

Va'era 5780  
Words and Things  
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Early in our morning prayer service, we rise and begin *P'sukei D'zimra* with a *bracha* known as *Baruch She'amar*--Blessed is the One who spoke, and there was the world. It calls us to praise God Who utters reality into being. Many Jewish texts make the same point: God can just say the word, and--*POOF!*--it materializes, in a new and solid reality.

And, God also destroys by fiat. In this week's *parashah*, God begins to reverse the work of Creation, at least in Egypt. The waters God had created now turn to blood, and the creatures God had created to live there now die in that polluted water. Creepy crawlers become infectious vermin, and so on. (*Come to my parashah study after Kiddush today to track the whole progression.*) The destruction God brings to Egypt is part of a narrative that God set in motion much earlier: The Lord said to Avraham, "Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions" (Genesis 15:13-14).

The God of the Chumash creates narrative structures and fills them in with real events. Like God, we also create and destroy through language and the stories we tell. I have talked about this before. What I want to say today is a bit different. I am talking about a mindset, or an underlying structure, that we build unconsciously from our attitudes, emotions, and perceptions and then turn into a story with a particular trajectory. Our sages teach, "With ten utterances the world was created," and I am saying that we, too, create worlds, if you will, built on word-thought progressions. In Mishlei (Proverbs 18:21), we learn, "*Mavet v'chayim b'yad halashon*"-- Death and life are in the hands of the tongue. We develop our visions, we hope or despair, according to the language we use to code our experiences.

On this Shabbat, I am so saddened by the death of our beloved Herman Goldstein, z"l. He was my friend and advisor, and we passed many delightful hours together since my arrival here. A few weeks ago, Herman related a true story to me that illustrates what I am saying about the power of narrative in shaping reality. Here is the story, in his words:

*I was patrolling with Lieutenant Co in the red light district of Amsterdam. It was sometime after midnight.*

*A young male--as I recall from the West Indies--came running up to Co--to report that another young male with similar origin had tried, in an altercation, to stab him with a screwdriver.*

*I watched as Co sauntered over -- ever so slowly -- to the other male who had been pointed out. They were not Dutch speakers. But all police from sergeant up in the Netherlands must speak four languages. He engaged the alleged offender in what I believe was French. He said to him, "Hello. I understand that you have a screwdriver." The man said, "yes." "May I see it, please?" Co asked, and then, "May I have it, please?" The male turned it over to him, and Co slid it into his back pocket.*

*Then, he engaged him, asking him to explain what he had been trying to do with the screwdriver. They had an extended, but not loud or angry conversation. The complainant chimed in. The man man with the screwdriver said he had become angered in a verbal argument that made him want to threaten the other with the screwdriver. Recognizing that they were new immigrants to the Netherlands, told them, "We don't do that here."*

*"We don't do that here."*

*After about three minutes, Co sent them on their way.*

*We resumed patrol and were soon approached by a young male tourist, somewhat startled and perplexed, having apparently just gotten his first impressions of the area, with its women on display in store windows and a sprinkling of sex shops. He asked Co, in a loud, excited voice, "Officer, is it safe here?" Co, in the calmest of voices, asked, "Where are you from?" He answered, "Chicago". Co answered assuredly, "It is safe." And we again resumed patrol.*

Herman told me that story during a conversation we were having about security here at BIC in which he advised that we should "invest heavily in (pause) welcome." He said: we need to state and reinforce the norms we believe are right and good. We must teach toward the reality we want to create. Herman spent the last half century proving that it works.

Perhaps the God of the Chumash models the Creation-Destruction dynamic so that we can understand the power and significance of the stories we tell ourselves about who and how we are, as a society or as individuals.

It is not by accident that the Hebrew term, "*Davar*" means "thing" and it also means "word." The distance from a word to a thing often is a straight line and in the times in which we live it is often a short distance.

On an individual level, we paint the stories we tell ourselves about who and how we are on internal canvases--narratives about our relationships, careers, personal worth, community, politics, religion, or whatever it may be. We live in the stories we create and follow them to their natural conclusions unless something happens to change our projections.

Our narratives are more malleable than they sometimes feel to us at times of strong emotion. How many of us have ever messed up an interaction, sent a bad email, exploded at someone we love, and then walked around for days in a funk, stewing over what kind of terrible people we are, feeling that it's only a matter of time before our ugliness or stupidity is revealed to everyone—and then that trajectory is reversed when we do something well, and someone says something like, "Thanks for what you just did. You are a really helpful colleague" or "I'm so glad you showed up. Thank you for being such a good friend?" Suddenly we're living in a different story. Our despair turns to hope and we envision ourselves flourishing in our relationships, our work, our world.

When something like that happens, we are reminded that while our feelings are always real, the narratives we construct are only partial stories. Indeed, the lesson our biblical ancestors must learn from the plagues is that the reality they had constructed was not the whole truth (Exodus 8:18). *They* had to learn that God is in charge, and cares about the Children of Israel. *We* must understand that all of our narratives will inevitably fall short of the ultimate truth and mystery of the universe.

Perhaps this week, our parashah can teach us to face of the stories we tell ourselves with humility, to interrogate them, refine them, and most of all to cultivate them with thoughtful intention. Especially when we feel strongly, we might ask: Is my story life-giving, or is it trapping me in a tight place? What information might I lack, or what input might I be screening out, that could change the trajectory of the story I am telling myself, from one of despair to one of hope?

If we want to cultivate our capacity to live inside of life-giving stories, we need time to think and feel. We need other people to help us reflect. And we need great stories to

inspire us, like the one--especially the one--we are in the midst of reading in our Torah. It is the story of one family that was redeemed from bondage because they knew deep in their bones that enslavement is wrong and they had the courage to cry out to God. It is the story of a God who seeks partnership, commitment, and radical new ways to promote justice. It is the story of a shepherd at the furthest end of the wilderness who hears the voice of God calling him to mission and purpose and a story about hope and possibility in the face of darkness.

Likewise, I hope we can be inspired to think critically about the narratives that shape our culture.

This Monday is the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. This year will also mark the 20th anniversary of the adoption of the Stockholm Declaration, under which the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research was established. This year will also mark 15 years since the adoption of January 27th as the International Holocaust Remembrance Day by the United Nations General Assembly.

It is tempting to think that civilized society stands with us because these days of remembrance were established. Certainly that was the intention. Yet we all know that despite worldwide acknowledgment of the perils of hatred and anti-Semitism, we are, again, facing hateful and murderous words and actions against Jewish people and others perceived to be outsiders. Rising nationalism and white supremacy here and abroad testify to the force of narratives, even when they are wrong.

And so, we must be vigilant in speaking out to shape a proud and courageous narrative in which we can thrive and flourish as Jews and as human beings. We have life-giving stories to tell about who we have been, who we are, and how we imagine ourselves and our world to be. And the stakes are incredibly high, because we are not only talking about our own lives or the security of the Jewish People. Our very planet is in danger, and it matters how we respond to the crisis of climate change. The undoing of Creation in our biblical narrative today may feel like a kitschy story of frogs, lice, and hail as we read it from our comfy chairs, but it is frighteningly possible. We must live into the Scientific narrative of this moment, and we must figure out our part in it. We must be part of a culture shift, a shift in consciousness, and it starts with the narratives from which we operate.

There *is* a narrative of hope, healing, and redemption. We can tell that story and bring it into being, just as God does through Moshe. We must be persistent with words and

deeds. It takes 10 plagues to get the Israelites out of bondage. It will take all of the words and all of the work we can offer to teach a narrative of love and dignity, responsibility and intelligent action. That is exactly what Torah comes into our world to do, through us.

I pray for the strength we need to shape the narratives of our lives, our society, and our world; to teach and reinforce and a life-giving story about who we are and what we are hear to do, so that our children and their children will be able to say, “it is safe here, and the world is very good.”