

Bending the Arc

Shabbat Hagadol 5780

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When I was in high school I learned about the narrative arc. This is the classic western world's way of telling a story. A very American way to tell a story.

A narrative arc consists of a precipitating incident, rising action, climax, falling action and denouement.

There is escalating tension as a problem develops, the explosive full presentation of the problem, followed by the cascading consequences and then the denouement where the problem is resolved and all the narrative strands come together.

This is a way to tell a story where harmony gives way to disharmony gives way to reharmonization

The perspective from which this story is told and the end for which it is in search, is human satisfaction. When things don't go well we seek to return to a place of happiness. Or at least the place of happiness the story in our heads tells us we have to get to.

Think of any Disney movie. The little mermaid falls in love with Eric who is literally a different species. She pulls it off for a while until he realizes they are not the same. It looks hopeless but then the irreconcilable difference magically disappears and even her father who is a staunch nativist of the sea gives his blessing. At first there is no problem. Then a problem presents. The problem is then resolved. Happiness.

And there are countless movies that follow this pattern providing resolution in around two hours.

The narrative arc communicates to us that we deserve or are even entitled to things going well and resolving. It's bad enough to deal with life's disappointment and complications but because of the stories we tell, we exacerbate the pain by convincing ourselves that we are not where we are supposed to be. There is some other chapter to this story which promises escape.

This way of storytelling generates a very forward looking trajectory on happiness. Things are not good now but they will get better. How do we know? That's just how stories go.

The rabbinic perspective on narrative is different. Every day we say blessings not about the things that are yet to be but about things we already have. The ability to open our eyes, have bodies that allow us to exist, the fact that we are members of a caring community and inheritors of a beautiful tradition.

Gratitude is not generated by looking toward the future for happiness, longing for it and anticipating it, but as the rabbis say in Pirkei Avot, being sameach b'helko, happy with what has already been given to us without us earning it.

And so the narrative arc of Dayenu takes each piece of the Exodus story and allows it to be savored on its own as if each one were a story in and of itself that we could spend a lifetime trying to appreciate.

Ilu hotzianu mimitzrayim v'lo asah bahem shfatim dayeinu

Ilu haechilanu at haman v'lo natan lanu at hashabbat
dayeinu

Ilu natan lanu at a shabbat v'lo hichnisanu l'eretz yisrael
dayeinu

It's like eating a meal bite by bite and trying to express appreciation for each one.

Dayeinu sounds like this:

I can hardly believe we were brought out of Egypt.

I can hardly believe we were provided for in the wilderness.

I can hardly believe we were given Shabbat.

I can hardly believe we were given the Torah.

Right now all of our future plans are on hold. We are not doing what we had planned to do next week, a month from now and who knows beyond that. We are so used to building our happiness on future plans that we might be finding our emotional lives balking against these unfamiliar restrictions. How can we be happy without a future to not only anticipate but plan for and picture?

This is exactly the time when we need the Dayeinu paradigm, the rabbinic way of telling this story which is a way of finding satisfaction while we are still inside of it.

Here are my Dayeinus for this week:

I spoke to a local restaurant owner in town who was about to take his pizza truck to the hospital and make 200 pizzas.

Dayeinu.

I heard from a physician who told me that a staff member at his hospital wanted to go sit in the room with critical patients so they wouldn't be alone.

Dayeinu.

I watched families from our community make sure Chef Rene kept cooking in our synagogue kitchen and I watched families deliver those shabbat meals to people who are ill, particularly isolated or in the midst of mourning. And the volunteers who imagined a passover meal program making sure people who could never shop for the different ingredients will have a seder plate in front of them for the holiday. Who could imagine a time when we would not be free to gather the symbols of our freedom? Our community will be delivering 40 passover meals this week.

Dayeinu.

I think of the congregant whose biotechnology company is donating free of charge 500,000 tests to New York State.

Dayeinu.

And the way my kids have made me and Hana laugh every night by repeating Hana's UJA Federation speak on her zoom calls, "FY 19/20, FY 20/21 how about FY 22? FY FY FY FY."

Dayeinu.

There has rarely been a time in our lives that we have needed to appreciate life in incremental ways as we must right now during this pandemic.

The narrative arc is the other curve we need to bend.

In the rabbinic imagination, the world doesn't owe us happiness in the future. We owe the world our gratitude for all the unearned beauty we have received. It's a good reminder always. And when all we have is now, it's the storytelling we need. It's the story we will tell this week about our past and present. It's the story we will tell future generations. And Dayeinu- it will be enough.