

Cute story about the Oscillating sprinklers...

I know from oscillating fans and sprinklers but until recently had never heard of an oscillating narrative. This concept was introduced by Dr. Marshall Duke and a colleague, Dr. Robyn Fivush, professors of psychology at Emory University. It is worth taking a few minutes to tell you how they came upon this noteworthy concept.

Fivush and Duke discovered that the children who know a lot about their families tend to do better when they face challenges. In July of 2001, the researchers interviewed about 4 dozen families. They asked questions like:

Do you know where your grandparents grew up?

Do you know where your mom and dad went to high school?

Do you know where your parents met?

Do you know an illness or something really terrible that happened in your family?

Do you know the story of your birth?

After asking these questions, they then compared the children's results to a battery of psychological tests the children had taken. Duke and Fivush reached an overwhelming conclusion. The more children knew about their family's history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem, higher academic competence, higher social competence, and as adolescents and young adults, a greater sense of meaning and purpose in life. The "Do you Know" scale turned out to be the best single predictor of children's emotional health and happiness.

September 11, 2001

September 11 was two months after Fivush and Duke's initial study. While they were horrified at what had happened, as researchers, they knew they had been given a rare opportunity: though the families they studied had not been directly affected by the events, all the children had experienced the same national trauma at the same time. The researchers went back and reassessed the children.

Another critically important discovery was made — the children who knew more about their families proved to be more resilient, meaning they could moderate the effects of stress.

Why are stories so important?

Stories are the means by which we create meaning. Think about dinner last night, going to work in the morning, coming to shul today. As we catch up with our family and friends, we discuss what happened — what we did, how we felt, and what we think.

And we listen to stories. We laugh together, commiserate, or share a moment of silence in response. Statistically, stories emerge in everyday conversation about once every 5

minutes and account for 40% of all conversation. Stories are the air we breathe. Stories are how we understand ourselves, how we understand others, and how we understand the world.

Back to September 11th: How could knowing where your grandmother went to school help a child overcome something as minor as a skinned knee or as major as a terrorist attack?

According to Dr. Duke — the answers have to do with how the stories are told. Psychologists have found that every family has a unifying narrative — and those narratives take one of three shapes.

First the **ascending** family narrative: “Son, when we came to this country, we had nothing. Our family worked. We opened a store. Your grandfather went to high school. Your father went to college. And now you...” OR “My parents were unbelievable. They always knew the right thing to say and were always there for me.” “We enjoyed spending time together always, and my parents never got on my nerves!”

Second is the **descending** narrative: “Sweetheart, we used to have it all. Then we lost everything.” OR “My father was a workaholic. I never remember spending time with my dad, he never came to any of my soccer games. He left the house before I woke up and return home late all the time.”

The most healthful narrative according to Dr. Duke is the third one — it is called an **oscillating** family narrative. “Dear, let me tell you, we’ve had ups and downs in our family. We built a family business. Your grandfather was a pillar of the community. Your mother was on the board of the hospital. But we also had setbacks. You had an uncle who dealt with addiction issues. We had a house burn down. When you were younger your father was laid-off. But no matter what happened, we always stuck together as a family.”

According to Duke, the words bind us into a larger narrative. They give us an emotional and historical connection. They allow us to transfer important values. But they also allow us to build what Dr. Duke called the “**Intergenerational Self.**” The intergenerational self means that we know that we are connected to those who have come before us. We are part of something larger than our individual identities and we learn to understand that life isn’t all highs or all lows. Life is both high and low, easy and challenging.

The Torah teaches this very important lesson. While not using the term oscillating narrative the Torah is replete with stories about very low challenging times and high exhilarating successes. We have no further to look than the Torah reading for Rosh Hashanah. (Look at the handout)

The Torah and its Oscillating Narratives

Chapter 21 is the story of great joy as Sarah has given birth to her son, Isaac, her only child as it will turn out. God remembers the promise that had been given by the messengers who came with a forecast of the barren Sarah bearing a child in one year's time. Of course, Sarah laughs and even throws her aging husband under the bus - thus giving their son his name "He will laugh" - a name which embodies and holds the story of the biblical version of a gender-reveal party.

Alas, we read this morning about what happens when the boy, named Isaac, shows up in the world and upon occasion for his weaning ceremony, the firstborn to Abraham - Ishmael, who an early teen by that point - seems to be mocking, jesting, or provoking the toddler and is banished from the family home.

In fact, the boy is not only kicked out with his mother, Hagar, the Egyptian handmaid of Sarah, it appears the boy is going to die. Nonetheless, God comforts Hagar and informs her that he, Ishmael, will become a great nation as well. As the offspring of Abraham, he will go on to greatness in his own right and thus two nations will be born from our patriarch Abraham.

Genesis 21 is an oscillating narrative. It's a moment of joy: a son has been born, God's promise has come true! It is a moment of heartbreak: Abraham must evict his flesh and blood and the boy's mother from the tent. It is a moment of joy: two nations will come forth. It is a moment of foreboding: those two nations will be at war at times.

Even the build up to Genesis 21 is filled with oscillation ... back to the very origin of the Abraham and Sarah journey. God called Abraham - sent him forth to a land of promise - "the land that I will show you" and when Abraham and Sarah (then Avram & Sarai) reached that land, there was famine in the land. Off they went to Egypt, but Sarai had to pose as Avram's sister, lest Avram be killed. Then there was a plague on Pharaoh's house and they were sent free from Egypt but they were sent free bearing gifts ... and so the whole of the narrative goes ... and even past today's reading into tomorrow's of Genesis 22 when God calls upon Abraham to bind his son for an offering.

And that story oscillates as Isaac is bound but saved from the knife in the last moment - filled with drama and not only is his life spared but the very blessing promised to Abraham is affirmed. Though we never see father and son together again ... and Sarah dies ... but then Abraham sends Eliezer to find a wife for Isaac and when Rebecca and Isaac marry, Isaac is comforted for the death of his mother and indeed, the newlyweds find the gift of love in marriage.

Take a moment and think about every Biblical story you know — think about the Book of Esther, the Book of Ruth, the life and times of Joseph, Miriam, Aaron, Moses, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Rebecca, etc... The Bible is replete with stories that oscillate. There are high and lows, peaks and valleys. Our Biblical characters are flawed. They make mistakes. They suffer hardships.

I want to take this idea of an oscillating narrative and I want to think about this past year. There are a few ways we can use this narrative to guide our thinking.

ANU Museum

As most of you know during my sabbatical this past year I was in Israel for about six weeks. While there I had occasion to visit the Anu Museum of the Jewish people. Located on the campus of the Tel Aviv University, the museum is well worth a visit.

Some of you may remember the museum by a different name - and once you walk in by a different look. Until 2022, it was known as Beit HaT'futzot - the Museum of the Diaspora. It was a lovely museum with a very different goal and pedagogy. As Beit HaT'futzot, it was an homage to the Diaspora and told the story of what happened to Jews - OUT THERE, namely outside the Land of Israel. Yes, we flourished but there was doom awaiting us in nearly every corner of our dispersion. Whether it was the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the pogroms of Europe or of Arab lands, life was uncertain for us abroad. The real story - especially with the museum situated on the grounds of the beautiful and thriving area of the Tel Aviv University - is in Israel.

In 2021, under the name of Anu - which is a contracted form of the word Anachnu (we - as in our or us) - opened and is a bright and welcoming space that tells our stories: the oscillations and the realities of life bachul - in the lands outside of Israel. But in very telling ways - it is also Israeli because it is the story of Jews being told ... on the Tel Aviv University campus!

Recognizing that October 7 posed a horrific challenge to Jews all over the world and especially to Israelis, the museum educators developed a program to address the traumatic effects of October — the name of this program the Jewish Resilience Project.

The project was inspired by Prof Duke and Fivush's research. Especially because Duke and Fivush studied American children after September 11 — the educators at the ANU museum were interested in applying the research from September 11 in the US to October 7 in Israel.

Inspired by the concept of an oscillating narrative, the curators of the museum are very intentional in the stories they tell about the Jewish people. Each exhibit demonstrates that there are ups and downs to our people's stories.

The museum rejects the simplistic non-nuanced Tel Aviv/Jewish narrative which says we came to Palestine with nothing, we were surrounded by enemies — we made the desert bloom and now we are the Start-Up nation. The museum also rejects the simplistic non-nuanced Palestinian narrative which says “We used to have everything, the Jews came, expelled us from our homes, and now we have nothing.”

At the Anu Museum, the atrocities of October 7 are recorded and remembered. But so too are the acts of heroism. While it would be easy to focus on how Hamas attacked

Israel and what happened on that fateful Simhat Torah day, the curators of the museum also show how Israelis fought back, how Israelis came together and how Israelis are determined to defend their homeland. An oscillating narrative for the Jewish people stresses “the good times, bad times, and the movement between them...” This whole philosophy means we have to help Jews remember what it means to be Jewish before we create contemporary limited stories based on current trauma that doesn’t include a broader perspective.

The beauty of the oscillating narrative as Marshall Duke acknowledges is that it both prevents the person who internalizes that story from being a victim and it guides him from becoming arrogant or self-righteous. It reminds us that we have good moments in our story and bad moments - the challenge is to hold them all and recognize that when things are bad, we will get through this and when things are good - to say, be careful because we know this will not last forever.

The oscillating narrative works for our people.
And it works for families.
And it holds for individuals as well.

In 1970, two years after his younger brother, Yehuda, was killed in battle and a year after his father died, Israeli songwriter Ehud Manor wrote the lyrics to the song “*Bashana Haba’ah*.” In his book, *I Have No Other Country*, Manor says that the impossible is made real in the song: all his family those alive and dead, are sitting together on the porch like they always used to, watching the familiar views: the fields, the grapes, the roads.

When musician Nurit Hirsch (perhaps best known for her version of *Oseh Shalom*) was asked to compose the song, she wrote the music in a slow tempo to reflect Manor’s longing. Over time she saw that Manor learned to live with the pain so she changed it to the upbeat tune we know today.

That shift of tempo choice reminds me of the narrative of our lives, of our people and of our world — a narrative that ascends and descends now and always.

This past year has been one of remarkable loss and pain - and yet - *od lo avda tikvateinu* ... and we pray the new year ahead will be a better one - *od tireh, od tireh*, we will yet see ... how much good may well be possible.

Sermon Anthem — to be sung by Cantor Shammash first a slow version of Bashana — and the congregation joins in for a faster one...