

# Opening the Heart Through Stories

*Source Sheet by Dr Jane Shapiro and David Raphael*

1. Close your eyes, take a deep breath.
2. Think of a story that a grandparent told you, that you heard about one of your grandparents or meaningful experience you had with a grandparent.
3. Think about how this story defines who your grandparent was, the nature of your relationship, what they meant to you, or how it shaped your thinking in important ways.
4. Share the story and your thoughts about it with your learning partner.
5. Discuss how this story connects with our larger Jewish narrative.

## **The Stories That Bind Us**

By Bruce Feiler, *The New York Times*, March 15, 2013

Excerpts

The single most important thing you can do for your family may be the simplest of all: develop a strong family narrative.

I first heard this idea from Marshall Duke, a colorful psychologist at Emory University. In the mid 1990s, Dr. Duke was asked to help explore myth and ritual in American families.

“There was a lot of research at the time into the dissipation of the family,” he told me at his home in suburban Atlanta. “But we were more interested in what families could do to counteract those forces.”

Around that time, Dr. Duke’s wife, Sara, a psychologist who works with children with learning disabilities, noticed something about her students. “The ones who know a lot about their families tend to do better when they face challenges,” she said.

Her husband was intrigued, and along with a colleague, Robyn Fivush, set out to test her hypothesis. They developed a measure called the “Do You Know?” scale that asked children to answer 20 questions.

Examples included: 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?

Dr. Duke and Dr. Fivush asked those questions of four dozen families in the summer of

2001 and taped several of their dinner table conversations. They then compared the children's results to a battery of psychological tests the children had taken and 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 and the more successfully they believed their families functioned. The "Do You Know?" scale turned out to be the best single predictor of children's emotional health and happiness.

"We were blown away," Dr. Duke said.

And then something unexpected happened. Two months later was Sept. 11. As citizens, Dr. Duke and Dr. Fivush were horrified like everyone else, but as psychologists, 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.

"Once again," Dr. Duke said, "the ones who knew more about their families proved to be more resilient, meaning they could moderate the effects of stress."

Why does 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?

"The answers have to do with a child's sense of being part of a larger family," Dr. Duke said.

Psychologists have found that every family has a unifying narrative, he explained, 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. ..."
- Second is the descending narrative: "Sweetheart, we used to have it all. Then we lost everything."
- "The most healthful narrative," Dr. Duke continued, "is the third one. It's called the 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 was once arrested. We had a house burn down. Your father lost a job. But no matter what happened, we always stuck together as a family.'"

Dr. Duke said that children who have the most self-confidence have what he and Dr. Fivush call a strong "intergenerational self"

1. What do you think of Duke's and Fivush's research? Do the findings resonate with you?
2. How would you describe your family's narrative: ascending, descending or oscillating?
3. Think about Duke's and Fivush's research in the context of our Jewish stories and

narrative?

1. Is our Jewish narrative: ascending, descending or oscillating?
2. How can our Jewish narratives play a role in the emotional well-being of our families?

### **Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 30a**

The Gemara asks: But is one's father's father obligated to teach him Torah? When the Torah says "And you shall teach them to your children" (Deuteronomy 11:19), doesn't that exclude your Deuteronomy 11:19? The Gemara asks: But is one's father's father obligated to teach him Torah? When the Torah says "And you shall teach them to your children" (children's children? And how do I realize, i.e., understand, an opposing verse which says "But make them (the mitzvot) known to your children and to your children's children" (Deuteronomy 4:9)? This serves to say to you that whoever teaches their child, the verse ascribes him credit as though they taught their child, grandchild, and great-grandchild, **until the end of all generations.**

### **Babylonian Talmud Taanit ("Fast Days") 23a**

One day Honi was journeying on the road and he saw a man planting a carob tree; he asked him, How long does it take [for this tree] to bear fruit? The man replied: Seventy years. He then further asked him: Are you certain that you will live another seventy years? The man replied: I found grown carob trees in the world; as my forefathers planted these for me so I too plant these for my children. Honi sat down to have a meal and sleep overcame him. As he slept a rocky formation enclosed upon him which hid him from sight, and he continued to sleep for seventy years.

When he awoke, he saw a man gathering the fruit of the carob tree and he asked him, Are you the man who planted the tree? The man replied: I am his grandson.

Thereupon he exclaimed: It is clear that I slept for seventy years. He then caught sight of his ass who had given birth to several generations of mules. When he returned home, he enquired, "Is the son of Honi the Circle-Drawer still alive?" The people answered him, "His son is no more, but his grandson is still living." Thereupon he said to them: "I am Honi the Circle-Drawer," but no one believed him.

He went to the Bet Midrash and overheard the scholars say, "The law is as clear to us as in the days of Honi the Circle-Drawer, for whenever he came to the Bet Midrash he would settle for the scholars any difficulty that they had." Whereupon he called out, "I am he;" but the scholars would not believe him nor did they give him the honor due to him. This hurt him greatly and he prayed for death and died. Raba said: Hence the saying, "Either companionship or death."

### **Dara Horn *The World to Come***

"I believe that when people die, they go to the same place as all the people who haven't

yet been born. That's why it's called the world to come because that's where they make the new souls for the future. And the reward when good people die" – her mother paused, swallowed, paused again – "the reward when good people die is that they get to help make the people in their families who haven't been born yet. They pick out what kinds of traits they want the new people to have – they give them all the raw material of their souls, like their talents and their brains and their potential. Of course, it's up to the new ones, once they're born, what they'll use and what they won't, but that's what everyone who dies is doing, I think. They get to decide what kind of people the new ones might be able to become."

### Discussion Question

1. What do these three readings have in common?
2. What metaphors are used in the Honi tale to teach its main point?
3. How do sharing our family and Jewish stories:
  1. Teach our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren **until the end of all generations.**
  2. Metaphorically "Plant carob trees"?
  3. "Help make the people in their families who haven't been born yet?"

A time it was, and what a time it was, it was  
 A time of innocence  
 A time of confidences  
 Long ago it must be  
 I have a photograph  
 Preserve your memories  
 They're all that's left you

Paul Simon  
 Old Friends / Bookends Theme lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group

Memory,  
 native to this valley, will spread over it  
 like a grove, and memory will grow  
 into legend, legend into song, song  
 into sacrament  
 Wendell Berry



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