

Just a few years ago, my friend Jaclyn Cohen was a woman about my age—lest you be confused, that means she was approaching her mid 30s—and she was about to have a baby. She'd had a healthy pregnancy, access to quality health care, and many loving friends and family members.

Things got off to a rough start with a difficult sixty-hour labor. But as soon as they got home, it became clear that something was not right. The baby seemed fine, but for Jaclyn herself—not only was her body “a mess,” but her mind had become an absolute “war zone.<sup>1</sup>” Jaclyn was a type A, hardworking overachiever—but suddenly, as the mother of a newborn, her vigorous pace was subject to the capricious whims of her infant. She had no idea what to do with herself. Breastfeeding was one painful and, to her mind, shameful failure after another, from “searing pain” to a perpetually “unsatisfied customer.” Unlike she'd expected, there was no instant connection to her baby, no fun or magic to make it all seem worth it. Jaclyn “sank into herself,” seething with resentment toward her son.

Any “free” moments Jaclyn was able to wring from her non-schedule were even worse—without a task, she was simply more free to contemplate her abject misery. Turns out it was far preferable to be busy with no time to think—because the thoughts were ugly, and ominous. One night, six weeks in, when the baby was crying, again, super loudly and utterly inconsolably, Jaclyn snapped. She joined him in his sobs, the kind that start from deep inside the soul and erupt involuntarily through the face, leaving not just your eyes

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<sup>1</sup> <https://forward.com/scribe/369687/what-nobody-tells-you-about-bringing-home-baby/>

but somehow your lips too used up and swollen from overexertion. Jaclyn was wracked with trembling, “feeling that horrific mixture of anxiety, terror and loneliness—like you’re the only person on Earth who’s ever felt this level of pain.” That no one could understand, that she’d never have a normal day again. She told her husband she simply couldn’t do it anymore.

That declaration, it turned out, was the first step toward regaining her life. The next morning, Jaclyn was diagnosed with postpartum depression. Her support system kicked into high gear. She found a great therapist and great medication. It wasn’t immediate, but then, one day, suddenly, without even thinking about it, she realized that she couldn’t imagine her life without her son—in a good way!!

This moment of calm contentedness, of realizing the journey traveled, put it all into perspective: the deep darkness that had entirely blotted out hope—and the supportive community and diagnosis that helped her see a new path forward. But Jaclyn’s recovery wasn’t actually complete yet. Because Jaclyn is a rabbi—and rabbis, in the best of worlds, tell stories and speak truths that help people make sense of life, make sense of their own lives, and connect to community to be there for them, to witness them along their journeys. Jaclyn was determined to tell her story not just to her immediate friends and family, but also to her greater community at a large synagogue in Seattle. And so on Rosh Hashanah 2016, 5777, she preached to her congregation about her postpartum depression and the many challenges of adjustment to parenthood<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.jaclyncohen.com/uploads/5/8/2/5/5825377/rh5777\\_-\\_jcohen\\_-\\_final.pdf](http://www.jaclyncohen.com/uploads/5/8/2/5/5825377/rh5777_-_jcohen_-_final.pdf)

It was only then, after publicly sharing her saga, that the true power of her story manifested. Because “for weeks afterward, men and women of all ages reached out [to her] with gratitude and grace. They shared struggles, fears and previously unspoken challenges they endured. They shared how the sermon changed the way they spoke with and related to the new parents in their lives. They told [her] how it gave them courage to open up to their loved ones, that it inspired more authentic vulnerability and compassion.” It was in the sharing, even the broadcasting of her story, that it had the chance to ripple outward and leave the largest mark. Because people of all genders, ages, shapes, and sizes, saw themselves in Jaclyn’s story! Some of course connected with the painful and oft-ignored topic of postpartum depression, which I’m sure is a known quantity to all too many people in this room. But even for those with no firsthand experience, Jaclyn’s struggle and breaking point of believing that she was totally, uniquely, terrifyingly alone resonated with many of her congregants.

Jaclyn’s storyline speaks to a universal human condition—of pain, of isolation, of some kind of catalyzing moment—and then, in time, of a pivot toward victory. By sharing her story, Jaclyn subsequently became an epicenter of sacred storytelling at her synagogue, of facilitating healing and meaning-making through listening. Once she’d shared her own story, people answered back with their own.

Their stories, our stories, YOUR story—are all rich with meaning. Our own interpretations of our past experiences have a strong impact on who we believe ourselves to be. Your stories are the defining moments in time that help that make you

you. And this is no mere observation, but a well-documented psychological concept authored by Dr. Dan P McAdams, chair of the psychology department of Northwestern University. He calls it narrative identity: the idea that who we are “[goes] considerably beyond [biological or demographic] facts as people selectively [interpret] aspects of their experience and...construct stories that make sense to them and to their audiences, that vivify and integrate life and make it more or less meaningful.<sup>3</sup>” Our stories animate us, explain the large and small choices we make, and point us firmly in the direction of who we want to be.

Obviously we as Jews are steeped in storytelling, from our neverending reading and rereading of our Torah to the entire folk genre of Chasidic tales passed down from generation to generation. But I think our attachment to stories is borne out most powerfully by actual Jewish practice. 2013’s Pew Study on the American Jewish Community found that by far the most observed holiday across the Jewish spectrum was Passover<sup>4</sup>. According to their data, seven out of ten American Jews had participated in a seder in the last year. By comparison, 53% of Jews had taken part in some sort of Yom Kippur fast in the last year. Almost 33% more American Jews attended a Pesach seder than participated in a Yom Kippur fast. Of course there are many potential explanations—but I’m so confident that part of Passover’s appeal is its incredibly strong narrative underpinnings. In just a few short hours (or long hours, depending how your family does it), we relive our descent into slavery and subsequent redemption and

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<sup>3</sup> McAdams, Dan P. “The Psychology of Life Stories.” *Review of General Psychology* 5.2 (2001): 100-122. Print.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>

journey to freedom. Passover lets us retrace those steps through tangible, edible ritual—and actively participate in the purposeful retelling of our most foundational origin tale.

And even though the story of the exodus isn't actually, personally about us—though of course we're supposed to imagine that it is—at seder tables worldwide it nonetheless inspires us to continue to share stories about freedom and slavery still happening today. Just like with Jaclyn, one story leads to another. People see themselves in the seder, just like they saw themselves in her story, because it's a tale of suffering and relief that speaks to the human condition. It's such a good lens for the human experience, in fact, that there's a whole genre of auxiliary seders specifically designed for small subcommunities to connect over their shared understanding of the story and its relevance to them. Not just does one story lead to another, but one seder leads to another: Multi-racial freedom seders, feminist seders, LGBT seders. [Chocolate seders!] The exodus is such a riveting, well-worn story that it spawned its own next generation of story-sharing.

So given that that's the meaning that certain groups are able to attach to the Israelites' narrative...imagine, now, what telling your own, personal, original story might do. Not the words in a book, however good that book might be, but the words that only you know. The release of coming together not to read a text, but to create an entirely new text in conversation with others who are also looking to add a next chapter by sharing their own stories. The chance to re-mine your story for meaning, both from looking back on it from who you are today *and* the chance for your story to have an impact on others who need your insight from the lessons you've already learned. Just like Jaclyn, you can

admit and then illustrate the human condition in vivid color, allowing others to see themselves in you, whether or not you've had the same exact experience. You can be that first story, that spark that lights the flame in others who will answer your story with one of their own.

And I'm not just speaking in hypotheticals. Jaclyn got to share her story with the masses because she was a rabbi with a bimah—but most of us have no such outlet to tell our story beyond our inner circle. Therefore, Temple Beth El: I'm inviting YOU to share your defining stories. I'm so, incredibly sure—that all of us gathered in this sanctuary are carrying big if not HUGE stories inside of us, stories looking for acknowledgement, begging to be told, to be liberated from isolation. Your miracles, your heartbreaks, your transformations, your hard-earned accomplishments. Stories that let each one of us become an address for sacred storytelling.

But I can't ask you to give without offering of myself first. So I just want to tell you where Jaclyn's story took me. When I read her description of her late night breakdown, of the moment she felt completely alone, it instantly evoked images of the start of my job search that led me here to Temple Beth El. I was freshly single, incredibly ready to be done with my studies—and so extremely fearful that the temple for me didn't even exist, let alone, that they'd like me too. Just *existing* while not knowing what state you'll be living in just a few months in the future was excruciating. So much angst was poured into my resume, my portfolio, my personal statement—even the very outfits I would wear for my interviews. I remember one day pouring out my miserable heart to a friend of mine as we planned our clothing choices. She listened as I shared my story, sat with

me as we talked through my anxieties and concerns...and at the end, she told me that the dress I had on at that moment was the winner since it was the dress I had worn while putting in the work to pull apart and push through my fears. And in fact, it was the dress I had on when I first met the interview committee of Rabbi Miller, Cheryl Kerwin, and Jordon Wertheimer. And I'm proud to be wearing that very same dress tonight, as I begin my third year as one of your rabbis, in a place that has become such a fantastic home for me. Jaclyn's willingness to share with her Temple encouraged me to share one of my own stories with all of you.

And now, I humbly ask, that you share your story, a story, a true story, with me. We have a dedicated phone line here at Temple, 248-865-0613, that is already live where you can call and you don't even have to talk to a person yet—it's there for you to just leave a message with the short version of your story. I will call you back to set up a time to hear your story in its fullness. And then—using the power of YOU and YOUR STORIES, I want to bring together small, kind, caring groups of people with similar overall topics to get to know each other by sitting down, face to face, and letting one story follow another. I want to provide a platform for YOU—and if you can hear me, I mean YOU!—to meet other people in our Beth El family and connect with them over the stories and experiences that define you. I want to create community through these small groups, and also to start a voluntary, opt-in referral network so no matter what someone comes into my office and shares with me—I can recommend someone they can speak to who's had a similar experience and is willing to share their story. Because that's what I want Temple to be—a place where no matter what's going on in your life, both us as clergy as well as other congregants are on your team.

Again, lest you think you're not fancy enough, or important enough, or insert-adjective-here enough, I want to assure you that you are enough, and you are exactly who I'm looking for. I'm seeking all kinds of stories—and if you pull out your flyer, with the phone number, you'll see I gave you a non-exhaustive list of some ideas to get started. Stories of becoming a parent, whether you succeeded or not, however your child came to you. Stories of coming to America, of self-acceptance, of grief from any kind of loss, of aging at any stage of life, of coming to Judaism or changing your Judaism, of addiction, of serving your country, of navigating multiple cultures, of beating the odds, of abuse, of dreams coming true, of wisdom, of physical change. Or whatever else you is on your heart that you feel called to share. Happy stories, sad stories. Painful stories, inspiring stories. Stories of your humanity in its fullest. And I should also add, we're hearing two incredible congregants publicly share their stories of survival on Yom Kippur afternoon, and I welcome you to come support them as they revisit some of their most defining moments—and surely will inspire more stories in us as well.

You are worthy and your story is worthy. Please give me a call—or, equally important, take a moment to give a meaningful look to someone you think should give me a call. Text them right as soon as you walk out of here. I need your voice, I need their voice, as part of our community of sharing. Over the coming weeks I'll also be reaching out to a few ambassadors to help me identify Beth El congregants who simply must be a part of our sacred storytelling.

Because sharing brings us closer together. Because we get to continually reconstruct and add chapters to our own stories. Because every person deserves a bimah. Because no one needs to feel that they're the only person on Earth who has ever felt this way. Because our stories are our very humanity.

*Music [You Will Be Found from Dear Evan Hansen]:*

*Have you ever felt like nobody was there*

*Have you ever felt forgotten in the middle of nowhere*

*Have you ever felt like you could disappear*

*Like you could fall and no one would hear*

*Well let that lonely feeling wash away*

*Maybe there's a reason to believe you'll be OK*

*Because when you don't feel strong enough to stand*

*You can reach, reach out your hand*

*And oh, someone will come running*

*And I know, they'll take you home*

*Even when the dark comes crashing through*

*When you need a friend to carry you*

*And when you're broken on the ground*

*You will be found*

*So let the sun come streaming in*

*'Cause you'll reach up and you'll rise again*

*Lift your head and look around*

*You will be found*

Temple Beth El, in your stories, in your courage to share, may you be found in 5779. Let your voices ring out, let your stories be heard. Let someone else in, and share the defining moments that make you you. And when we raise our voices up, when we take a chance on being brave...we write the next chapter of our own story. And when we come together, one year from now, ready to greet our next new year—let the story of this year be the stories that brought us together.