

Yom Kippur 5773 / 2012  
Machar, Washington D.C.

Rabbi Jeffrey L. Falick

I would like to thank the leadership and all the members of Machar for inviting me to spend this holiday with you. It is an enormous honor for me and I'm looking forward to our time together.

By way of introduction, let me just say a few words about myself. I was ordained as a rabbi at the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. I've served as a Hillel director in Illinois and Miami. For the past twelve years I've been the assistant director of a large JCC in suburban Miami where I grew up.

In my over twenty years of professional Jewish life, I struggled with my approach to Judaism. I finally made my way into Humanistic Judaism after many years of searching and struggling.

When I first joined our movement, with my training and background in more traditional ways of explaining and understanding the Jewish experience, I felt a little bit adrift. Without the pretext that they should serve as our main fonts of wisdom – as opposed to a treasured but mythical literary heritage – I found myself unable to exploit the Torah and other sources as I once had done. I could no longer assert that “the Torah teaches” because, as Sherwin Wine taught us, what the Torah teaches us about our experience is but one way of understanding it.

But Rabbi Wine also reminded us that we secular Jews possess a different kind of text from which to learn and teach. Our text is the real, the actual, the sum total of the entire history of the Jews. As someone who loves learning about that history, I was and continue to be captivated by it. Recently Rabbi Adam Chalom, who – for those who don't know him is dean of the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism – brought to life the book that Rabbi Wine was finishing when he died. Appropriately, it is a secular history of the Jews called *A Provocative People*. Aside from being an excellent one-volume survey of the Jewish experience, it is a valuable reminder that it was not God or miracles that fashioned Jewish history. It was the Jews themselves.

This secular approach to our history is in direct opposition to what I call the “Official Standard Jewish Narrative.” Outside of the academic world and small movements like our own, that narrative continues to dominate Jewish discourse. It is designed – and it is designed – to reassure us that our history is more or less a pre-determined path highlighted by miracles and sealed with divine covenants.

We reject the supernaturally dependent Official Standard Jewish Narrative because it is obviously fiction. It was intended to inculcate obedience. It was underscored over and

over by stories such as that of Abraham, our mythical ancestor, covenanted to obey his creator's will without reflection or resistance. Just a few days ago, on Rosh Hashana, most synagogues read the Torah portion portraying his submission to Yahweh when asked to take the life of his son, Isaac.

It is the kind of obedience and resignation to God's will that is recalled in the traditional daily recitation of Deuteronomy. It teaches that...

...If you obey my commandments ... then will I send the rain for your land ... and I will provide grass in your field for your cattle, and you shall eat and be sated. Be careful that your heart be not tempted and ... turn away to serve other gods .... For then God will be furious with you and ... there will be no rain ... and you will perish quickly...

Yes, the Official Standard Jewish Narrative is all about doing what we are supposed to do and receiving our reward.

Not that the Jews were always so willing to acquiesce. Later books of the bible attest to some very serious doubts.

We all know the story of Job. He was made to suffer on a dare from Satan to God. "Make him lose all that he loves," said the prosecuting angel, "And he will break down and denounce you." Job does break down. But the original deus ex machina – the deus himself – sets him straight at the end of the tale by appearing in a whirlwind and reminding Job that he's just a pitiful human being who cannot possibly understand God's awesome and mysterious ways. Once again the Official Standard Jewish Narrative was shored up, strengthened and tempered with a bit of mystery to dispel the doubt.

Of course, the Official Standard Jewish Narrative, no matter its power over the Jewish imagination, could only take a people like ours so far. After all, we have been around for some time and that does not just happen by accident, though accidents and chance were often contributing factors. That happens because we were – despite all mythological claims to the contrary – able to adapt to some of the most changeable and arduous environments conceivable.

We survived where we survived – because we made the necessary changes or alterations to our behaviors that enabled us to adapt.

The high holidays are a central celebration of the Official Standard Jewish Narrative. Yom Kippur is a powerful reminder of our place in this narrative, featuring traditional re-tellings and re-creations of ancient Jewish cultic rites.

In keeping with the holiday tradition of recalling our past, I would like to share with you two tales of Jewish significance from the real text that is our history itself.

Each of my stories is about a wall in ancient Jerusalem. One of these walls is well known to you and the other is not.

My first story is about the most well known wall in Jewish history and iconography. It goes by different names: The Wailing Wall, The Western Wall, the Kotel or just THE Wall. It is so well known to us because, more than any other physical structure in Jewish history, it embodies the Official Standard Jewish Narrative.

Now - just as I do when I lead groups through Jerusalem - I invite you to join me as we make our way through the pathways and alleys of Jerusalem's Jewish Quarter to the Western Wall.

The Wall that we're so familiar with – the Wall that looms so large in the Jewish imagination – did not originate as a featured player in the Official Standard Jewish Narrative. It was designed with a supporting role in mind...quite literally it was built as a support structure. It was designed to serve simply as the outer retaining wall of the Second Temple's platform where Jews gathered for worship and communal events. The Muslims' Dome of the Rock sits there today.

The Jews' Temples themselves were the premier architectural expression of the Standard Narrative. They served as the cultural, administrative and religious seats of power for the priestly cult. The Second Temple is so named and numbered because it replaced an earlier version that both scholars and the bible agree was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. Legend has it that the destruction took place on Tisha B'Av – the Ninth Day of the Jewish Month of Av – a day still characterized by Jewish mourning practices. In harmony with the Standard Narrative, its destruction was interpreted as God's punishment for our disloyalty. I'm not sure the Babylonians would have agreed with that interpretation, but the bible and later Jewish tradition are unambiguous on that point.

In 538 BCE it was the turn of those same Babylonians to be defeated. The Persian Empire, under Cyrus the Great, offered the Jews in exile the opportunity to return to the city of Jerusalem and to re-build their Temple. Our tradition, of course, holds that it was God who gave him the idea.

So, under the leadership of Ezra, whose exploits are described in the biblical book bearing his name, some Jews returned from exile in Persian-controlled Babylon in order to re-establish a Jewish presence in Jerusalem.

By all accounts, the Second Temple built by those who returned was an uninspiring edifice. Later historians attest to that. The budget was quite small in contrast to the large impact it would soon have on the Jewish world. In fact, Yom Kippur probably developed and grew in importance in the Second Temple period. Even with a thriving

Babylonian Diaspora, the Second Temple led to Israel's re-establishment as the center of Jewish life.

Now let us flash forward in time a few hundred years to the Hellenistic era. About 150 years after Alexander the Great conquered the Near East, a new Jewish kingdom sprung up in Judah. This Jewish state – the Maccabean kingdom – the same one established and commemorated by the events we celebrate at Chanuka – was in trouble after only 100 years. It began to crumble in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE prompting the Romans to come to Israel and impose some order on the place. Eventually the Romans fired the ruling royal Maccabee family and placed their own Jewish puppet-king on the throne. That was King Herod.

We know quite a bit about Herod. He was a self-aggrandizing megalomaniac. He was extremely paranoid. And he wanted more than anything to impress his Roman masters and build a tributary kingdom of imposing proportions.

In his grandiosity, he built colossal projects throughout Israel such as his palaces at Caesarea, Tiberias and Masada. Surpassing them all was his greatest building achievement, a complete overhaul of the Second Temple. It was a renovation so complete that some scholars refer to it as the Third Temple. Much like a modern highway project, he had to build it without shutting it down, so we generally call it the latter Second Temple. When it was complete, God had a brand new house in which to dwell on his mountain in Jerusalem.

Needless to say it all cost more than a few shekels, not to mention an uncountable numbers of slaves.

So where does the Wall fit in with all of this?

Since the Temple is located on top of a small mountain it was necessary to create huge vaults alongside the mountain to hold up a greatly increased surface area and to flatten out and expand the top of the mountain. The Western Wall was just that. It was the western wall of the western vault holding up the newly expanded platform.

When the entire project was completed it was longer than five football fields and wider than three. It was also about twice as high from the ground level as it appears today. In fact, it was one of the most outstanding structures of the Near East. It was just enormous. It was a source of pride for Jews throughout the world and it served as the center of all Jewish life.

It also didn't last that long: With the outbreak of the Jewish Revolt against the Romans that came just a few decades later in 66 CE, the Temple was captured and shortly thereafter it was destroyed.

A subsequent uprising by the Jews in 135 CE - The Bar Kochba Revolt - led to the expulsion of the Jews from Jerusalem. Once again, just as with the conquest of Judah hundreds of years earlier, the Official Standard Jewish Narrative accounted for it all. It was Jewish disobedience and disunity that led to the destruction of Jerusalem.

As Rabbi Wine put it in *A Provocative People*, “So traumatic was this event...that the loss of the Temple elevated [it] to a national obsession. Since sin had caused the destruction of the Temple, only true repentance could restore it.” Obsession with the Temple and the sins that were believed to have caused it is a central theme of the traditional Yom Kippur observance.

The Temple Mount soon passed into Christian and then into Muslim hands. Because of its physical accessibility, the Western Wall became more and more central as a symbol of Jewish longings for Jerusalem and a return from exile. In some ways, it became as important a symbol as the Temple it had once held up. The mourning of the Jews there led to a new name: The Wailing Wall. This was all perfectly consistent with the Standard Narrative.

The early Zionists, secularists that they were, did not hew to the Standard Narrative. They weren’t willing to wait for God to redeem the land or the Wall. The result was the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. But one of the sad outcomes of Israel’s War of Independence was the expulsion of every Jew in the Jewish Quarter and the division of the city itself. It would be nineteen years before Jews would access their Wall again.

That day finally arrived – and quite unexpectedly – when in 1967, the Israelis won the Six-Day War. Most of us are probably familiar with the pictures of the first soldiers arriving there and of Moshe Dayan’s triumphant entrance.

Overnight the place became a huge hit with Israelis and Jews around the world. A plaza was created, part of which became an Orthodox synagogue with separate access for men and women. And that plaza, the Wall and the Orthodox synagogue became a shrine to the Official Standard Jewish Narrative. How was little Israel so victorious against the combined might of its enemies? For too many the answer was clear – even if it was clearly wrong. God did it.

Most historians – as well as the people who fought in that war – would argue that point. But given the centrality of the Standard Narrative, and the mythos and mystery surrounding the Temple and its remaining Wall, it’s difficult to convince many people otherwise.

A visit to the Wall today confirms that. It is the central shrine of the Jewish people. It is almost an idol itself. People fight over who can pray there and in what fashion. People kiss it, drops slips of prayers into its cracks and the truly pious walk backwards as they take their leave of it. I am told that Sherwin Wine was so put off by all this that he

jokingly staked out an area just around the corner – the southern wall – for Humanistic Jews.

Personally, I wouldn't have chosen any part of those retaining walls for our movement. I have another wall in mind for us.

Archeologists call it "The Broad Wall." I'd venture that few of you have heard of it because it never made its way into the Standard Narrative. In fact, its importance seems to have been purposely concealed. That is why what might very well be the most important wall in Jewish history is virtually unknown today.

The Broad Wall was not beheld by modern eyes until Israeli archeologists unearthed it in the 1970s. It's quite likely that most of you who have visited the Jewish Quarter in Jerusalem's Old City have missed it altogether. Archeologists who spent years searching for it on the basis of its biblical descriptions had begun to doubt its very existence until it was uncovered.

Its remaining visible section is located in the small backyard of a school near the Jewish Quarter's Cardo where modern tourists shop for t-shirts.

It's much, much older than the Western Wall. In fact it is over 700 years older than that one.

So why was it so important?

To answer that we must venture backward in time much further than the Second Temple period. In fact we must go back almost a century and a half before the destruction of the FIRST Temple...all the way back to 722 BCE when there were not one, but two Israelite kingdoms.

According to the bible they had begun as one united kingdom – mighty and powerful – under Kings David and Solomon. There are doubts about that, but I'll leave those for another time. The larger and wealthier kingdom was in the northern part of the land and was known as Israel. The smaller southern kingdom was called Judah or in Hebrew "Yehuda."

Its inhabitants were known as "Yehudim" – Jews.

Now despite biblical accounts of grandeur, Israel and Judah were two tiny and unimportant kingdoms located at the crossroads of mighty and soon-to-be-mighty empires in every direction. On the west was the Mediterranean Sea that had brought in the Sea Peoples who settled on the coast. To the east was Babylon – that same Babylon that would later destroy the First Temple and that played a role in our first story.

To the southwest was Egypt. And in the north lay Assyria...Egypt's number one rival and the greatest power of the time.

For reasons too complicated and convoluted to enter into, the northern kingdom, Israel, was attacked by Assyria in 722 BCE. It fell and its inhabitants were taken into exile. If you've ever heard of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, that was them.

Israel's sister kingdom to the south, Judah, did not desire the same fate. Its king chose instead to make peace with Assyria and pay it a large tribute. But Assyria's rivalry with Egypt made Judah's position weak. And when King Hezekiah of Judah decided to back Egypt, Judah's peace with Assyria was history. Twenty years after the destruction of Israel, King Sennacherib of Assyria now turned his stones, spears and arrows on Judah.

He destroyed Judah's cities, reducing Judah itself to a surviving rump in Jerusalem. Its turn came next.

Sennacherib's troops arrived at Jerusalem and encamped overnight. This is attested to by the bible and corroborated by archeological evidence. In the biblical account, the Assyrian troops taunted King Hezekiah, making light of his ability to defend himself.

This is what the Book of Second Kings says occurred next:

And it came to pass that night, that the angel of Yahweh went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians a hundred fourscore and five thousand: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses.

Yes, you heard that correctly. An angel killed all of Sennacherib's troops. Jerusalem was saved.

And so the story fit neatly into the Official Standard Jewish Narrative as another milestone on Yahweh's planned path for his people.

Well at least that's how they told it. But there were no angels of death that night. Nor did fervent prayers or fasting save King Hezekiah and the Jews of Jerusalem.

They were saved by the Broad Wall.

When King Hezekiah made his pact with Egypt, he knew that this would anger Sennacherib. So – and the bible attests to this too, if only in passing – he undertook massive preparations for the oncoming assault. One of the first things he did was to order the construction of an underground tunnel – a considerable engineering project – to protect Jerusalem's exposed water supply and bring it deeper into the city.

Simultaneously he built the Broad Wall. With the wall, the tunnel and other

preparations in place, Hezekiah managed to save his city and to save every single Jew that then existed in the world. Every single one of them. Without those preparations, Jewish history would have come to a premature conclusion and we would not be sitting here today.

It's kind of a shame that Yahweh's angel received all of the credit, but that's the Official Standard Jewish Narrative for you. Yahweh always gets all of the credit.

I hope that it is clear to you by now why I have shared with you the stories of these two walls.

Ever since I first stumbled across the Broad Wall and learned the story behind it, it has fascinated me. Not because it was so well known. It's barely mentioned in the bible. It's hardly an afterthought in its telling. How could there be much room for it what with all of the fasting and praying and angels and such?

And to be honest, few who stumble upon it, hidden in its school courtyard, really work up much excitement about it. It's mostly gone now and it didn't leave behind any remnants nearly as impressive as the Western Wall. It was never the focus of great longing. No one prays at it nor is it filled with tiny pieces of paper pouring out the passions of the heart. It's not even that easy to find.

But for secular-minded and Humanistic Jews, it is a reminder of the true story of our people. It flies in the face of the Standard Narrative. It exemplifies Rabbi Wine's poem, Eifo Ori. It is a testimonial to the reality that our light, our strength and our hope are not part of some great plan. They are human needs found only in ourselves and our relationships with others.

Like many of you, I was taught that the Jews were a chosen people, singled out by God to fulfill a special mission in the world.

My teachers, far from being Orthodox Jews, were nonetheless promoters of the Official Standard Jewish Narrative. They taught me that yes, the world may have despised us, but no matter... we survived because of our faith. They pointed to the wonders that our faith had fashioned in the world, giving birth to two enormously popular monotheistic religions that both worshiped the God of the Jews. All of it was but the continuation of the great chronicle that began with Abraham's covenant with God.

Of course this is just so much nonsense. But it is nonsense that continues to span almost every major approach to Jewish life. The Orthodox, of course, teach it more literally. But Reform and Conservative Jews hold these views, too. Only the great Mordecai Kaplan made any real attempt to reject it when he made the bold, but completely obvious observation that the uniqueness of the Jewish people, to the extent that it exists at all, was not a result of its election.



It is natural for Jews to believe in the Narrative's notion of chosenness. Almost every human culture puts itself in the center of the world. Yet the Jews were no more or less central than any other group (although we seem to be the object of some fairly disproportional obsessions on the part of others).

So if God, the covenant and all the other details of the rich Standard Narrative could not explain our survival. Why had the Jews survived?

Any answer must begin with a caution: Jewish culture did not survive... Only SOME Jewish cultures survived. There were plenty of Jewish communities throughout history that did not leave behind descendants. Some of them are barely a whisper in Jewish memory. The Jews of Alexandria, Egypt lived in one of the largest and most successful Jewish communities of their time. But even its great Jewish philosopher, Philo Judaeus of Alexandria, was forgotten by us. We know of his existence only because Christian monks preserved his words.

Part of our survival was due to dumb luck. Everything on this planet that goes any distance is the beneficiary of some element of chance that allowed it to be in the right place at the right time.

Rabbinic Jewish culture was the one to survive and prevail. We went on to build variations of it wherever we roamed.

Rabbinic Judaism was the invention of the Rabbis, with a capital "R," who reconstituted Jewish life by asserting their authority over world-wide Jewry through what they called the Oral Torah. This Oral Torah was the key code that they used to interpret the Written Torah according to their own contemporary needs. By claiming Mosaic origins for the Oral Torah – preserved today in the Talmud and related literature – they managed quite easily to fold it into the Standard Narrative. They taught that the Oral Torah was derived from the authoritative method of interpretation that God gave to Moses at Mt. Sinai when he revealed the Five Books of Moses. The Oral Torah was, in fact, their own invention. It provided for the concentration of Jewish leadership in Rabbinic hands. This would prove to be crucial for Jewish survival.

Brilliant leadership was important. Another was our famed Jewish tenacity. We refused to disappear. When others sought to forcibly convert Jews they resisted with a stubbornness that made them immovable. More traditional Jews might call this an act of perfect faith. I'll stick with stubbornness. Even the Torah calls us a "stiff-necked people."

We were also quite good at adapting. Just as nature's survivors rise to fill a niche, the Jews found theirs. Jews developed a particular talent for finance. Barred from other ways of making a living, Jews were able to leverage a loophole that allowed them to

lend money and engage in related commerce when other groups would not. They found other specialties, too.

Later on, Jews continued to demonstrate their adaptability.

When Europe came under the influence of the Enlightenment, many Jews adopted its values and created new ways to be Jewish including Zionism, liberal Judaism and other new and creative approaches.

Jews also knew when to relocate.

When pogroms and persecution darkened their towns and homes, they picked up everything they could and moved to new towns and homes. And when most nations blocked that path, some Jews took up the project of building new towns and homes in Israel.

Each one of these acts of courage and survival defied the Official Standard Jewish Narrative. Never mind that some of them were later made to fit into the secure boundaries of the narrative. Just as surely as we know that there was no Angel of Death lying in wait for Sennacherib, we can be assured that our survival was neither miraculous nor pre-determined.

It was achieved by the work of our own hands.

Today we must be ready to continue that work. We humanists, Jews and everyone else who shares our ideals, can lead the way.

We have great challenges that lie in our path. It is not only the Jews who have their Standard Narrative. Christians have their versions. Muslims have theirs. Everyone else does, too. Actually, in an era where religion continues to dominate and claim privileges for itself, our world is still governed by those who seek to serve and elevate their varying narratives. Even today in our country, no atheist could be elected president and no president would dare to conclude any major address without uttering the words, "God bless America."

Our task as Humanistic Jews is to create a path to Jewish identity and cultural participation that is independent of the myths and claims of the Official Standard Jewish Narrative. Our task as humanists is to create a future for our children where decisions are made and societies operate independent of such myths.

Humanistic Jews tell the truth about Jewish history. We are informed by the most important Jewish text of all, that of real, human, Jewish experiences.

It is the Unofficial, Not-So-Standard, Really Complicated, and Completely Fascinating Jewish Narrative.

And it has the merit of being true.