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## Unit One: The Stories We Tell iEngage Global Online Class

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### I. The Power of a Story

#### 1. Yuval Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, pp. 25–30

"Our chimpanzee cousins usually live in small troops of several dozen individuals. They form close friendships, hunt together and fight shoulder to shoulder against baboons, cheetahs and enemy chimpanzees...There are clear limits to the size of groups that can be maintained in such a way. In order to function, all members of the group must know each other intimately. Two chimpanzees who have never met, never fought and never engaged in mutual grooming will not know whether they can trust one another, whether it would be worthwhile to help one another, and which of them ranks higher. Under natural conditions a typical chimpanzee troop consists of about twenty to fifty individuals. As the number of chimpanzees in a troop increases, the social order destabilizes, eventually leading to rupture and the formation of a new troop by some of the animals...

Similar patterns probably dominated the social lives of early humans...

How did *Homo sapiens* manage to cross this critical threshold, eventually founding cities comprising tens of thousands of inhabitants and empires ruling hundreds of millions? The secret was probably the appearance of fiction. Large numbers of strangers can cooperate by believing in common myths.

Any large-scale human cooperation – whether a modern state, a medieval church, an ancient city or an archaic tribe – is rooted in common myths that exist only in people's collective imagination.

## 2. Ilana Pardes, *The Biography of Ancient Israel: National Narratives in the Bible*, p. 2

Israel has a life story: it was conceived in the days of Abraham; its miraculous birth took place with the Exodus, the parting of the Red Sea; then came a long period of childhood and restless adolescence in the wilderness; and finally adulthood was approached with the conquest of Canaan.

The relevance of metaphor to the construction of nations has been raised in the groundbreaking work of Benedict Anderson. A nation is necessarily imagined, he claims, because it consists of numerous members who do not know each other yet share “the image of their communion.”

## 3. Passover Haggadah (excerpts)

We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and the Lord, our God, took us out from there with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm. If the Holy One, blessed be He, had not taken our fathers out of Egypt, then we, our children and our children's children would have remained enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt. Even if all of us were wise, all of us understanding, all of us knowing the Torah, we would still be obligated to discuss the exodus from Egypt; and everyone who discusses the exodus from Egypt at length is praiseworthy.

עֲבָדִים הָיִינוּ לְפָרְעָה בְּמִצְרַיִם, וַיּוֹצִיאֵנוּ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִשָּׁם בְּיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְזְרוּעַ נְטוּיָהּ. וְאֵלֹהֵי לֹא הוֹצִיא הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת אֲבוֹתֵינוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם, הֲרִי אָנוּ וּבְנֵינוּ וּבְנֵי בְנֵינוּ מְשַׁעֲבָדִים הָיִינוּ לְפָרְעָה בְּמִצְרַיִם. וְאֶפְּלוּ כְּלָנוּ חֲכָמִים, כְּלָנוּ נְבוֹנִים, כְּלָנוּ יוֹדְעִים אֶת הַתּוֹרָה, מְצַנְחָה עָלֵינוּ לְסַפֵּר בִּיצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם. וְכָל הַמְרַבֵּה לְסַפֵּר בִּיצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם הֲרִי זֶה מְשֻׁבָּח.

A person is obligated to see themselves as if he or she was personally redeemed from Egypt.

בְּכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר חַיָּב אָדָם לְרַאֲוֹת אֶת עַצְמוֹ כְּאֵלֹהֵי הוּא נִצָּא מִמִּצְרַיִם.

The *wicked one*, what does he say? “What is this service to you?” He says “to you” but not to him! By thus excluding himself from the community he has committed heresy [rebelled against the essence of our faith]. You, therefore, blunt his teeth and say to him: “It is because of this that the Lord did for me when I left Egypt;” “for me” -- but not for him! For if he had been there, he would not have been redeemed.

רְשָׁע מָה הוּא אוֹמֵר? מָה הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם? לָכֶם - וְלֹא לוֹ. וּלְפִי שֶׁהוֹצִיא אֶת עַצְמוֹ מִן הַכָּלל כְּפֹר בְּעֵקֶר. וְאִם אֵתָּה הַקְּהָלָה אֶת שְׁנֵינוּ וְאָמַר לוֹ: בְּעִבּוֹר זֶה עָשָׂה ה' לִי בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם. לִי - וְלֹא לוֹ. אֵילֹהֵי הָיָה שָׁם, לֹא הָיָה נִגָּאֵל.

## II. To be at Home: To be Safe, to be Normal, to be Exceptional

### 4. Numbers 23:9-10

<sup>9</sup>As I see them from the mountain tops,  
Gaze on them from the heights,  
Behold, there is a people that dwells apart,  
Not reckoned among the nations,  
<sup>10</sup>Who can count the dust of Jacob,  
Number the dust-cloud of Israel?  
May I die the death of the upright,  
May my fate be like theirs!

ט כִּי-מֵרֵאשִׁי צָרִים אֶרְאֶנּוּ וּמְגֻבְעוֹת אֲשׁוּרְנּוּ הֵן-עַם לְבָדָד יֹשֵׁב וּבְגוֹזִים לֹא יִתְחַשֵּׁב :  
י מִי מִנָּה עֶפְרָר יַעֲקֹב וּמִסֶּפֶר אֶת-רִבְעֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל תִּמְתֵּי נַפְשֵׁי מוֹת יִשְׂרָיִם וְתִהְיֶי אַחֲרֵיתִי כְּמֵהוּ :

### 5. Exchange Between AJC President Jacob Blaustein and PM David Ben Gurion

There are a few unthinking Jewish nationalists who appear to want to assign to Israel the role of ingathering Jews from all over the world in the false belief that Jewish life outside of Israel—in exile as they put it—is without spiritual value, cultural significance, or hope of personal or group security... We repudiate vigorously the suggestion that American Jews are in Exile. The future of American Jewry, of our children and our children's children is entirely linked with the future of America. We have no alternative, and we want no alternative.

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To American Jews, America is home. There exist their thriving roots, there is the country which they have helped build, and there they share its fruits and its destiny.

## **6. A. B. Yehoshua, “The Meaning of Homeland” (2006)**

What I sought to explain to my American hosts, in overly blunt and harsh language perhaps, is that, for me, Jewish values are not located in a fancy spice box that is only opened to release its pleasing fragrance on Shabbat and holidays, but in the daily reality of dozens of problems through which Jewish values are shaped and defined, for better or worse. A religious Israeli Jew also deals with a depth and breadth of life issues that is incomparably larger and more substantial than those with which his religious counterpart in New York or Antwerp must contend.

Am I denouncing their incomplete identity? I am neither denouncing nor praising. It’s just a fact that requires no legitimating from me, just as my identity requires no legitimating from them. But since we see ourselves as belonging to one people, and since the two identities are interconnected, and flow into one another, the relation between them must be well clarified.

As long as it is clear to all of us that Israeli Jewish identity deals, for better or worse, with the full spectrum of the reality and that Diaspora Jewry deals only with parts of it, then at least the difference between whole and part is acknowledged. But the moment that Jews insist that involvement in the study and interpretation of texts, or in the organized activity of Jewish institutions, are equal to the totality of the social and political and economic reality that we in Israel are contending with—not only does the moral significance of the historic Jewish grappling with a total reality lose its validity, there is also the easy and convenient option of a constant flow from the whole to the partial.