

Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story

Yom Kippur 5779 Sermon by Rabbi Eve Posen

Last year I opened my Yom Kippur sermon by quoting the movie *Moana*. I mentioned that the music was written by Lin-Manuel Miranda, who created *Hamilton*, but that I had not yet been fortunate enough to see *Hamilton*. Well, a lot can happen in a year. I'm going to say upfront this sermon is about *Hamilton*. But not the man, the musical, because - hear me out - they're not really the same thing. *Hamilton* didn't become a sensation and win 11 Tonys because it was about the secretary of the treasury. *Hamilton* is really about leaving a legacy. It's about how we tell our stories.

"Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?" That's the final song. It has a little *Unetaneh Tokef* in it, doesn't it? Who lives, who dies, who by water, who by fire.

I know my timing for this sermon seems a little off since the musical has been around since 2015. I'll give you a little background as to why I'm just now making this connection this year. I was late to the *Hamilton* bandwagon, which may be surprising if you know I love musicals. I love going to musicals. I married into a

family of theater buffs. For Duncan's parents, a successful trip to New York means 7 plays in 6 days.

Perhaps I didn't let myself get sucked into the hype for this very reason. On top of that, I was one of the few people who didn't start listening to the cast album years before I saw the show. I didn't want to fall in love and become obsessed with something there was little chance of me seeing live any time soon.

Then I got the text message. Good friends who asked nonchalantly, "Are you busy on April 8 in the evening?" Maybe you're aware - I keep somewhat of a crazy schedule. But it just so happened we were free. I responded, "Yes, why?" "We have 2 extra tickets to Hamilton, be our dates?" And suddenly my obsession was set free.

My plan was to catch up and listen to the music beforehand to get a sense of the movement of the show. So that's what I did as I prepared for Passover. I had no idea just listening to the music of this story of one of our founding fathers would bring me to tears.

The musical *Hamilton* is essentially a biography of the founding father Alexander Hamilton, told from the years 1776 when Hamilton arrived in New York, through Hamilton's death in 1804. It covers the work that became his lasting legacy on America. And it was the final reprise song: "Who Lives, Who Dies, Who tells your story" that spoke to me as I listened and prepared the matzo balls.

The stories of who we are that are told after we're gone depend on how we're viewed when we're here. Now, for most of us, it won't be history telling the story, but it will be anyone who knew us. And if you want to leave a legacy, you have to create that legacy while you're alive. Aaron Burr, who ultimately kills Hamilton in a duel, laments that although he won the duel, he's the one who's the villain of the story.

In the next to last song, Burr sings:

Death doesn't discriminate

Between the sinners and the saints

It takes and it takes and it takes

History obliterates

In every picture it paints
It paints me and all my mistakes
When Alexander aimed
At the sky
He may have been the first one to die
But I'm the one who paid for it

The story we hear is because of the way history chose to tell the story.

Who lives, who dies, who tells your story. There I was in the kitchen, preparing the traditional culinary story of freedom from bondage, as I listened to the story of America's freedom. And what I realized as I was cooking is that I was telling my own story through the work of my hands. I realized Passover isn't just the Exodus story. It's my story that I tell through recipes my parents and grandparents passed down to me. My story is the continuation of each of their stories. Who lives, who dies, who tells *their* story.

Once I listened to it, I wasn't surprised at all that I got hooked and immediately started seeing the Jewish connections. Life stories just have a way of doing that -

they grab me. For most people the *The Diary of Anne Frank* was required reading at some point, but for me it was one of the first books I remember reading over and over again. I remember reading each entry and imagining myself there with her. I was sharing that experience. Even with historical fiction like *The Red Tent* or *Rashi's Daughters*, I felt closer to my own story through these narratives. When an author is able to tell the story of someone's life in a way that makes you feel as though you were lifelong friends with that person, that's magic.

It's no wonder that I became a rabbi. I fell in love with reading the same story - I've read it 36 times now - and understanding in layer after layer how I was connected to the Torah. And for me, as a rabbi and a parent, practically my whole life is about legacy - the one I've inherited and the one I want to leave.

When I'm giving a d'var Torah on the week's *parshah*, part of my job as I see it is to connect the Torah in some way to our story today. Each portion, each holiday has its own narrative that can resonate with our own relationships. When I officiate at a funeral, my primary job is to help tell the story. When I sit with a family, I learn about a person's legacy told through their childhood, courtship,

career, family life, ambitions. And it's the people who are left to remember you, the ones you leave the legacy to, they craft the story.

A famous Jewish story tells us of the man who was planting a carob tree and was interrupted by an onlooker who asks, "Why are you planting a carob tree? It takes 70 years to grow, you'll never even enjoy it." The man responds, "I have great memories eating dried carob as a child on Tu B'shevat. Those carob trees were planted by people who wanted to leave a gift for the generations to come. I am planting this tree as a gift for the generations who will be living seventy years from now. Then they can enjoy eating carob on Tu B'Shevat, too. Just as my parents and grandparents planted trees for me, so I plant trees for my children and grandchildren."

Lin Manuel Miranda also uses a version of this teaching in *Hamilton*, with the line:

Legacy. What is a legacy?

It's planting seeds in a garden you never get to see

What you do, who you were, and how you are remembered are tied together through connections you've made throughout your lifetime. In this season of introspection, we are called to examine our own story. The *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer, which we recite during *Musaf* of the High Holidays, reminds us that our lives are finite. We are not immortal. The way we will all leave this world remains to be seen, but our stories, the marks we make in the world, will be measured by *teshuva, tefillah, tzedakah*.

Teshuva is often translated as repentance, but it really means to return, to look back and then turn forward. Our story is told in part by the ways in which we learn from our mistakes, and not only change our behavior, but teach others to do the same.

Tefillah, prayer life, is the way in which you engage in spiritual community. It doesn't necessarily mean you have perfect attendance at daily minyan, although that's nice. *Tefillah* is the way in which you turn yourself over to a higher power. This is the recognition that as amazing as you are, you are not God. Rather, you are a part of a community of people who share faith and understanding. *Tefillah* is

your guts, your core, your beliefs. And just like with *teshuva*, it's through your moral compass that you teach others how to connect too.

Finally, *tzedakah*. What will the story of your giving be? Were you an active community member, giving of your time and expertise? Will your story be one of investment of wealth or wisdom, through your talent or your time? Our stories are told through how we give of ourselves.

While most of us will never have a smash Broadway musical made of our life's story, believe me there will be a story to tell. A story about who you were and what you did. As we begin *Yizkor*, we recall the stories of those whose memories live on because we tell their story. Who lives, who dies, who tells your story? And what story will they tell?