging, she looks worried. "Hold
it Francis," she says, "Is this that same old stuff about the umbilical cord?"

This, to some is not only about Momma and Francis. It is Isaac and
Abraham, and lots of other parent--child relationships.

Let me share one final flash of insight that relates to today's Torah portion.
One gained by the 20th Century theologian, Abraham Joshua Heshel, who
related his realization of what the story meant when he was a mere child
studying with his rabbi in Poland:

"Isaac was on the way to Mount Mariah with his father. Then, he lay on the altar, bound, waiting to be sacrificed."

"My heart," says Heshel, "began to beat ever faster. It actually sobbed with pity for Isaac."

"Behold, Abraham now lifted the knife."

"and now my heart froze within me with fright."

"Suddenly the voice of the angel was heard: `Abraham, lay not thine hand upon the lad, for now I know that thou fears God.'"

"And here I broke into tears and wept aloud."

"Why are you crying?" asked the Rabbi, my teacher."

"You know Isaac was not killed."

"And I said to him," still weeping, "But, Rabbi, suppose the angel had come a second too late?"

Heshel then added, "An angel cannot come late, my friend. But we, made of flesh and blood, we may come late."

This was a moment of truth for young Heshel. We, too, hearing this story, can grasp deeper meanings that enrich our understanding of life and change how we live.

Arthur Koestler once commented that there are three kinds of stories, "Ha ha" stories to amuse and entertain, "Ah-ha!" stories of discovery of ideas and education and "Ahh" stories where the tales are sublime and connect the teller and listener with a golden thread.

May this New Year connect us to the golden thread that not only tugs at our hearts, but changes our lives through a flash of insight. Amen