

EJewish Covenant storytelling

Division is in the air. Many of us struggle with the challenge of civility across ideological lines. In a recent essay on OnBeing.org (<https://onbeing.org/blog/omid-safi-why-conversations-across-ideological-lines-fail/>), Omid Safi points to an often overlooked factor behind our inability to communicate: “There is surely a dimension to us that is about reason, rationality, and logic, but there is also that in us that is about emotions, passion, lust, wonder, awe, spirit, rage, compassion, tenderness, love, and all that cannot be neatly contained within ‘rationality.’” It is our inattention to these latter human qualities, he argues, that makes our conversations so difficult.

As an adult educator, I am seeing the same dynamic in our Jewish communities. Synagogue leaders tell me that ideological and policy differences increasingly define collective conversations, making board meetings, adult learning programs, and family dinners more fraught than in the past. It’s easy to forget our connections when we disagree about policy on Israel or intermarriage. Our conversations too often become binary, win or lose, and we lose sight of our underlying commonality.

This has led me to wonder, what role can Jewish education play in building bridges across ideological divides? What form of Jewish discourse can help us connect in spite of policy disagreements?

One contribution Judaism can make to our own and other communities in 2018 is the power of Aggada, storytelling, which is an accessible and underutilized resource in our Jewish toolkit.

Classical Jewish text is composed of two kinds of literature, Halacha and Aggada, literally “walking” and “telling”, i.e. practical guidelines and speculative ideas. The rabbis of the Talmud saw these as intertwined: every aspect of law was rooted in conjecture, and every idea had practical application. The Talmud integrates both modes in its very structure: each volume of the Talmud is called a *masechet*, literally a weaving – of law, story, associations flowing across subject matter with beautiful and sometimes bewildering fluidity.

Yet when I was a young person in Orthodox yeshivot, we almost always skipped the non-legal sections of the Talmud. Once, after he had told us we were skipping a few pages of stories, I asked the venerable head of my yeshiva why.

With a kind of wistfulness, even sadness, he answered, “I never received a tradition about how to learn Aggada”.

I respected his sadness. I liked that he didn’t claim that the stories were somehow less important. But the result was the same: missed opportunities to engage our imaginations as well as our analytical minds.

Dealing only with ideological and policy issues in our collective conversations is very much like skipping the stories in that Talmud class.

How can storytelling help us today?

In moments when we get stuck in policy disagreements, stories allow us to breathe, slow down, and connect to other human beings with empathy. By appealing to our non-rational selves, storytelling helps shift our mindset from futile zero-sum battles to vulnerable, human moments. They give us access to the divergent thinking that can help us find new ways of being in troubled times, when the old ways don’t work.

Parker Palmer writes, “We can evoke the spirituality of any discipline by teaching in ways that allow the ‘big story’ told by the discipline to intersect with the ‘little story’ of the

student's life." Jewish wisdom tales evoke and elicit students' personal stories, creating relevance and connection between learner and text, and between the learners themselves.

And it's not only about the stories on the page – it's also our own stories. Increasingly, I invite students to share stories with one another, as well as studying text. I ask them to share with a partner the earliest story they've inherited from their ancestors – a moment or image from a grandparent or great-grandparent. Then I ask the partner to retell that story to the group. In learning to listen deeply to one another, and retell others' stories, students exercise their empathy and compassion muscles.

Sharing personal stories surfaces surprising, profound, and often amusing human insights among learners. When students share their partner's earliest family stories, people learn things about one another they never would have known. In a recent workshop with adult learners, we discovered that we were descendants of immigrants, that one of us was the grandson of a *mafioso* in Italy, another was here only because her grandmother barely escaped the Kishinev pogrom, yet another spoke of her childhood discovery of an uncle who had been killed by the Soviet regime. The learners in the room had very different opinions and ideologies about current issues. But, by connecting on an entirely different level, the level of imagination, vulnerability, narrative, they felt their common humanity. Intuitive, symbolic thinking helps us have conversations about contemporary issues without getting caught in the trap of binary policy conflicts.

I want to offer a definition of an ethical society that I think can help us in 2018: "A society is a group of people who tell one another's stories." When we are willing to bear witness to one another, to take others' pain and joy seriously, to listen deeply, with full attention, to tell other's stories over – we reweave the bonds of civil society.

Safi concludes: "We are not going to out-fact our way out of this conversation. We are not going to out-chart our way out of this conversation. We are not going to out-argue our way out of this conversation." I agree. But we might out-story our way, and out-empathize our way into better ones.