



The **STORIES** We **SHARE**

Introduction by Rabbi Melanie Levav
DIRECTOR, PJ LIBRARY IN NEW YORK

As residents of New York City, my family is fond of Broadway musicals. During this profound absence of live theater, my kids have been listening to their favorite musicals on repeat for the last several months. *Hamilton* tops the list, to no surprise. Hearing the brilliant lyrics over and over again in the midst of this pandemic gives me an even greater appreciation for the show. The song “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story” prompts me to reflect on the stories we will tell the generations that come after the pandemic. The experience of living through this time of isolation has helped me recognize the vital role storytelling plays in preserving our individual and shared legacies.

Driving down the West Side Highway in Manhattan one afternoon midpandemic, I stopped at a red light (yes, this highway has traffic lights) and took out my phone to capture the image of the traffic update sign against a gorgeous blue sky. “WE ARE NY TOUGH” read the sign instead of an update on traffic conditions. “Ema, why are you taking so many pictures lately?” asked my 10-year-old (a proud PJ Our Way subscriber) from the back seat. “To document our lives during the pandemic so I can tell stories to my grandchildren,” I replied.

The privilege of working for PJ Library has helped me to internalize the importance of not only sharing our stories but also creating the stories we want to tell. What is it about our lives that we want to share with our children and grandchildren?

According to Marshall P. Duke, a professor of psychology at Emory University, telling family stories can have positive effects on both those who tell stories and those who hear them. Children who know a lot about their family history tend to be more resilient and have higher levels of self-esteem, more self-control, lower levels of anxiety, and fewer behavioral challenges. This is still true within our larger community – our Jewish family.

The following stories represent the Jewish narratives that have held the greatest meaning for several rabbis and community leaders. They share these stories with us as we together weather the storm of the pandemic, find hope, and grow stronger as a community.

The best stories are those you hear and rehear — the ones that spiral back into your life, eventually weaving themselves into the fabric of your very being.

For me, a story about Moses is one story with multiple lessons to last a lifetime.

In this story, God tells Moses to speak to a rock, which will then give water. But Moses doesn't speak to the rock; he hits it. God punishes Moses by telling him he will not enter the Promised Land.

This was an intense story for me as a kid. Here was our greatest hero, God's partner in creating the Jewish people, excluded from his lifelong dream. And why? Because he failed to follow instructions. This is a foundational lesson: We need to listen carefully when someone asks us to do something.

As a teenager, the story agitated me. The punishment was disproportionate — why should Moses be denied his dream because of such a small slip? Didn't God believe in second chances? I chafed at the conclusion and

connected, sometimes in adolescent anger, to those who critiqued the story and demanded a different ending.

As a young adult, I began to find my frustrations echoed in the words of commentaries hailing from throughout the generations. Maybe Moses really did something unspeakable, whether it was failing to inspire the people at a key moment, losing his temper at them, or perhaps doubting God's power. Or maybe the text shows us that this was all a setup. After all, God told Moses to take his staff — what for, if not to hit the rock? I reveled in the questions and found my place in a larger tradition.

Now that I spend my time in teaching and communal affairs, I return to a simple truth that this story reveals: We are never defined by our actions alone, and we are unavoidably linked to the fates of our colleagues, our students, and the generation in which we live. Moses couldn't go into the land while the generation of the Exodus died in the desert. We are too responsible to one another to simply write a personal history for ourselves alone. And through that insight we cultivate responsibility and build community.

Rabbi Ethan Tucker

**PRESIDENT AND ROSH YESHIVA AT THE HADAR INSTITUTE
TRUSTEE OF THE HAROLD GRINSPOON FOUNDATION**

When I was young, my dad would tell me and my siblings our favorite story.

It was based on the book of Samuel, in which the prophet Samuel visits the home of Jesse while seeking the next king of Israel. One by one, Jesse parades his sons before Samuel. The first son, Eliab, is tall and striking. Although Samuel is tempted to assume that Eliab is the future royal, God quickly corrects him. "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him," God says. My dad would quote that verse, saying, "God does not look at the same things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but God looks at a person's heart."

The story goes on to describe Jesse's other sons, Abinadab and Shammah. My dad embellished the tale to make it fun for us children, all the while trying to show us that external beauty and strength are secondary to internal character and virtue. Toward the end of the story, Samuel turns to Jesse and

asks, "Are these all your sons?" At this query, Jesse presents his youngest son, a blue-eyed, redheaded shepherd named David — a physically unassuming youth, forgotten by his father. My dad would then describe the character of David: how he would take care of vulnerable

sheep and how he would write poetry and engage in song. This, of course, is the future king, the one that Samuel anoints.

Now that I am a mom myself, I tell this story to my toddler. I want him to understand that we must emulate God's vision and try to see the potential and goodness in unassuming people. I want my son to consider what it means to have good character and what kind of people we want to crown as heroes. I want him to learn from ancient biblical tales indelible lessons about goodness and the human spirit.

Dr. Mijal Bitton

**COMMUNAL LEADER OF THE DOWNTOWN
MINYAN, SCHOLAR IN RESIDENCE AT
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Our tradition abounds with stories.

One story in particular from the founder of the Hasidic movement, Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, the Baal Shem Tov, never fails to inspire me.

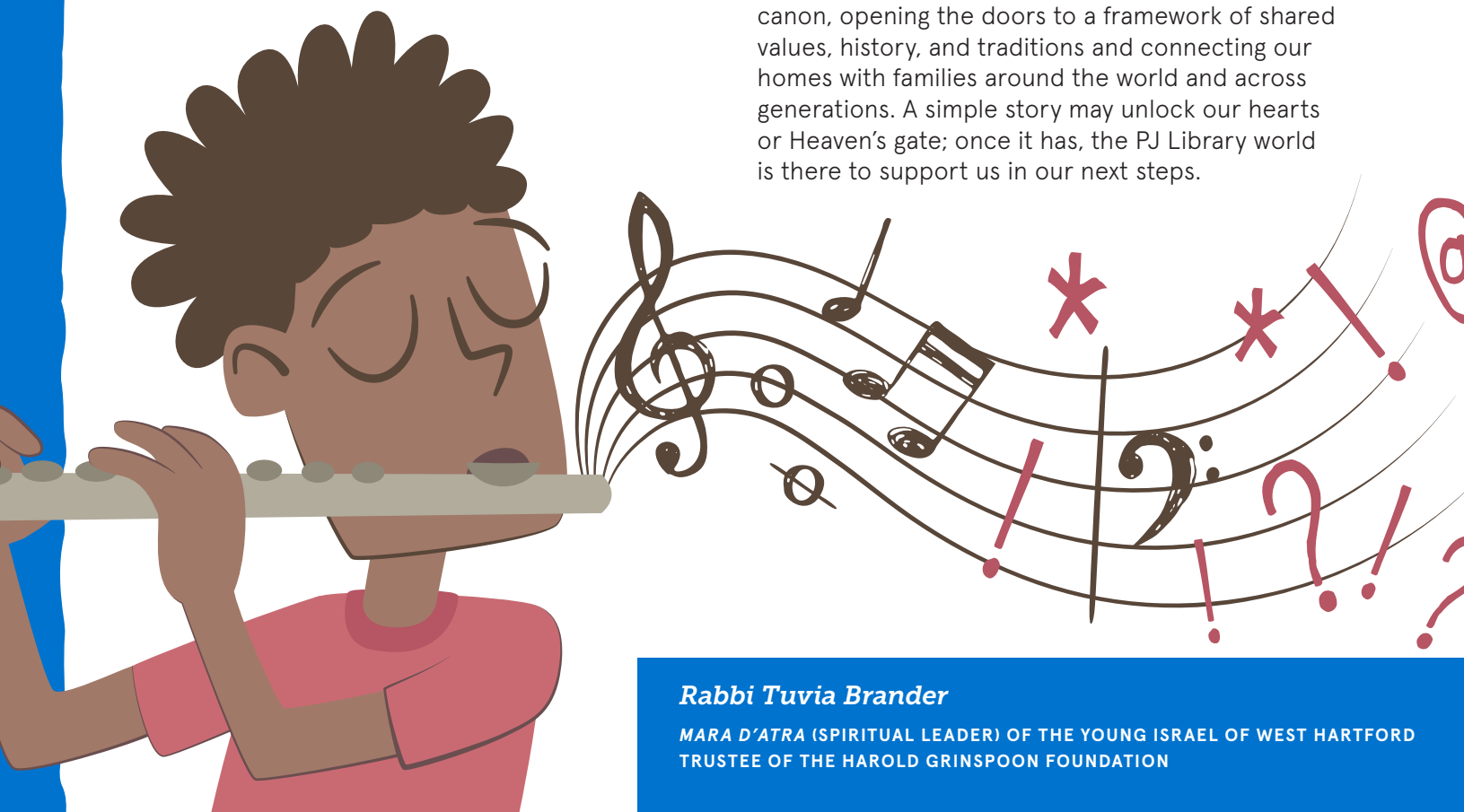
A child accompanying a parent to Yom Kippur services is confused by the scene of the solemn community steeped in prayer. "I want to talk to God too," exclaims the child, "but I don't know the words." The parent shushes the child, saying, "Just sit quietly." As the day wears on, the child becomes increasingly restless, yearning to partake in the congregation's deep devotion. Finally, as the auspicious moment of *Neilah* – the climax of Yom Kippur – approaches, the child, ignorant of the words being said but comprehending the mood of the moment, pulls out a flute. Suddenly, a shrill sound bursts through the room, roaring above the shouts of prayers. An angry murmur spreads across the room – a child's flute has no place during these sacred moments! But the Baal Shem Tov quiets the room with a smile. "The entire day," he says, "I felt the Gates of Heaven locked before us. No matter how hard we banged, they would not open. But just when I thought all was lost, the sound of flute – blown with a whole heart – pierced the Heavens and ushered in all our prayers."

This tale reminds us that our engagement with community cannot be limited to those who know the magic words. It is our essential duty to cultivate a culture of inclusion – one that meets the next generation *where they are*, seeks opportunities for all to enter and engage, and values different expressions of connection. After all, it was not the prayers that unlocked the Heavens.

At the same time, I cannot escape the unwritten end of this story. What came of this child the following year? What happened in those pews the following Yom Kippur? Was that thirst for context, content, and connection left unrequited, or was the child given the opportunity to learn the prayers they so deeply wished to utter and share with the community? Were they invited to share in the rich tradition, heritage, and values of our people? Were they given the gift of access to the sacred canon of our people? After all, what future would our people have if we merely raised a generation of flutists?

This is the secret and beauty of PJ Library.

PJ Library works to greet each of us, every reader and family, with meaningful stories and accessible content. At the same time, it ushers our children and our families into the great chambers of the Jewish canon, opening the doors to a framework of shared values, history, and traditions and connecting our homes with families around the world and across generations. A simple story may unlock our hearts or Heaven's gate; once it has, the PJ Library world is there to support us in our next steps.



Rabbi Tuvia Brander

MARA D'ATRA (SPIRITUAL LEADER) OF THE YOUNG ISRAEL OF WEST HARTFORD
TRUSTEE OF THE HAROLD GRINSPOON FOUNDATION