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## THE VOICE IS THE MESSENGER OF THE HEART: SHARED STORIES STILL WORK BEST

A Song of David  
The heavens declare the glory of God;  
The sky proclaims His handiwork.  
Day after day the word goes forth;  
Night after night the story is told.  
Soundless the speech, voiceless the talk,  
Yet the story is echoed throughout the world.

*Psalm 19*

Say it! Say it!  
The world is made up of stories. . .  
Not of atoms.

*Muriel Rukeyser*

### STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

**T**his essay will explore Jewish storytelling as an inspirational and creative educational tool to instill emotional and educated connections to Judaism. After examining the great stock of sacred and secular Jewish stories, we will address the roles of stories, the effective ways they enlighten listeners, and their telling. Our purpose is to encourage the use of this influential and effective educational tool by educators, rabbis, parents, and students alike, in all areas of formal and informal education.

From the beginning of recorded time to the present day, stories have served as powerful and effective means of communicating a culture's faith, history, traditions, and values. For Jews, stories have been a treasured heritage (*morasha*) handed down from generation to generation through the oral tradition.

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In Jewish lore, the heart is often considered to be the seat of wisdom combining both the cognitive and affective realms. As is stated in *Kohelet Rabba*, “A man’s whole wisdom is in the heart.”<sup>1</sup> I believe that stories answer most effectively the “heart” questions: Who am I? Who are my people? By what values have we lived? How should I live? How should I die? How do I become a *mentsch*? What is the legacy that I should leave to the next generation?

Bahya Ibn Pakuda writes in his medieval text, *Duties of the Heart*, “The tongue is the heart’s pen and the mind’s messenger.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, the voice is the messenger of the heart. It is the voice, a person’s exquisite musical instrument, which carries the message on wings of a story from one heart to another. Hasidic tradition echoes the idea that the story bypasses the intellect and enters directly into the heart. In this way, shared stories teach the important values and perspectives in a most beautiful and lasting way.

## WHAT MAKES A STORY JEWISH?

Stories were a unifying inspiration wherever Jews traveled and lived throughout the world. Jews not only carried the sacred stories of the Torah with them, but also folk narratives, many of which were inspired by the biblical stories, the *aggada*, and the *midrash*. No matter how diverse the genres, tones, themes, and characters among all of these Jewish stories, the form as a whole is “distinguished from that of other nations . . . by its *monotheistic* and *ethical* background,” as one observer puts it.<sup>3</sup> Jewish stories reflect the Jewish belief in one God and in teaching moral lessons (*musar haskel*). In other words, the folktales, folk-songs, folk belief, rituals, and so on, mirror the soul of the people. As Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky write:

By their nature, legends are not passing, temporary literary visions, but are the classic creation of the spirit of our people—a creation that is the fruit of its hour and an enduring fund for generations. In their essence and totality they are the great revelations of the soul of the nation and its people.<sup>4</sup>

There is a variety of tales (parables, legends, fairytales, folktales, fables, supernatural and mystical tales, tall tales, etc.) with a wide range of themes and characters in the great repertoire of Jewish stories. One characteristic, however, is common: all the Jewish tales have encoded in

them a moral message. Indeed, the main criterion for identifying a story as Jewish is the message that resonates with what Judaism teaches.

Dov Noy's model of the Jewish folktale includes four guidelines that do not focus on the plot or content of the story. Although many folktales contain variations on a theme found in world folk literature, his four guidelines revolve "around the storytelling act, that is, the context in which the story is told". These four components "characterize the uniquely Jewish aspects of the Jewish folktale. They are: 1) The Time; 2) The Place; 3) The Acting Characters; and 4) The Message."<sup>5</sup>

While the first three elements (Time, Place, and Characters) are guideposts for identifying a tale as Jewish, the fourth, Message, pervades the other three elements. Noy states:

Probably the most characteristically Jewish element of the folktale is the introduction of a moral or lesson. The universal folktale most often had as its purpose the entertainment of the listener. . . . The Jewish folktale has as its clear and manifest *raison d'être* a lesson—sometimes about life, but more often about man's duty to God, to his fellow man and to his people. The ubiquitous instructional element of literally *all* Jewish folktales . . . distinguishes the Jewish storyteller from all others.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the message of a story teaches its listeners how to live and act Jewishly: to choose life; to improve the world; to seek justice; to renew hope and restore faith; to incorporate Jewish values, such as Jewish peoplehood, family, hospitality, and the Sabbath; and to reaffirm the Jewish credo of one God. It is important to point out that not all of these messages, such as hospitality, are unique to Jewish stories, but rather that there is a major emphasis on them in our repertoire.

While these identified values are more often found in serious and thought-provoking types of stories, they are also embedded in the many humorous stories in the "hearing" or oral literature of the Jews. What message do stories, such as trickster tales and tall tales, contain? A funny story, which often includes incongruous situations, unexpected and surprise elements, causes laughter, a universal, uniquely human phenomenon. According to Aristotle as well as current research, laughter purges negative emotions and serves as a healing catharsis.

In the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Donald W. Black, reporting on his findings about the physical nature and evolution of laughter, concludes that "laughter does clearly seem to have a cathartic effect; people often feel better and more relaxed after laughing."<sup>7</sup>

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Thus, laughter allows listeners to put life in a perspective, and strengthens them to go on, possibly adapting to new situations. Throughout time, Jews have needed the benefit of these healing abilities in many situations and in many countries. Another benefit that is derived from humorous stories is the ability to gain control over a situation. Since there were many times when Jews had no authority to exercise religious, economic, or political control, Jews could exert control using words and situations cleverly by creating stories with humor, word play, resolved endings, and resourcefulness. I believe that this served as their release and salve.

## **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES**

Before exploring the domain of storytelling, we turn to the sources of Jewish stories. The sacred source of our stories is the Torah, a corpus that includes not only the Written but also the Oral Torah. Rabbi Avraham Weiss has captured the essence of the differences between the letter and the spirit, the black fire and the white fire of the Torah, in this multi-layered description:

On the simplest level, black fire is the letter of Torah, white fire the spaces between the letters. . . . And on yet another level, the black letters represent the cognitive message, while the white spaces represent that which goes beyond the world of the intellect. The black letters are limited, limiting, and fixed. The white spaces, on the other hand, catapult us into the realm of the limitless and the ever-changing, ever-growing. They are the silence, the song, the story.”<sup>8</sup>

Learning Torah is a process that involves wrestling with ideas, events, and meaning. The explanations of Torah and its applications of law were taught orally to generations of students by their rabbis. These explications, questions, and discussions, interwoven with parables, collected and edited from all the various schools, countries, and rabbinic authorities, became the Oral Torah.

## **UNIQUENESS OF ORAL TORAH**

The uniqueness of the Oral Torah, especially the Talmud, lies in its structure. As a dynamic and historical conglomeration of cases and discussions, it incorporates law (halakha) along with lore, narratives, and

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stories of all kinds (*aggada*). Dr. Norman Lamm states, “If Halakhah is the science of Jewish religious life, *derush* [Agadah] is its art, and esthetics needs no apology in its claim to a rightful place in the sanctuary of Torah.”<sup>9</sup> He further claims that “*derush* has been ubiquitous throughout the history of rabbinic Judaism and is coextensive with it.”<sup>10</sup>

The Hebrew word *aggada* means “telling” or “that which is told,” which implies oral transmission. David Stern, in his introduction to *The Book of Legends*, comprehensively describes *aggada*:

In the original Hebrew Introduction to the first edition of *Sefer Ha-Aggadah* [1908-11], Bialik and Ravnitzky articulated the vision behind their work. *Aggadah* (pl. *aggadot*), the traditional name for all the non-legal teaching of the early sages of Rabbinic Judaism, from their homilies to their tales, was, Bialik and Ravnitzky wrote, ‘the principal literary form’ of the Jewish people, the ‘classic expression of their spirit.’ The product of the creative powers of generations of rabbis, it was like ‘a beautiful palace’ in which ‘the spirit and soul of the Jews permanently dwelled. . . .’ Its literary forms similarly range across the entire spectrum: from biblical exegeses and extra-biblical legends—stories elaborating upon biblical characters and episodes in their careers not found in the Bible itself—to fully developed sermons . . . to snippets of popular folklore, anecdotes about the sages’ own lives and about their contemporary history, and, not least of all, the entire body of Rabbinic thought . . . and much material that some would call popular religion and others superstition—namely, topics like magic, angelology, demonology, folk medicine, the sciences of amulets, secret charms, astrology, and so on.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the Middle Ages, many stories were mined from the Oral Torah and oral tradition and written down: Ben Sira’s *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*, Nissim ben Jacob Ibn Shahin’s *Hibbur Yafeh me-ha-Yeshua* (translated under the title *Elegant Composition Concerning Relief After Adversity*), Berekhia ha-Nakdan’s *Mishlei Shualim* (Fox Fables), Joseph Ibn Zabara’s *Sefer ha-Sha’ashuim* (*Book of Delight*) and Yehuda ha-Hasid’s *Sefer Hasidim* (*Book of the Pious*).

### LATER PERIODS

In the eighteenth century, the Hasidim created a vibrant revival of storytelling along with an important body of stories. Eli Yassif, in *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning*, writes: “The tales that grew

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out of and around the Hasidic movement form one of the largest and richest veins to be mined in all of Jewish literature.”<sup>12</sup> While the Hasidim created many stories, they also transformed tales heard from the folklore of the people living around them. They borrowed secular fantasy folktales and reinterpreted them as sacred tales that contained kabbalistic secrets. In addition, they began telling legends about their Hasidic masters, beginning with the Baal Shem Tov. His great grandson, Reb Nahman of Bratzlav, acknowledged as the greatest of the Hasidic storytellers, appealed to the heart and soul of his people through story, saying that “most people say that stories help you fall asleep; I wake people up with stories.”<sup>13</sup>

In the twentieth century, four master folklorists/scholars can be credited with seminal work in collecting and publishing Jewish folktales. The four are Louis Ginzberg, Moses Gaster, Micha Joseph Bin Gorion, and Dov Noy.

Ginzberg’s seminal seven-volume *The Legends of the Jews*<sup>14</sup> is a suggested place to begin the search for themes, topics, stories and sources connected with the biblical narrative. This compendium is invaluable for investigating the rabbinic and folkloristic sources on the Bible.

In addition, Moses Gaster is responsible for the compiling of two major works: *Ma’aseh Book (Book of Jewish Tales and Legends*, two volumes),<sup>15</sup> and *The Exempla of the Rabbis*.<sup>16</sup> *Ma’aseh Book*, reprinted in 1981 in one volume, is based on an early manuscript, the first known Yiddish collection of popular tales. The 254 stories from various post-biblical sources cover a wide range. *The Exempla*, reprinted in 1968, is a volume of more than 300 tales in summary form and is subtitled: “Being a Collection of Exempla, Apologues and Tales culled from Hebrew Manuscripts and Rare Hebrew Books.”

The third scholar is Micha Joseph Bin Gorion, whose monumental collection of 1,082 stories in three volumes is titled *Mimekor Yisrael: Classical Jewish Folktales* (1976).<sup>17</sup> There are four main divisions in the collection: “National Tales,” including biblical heroes, events and places, tales that take place during the Second Temple, etc; “Religious Tales,” including Talmudic, Kabbalistic and Hasidic stories; “Folktales,” including stories of love and faithfulness, Elijah stories, and moralistic short stories; and “Oriental Tales,” including fairytales and tales of wisdom, fables and parables, and popular Jewish reworkings of Indian, Persian, and Arabic stories.

Dov Noy is the fourth major figure in the renaissance of preserving and perpetuating the Jewish oral tradition. While he has published

many books and important essays (including the entry on “Folklore” in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*), his two main contributions are: 1) applying an international classification system to Jewish traditional narrative; and 2) establishing the Israel Folktale Archives. In the first case, Noy (under the name Neuman) wrote his doctoral dissertation in folklore at Indiana University and created a “Motif-Index of Talmudic-Midrashic Literature.” When folklorist/scholar Stith Thompson republished his expanded *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (1955-58),<sup>18</sup> “he incorporated Noy’s motifs, thus placing the Jewish traditions in a world-wide context.”<sup>19</sup> In 1954, Noy established the Israel Folktale Archives and Ethnological Museum at Haifa University. Currently, this archive counts over 23,000 discrete folktales, classified according to type and motif, country of origin, informant, etc. These folktales have been collected from all the many ethnic communities living in Israel.

#### MAIN DEVELOPMENTS OF CULTURAL EXCHANGE

Situated in the Diaspora throughout many centuries, Jews had many opportunities to hear stories of the host people in their country of residence. Like one river flowing in two directions, this exposure allowed for the exchange of tales between cultures, often with a resultant influence of one culture’s tales over another. This process of cultural exchange, whether it took place in an inn, a coffee house, or a marketplace, led to three main developments.

1. Jews heard folktales from other cultures that they transformed into Jewish variants. These stories then became part of the extensive Jewish repertoire of tales. To clarify this first point, folklorists have traced the influence on Jewish folktales from one such book of Sanskrit/Persian/Arabic tales: *Kalila and Dimna*. This book employed the pattern of the frame narrative with its chain stories, a pattern subsequently adapted by Joseph ibn Zabara for his *Book of Delight*.

2. Jews shared their own stories among themselves but other peoples borrowed and transformed these Jewish stories into universal variants that were told by other cultures. *The Arabian Nights* is an example of this second point. Also known as *The Thousand and One Nights*, this book can be traced to three ancient oral cultures: Indian, Persian, and Arab. These tales, embedded in a frame narrative, probably circulated orally in the vernacular for hundreds of years. Written down some time between the ninth and fourteenth centuries, the collections included stories from Jewish sources. It is interesting that there is no one defini-

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tive collection of this title, nor do any of them actually contain 1001 tales. According to Morris Epstein:

Many Jewish stories have entered Arabic literature. Of the four hundred-odd stories in *The Thousand and One Nights*, some forty-five are Jewish. . . . It has even been suggested that the framework story of the whole collection, in which Queen Shahrazad averts execution by telling tales for one thousand and one nights, is the same story as of the biblical Book of Esther (dated certainly not later than the third century B.C.E.)<sup>20</sup>

3. Jews translated into Hebrew many tales they had heard or read originally in other languages, such as Persian, Greek, Indian, Arabic. When these Hebrew versions of the tales were again translated, especially into Latin by priests, the tales were subsequently introduced to Western Europe. Thus Jews became mediators of tales between east and west, within their own culture and as exporter of tales to other cultures.

To illustrate this last point, the collection of fables called *Kalila and Dimna*, originally written in Sanskrit, was first translated into Persian, and then in 750 C.E. into Arabic. Jacob ben Eleazar (1195-1250) and later Rabbi Joel in 1250 translated this collection into Hebrew. This version, now containing many maxims from the Talmud and stressing Jewish values, became popular among the Jews of that time. It was, however, Rabbi Joel's Hebrew version of *Kalila and Dimna* that served as the text for John of Capua's Latin translation in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. This Latin version, called *Directorium Vitae Humanae*, became the source of the European versions. These became known throughout the continent and were soon transformed into popular European folktales.

According to Shalom Spiegel in his introduction to Louis Ginzberg's *Legends of the Bible*, Ginzberg identified the Jews

as great disseminators of folklore, who on their long wanderings from the East to the West, and back from the West to the East, brought the products of oriental fancies to the occidental nations, and the creations of occidental imagination to the oriental peoples.<sup>21</sup>

## STORIES AS TEACHING TOOLS

Stories, in all cultures, have been a powerfully effective and meaningful teaching tool. Our formative stories plant images that last longer in our deep-seated memories than do lectures or sermons without illustrative



narratives. Interestingly, in *Deuteronomy* (4:9), the heart, in addition to being the seat of wisdom, is conceived as the seat of memory.

Formative stories are often stories heard in childhood, in the home, school, synagogue, and camp, or wherever stories are shared, casually or formally, which influence us and help shape us. These stories guide us to become the adult person. These formative stories, whether they are personal, family, biblical, or folk stories, continually nourish children because they give them a sense of knowing who they are as a member of a cultural group and a family, what the group values are, and how to live as a *mentsch* (a resourceful, compassionate, empathetic, human being). Jewish stories have been the courage teachers, and consolers, and have served as storehouses of wise counsel for generations.

Penelope Leach has written in her book *Children First*:

Whether the focus is on children's feelings, understandings or thoughts, their judgments, beliefs or reasoning, the beginning of middle childhood promises a new maturity and a new desire to learn that is recognized in every culture. All over the world, it is at about seven years of age that children become increasingly aware of a wider society surrounding the family. They want to acquire its knowledge and skills; they need to learn its history; they strive to understand its concerns and aspirations. And because children are, above all, social animals, they do all that learning within a context of social value systems and come to behave as others in their social group behave."<sup>22</sup>

Listening to stories in early years also helps instill a sense of wonder and curiosity, which are gifts for life. Wonder and curiosity are qualities that generate a greater desire to learn and understand. In his book, *Tell Me a Story: A New Look at Real and Artificial Memory*, Roger C. Schank discusses this quality of becoming curious as a dimension of intelligence.<sup>23</sup> When he was involved with the Yale Artificial Intelligence lab investigating, in the late 1970s, whether or not computer programs could understand stories, the one property that students exhibited that the program did not was curiosity.<sup>24</sup> Wonder and curiosity fill the storehouse of human memories and serve as catalysts for lifelong learning and action. These traits are best stimulated through stories, especially listening to stories.

## STORIES AND INTELLIGENCE

Stories reside at the heart of human intelligence, according to Schank, who is the director of the Institute for the Learning Sciences at North-

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western University. He claims that “. . . intelligence is the apt use of experience and the creation and telling of stories . . . to understand the nature of intelligence we must understand the role that stories play in memory.”<sup>25</sup> Schank posits that smart people are able to absorb large numbers of stories that are applicable to various kinds of problems, store these stories so they can be retrieved later and retrieve the appropriate stories as needed.<sup>26</sup>

Scholars in the field of communication are discovering that the oral transmission of tales is literally mind-expanding. In his *Scientific American* article of 1976 entitled “Paleoneurology and the Evolution of Mind,” Harry Jerison states that “we need language more to tell stories than to direct actions.”<sup>27</sup> He continues:

In the telling we create mental images in our listeners that might normally be produced only by the memory of the events as recorded and integrated by the sensory and perceptual systems of the brain. These mental images should be as real, in a fundamental sense, as the immediately experienced real world. Both are constructions of the brain, although it is appropriate to encode them in order to distinguish image from reality. The role of language in human communication is special because we have the vocal and manual apparatus to create spoken and written language. In hearing or reading another’s words we literally share another’s consciousness, and it is that familiar use of language that is unique to man. The point, however, is that it was necessary to have a brain that created the kind of consciousness communicated by the motor mechanisms of language. That new capacity required an enormous amount of neural tissue, and much of the expansion of the human brain resulted from the development of language and related capacities for mental images.<sup>28</sup>

While the brain of a young child is developing, the child needs to be fed the language and the mental imagery in a non-threatening way so that they will interact with the material, internalize it, and recall it when needed. In this way, storytelling serves to expand a child’s horizons.

In the mid-1970’s, I established a storytelling program for youngsters aged 8-12 at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street YM-YWHA in New York City, in conjunction with Stern College, called “Kernels of a Pomegranate.” At one of these programs I told the biblical story of Joseph and his brothers. After the story, I passed around very large sheets of paper and placed a mound of crayons in the center of the floor asking the young listeners to draw any scene or moment from the story they remem-

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bered. Afterwards, each listener would tell the story of his or her drawing. One young boy, about ten years old, held up his picture. The paper was completely filled with inverted V stripes, each one about 1 inch in width, with the vivid colors of a rainbow. He explained that this was his drawing of Joseph's coat of many colors. Then he took a breath and added, "It's a close-up!"

I still recall my amazed reaction. (This was years before zoom lenses and camcorders were easily available to children.) This young boy "saw" a different and fresh perspective while he was listening to the story. His visual interpretation was unique to him. Because of his vision, I continue to see his close-up every time I retell that biblical story. Perhaps he does, too, whenever he hears it.

Thus, in order to have a repertoire of stories to draw from, we need to hear all types of stories. The obverse is that we also need to tell stories. As Schank writes,

We need to tell someone else a story that describes our experiences because the process of creating the story also creates the memory structure that will contain the gist of the story for the rest of our lives. Talking is remembering.<sup>29</sup>

Talking sets the story in the heart. It is interesting to note that the word "ear" is embedded in both words: hear and heart. Thus, we tell stories with the voice from the heart to reach the ears and hearts of others. Telling stories is sharing. Walter Benjamin, in his essay "The Storyteller," wrote: "The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others, and he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale."<sup>30</sup> In effect, storytelling promotes a "trialogue" between the storyteller, the story and the listeners.

The oral tradition involves the use of the spoken word that is dynamic and ephemeral. However, we need to differentiate between words that carry information and those which carry story. Benjamin discusses the nature of true storytelling:

The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment. . . . A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time. . . . It resembles the seeds of grain which have lain for centuries in the chambers of the pyramids shut up air-tight and have retained their germinative power to this day.<sup>31</sup>

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Another story comes to mind in a version that Howard Schwartz retells in a way where one story triggers the idea for a solution to a seemingly unsolvable problem.<sup>32</sup> In “Reb Nahman’s Chair,” Reb Nahman had been given a gift of a splendidly carved chair. After his death in 1810, his Hasidim refused to let anyone sit in it and it was kept as a precious reminder of their beloved Rebbe. During World War II, they needed to flee but they wanted to take the chair with them. This posed an insurmountable problem: how could they flee with this large heavy chair?

Suddenly a child recalled a Reb Nahman parable about a prince whose wisdom was being tested by the king. The prince was told to bring a huge heavy millstone from the grounds into the palace. How could he accomplish this by himself? Watching a squirrel break up a nut, the prince got the idea to break the millstone into small pieces and carry them into the palace bit by bit. From this parable, the Hasidim got the idea to cut the Rebbe’s chair into small pieces while each Hasid took one piece, promising to meet after the war in Jerusalem. And so it happened. Each one carrying a piece of the chair arrived safely in Jerusalem and there they reassembled Reb Nahman’s chair in the Bratslaver synagogue where it remains to this day. This was indeed a most creative solution to a perplexing problem!

The account of the chair is well known in Bratslaver circles. However, what actually led to the creative solution to break up Reb Nahman’s chair is not documented. Schwartz suggests two possibilities. The first, as we have seen, is the parable about the squirrel, which is one of Reb Nahman’s tales, “The Tale of the Millstone,” from *Sippurei Maysiot Hadashim*.<sup>33</sup> Since this tale parallels the dilemma in the chair story, Schwartz inserted this parable as a story-within-a-story in his 1996 narrative of “Reb Nahman’s Chair” as a viable solution to getting out the chair undetected.

The second possibility that Schwartz postulates is that “the motif of the chair being broken apart and then reassembled has strong echoes of the cosmological myth of the Ari about the Shattering of the Vessels and the Gathering of the Sparks.”<sup>34</sup> From these two examples we can also learn that people are capable of adapting a story to their own problems. As Schank has stated:

The more stories one has available to adapt into usefulness, the more inventive one can be. Intelligence, then depends upon having a great many cases . . . available for adaptation and upon the ability to find the relevance in the generalities that those cases capture to the particular problem at hand.<sup>3</sup>

While words generally cease to exist the moment they are spoken, listeners listen to words of stories in a different way because the words are filtered through the sound of the voice and the physical presence of the storyteller. Words are only one component in the storytelling experience.

However, when the words reach the hearts of the listeners, they internalize the meanings and retain images which can lead to action. In Judaism, words are synonymous with actions. The Hebrew root *d-v-r* can refer to both “word” and “event”. Ong writes, “The spoken word is always an event, a movement in time, completely lacking in the thing-like repose of the written or printed word.”<sup>36</sup> He adds: “Sight isolates, sound incorporates. . . .”<sup>37</sup>

### STORIES IN MORAL DEVELOPMENT

In his article, “The Use of Stories in Moral Development: New Psychological Reasons for an Old Education Method,” Paul C. Vitz proposes “that narratives (stories) are a central factor in a person’s moral development.”<sup>38</sup> By examining the theories of Jerome Bruner, Theodore R. Sarbin, Donald Spence, Robert Coles, and a number of other psychologists, Vitz demonstrates that narratives and the narrative thinking mode lead to moral development. He concludes in his Abstract that stories should become “a valuable part of moral education.”<sup>39</sup>

Extrapolating four principles and a hypothesis from the work of Robert Coles, Vitz states his fourth principle:

Morally structured stories or narratives, often of a religious kind, provide strong support and inspiration for children, and their own moral responses are often deeply rooted in their previous experience with narratives.

From these general Colesian principles, one can draw a simple educational hypothesis, namely, a very effective way to introduce children to the moral life, short of actually placing them in morally challenging situations, is to have them hear, read, or watch morally challenging narratives.<sup>40</sup>

A major book of stories that continues to contribute to the development of a child’s moral sense is the Bible. Dr. J. H. Hertz comments about the worth of hearing the stories of Genesis, especially, to the moral and religious training of children:

Like summer and the starry skies, like joy and childhood, these stories touch and enthrall the human soul with their sublime simplicity, high

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seriousness and marvelous beauty. . . . Not by means of abstract formulae does it bring God and duty to the soul of man, but by means of *lives* of human beings who feel and fail, who stumble and sin as we do; yet who, in their darkest groping, remain conscious of the one true way—and rise again. Witness the conduct of the brothers of Joseph when they had fully grasped the enormity of their crime. “By the study of what other book,” asked the agnostic T. H. Huxley, “could children be so much humanized. . . .”<sup>41</sup>

By hearing Jewish stories, listeners can take the words that express Jewish themes and values and energize them. Because the messages of the people are presented in a form that is entertaining, aesthetic, and educational, the listener, especially a young one, attaches special importance to those values. The values in the stories give the child the aspirations for the future as an individual and as a member of a particular group that treasures these values.

## HOPE AS IMPORTANT VALUE

An important life-sustaining value is hope. Hope, or perhaps the potential for hope, is inside each of us as it was in Pandora’s Box. What we need is a key to release it. Rabbi Maurice Lamm, in his book *The Power of Hope: The One Essential of Life and Love* writes, “Hope is natural. We all possess it. It needs only to be *uncovered*, not *discovered*.”<sup>42</sup>

Psychologists Charles Snyder, Timothy Elliott, and others, have studied and measured hope and they have concluded that genuine hope is desirable and necessary in order to live fully. After all, hope is not the same as wishful thinking (“I hope I win the lottery”), but rather is a process not contingent on any outcome in which we have not actively taken part. Snyder has offered his definition of hope as a “cognitive set that is based on a reciprocally derived sense of successful (a) agency (goal directed determination) and (b) pathways (planning of ways to meet the goals).” He identifies agency and pathways as will and ways as in “where there is a will, there is a way.” Therefore, both must be operative since they are reciprocal and related. Together they define “hope.” The psychologists have determined that optimism or hope is the best key to success in life (not materialistic success, but rather academic achievement and the ability to handle difficult and stressful jobs and cope with illness).<sup>43</sup>

Hope gives us a sense of tomorrow. In the Talmudic story of Honi the Circle Maker,<sup>44</sup> Honi sees an old man planting a carob tree (which takes 70 years to bear fruit) and asks him whether he will live long enough to enjoy the fruit of the tree. The old man answers: “Perhaps not. However, when I was born into this world, I found many carob trees planted by my father and grandfather. Just as they planted trees for me, I am planting trees for my children and grandchildren so they will be able to eat the fruit of these trees.” Jewish stories reflect the hope-filled idea that tomorrow belongs to the children.

These various psychologists feel that hope can, and indeed must, be taught to children, by giving them role models or a mentor, videotapes with hopeful scripts, and so on. However, I believe, hope can best be taught through story because stories offer a way in which to provide options, perspectives, possibilities, problem-solving, and conflict resolution. As Jack Zipes states, “We remember wonder tales and fairy tales to keep our sense of wonderment alive and to nurture our hope that we can seize possibilities and opportunities to transform ourselves and our worlds.”<sup>45</sup>

In the Jewish oral tradition, we have stories that lift us up, not with false hope, but with true hope and perspective. I am especially thinking of the stories of the folklore hero Elijah the Prophet. One of his many significant roles is that of the deliverer of hope. In these folk narratives, such as “Elijah’s Mysterious Ways” the theme of “No one can understand all of God’s ways” is communicated through the journey a man takes with Elijah to try to understand why good people suffer and why greedy or wicked people seemingly prosper.<sup>46</sup> As humans we are goal-directed. Jewish stories, as already noted, contain in them ethical messages and guide us to the right actions. Many of the stories convey the lessons of *tikkun olam*, *tsedakka*, and other worthy concepts. As parents and educators, we need to foster hope and forward-looking-to-positive-outcomes with all of us as active participants by learning stories that incorporate role models, and possibilities to solve challenging problems so that young listeners can see a vision of wholeness.

### STORIES RESTORE MEANING TO LIFE

The telling and listening to stories contribute, and even restore, meaning to life. If we examine the works of Bruno Bettelheim, a psychologist, and Barbara Myerhoff, a cultural anthropologist, we will be able to

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review the responses of children and older people to storytelling, respectively. Bettelheim explores in depth the meaning and importance of fairy tales for children in his major contribution on the subject, *The Uses of Enchantment*. He writes:

While it entertains the child, the fairy tale enlightens him about himself, and fosters his personality development. It offers meaning on so many different levels, and enriches the child's existence in so many ways, that no one book can do justice to the multitude and diversity of the contributions such tales make to the child's life . . . our cultural heritage finds expression in fairy tales, and through them is communicated to the child's mind. Another volume could detail the unique contribution fairy tales can and do make to the child's moral education. . . .<sup>47</sup>

Stories heard in our early years guide us, filling our hearts with wisdom, wonder, warnings, and advice. Among the most important stories heard in childhood are our family stories. These stories, as Kotre writes in *White Gloves: How We Create Ourselves Through Memory*, "convey the family's essence and spirit. . . . Our children learn from the stories how the world works and what can be expected from it. They pick up our ethnic, religious, and social values."<sup>48</sup>

Indeed, psychologists interested in narrative have found that there is "the human drive to make meaning."<sup>49</sup> The theme that runs throughout Myerhoff's extraordinary book, *Number Our Days*, is that by telling or writing one's life stories, and having someone listening, restores meaning to that person's life. It showed that they had, indeed, lived. Writing of one man named Jacob, Myerhoff comments:

In his autobiographical work, Jacob was not only constructing a myth, an orderly and moral tale about himself, he was constructing a Self . . . he was crossing the delicate but crucial threshold between merely being and being a man, a sentient human being, *knowing* himself to be."<sup>50</sup>

It is, after all, the story we tell about ourselves, weaving together the continuity of our lives, the wisdom we have acquired, and cultural meaning that constitutes our human existence. These are the stories that we need to keep hearing so that we can continue to glean wisdom from the older generation. Kotre writes that "the remembering self" has two very different aspects:

On the one hand, it has the temperament of a librarian, a keeper of memory's most important archives. It can be fastidious in that role,



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guarding its original records and trying to keep them pristine.” On the other hand, “memory’s archivist by day has a secret passion by night: to fashion a story about itself, a story that some of us call the personal myth”—not “a falsehood but a comprehensive unique view of reality” that “speaks to the heart as well as the mind, seeking to generate conviction about what it thinks is true.”<sup>51</sup>

In other words, it is the listening mythologist in us that turns certain events into symbols or representative metaphors for our lives.

### INCORPORATING STORIES INTO OUR CHILDREN’S LIVES

While formative stories are heard in the early years, they become transformative stories as we grow older. The wonder and memory of a story, although relatively ethereal and ephemeral, can lead to more concrete and enduring behavior. This is the learning and integration into our lives of the history of a people, its rituals, traditions, customs, warnings, and advice. This, in turn, can be put into observable practices—practices which are a part of ourselves.

Incorporating stories into the formal or informal classroom leads to cognitive development of language and listening skills and pro-social emotions and behavior, including empathy, hope, and ethical practices. Empathy is an indirect response to hearing a story. A story allows a listener to “feel the experience” as well as feel the pain or joy of the other person. “One can receive a message on an intellectual level, just as one can receive a message on an experiential level. A well-told story is a bridge between the two; it is an attempt to give people a sense of the experience,” says Avraham Weiss.<sup>52</sup> He explains:

If one were teaching *mussar*, an ethical lesson, on the intellectual level, he or she would share the principle that is operative . . . might *teach* texts that explain the details of the law and the reasons behind it. On the experiential level, on the other hand, one might ask the listener to *experience* the pain of an offended person. A story, however, can bridge these two approaches. Even if it is impossible to subject the listener to the actual experience, to the real pain of the insult, the listener can, through the story, *feel the experience*.<sup>53</sup>

In other words, there is a vicarious connection between the word and the event.

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I propose that we restore the dignity and worth of stories told in the Jewish home, synagogue, school, and camp life. We can do this in two simultaneous ways: 1) to have more educators (teachers, rabbis, cantors, and parents) committed to incorporate more storytelling into their talks, sermons, discussions, lectures, life cycle rituals, and 2) to encourage students to tell stories in various settings.

I believe that teachers must not be “outside” of the lesson, but rather must share our own perspectives and passions (with a balance). In teaching, we need to pursue connections among the teachers, the subjects we are teaching, and our students. In “The Heart of a Teacher: Identity and Integrity in Teaching,” Parker J. Palmer writes: “We need to open a new frontier in our exploration of good teaching: the inner landscape of a teacher’s life.”<sup>54</sup>

This encourages teachers to include personal experience stories from the teacher’s life, traditional folktales, sacred stories, as well as biographical narratives of great people. Palmer continues: “Good teachers join self, subject, and students in the fabric of life because they teach from an integral and undivided self: they manifest in their own lives and evoke in their students, a ‘capacity for connectedness.’”<sup>55</sup>

Parker gives one example of a great mentor who taught the history of social thought: “. . . his classes were . . . permeated with a sense of connectedness and community. . . . He told stories from the lives of great thinkers as well as explaining their ideas.”<sup>56</sup> In this instance, the stories are biographical narratives, but narratives nevertheless. We are always drawn into a told story and learn more beautifully from it.

First, educators (anyone involved with students of any age and in any capacity) must attend to the stories they recall from childhood and their responses to those stories. Certain key questions would be helpful to ascertain the types of stories and themes they are drawn to. Make a list of stories you tell and underline those stories you love to tell often. Is there a reason you love to tell certain stories more than others? Why? When do you tell them? How/when did you yourself hear these stories? Is there a pattern of similar themes or characters between these stories? Write out the earliest story you can remember, told or read to you. If it is a story that can be found in a written source, do not go to that source until you have written it out to the best of your memory. Then you can try to compare versions between your recalled version and that of the written story. This will add insights into who you are, by showing what you remembered and also what you forgot to include or what you might have changed.

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Second, start the journey to discover, choose, and learn many more stories. There is no short-cut method of doing this except by the pleasure and time needed to read stories. The notes following this essay refer to many books containing a wealth of Jewish stories. When you find a story you especially like and need to tell, perhaps find or create other versions of that story so that you can find your own voice in the version that you tell. We often tell stories with gems of wisdom that we ourselves need to remember or learn.

Third, create a cross-listing of stories to find again when needed. The card file or computer file should contain the following information: title of story, title of book, author/editor, publisher, date, page number, source, country, Sephardic or Ashkenazic, theme, value, and moral/message, list of characters, places, any specific foods/important words or phrases, and a summary or sequence of the story in outline form. It is also useful to list the holidays or other occasions when this story might be used.

Fourth, introduce in your classroom, at the *Shabbat* table, or wherever you are with students, family and friends, the subject, theme, or character for which you have a “perfect” story so that you can create the opportunities to tell the story you have practiced and are eager to share. Rabbis can try to incorporate a midrash, parable, folktale, or personal story into almost every sermon. In addition, rabbis may encourage *Benei Mitsva* to include stories within their presentations. Camp counselors can work in tandem to tell stories, which might also incorporate music. (For more on participatory storytelling, see my article “Participatory Storytelling: A Partnership Between Storyteller and Listener” in *Tales as Tools: The Power of Story in the Classroom*.<sup>57</sup>)

Fifth, in order to accomplish what I have suggested above, begin working on learning stories and telling them at every opportunity you can.

Remember that there are many different ways to tell a story utilizing various styles of telling. As it is stated in *Sanhedrin* 89: “Two prophets may receive the same message but no two prophets will relay it in the same way.” No one tells a story better or worse than you. They just tell it differently. You need to find the story that will allow you to convey the message in your most sincere style and with your entire being, meaning your voice, your physical presence, and your imagination.

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### THE TOOLS OF THE STORYTELLER

After finding a good story and the occasion for telling it, to be a storyteller you must utilize all communication skills, involving all five senses (voice, body, gesture, face, eye contact, observation, concentration, and listening skills). The art of storytelling utilizes rhythm, pacing, sound and silence, words and meaning, and response. Pause or silence is as much a part of the story as are the words.

#### **Voice**

While stories are important tools for learning, the telling of the stories makes them even more powerful because the voice creates an immediate relationship between the teller and the listener. It is primarily through the voice that one communicates the humanity of a tale and the believability of the kernel of truth.

The voice adds a dimension of sincerity and credibility. It dovetails the person to the content and the feeling for the role of storyteller/teacher. The direct oral telling experience has no replacement even in our technological age. There is no substitute for the human voice.

Walter Ong explores the element of sound and how it situates a person in the middle of the existential experience between the speaker and the listener. He writes:

Spoken utterance is addressed by a real, living person to another real, living person or real, living persons, at a specific time in a real setting which includes always much more than mere words. Spoken words are always modifications of a total situation which is more than verbal. . . . In oral speech, a word must have one or another intonation or tone of voice—lively, excited, quiet, incensed. . . .<sup>58</sup>

In spite of, or perhaps because of all our electronic media, we need, more than ever, to hear the human voice. The voice draws persons closer together through the shared experience of vocal sound. In defining the difference between sight, as in reading a text, and sound, referring to the oral tradition, Ong explains:

Sight isolates, sound incorporates. . . . When I hear, however, I gather sound simultaneously from every direction at once: I am at the center of my auditory world, which envelopes me, establishing me at a kind of core of sensation and existence . . . sound is thus a unifying sense.<sup>59</sup>

The characteristics of a good voice include the musical qualities of

flexibility, variations of pitch, tone, volume, articulation, clarity, and, above all, sincerity. These are sometimes natural to the storyteller. At other times, they need to be developed under the guidance of specialists, vocal coaches and speech therapists.

### **Physical Presence**

Storytelling does not utilize only voice, but rather engages an entire body. Storytelling involves a somatic component. Ong elucidates this idea:

Words acquire their meanings only from their always insistent actual habitat, which is not, as in a dictionary, simply other words, but includes also gestures, vocal inflections, facial expression, and the entire human, existential setting in which the real, spoken word always occurs.”<sup>60</sup>

Like a voice, the body needs to be flexible and responsive to the tone and style of the story. Even when a storyteller remains stationary during the telling, in order for the telling to be effective, the teller’s muscle track must respond in a visceral way. In other words, the physical body, including gestures and facial expression, must attend to and be consistent with the images expressed through the channel of the voice.

### **Partnership**

While the live voice and physical presence of a storyteller command attention, the storyteller also necessitates a response. As Ong states, “Narrative originality lodges not in making up new stories but in managing a particular interaction with this audience at this time—at every telling the story has to be introduced uniquely into a unique situation, for in oral cultures an audience must be brought to respond, often vigorously.”<sup>61</sup>

Response, in the case of a storytelling event, can be in the form of laughter, a knowing smile, a nod, a verbal response, a singing response, a response of a predetermined gesture, such as rhythmic clapping, etc. When listeners anticipate the response in an active manner, they actually enter into the storytelling experience as partners with the storyteller. Here, then, is a paradox: I tell you a story, but you are the storytellers.

Telling stories, face to face, is the most direct human interactive experience that creates a rapport and draws people close. In this exchange, the storyteller and the story listener share their innermost feelings, thoughts, and values in a most entertaining way, through a

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story. A magic circle is drawn around the perimeter of the space incorporating the storyteller and the listeners within the same space to share the experience.

In communication theory, there is not only the speaker, but there must also be a listener in order for the cycle of communication to continue. The listener responds by becoming a co-creator with the storyteller through the response of empathetic listening. Walter Benjamin explains: The storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others, and he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale.”<sup>62</sup>

The speaker/storyteller and the listener become partners in the experience by suspending their own worlds and allow the creation of a new world in which they often experience deep levels of emotional experience. In essence, listening is an active process of hearing, relating attention, understanding, and remembering. Listening involves more than hearing, that is more than just registering sounds. Hearing refers to the physiological sensory process by which the ear receives auditory sensations and transmits them to the brain. Nevertheless, attentive listening involves a process that encompasses the interpretation and understanding of the heard sounds.

The word “listen” derives from two Old English words: “hlystan” for “hearing” and “hlosnian,” which means “to wait in suspense.” Thus, we can understand listening as a combination of hearing what another person says and a suspenseful waiting, which indicates a psychological and a bonding involvement with that other person. When this happens, the atmosphere becomes conducive to open discussion, to an honest exchange of ideas and questions, and to true education through the medium of story.

In the Jewish tradition, listening is a central theme. The keynote of all Judaism is the creed *Shema Yisrael*, usually translated as “Hear O Israel,” but better as “Listen O Israel.” The reason for speaking it aloud is so that our own ears hear these words. In his essay “The Storyteller’s Prayer,” Elie Wiesel writes: “It is no accident that ‘*Shema Yisrael—Listen, O Israel*’ has become imperative in Judaism. God needs an audience. Thus, the quality of any exchange depends upon the listener.”<sup>63</sup>

Judaism understands listening as a major component in the communication process. As Wiesel writes in the same essay,

Once I asked my own master, ‘I understand why the *mitzvot*, the laws, were so scrupulously transmitted from generation to generation, but

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why the *aggadot*? Why the legends?’ And my master answered, ‘They are important because they stress the importance of the listener.’”<sup>64</sup>

This shared experience between the teller and the listener creates a bond and an exchange that remains in the heart, the place of wisdom where cognition and affect combine.

**Language**

In the oral tradition, stories reach us through a short-hand use of imaginative and vivid language, such as metaphors, analogies, rhythm, repetition, symbolism, exaggeration, fantastic characters, challenging problems, formulaic openings and endings. Some of these mnemonic patterns and other structural and language elements also aid memory. This is true whether we are analyzing Talmudic stories, Hasidic tales, allegories or folktales that come from other centuries. By this use of creative language, the stories often convey several levels of interpretation and can motivate listeners to explore their own interpretations. For example, in the Talmud, there are many tall tales, using fanciful images and exaggerations, piquing curiosity, wonder, and the imagination.

Two such tales are about the enormous frog and other giant creatures, and a fish story recounted by Rabba bar Bar-Hanna:

‘I once saw a frog that was as big as the city of Hegronia. And how big is the city of Hegronia? Sixty houses. Then came a snake and swallowed the frog. Then came a raven and swallowed the serpent and perched on a tree. How strong that tree was!’ Rav Pappa bar Shmuel said: ‘Had I not been there myself, I would not have believed it.’<sup>65</sup>

Rabba bar Bar-Hanna further stated:

Once we were traveling on board a ship and saw a fish in whose nostrils a parasite had entered. Thereupon, the water cast up the fish and threw it upon the shore. Sixty towns were destroyed thereby, sixty towns are therefrom, and sixty towns salted [the remnants] thereof, and from one of its eyeballs three hundred kegs of oil were filled. On returning after twelve calendar months we saw that they were cutting rafters from its skeleton and proceeding to rebuild those towns.

One story leads to another, as though they were competing in a tall-tale contest to best each other (although, in this case, both tales are told by the same storyteller). Talmudic tales can be understood by applying various levels of interpretations, as has been done by a number

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of scholars throughout the centuries. However, it is first the fantastic images found in these enigmatic *aggadot* that challenge us to become curious and enter into a discussion to fathom their hidden meanings. By this process, we also retain the outrageous events by recalling the story. In turn, this motivates us to retell the stories to someone else. By repeating stories, a person can build a repertoire of stories to tell.

### Openings and Closings

Stories open the imagination to receive the message in a non-threatening guise by use of such formulaic devices as the beginning phrase known to that culture. The most familiar is, without a doubt, “Once upon a time.” In the Hasidic tradition, there are also formulaic openings. According to Dov Noy, these stories open with praising the Baal Shem Tov as an introduction to one of his stories: “I shall tell you a story of the Baal Shem Tov and let his grace rest up unto us.”<sup>66</sup> Aryeh Kaplan describes how Reb Nahman also opened his storytelling with a formulaic beginning:

When the Rebbe (of blessed memory) began telling stories, he said, ‘I am now beginning to tell stories’ (*ich vell shoin an-heiben maasios der-tzeilen*). His intent was as if to say, ‘[I must tell stories] because my lessons and conversations are not having any effect in bringing you back to God.’<sup>67</sup>

Just as formulaic beginnings create a threshold to the world of the story, formulaic endings bring the listeners back to the present reality, the here-and-now. One of the most popular and best known formulaic endings is “And they lived happily ever after.” One of the variations found in a Jewish folktale is “Everybody lived happily ever after for all the days of their lives.”<sup>68</sup> Another example comes from an Iranian folktale: “I was there and drank a *V'khayim* to their happiness.”<sup>69</sup>

A more elaborate formulaic ending is found in a Yemenite story: “This happened to them, but this happened to us. On their roof is sheep dung; on ours, almonds and raisins. If we have spoken the truth, it is God’s truth; if we have lied, God forgive us. Go home quickly, or the dog will eat up your supper, and forgive us for wearying you. We, in turn, forgive you for being such a nuisance to us.”<sup>70</sup> The uses of exaggeration, contrast, challenge, and a form of nonsense allow the audience to respond with laughter which releases them from the tension and concentration of listening to the story, perhaps of even “living” in the story during the suspended storytelling time.



### **Preparation and Process**

There are two phases to learning a story: the background preparation needed to tell it and the rehearsal of the actual story. Regarding preparation, to fully understand the story, you may need to do some research about the time period of the story, the characters, especially if they are biblical or historical characters, key terms or words or special occasions in the story, and the clothing and climate of the story.

Ask what is the mood of the story? Serious? Humorous? Sad? Happy? What dominant color(s) would you “paint” the story? Some questions to consider when preparing a story: What does this story mean to you? What connection do you have with this story? Why do you want to share this story with the intended audience? What do you love about the story? What part do you especially look forward to telling in the story? Why?

Stories tend to have three main divisions: introduction, body, and conclusion. Outline the sequence of the story within each division. Draw a map of the plot using crayons or colored pencils. Draw the places in the story and where the characters go throughout the story. This is a visual blueprint or map of the story.

It helps to rehearse. Practice breathing and stretching exercises to help relax the voice and body so that they can be more flexible and responsive to your task. In addition to breathing exercises, two of the best ways to relax your vocal mechanism is through yawning and humming. In order to relax your physical body, you need to add tension and then release tension. Stretching and shaking the limbs gently are good ways to achieve some relaxation. Also making lots of exaggerated faces at yourself in a mirror. Dancing or walking around the room in “interesting” ways can help achieve this relaxation and free inhibitions.

Read the story out loud several times. Tell yourself or a friend what the story is about and what happens in the story, but summarizing the story in your own words. Once you have the sequence mastered, then you can begin rehearsing the story itself. Also, practice the story in parts, working with images in the head and not just memorizing a text. Use the images as springboards for the words. Work on the opening or introduction to the story first. Refer to the text only after you have tried telling from your own imagination.

Tell the first part of the body of the story to yourself. Refer to the text and then retell the first two sections. Now tell the next part of the story. Continue to refer to the text after each part and begin the story from the beginning through the newly learned part, and so on until you have completed the entire story. Always work out loud, with concentration.

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Work on a clean strong beginning of the story that is delivered slowly and interestingly so the audience “gets” it and pulls them into the story immediately. Work also on the ending of the story in a way that the audience prepares for the end of the story. Never rush the ending. When you feel comfortable and confident that you know the story, then practice on your feet watching yourself in the mirror, or in your own mind’s eye, with a consciousness to notice what you are doing with your stance, your hands, etc.

Feet should be on the floor with equal weight balance but with your weight slightly forward, as though you might want to embrace your audience. Do not stand on one foot, or crosslegged, or with your weight randomly shifted. Feel free to walk or move, but use only purposeful movements that do not distract. Hands should be at your sides in a relaxed way so they can be used when needed for purposeful gestures. Do not put hands in pockets, behind your back, or crossed in front. And if you should put your hands in your pockets, make sure that there are no coins or keys to create a distracting sound. Gestures should feel natural and organic, not theatrical, and appropriate. Depending on your style and that of the story, gestures can be effective and expressive, but should never be excessive or distracting.

Concentrate on eye contact with the audience. Their faces and interest will help you tell the story and, in turn, give you energy. Looking at the members of the audience creates an immediate bond between you. Storytelling is a dialogue. Work to tell in a natural voice using energy and expression as if you were telling the story for the first time. Concentrate on meaning rather than on memorized text.

Talk to your audience and never down at them, no matter what age. Eliminate non-words, such as “um,” “like,” and “you know.” Better to pause and think, then continue with the story. The audience will stay with you. While we want to have a natural sound, not cluttered speech, the audience needs to feel confident in your telling abilities and memory without your calling attention to a “memorized” sound. They want to concentrate on listening to the story, not on worrying whether or not you’ll make it through to the end of the tale.

Polish the story by working on pacing and phrasing. Time your story, although no timing can be exact for a retelling. Retell the story mentally to yourself before you go to sleep or when you are walking leisurely. The more you tell it to yourself, always using images as well as words, the more comfortable you will be when you get in front of an audience. In this way, the story becomes yours, but only after the twen-

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tieth telling. Most important, enjoy your telling of the story! If you have fun telling it, so will your audience. Say the story in the way that you feel it and image it!

### YOUNG PEOPLE BECOME STORYTELLERS

Too often we think of young people as well as older audiences as recipients of story. In recent years, however, many storytellers and other educators have encouraged and organized classes to teach students to become storytellers. There are now a number of books that celebrate young people as storytellers, such as *Every Child a Storyteller*, *Give a Listen: Storytelling in Schools*, and *Storyteller Storyteacher: Discovering the Power of Storytelling for Teaching and Living*. (A list of these and additional resources for storytelling in education is appended to the notes of this essay.)

Children are natural and ingenious storytellers, as Vivian Gussin Paley documents in her inspiring book, *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter: The Uses of Storytelling in the Classroom*. Her innovation is her use of stories children tell as a vehicle of instruction. It should be noted that Paley was a recipient of a MacArthur award for her pioneering work on the storytelling technique and its use within the classroom, especially for early childhood. She states:

Friendship and fantasy form the natural path that lead children into a new world of other voices, other views, and other ways of expressing ideas and feelings they recognize as similar to their own. . . . To children, each new revelation of connectedness is a miracle.

If friendship and fantasy provide links to individual children, there is yet a third condition that completes the frame within which school makes sense: the need to become part of a larger group. It is the group that most influences the development of the storyteller. . . .

But the storyteller is a culture builder, requiring the participation of an audience. Play is not enough, there must be a format that captures the essence of play while attaching to it a greater degree of objectivity. Storytelling and story acting can perform the task.<sup>71</sup>

To illustrate how powerful and effective storytelling by children can be, I relate a personal experience. At a *Shabbat* dinner at a home in Melbourne, we were sitting and talking. The host family with their four children, a number of guests, and I were celebrating *Shabbat*. One of the parents turned to their 12-year-old son, who was known to be

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extremely shy, and asked him if he had attended my program at the day school that day. He replied that he had, and then said that he wanted to retell one of my stories. The young man launched into a beautiful and very detailed retelling of a story I had told. He had listened well and now became transformed as he told the story. All of us were caught up in the presence and obvious pleasure of his enthusiastic telling. The parents later confided that they were surprised since this son had never before volunteered to tell a story or enter into any discussions easily. That is the power of a story with the imagination.

By telling a story, we come out of ourselves and enter into the world of the story. Storytelling creates bonds between the storyteller and the listeners. We share with others, bringing them to the world of the story. (My young listener's attention undoubtedly strengthened his self-esteem and encouraged his telling.) We not only succeed in having listeners respond, but the storyteller also responds to the energy of the listeners. It is an interactive process, a partnership.

Parents, youth leaders, and educators of every stripe should encourage the telling or retelling of stories at various group encounters, be it a *Shabbat* dinner, a meeting, around a campfire, in the *Sukka*, etc. By assigning different students or volunteers in advance to begin the class or meeting with a brief story, we help more stories to enter into everyone's repertoire and trigger more story connections. Young people over eight or ten years old, and especially teens, are wonderful storytellers. They could be asked to tell a story to younger students as well as to elders in a Residence Nursing Home. In small groups, they become more skillful and empowered by becoming storytellers at many other venues and occasions.

This opportunity of telling stories to elders may form a two-way flowing river of sharing, to tell and listen to the elders' stories. As indicated earlier, the work of Barbara Myerhoff illustrates how important it is for elders to have listeners for their stories. There is much for the generations to learn from each other.

A potential forum for storytelling could be storytelling festivals organized at schools and camps. At festivals everyone "wins." Preparation and rehearsals are necessary. Criteria for the festival could be established with the assistance of the librarian and a local storyteller. Preparation would begin with reading and selecting a story or writing a family story. Parents and people in the community would be the audience for this event. If the school highlights the event as "important," then it will add to the prestige of the students who participate.

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In sum, the oral tradition, which fuses the stories by the telling and listening, is the ethical guide that serves as the inspiration and the link to the cultural and religious heritage and the values of the Jewish people. In Judaism, the telling of tales is a celebration that continues to form and inform our lives in the present.

*Sefer ha-Hinnukh* counts as the tenth *mitsva* to *tell* the story of Exodus. As one is commanded to *tell*, the stress is on having the story told aloud, even if there is no one to listen. If this occurs, we become our own listeners, hearing our words spoken aloud. When the heart (combining intellect, feelings, understanding, and intention) is aroused, the storyteller/listener internalizes the values and acts on them.

While stories teach us, it is the voice of the storyteller that creates the bond between the story and the listener. In the book *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters: Oral Histories of Women Who Survived the Holocaust*, one account moved me very deeply because of the role of story within the story. Rose Muth, while in Auschwitz tells of relating parables to her sister that their father had told her:

. . . I had told her things that my father said. He prepared us for the hardship . . . through meshalim he gave us courage and taught us how to live in spite of difficulties.

Just before we were separated, before we went to Wadowice, my father took us four girls aside. He told us a parable of two men. They were tired of life. They had difficulties and problems. They went to a river, stood on the bridge, and contemplated suicide. One of the men courageously jumped into the water and was gone. The other one shivered and went away. Which was the coward and which was the brave man? Of course, as children, we said it was the one who had the courage to jump into the river. My father said, 'No, you're wrong. The one who took up the fight and continued to live and fight for what he wanted, this one was the brave man.' I had told this to Estusia before, and she kept on repeating it to me. Other things that he told us made us have faith, to believe that some good would come of it. I feel that it was my father's blessing that helped me survive.<sup>72</sup>

Jews have a tradition to offer a parable (a *mashal*) in order to illustrate a point. In Rose Muth's case, the remembered parable served as a blessing and as an image that helped her and her sister survive. As Walter Benjamin said,

All this points to the nature of every real story. It contains, openly or covertly, something useful. The usefulness may, in one case, consist in a

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moral; in another, in some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or maxim. . . . To seek this counsel one would first have to be able to tell the story. . . . Counsel woven into the fabric of real life is wisdom.<sup>73</sup>

We never know when we will need the wisdom given to us in the most beautiful way through a story. Therefore, stories must fill the storehouse of memory from early childhood and on through life to help us live and transmit our Jewish culture and faith. The stories are a special treasure (*segula*) that must continue to be shared with the voice as the messenger of the heart.

## NOTES

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