

Why Talk about the Old Tales Now?

Sharon Elswit

Description:

- Once upon a time, a Jewish grandfather told his granddaughter who was being bullied about a woman who had to figure out how to pull three hairs from a lion's mane.
- Once upon a time when times were hard, a rabbi told the community the story of the miracle that occurred after the Baal Shem Tov's secret spot for praying for his people was lost.
- Once upon a time, a stranger helped a lost young man find his way in the world by telling him the tale where King Solomon loses his whole identity in one moment of arrogance and needs to start again.

They began once upon a time, and they're still here - all these relationships and struggles in a messy world - and all the folktales. Jewish stories people have passed on from generation to generation stand ready to bring wonder, comfort, teaching, laughter, argument, and quiet reflection to enrich our human lives. Not just for children. Applying Jewish values, the old stories are ready to show us how to forgive; how to help others; the importance of education, devotion, generosity, and perspective; when to proceed with caution, and why to bother. So many Jewish stories are out there. But, how can you find the right story to fit a situation? How do you choose one variant of a story over a different telling? How have the old tales changed over time? How do they inform new ones? Why share them outside of the Jewish community? And why do I collect them for you? I'd like you to come out of my talk with renewed appreciation for seeking and sharing the old tales and some practice with me in finding them.

Sharon Elswit is the author of *The Jewish Story Finder: A Guide to 668 Tales Listing Subjects and Sources* 2nd ed.; *The East Asian Story Finder: A Guide to 468 Tales from China, Japan, and Korea*, and a forthcoming *Latin American Story Finder*. She has been sharing stories with children and adults for 35 years as a children's librarian. She currently teaches at Léman Manhattan Preparatory School in NYC and reviews folklore for *Jewish Book World*.

It was on a full moon autumn night that a young man and woman were celebrating their marriage in a sukkah, the hut festively decorated with branches and harvest vegetables and fruits. They had chosen a sukkah, so that not only all of their friends and family would be there, but perhaps even some of the ancient ancestors, the ushpizim they had invited to join them, as tradition holds. After the ceremony a stranger approached. I have something for you, he said in a low voice to the couple, and pulled a gourd from a pocket of his coat. This is a magic gourd. It can make a wish come true, but only one wish, and only one time. And, his voice grew even softer, You must make this wish together holding the gourd in your hands. Take it, it is my wedding blessing for you.

The young man and woman thanked him earnestly and placed the gourd on a table in the crowded sukkah, intrigued by the good hope that gourd could hold for them. As other people pressed now closer to congratulate them, the stranger disappeared. But someone who had overheard the stranger wanted that wish for herself. I need it more, she thought, and slipped that gourd into her bag. She replaced it with another which had been hanging from a branch on the wall. And snuck away.

A story that ended here would not be one to be passed along over time, it wouldn't be one you'd likely retell. It wouldn't be a folktale. Bicycles, cell phones, identities are stolen all the time. We need to know what happens when they do disappear – Who gets angry? How do

people handle the loss? Does anyone come to help? And this gourd was irreplaceable – it contained magic which could help them in a time of need. Do they ever find it again? What will happen to their relationship now? It's not just children who need messes straightened out. We'd all like to see some ideas of how to cope....

.... I will tell you how this story ends at the end of our talk. And, if you find the story memorable you may ask, "Where may I find it?" And I will tell you that, too.

Why have Jewish folktales lasted over all these generations?

We know why they did so well in the beginning. They were the TV and movies and internet of that older era. Bubby, tell us a story, a scary one! Well, there's the tale where King Solomon is soaring over the earth on his magic carpet, feeling so grand, and he begins to boast, and his magic carpet swerves down and tosses him off on a bleak rocky pinnacle. As he clings there, he looks up and towering above him is a mysterious black palace.How about that one?

Folktales survive in our fast-paced world because they are engaging...and SHORT. As a child, who used to go looking for the fattest books she could find in the library because she did not want the stories to end, I know that a good folktale can still slip in both under the wire - and over 135 characters. It has the power to hold attention, so that people remember the story for years afterwards.

If I was unhappy over the way things were going, my mother would tell me that if I put all my troubles into a bundle and my friends each filled a bag with theirs, I would choose to take home the bag that had my own troubles inside. Other people had it much worse than me. I didn't know that story was a Jewish folktale. Years later, I found eight more versions of that tale, but back then, I learned from that one bit of oral wisdom that I could certainly make things better or worse for myself by attitude.

After a decade of actively collecting and sharing folktales and publishing folktale guides, I know that Jewish folktales can help us think about our own lives. They transmit messages and values that have been passed on through the ages. There it is: humor, adventure, pathos, love, imagination...and education - all in a short, value-packed, time-tested package that helps to pave the way for the continuity of a people. Wow!

When my first Jewish Story Finder was published in 2005, I got into an argument with the director of a small town library. "Why should we add this book to the collection," she said. "These are religious stories, didactic. "

"No," I countered, "No, these are folklore, good ethnic stories people told, with laughter and wonder and problem-solving that are good for everyone to hear - Take this Chelm story set in the infamous town of fools: The wise men of Chelm were having a hard time choosing an official worrier to do all their worrying for them. For they thought, once we pay him a salary, he will have nothing to worry about...."Where's the moral in that?" I thought.

I was right about how Jewish folktales transmit culture and history – times really were hard economically and politically for the Jews in Eastern Europe in the 1800s – they could use a worrier to take on the burden for the community. But, it turns out there also is a message, after all. After you laugh, the Chelm stories really are about resilience. They are filled with traditional observance. They recognize that there are problems and put a perspective on them, like my mother’s bag story. You laugh and then perhaps even work hard to solve the problem – No luck? does the bread always fall butter side down, or did you just butter the wrong side?

Memorable folktales have lasted because the way the tale is told is unique, different from other forms of literature. The message is wrapped in honey. The ones that stick with me don’t have hit over the head morals. Iroquois Native Americans told their children stories with monsters, not to scare them, but to teach them that by clever thinking they might get out of a bad situation. Jewish folklore also puts a value on thinking for survival. In the story “In Your Hands” an intimidating Nazi soldier demands whether the bird he holds is alive or dead, and the rabbi, who knows that no matter what answer he gives will be wrong, responds, “You hold the answer in your hand.” But it’s not only the learned rabbis who solve problems in Jewish tales. In Peninnah Schram’s story, the wise innkeeper’s daughter is the only one who knows what to do when the king commands that her father send her to him neither riding nor walking, neither dressed nor undressed, and bearing a gift that is not a gift.

Despite injustice and economic or ecological trouble, folktale protagonists persevere in many different ways and always manage to transform the situation. Many times the stories are metaphors. Slip in Sheldon Oberman’s story where the grandfather tells his granddaughter who is afraid of a bigger, stronger girl at school to bring him three hairs from the fiercest dog in the neighborhood. Once she figures out how to do that and shows up with the three hairs, he tells her that she is now ready to face the class bully. We get caught up with the granddaughter’s struggle to face her fear and make our own connections to her patience, ingenuity, and perseverance, better than any lecture on standing up to bullies can. It’s all about connections.

I first heard this story with an Ethiopian woman distressed that her husband has withdrawn from her when he returns from war. The wise man sends her to bring him three hairs from a lion. Because they deal with real human emotions, there is no age limit on many tales. And they travel with people and snuggle in to meet different needs.

The other day I was reading a Chinese folktale with rainbow dragon people to a 3rd grade class, when here and there as we went along, one child or sometimes two or three or six, would wave an arm quietly in the air and then put it down. What were they doing? And then I realized - their teacher has taught them to do this when they hear something they can connect with their own experiences and understandings.

Like the liveliest internet software, folktales are freeware and allow users to attempt to make the program better with their own spin, until there’s almost sure to be a version just for you. We need to pass on the old stories which have sustained people over hundreds and sometimes thousands of years. They have been tested and touched hearts and minds.

But that doesn't mean they are not themselves transformed along the way. As stories bump up against the lives that Jews have lived in other places and times, they may change, and it is up to us whether to accept a new telling or not. Once you start looking into Jewish folktales, another aspect of our culture pops up. We're literate, and we like to argue. Over the generations, other voices have thought they could tell a story better; make it more relevant or more poignant or funnier.

To show you how different the same story can be, take a look at "The Reminder": This single story has been told 10 different ways in 14 different sources: print, CD, and online. It has been told in Iraq, Eastern Europe, Afghanistan, Austria, Jerusalem, and the United States. It's the same basic tale: a man, whose fortune has changed for the better through luck, has a secret way to remind himself where he came from or what happens to us all in the end, in order to keep himself humble and become a better leader. He may start out as a jester, a slave, a poor porter, or the legendary wealthy Rothschild; later, to remember, he may go into a bare room or dress in rags; he may eat matzah, look at a coffin, or even open a gold box filled with excrement. Some of the tellings emphasize humility, some promises, and some freedom or compassion. As reader, take your pick, depending on where you want to go with the tale.

And this is where I come in. Where do you find all these versions to choose from? If you're me, you spend two to three years per book, searching through folktale collections in the library at the Center for Jewish History and in the Dorot Jewish Division at the New York Public Library on 42nd Street. To save you a few years, I'd like to tell you about my guide to Jewish folktales, how you can use it to find the story you need. And to let you know that the 2nd edition came out in 2011, with almost twice the number of stories as the first.

I am deeply indebted to – and in awe of – the storytellers, like Howard Schwartz and Peninnah Schram, who search the sources and give us volumes of stories in English which have touched them. And Dan Ben-Amos, who collects and retells stories from Jews around the world from Dov Noy's Israel Folklore Archives. And I collect them. I had to figure out a way to find their stories again when I needed them and thought other people might, too. So, the story finders grew with title indexes and subject indexes in natural language to organize it all.

Storytellers reshape tales to be meaningful to new generations of people. Reb Nachman of Bratslav created the story of The Prince Who Thought He Was a Rooster in the late 1700s. I was able to track down 21 worthy and available variations, even two in graphic format. But the most recent, Ann Redisch Stampler's picture book, offers a wonderful new definition of what it means to be human to this 200 year old tale. In the story, an old man wins the trust of a prince who has taken off his clothes and begun pecking at corn on the floor and crowing like a rooster. For Ann, it is the prince's act of covering the old man with a blanket when he senses his friend may be cold, his compassion, that marks the prince's readiness to rejoin the human world (even if he may still be a rooster inside).

Exploring and comparing the variations with each other, as we did in a NYMA workshop this past February, brings some of the differences to light. What do you like about this telling of

the story? Is that one too campy? Another too formal? Is it not Jewish enough? This one, just right? What response are you looking for when it's done?

Because the Jewish folktales that have survived deal with timeless key human questions, their validity has survived within the Jewish community and travels outside it just fine. I agree with what Leslie Kimmelman said in an interview with Michal Malen in *Jewish Book World* recently – the Jewishness does not need to be taken out of stories for them to be widely accepted and enjoyed in the mainstream. Like bagels....with meaning.

Take Margot Zemach's widely adapted retelling of *It Could Always Be Worse*, where the rabbi advises the man distressed by his noisy household to bring more and more barn animals inside until finally telling him to take them all out again, and then Ahhhh, how quiet it now seems. You don't have to remove the rabbi for the story to have universal appeal.

As a librarian, I share stories from many different cultures with diverse audiences, often even the same story given different spins by people in different countries. The children who belong to that culture feel proud that others are hearing and enjoying their story. Me, too, they sign, and I fervently believe that sharing these stories widens the circle and leads to greater tolerance. New listeners are included, and everyone who hears it now becomes part of the story. We are fortunate to have choices among many higher quality picture books and collections of Jewish tales now being published.

The other day I was reading a Chinese folktale with rainbow dragon people to a diverse third grade class, when here and there as we went along, one child or sometimes two or three or six, would wave an arm quietly in the air and then put it down. What were they doing? And then I realized - their teacher has taught them to do this when they hear something they can connect with their own experiences. But, like the telephone game, the story they each bring home is going to be personalized, changed by their own understandings.

What changes as stories from one community are adapted to fit another? I am currently working on a guide to Latin American tales, and have found transformations where modern Mayan people interweave their own culture with Spanish colonial and Sephardic tales. In some stories, the whole story has been transported with only people and place names changed. In the Middle Eastern Jewish Joha and Arabic Djuha trickster-fool tales it's the traditions which change. Sometimes, the whole focus of a story changes, but that's for a longer talk.

Lighting the Fire is one of the old stories, from a Jewish culture different from the one which I grew up in, which newly took hold of me and wouldn't let go. It is a tale about the power of story. When the 18th century mystical rabbi, the Baal Shem Tov, senses danger for his community, he journeys to a secret place in the forest. There he lights a ritual fire and speaks a special prayer. A miracle happens, and misfortune is averted. In successive generations, however, each disciple remembers less and less how to recreate where the rabbi actually went and what he did and said, until all that is left is the story about his having done it. And yet, God hears the yearning in their story.

We yearn. We want to know what to do, and there are narratives to tell us with wonder, danger, humor, magic, and the comfort of tradition:

From Germany, young Istahar wishes for a star of her own.

A mouse in a synagogue wishes to marry someone grander than just another mouse.

Elijah the Prophet tests worthy people by granting their wishes and then seeing what they do with it.

Nissim of Morocco wishes to find who is stealing his water and comes up against a witch.

A Polish goatherd wishes to see the Holy Land his father has spoken of and follows his goat into a magic tunnel.

And what happened to our bride and groom whose wish was stolen? They carefully brought the other gourd home and set it on their bookcase. When their store wasn't doing so well, they considered making a wish with the gourd, but as they sat there, holding it in their hands, the woman thought that perhaps they might need it for something greater later on, and together they worked hard to come up with a new plan for the business. A few years later, they thought about wishing for a child, but again they waited and eventually there were three lovely children. And when in middle age, the man brought the gourd to the woman in the hospital to ease her pain, certainly now, she shook the gourd and heard the seeds rattle, she felt his love for her and said that was enough, they should save the wish. Then, as they were both old, they thought about wishing to live forever, and realized their desires to live a long, resonant life together had already been fulfilled. And so they never knew that their magic wish had been stolen. But perhaps it had not. Maybe it was the promise of that wish which blessed them and guided them and which had been the magic, all along.

You'll find this Magic Gourd story, which I adapted from Debra Gordon Zaslow, in *Mitzvah Stories*, edited by Rabbi Goldie Milgram. Also online, at Reclaiming Judaism. Shake the story and listen, and, if it speaks to you, pass the magic on.

Thank you.

*You'll find connections to many online resources for Jewish folklore plus information about *The Jewish Story Finder* at <http://www.sharonelswit.com/>