

MYTHIC PASSAGES
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Update from Michael Karlin
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"Every life is a story, and a story can change the world." I must say those words 100 times a week. They are written in our articles and emblazoned on our t-shirts. They are in our speeches and marketing materials. I believe them intensely, and yet, only two weeks ago did I truly discover what they mean. I am privileged to be a participant in the [Wexner Heritage Jewish Leadership Program](#). The Wexner Foundation convened the first Leadership Institute for this year's class two weeks ago in Aspen, Colorado. At first I was a bit skeptical. While I have studied the traditions and texts of Judaism rather extensively both here and in Israel, and follow a fairly broad set of the daily and annual rituals, I did not feel like my views of Judaism or our role in the world would necessarily synch up too well with "mainstream" Judaism. I founded the Mythic Imagination Institute for goodness sakes! I see it *all* as myth; truth cloaked in fiction. A universal set of principles encoded in a particular cultural heritage that is meant to strengthen us and connect us more deeply to people of all faiths and beliefs. As a people who are constantly fixated on survival (historically for good reason, I might add), with laws that often create separation and not unity, I thought my beliefs might be counter to what would be taught. Well, I was blown away.

There were two Rabbis with whom I primarily studied all week. On the first night, I happened to be standing in line at dinner with one of them, [Rabbi Mordecai Finley](#), and I struck up a conversation. Imagine my surprise when, before I even told him my background, he told me that his Jewish philosophy and practice were most dramatically influenced by reading *Revisioning Psychology* by [James Hillman](#)! He went on to tell me that he has studied all of the archetypes and how they relate to Judaism. That the daily rituals and holidays are deeply spiritual and psychological practice, and that we must see the metaphor in each of the stories and relate it deeply to our own life. I spent an amazing week studying all of the holidays in the calendar with him and understanding how they map to a spiritual and psychological process of annual renewal and reflection. He used archetypal psychology and myth to make these stories and rituals relevant in today's world.

The second Rabbi we studied with opened up the first day with a lecture on Oneness; how right from the beginning of the Torah, the message is of a universal unity. That the separation is an illusion that was created by humans when we recognized our own individuality. We are on a path

back towards this unity and our mission is to try and work in this world, so we can return to that unity. If you have been keeping up with our work with The Alliance for a New Humanity at all, you will know that this is precisely the theme of our work together; the recognition of ourselves in the other and return to Oneness. I was delighted to hear this message being delivered in this way from a Rabbi, and even more ecstatic when he pointed to a particular word in Hebrew in the text and said, "Do you know why this word is in here? It is in here to teach us that this is metaphor! This is truth disguised in a story. We are not supposed to read this as history!" By that point, I was levitating; I was so excited and appreciative to be hearing this message being articulated so strongly and clearly within my own spiritual belief system. These were spiritual leaders who were not afraid to stand up and say that this is mythology. That taking away its historicity does not take away its power; it unleashes it!

If you are interested in this particular lecture, after the event, I went online and found that [Rabbi Edward Feinstein](#) had delivered a similar lecture in 1998 during Yom Kippur. You can find it at www.vbs.org/rabbi/rabfeins/oneness.htm.

So what does all of this have to do with "every life is a story, and a story can change the world?" The Wexner Foundation did a brilliant thing. At the conclusion of this week long, intense, spiritual, soul searching and deeply psychological experience, they brought our Atlanta group together with Rabbi Feinstein, and they asked us to begin to write an ethical will. As he put it, "You have been studying sacred texts all week. Now it is time to feel what it is like to write a sacred text." For those of you who have participated in this process, you will know just how intense and important this act is. Prior to that moment, I did not know what an ethical will is. An ethical will is a document written to your kids, parents, or friends that states your values, dreams, inspirations, disappointments and wisdom. It does not have to be read after you are dead, but many people will write an ethical will and make it a part of their last will and testament. In essence it is the values that you stand for and want to live on after you are dead.

A number of very powerful insights came to me while I was writing this document. I was humbled many times during this Leadership Institute, but right there at the end, I was humbled most greatly. I realized that I tell people every day that "every life is a story and a story can change the world," but I have never actually articulated my own story; the important points; the pieces I want my children and friends to know me for and to carry on. This was only the beginning. I plan to take a look at this will each year, and reflect on its contents, and to update it as I gain wisdom and perspective. If you have never done this, I encourage you to try it. One good book to help you get started is [*So That Your Values Live On — Ethical Wills and How to Prepare Them*](#) by Jack Riemer and Nathaniel Stampfer. Good luck with your story. Let me know how it goes.

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