

Telling one's story: Bo and Congregation-based Community Organizing

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This week's parsha, Bo, continues the story of the Hebrews' liberation from Egypt. It begins with the eighth plague, Darkness, after which Pharaoh is ready to negotiate for the first time and Moses rejects his offer. This is followed by the plague of Locusts covering the land so thickly that it was impossible to see- another plague of darkness. The final plague of course is the death of the first born which, also, happens in the dark. Before the final plague the Israelites have to sacrifice a lamb and use its blood to paint the doorposts of their houses. In this context comes the commandment for there to be an annual sacrifice of a lamb and an annual retelling of the story to our children, as well the commandments to lay tefilin on the arm and between the eyes to remember the liberation from Egypt.

We are to remember this annually in a special telling (the Passover Seder) and with a special sacrifice to be consumed with others- to make sure it is a collectively shared experience and we are to remember this daily as individuals by laying tefilin. The Exodus is the master story of the Jewish people. Repeatedly the Torah ends statements with the phrase "because you were slaves in Egypt" or "because I (God) redeemed you with a mighty hand from Egypt."

Historically the Jewish people have chosen to define themselves by this story. Many of the recent sociological studies about Jewish identity in America talk about identity being a choice. In the multi-cultural post-modern possibilities of contemporary society identity is seemingly a choice for many people. More people believe that they can create their own stories- that it is no longer a given. We live in an age where people create identities, create stories; just surf the net for proof.

Paradoxically, the story can become both more and less important. Because of the fluidity of our society and the desire by some to create and recreate identities, people's stories may become more important as self-defining. In this same cultural moment, the spread of meditation has led many people to the realization that we are constantly creating stories about our observations that reinforce our beliefs, habits and outlook. Understanding the story we tell becomes a window into our psyche.

Here we have a tradition that is requiring us to tell the same story every year and to set up devices to help us remember it every day. It is a story about the possibility of freedom, the possibility of faith, of the interplay between light and dark. We continually have the opportunity to re-examine how we can identify with it, how it can become our story.

The practice of the [Congregation Based Community Organizing](#) (CBCO) relies heavily on the importance of telling one's story- eventually developing a deep understanding of one's own master narrative and cultivating the ability to tell it. CBCO work begins with congregants sharing their stories with each other in one-on-one settings. These are public conversations, for the benefit of the whole community and not just the two people involved. We learn how each of us deals with the challenges of our society, what we feel passionate about. The relationships that are created through the sharing of stories and the information gleaned from these stories becomes the basis for the organizing.

The master narrative of our tradition can provide a context in which we can understand our own stories both political and spiritual (there are many ways to interpret why the tefilin, reminding us of the Exodus, are worn on the forehead and on the left arm next to the heart). At the Passover Seder we say that we need to consider ourselves as having been slaves in Egypt. Rav A. I. Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Israel, taught that leaving Egypt was also leaving spiritual slavery, an ongoing struggle for each person. Telling and remembering the Exodus story is a continuous reminder to be aware of what Egypt-what tight place of bondage- we are in at any particular moment and that liberation from that is possible.

The CBCO practice of sharing stories with each other of where we feel bound or oppressed takes it out of the individual realm and brings it into the public arena. When a group of people realize that they are facing similar problems, it is then possible to analyze those problems and consider the possibility of collective action or solutions. The prevailing norm of our culture is to treat problems as individuals, especially for the middle class and above. Sharing problems about health care costs, college tuition, elder care and the quality of public schools can negate the isolation that families experience. They can even become contextualized in our master story leading to the possibility of acting together to leave the narrow place and move toward freedom.